AN ANTI-DEFICIT APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING BACHELOR'S DEGREE
ATTAINMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
INSTITUTION

By

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A DISSERTATION

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

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education - Doctor of Philosophy

2017

ABSTRACT

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The percentage of African Americans who pursue bachelor's degrees and graduate is dismal with less than 40% of the 2009 cohort earning a degree within six-years. For decades' researchers have explored why a disproportionate number of minorities do not graduate. In this study, I take an anti-deficit approach to understandings bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans at a predominantly White institution by looking to those who have graduated or are successfully persisting towards earning a degree.

This research study is an interpretive qualitative design. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with eight African Americans who earned a bachelor's degree or will soon earn their degree from a predominately White, Midwest institution. The data collected was used to identify themes that arose amongst the participants. The participants' family, K through 16 experiences, and what they believe led to their success in earning a degree was examined. There were five primary themes that were salient amongst the participants in this study: self-efficacy, support, resilience, student group involvement, and engagement with faculty and staff. There were three additional themes that arose amongst at least half of them: precollege program participation, on-campus employment, and spiritual and/or religious participation.

The study was conceptually guided by common factors that came out of selected research that took an anti-deficit approach to understanding academic success among minority students in college. The common factors identified in the research were precollege experiences, support

systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement. The findings from this study are aligned with the research that conceptually guided it. The recommendations made for practice and suggestions for future research came out of the findings from the study.

I give all praise and honor to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ for all he has done for me.
This dissertation is dedicated to my family, friends, church families, and my advisor who guided,
encouraged, supported, pushed, and/or prayed for me along the way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

PWI   Predominately White Institution

UCU   Urban City University

UCCC   Urban City Community College

HBCU   Historically Black Colleges and Universities

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

While there are many African Americans who go to college to earn a bachelor's degree and do not graduate, there are some that do. What can be learned from those who earn college degrees?

Soledad is an African American female who was born and raised in Urban City, an inner city known for its high crime and poverty rates and a failing industry. Her grandparents raised her, her older brother, and younger sister. Soledad's grandmother was a registered nurse and her grandfather worked in the local industry prior to its decline. Her grandparents stressed the importance of education and Soledad strived to meet their expectations and to make them proud. In the spring of 2015, Soledad graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology from a predominately White institution, Urban City University (UCU). She earned her degree in four years. In addition, she graduated with high honors, earning a 3.75 grade point average. She is now pursuing her Master's degree in one of the top programs in the nation. Soledad is a success story, as most African Americans who go to college do not graduate.

A wealth of the research on college going among African Americans tends to focus on why they do not graduate. In addition, the research that does explore college success among African Americans tends to focus on the obstacles successful students overcome to be successful. While research that looks to understand what obstacles African American students overcome to be successful is important, it is also imperative to understand what they have done or what occurred during their experience that may have helped them be successful and avoid certain obstacles. It is true Soledad overcame obstacles to be successful. While in college, Soledad did not receive much emotional or financial support from her family. During her first year in college, she struggled through a chemistry course because she did not have the book for the class. She

also encountered financial challenges while in college so she worked all four years. The obstacles Soledad faced are like what many students face while in college and learning what she did to overcome those obstacles is important. However, there is more to Soledad's earning her bachelor's degree than the obstacles she faced and overcame.

Soledad overcame obstacles but she also made decisions and took steps in the right direction that aided in her success and as a result she avoided some obstacles. Soledad knew she wanted to go to college at a young age so while in high school she participated in all the academic opportunities she came across, including two precollege programs. Because of the two programs, she had some knowledge of the college going process, became familiar with UCU campus and faculty, and earned scholarships. While in high school she borrowed ACT/SAT prep books from her teachers so she could study for her college entrance exams outside of the classroom. In addition, she applied for every scholarship she could find and earned enough financial aid to pay for her tuition and fees through graduation. Once she was in college she spent most her first year studying and adjusting to college life. Over time she began to engage with the faculty and staff, she got involved in student groups, and earned an on-campus job. Soledad likely avoided many obstacles because of the choices she made prior to and during college. There is a great deal that can be learned from students like Soledad who are successful in their pursuit of earning a bachelor's degree by taking an anti-deficit approach to understanding their families, K through 16 experiences, and what they believe lead to their success.

In this study, I take an anti-deficit approach to understanding and examining the families and K through 16 experiences of eight African Americans who have earned a bachelor's degree and what they attribute to their success. UCU is in the Midwest, specifically in Urban City and in Midwest State. The total student population is slightly higher than 8,000 and almost 870 of

those students are African American. UCUs' overall graduation rate is low. According to the *National Center for Education Statistics* (2017), the six-year graduation rate for first time students pursuing a bachelor's degree in 2009 at UCU is 38%. The graduation rate among African American's at UCU is 26%, 15% lower than their White counterparts. The national six-year graduation rate of African American students from the class of 2009 is 39.5 %, the rate in Midwest State is 33.3 %, and at UCU it is 26%, each over 15% lower than their White counterparts. "Regardless of an institution's mission and selectivity, schools with low retention and graduation rates carry a burden that has a direct impact on the college's ability to recruit and retain future students" (Swail, Redd, & Pena, 2003, p. 25). Most institutions of higher education focus on understanding why students do not graduate rather than why some students do, to increase graduation rates. Such an approach results in them missing the opportunity to learn from students like Ashley, De'Ron, Valerie, Soledad, Brianna, Sonny, Jeff, and Danielle, African Americans who earned bachelor's degrees from UCU. While their families, K through 16 experiences, and beliefs on what lead to their success may differ, they have at least one thing in common; they were successful in their pursuit of earning a bachelor's degree from UCU and much can be learned from them.

Statement of Problem

African Americans are now going to college in large numbers but many them are not graduating. Of the African American students who enrolled in their first year of college in the Fall of 2009, less than 40% earned a bachelor's degree by 2015, which is 15% less than their White counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). There is research on college degree attainment among African Americans, however much of it takes a deficit research approach by focusing on why students do not graduate. There is also a body of work that looks

at successful students but much of it focuses on the obstacles students overcame to earn their degree. There is a need for more research that uses an anti-deficit approach to understand what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans. We can learn from such research by identifying what contributed to their success. The information learned can be used to create environments for future students that will result in them having similar experiences as those who were successful and ultimately increase the number of African Americans who earn college degrees.

Definition of Terms

In this study, I use terms that can be defined in a variety of ways. Thus, I provide definitions of terminology used consistently throughout this study. To fully understand the phenomenon being studied, the following terms are defined: student success, successful student, African American, minority, and anti-deficit.

Student Success

Student success is defined as successful persistence towards bachelor's degree attainment.

Successful Student

A successful student is defined as a student who has earned a bachelor's degree.

African American

African American is defined as a person who is of African American descent and identifies as such. The term "African American" is used interchangeably with the term "Black".

Minority

Minority is used to refer to a person(s) identified as belonging to one of the following racial or ethnic groups: Black, Hispanic, and Native American.

Anti-Deficit

A research approach that seeks to understand the abilities among a group of people rather than their deficiencies.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors do African Americans who earn bachelor's degrees from predominately White institutions identify as important to their academic success?

2. How do the factors successful African Americans identify contribute to their success?

Statement of Purpose

Increasing the number of African Americans who graduate from college is imperative. There is literature that examines departure, retention, persistence, success, and college degree attainment among African Americans, however most of it explores the deficiencies among them rather than what can be learned from those who do earn a degree. In addition, the literature on successful students tends to focus on what obstacles they overcame to be successful. This study gives a voice to the small population of African Americans who are successful in their pursuit of earning a bachelor's degree by learning what a group of eight African American college graduates believes contributed to their earning a bachelor's degree.

The goal of my research is to further our understanding of what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans at predominately White institutions. In this study, I take an anti-deficit approach to understanding and examining the families and K through 16 experiences of eight African Americans who have earned a bachelor's degree and what they attribute to their success. The hope is the results of this study will provide institutions with a better understanding of African American college students, their experiences, and what leads to

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bachelor's degree attainment among them. In turn institutions can use what is learned to provide students with environments that will give them experiences like the successful students and ultimately increase college graduation among them.

Statement of Significance

Research concerning African Americans who have successfully persisted towards earning a college degree can provide a wealth of useful information that could lead to an increase in African American college degree attainment. There has been research done for several decades concerning student departure, retention, persistence, and success including work by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1987), Bean (1980), Bean and Eaton (2001), Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino (1997), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail, Redd, and Pena (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayez (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013), among others. Their work has contributed to our current understanding of what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans. However, most of the research takes a deficit approach or focuses on the barriers students have overcome to be successful. The goal of my research is to further our understanding of what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans at predominately White institutions. To achieve this goal, I take an anti-deficit approach to my research by asking anti-deficit questions of study participants to understand their family, K through 16 experiences, and what they believe lead to their success, by not focusing on the barriers they may have overcome to be successful, and by highlighting the common themes they believe lead to them earning a bachelor's degree.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to take an anti-deficit approach to understanding bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans at predominately White institutions. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the research problem, questions, purpose, and significance. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and is divided into six major sections. The sections include college degree attainment; history of higher education; the foundation of college student departure and retention research; college student success research; common factors that contribute to student success; and an anti-deficit research approach.

The first section of this chapter explores college degree attainment in the United States. The chapter begins with an explanation of why college degree attainment is used as a measurement of student success. Then it goes on to provide data on college degree attainment by race in the United States, Midwest State, and Urban City University (UCU). The section concludes with further evidence of the problem being addressed in this study.

The second section gives a brief history of American higher education. It begins with the history of the first colleges established in the United States and the purpose of education in the 1600's. Then there is a brief discussion on who was permitted to attend college. The section goes on to give a historical overview of African Americans lengthy journey towards equality in American higher education. The section ends with a look at the status of African Americans in higher education.

The third section explores departure and retention research as far back as the 1970's. This section is of importance because it discusses several researchers that laid the foundation for the body of work that conceptually guides my study. The first researcher dealt with in this section is Spady (1970) whose research was on dropouts from higher education. Also, his explanatory

sociological model of the dropout process is explored in this section. The second researcher who is given attention is Tinto (1975, 1987). Tinto also researched college dropouts, and he too has a model that is reviewed in this section. The final researcher is Bean (1982) who studied models of student attrition and developed a model, which is also analyzed. This section closes with an acknowledgment of how their work contributes to the current research on student success.

The fourth section presents the research that conceptually guides my study. Selected research conducted by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (2002), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013) is used to conceptually guide my work. Their research was selected because it takes an anti-deficit approach to understanding success among minority students by looking to those who are successful rather than those who are not.

The fifth section is an overview of the common factors that came out of the research selected to conceptually guide my study. The common factors are precollege experiences, support, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement. In this section, the factors are defined and evidence of their importance is highlighted in charts. The section ends with a summary of the common factors.

The sixth section presents the anti-deficit approach I took to my research. The section starts by giving an overview of deficit thinking. It goes on to explain anti-deficit approaches to research. In addition, Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework is briefly revisited. Lastly, the anti-deficit approach I use as a research method is highlighted.

This chapter concludes with a summary of the literature discussed in this chapter and an explanation of how my work will add to the current research on African American college student success.

College Degree Attainment

Educators and administrators have not adopted a universal definition of student success (Kuh et al., 2006). There are several ways in which postsecondary student success is measured, including but not limited to, academic achievement, development of proficiencies, degree attainment, and post-graduation achievement. Although there is no consensus on how to measure student success, many agree degree attainment is a clear-cut measurement of it (Kuh et al., 2006). There has been a growth in research on successful minority students, which explores their experiences to understand what leads to success. The aim of the research is to use what is learned to increase retention and graduation rates among minority populations.

Earning a college degree can be a means to obtain upward mobility today (Swail et al., 2003; Kuh et al., 2006; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Cheah, 2012). According to Swail et al. (2003), "individuals with a bachelor's degree earn, on average, twice that of high school graduates, and those with a professional degree earn twice what individuals with a bachelors earn" (p. v). College graduates can earn nearly a million dollars more than high school graduates can over their lifetime (Swail et al., 2003). On average, those who earn a college degree fare better than those who do not. Swail et al. (2003) suggest there are advantages to earning a college degree: "Long-term or future benefits include higher lifetime earnings, a more fulfilling work environment, better health, longer life, more informed purchases, and lower probability of unemployment" (p. 44). However, in the United States, the percentage of people who earn a college degree is dismal. Nearly half of the students who set out to reach the goal of earning a certificate or degree fail to do so (Swail et. al., 2003).

According to the *National Center for Education Statistics* (2017) of the 4.3 million students in the United States who enrolled in their first year of college in the Fall of 2009, 59.4%

earned a college degree by 2015, as seen in Table 1. While the number of those from the 2009 cohort who earned degrees seems small, the percentage of minorities who earned a degree, in some cases is nearly 20% lower than the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Table 1: National college graduation rates by race.

	All Students	White	African American	Asian	Hispanic	American Indian
National Average	59.4%	63.3%	39.5%	72.3%	53.6%	41.2%

College Degree Attainment Among African Americans

Since the 1960's, college access among African Americans has increased significantly; however, the college graduation rates of African Americans are much lower than Whites (Swail et al., 2003). The disparities in college graduation rates can be attributed to many factors, particularly socioeconomic status since African Americans tend to make less money on average than Whites and as a result have fewer funds to pay for college. According to Swail et al. (2003), "educational opportunity and success are uneven in the United States by income and by race/ethnicity" (p. 28). The cost of college is a major concern as the cost of college is growing faster than family income (Kuh et al., 2006). The completion rates among African Americans and other minority groups have always been significantly lower than Whites, which is becoming more of an issue as the number of minorities continues to grow (Swail et. al., 2003; Kuh et. al., 2006).

The disparity in graduation rates between White and minority students is evident when you look at the statistics for 2009 cohort in Midwest State. As displayed in Table 2, in Midwest State, the number of students from the class of 2009 who earned a degree by 2015 was nearly 60.4%. That percentage is 1% higher than the national average; however, the number of

graduates among African American students was 36.5%, 3% lower than the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Depending on the institution of higher education in Midwest State, these numbers are significantly lower.

The college graduation rates among all students at UCU is lower than the national and state average. In addition, the graduation rate of African American students at that same institution is alarming. According to the *National Center for Education Statistics* (2017) UCU graduated nearly 26% of the African American students from the class of 2009, see Table 2. The table also shows there was a 9.4% drop in the six-year graduation rate of African American students from 2002 to 2009 cohort at UCU, nearly twice as high as the statewide drop. At UCU, the percentage of African American students who graduate is declining rather than increasing.

Table 2: National, state, and institutional college graduation rates by race.

	Urban City University	Midwest State	United States
All Students	38.0%	60.7%	59.4%
White	41%	63.5%	63.3%
African American	26% *-9.4% change from the 2002 to 2013 cohort*	33.3% *-5.1% change from the 2002 to 2013 cohort*	39.5% *-1.6% change from the 2002 to 2013 cohort*
Asian	50%	74.6%	72.3%
Hispanic	33%	58.2%	53.6%

Bachelor's degree attainment among African American students is extremely low at UCU, which has an adverse impact on the institution, Midwest state, and the country. Students who go to college and do not graduate tend to have a hard time finding jobs, receive financial assistance from the government, go into default on their student loans, and/or fail to contribute financially to the economy. Historically, African Americans overcame slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow laws, to earn the right to seek a higher education, so it is of concern that of those who do pursue a higher education the majority do not graduate.

History of American Higher Education

The first college established in the United States was Harvard in 1636. There were new colleges established following Harvard including William and Mary in 1693, Yale in 1701, and Princeton in 1746. The early colleges adopted many of the practices of the English and Scottish institutions. The initial purpose of college was to provide White elite men with a liberal arts education and prepare them for the ministry. According to Thelin (2011), "the early collegians were sons of privilege who at the same time were expected to inherit grave responsibilities as leaders and men in a new world where their religion was central and not subject to government or ecclesiastical constraints" (p. 24).

In the United States during the early years, there was a lack of diversity among college attendees. The first colleges enrolled wealthy White men, and for the most part, women, minorities, and the poor did not go to college. There were scholarships available to the less fortunate however most of those families choose to have their sons work to bring money into the household rather than go to school (Thelin, 2011). There was an attempt to diversify the student population by admitting Native Americans. The goal was to educate and convert the Native Americans to Christianity, and it failed miserably, so it was discontinued. The same is not true for African Americans who at that time were slaves. According to Thelin (2011), "There is no record of colonial commitment to the collegiate education of black students, whether in the regular course of study or at special affiliated schools" (p. 30). It took over two centuries for African Americans to be afforded the right to a college education.

History of African Americans and Higher Education

The African American struggle for the right to receive a higher education was a lengthy one. African Americans were brought to the United States in the 1600's as slave laborers and

were deemed inferior to White people, and as a result was denied individual rights including the right to an education (Smith, Altbach, & Lomita, 2002). According to Smith et al. (2002), "Racism was embedded in the nation's foundations, affecting its major institutions, including the institutions of higher education" (p. 4). It was illegal to educate slaves in the United States so when the first college opened in 1636; slaves were not allowed to enroll. Even with the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 that declared all slaves free in the United States, African Americans were denied access to higher education.

Post-emancipation, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) were established specifically for African Americans. The HBCU's were private, nonprofit institutions that did not receive funding from the United States government (Bejar, 2002). In 1873, Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina was one of the first HBCU's established as a coeducational institution for emancipated slaves. Bennett was like many of the colleges and universities for African Americans; it was affiliated with a religious organization that provided funding to the institution. Regardless of the afflictions of the early HBCU's, it was a victory for African Americans after being denied the right to go to college for hundreds of years.

The second Morrill Act was passed in 1890, which resulted in the establishment of Public HBCU's (Thompson, 2002). The southern states established schools under the "separate but equal" doctrine, so White institutions would not have to admit African Americans. Again, this was a victory for African Americans as it presented more opportunities to earn a college education. Even with the establishment of public HBCU's, African Americans continued to fight for equal education under the law. In 1954, African Americans had yet another victory in their quest for an equal higher education when the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling ordered the desegregation of schools. Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Earl

Warren, overruled the *Plessey v. Ferguson* decision and declared the separate-but-equal doctrine unconstitutional (Teddlie & Freeman, 2002). Despite the decision, African Americans still experienced significant resistance to the integration of schools.

The passing of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* assisted in the effort to desegregate schools, but challenges still existed for African Americans within higher education. In 1967, only 2% of African American's were attending the desegregated traditional schools, but by 1975, many them were attending those same schools (Duster, 2009). Over 50 years after the passing of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, the conversation had shifted from equal access to education among African Americans to their retention and graduation (Nguyen, Bibo, & Engle, 2012). Today the number of African Americans who go to college has increased, but there are still problems with retention and graduation among them. Many factors affect college access and graduation among African Americans in higher education including but not limited to economic and racial inequalities and institutional racism.

Foundation of College Student Departure and Retention Research

Research has been conducted for over 80 years to understand college student departure, retention, persistence, and success. According to Braxton (2000), Summerkill (1962) reviewed research by Johnson (1926), and Pantages and Credeeon (1978) reviewed studies conducted between 1950 and 1975. A few of the well-known researchers who laid the foundation for current research on student departure, retention, presistence, and success are Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1993), and Bean (1980, 2000). The models they created are, Spady's (1970) explanatory sociological model of the dropout process, Tinto's (1987) model of institutional departure, and Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of college student retention. Their models have been critiqued, criticized, modified, built upon, and continue to inform the research of today. A

brief overview of their research and models are below.

Spady: Dropout Process

Spady (1970) was one of the first theorists to examine "dropout" in higher education. He realized while there was a lot of research about the phenomena there was still work to be done. In a 1970 article, he stated,

> The task before us, then, is to move beyond a mere summary of available studies of "college success" toward a more interdisciplinary-based, theoretical synthesis of the most methodologically satisfactory findings and conceptually fruitful approaches to the problem (Spady, 1970, p. 64).

He goes on to suggest combining the work that has already been done to create a framework is ideal, so he created a model, the sociological model of the dropout process. The model was influenced by Durkheim's (1951) work on the causal link between two variables (Spady, 1970). The model started with the assumption that the dropout process is best explained using an interdisciplinary approach, with interactions between the student and institution (Spady, 1970). The model suggests,

> the individual student and his particular college environment in which his attributes (i.e., disposition, interests, attitudes, and skills) are exposed to influences, expectations, and demands from a variety of sources (including courses, faculty members, administrators, and peers) (Spady, 1970, p. 77).

There are two possible results of the interaction between the student and college. The first is the student successfully assimilates into the academic and social systems of the college. The second is the student decides to withdraw because the rewards available within the academic or social systems appear insignificant. The model is displayed below in Figure 1.
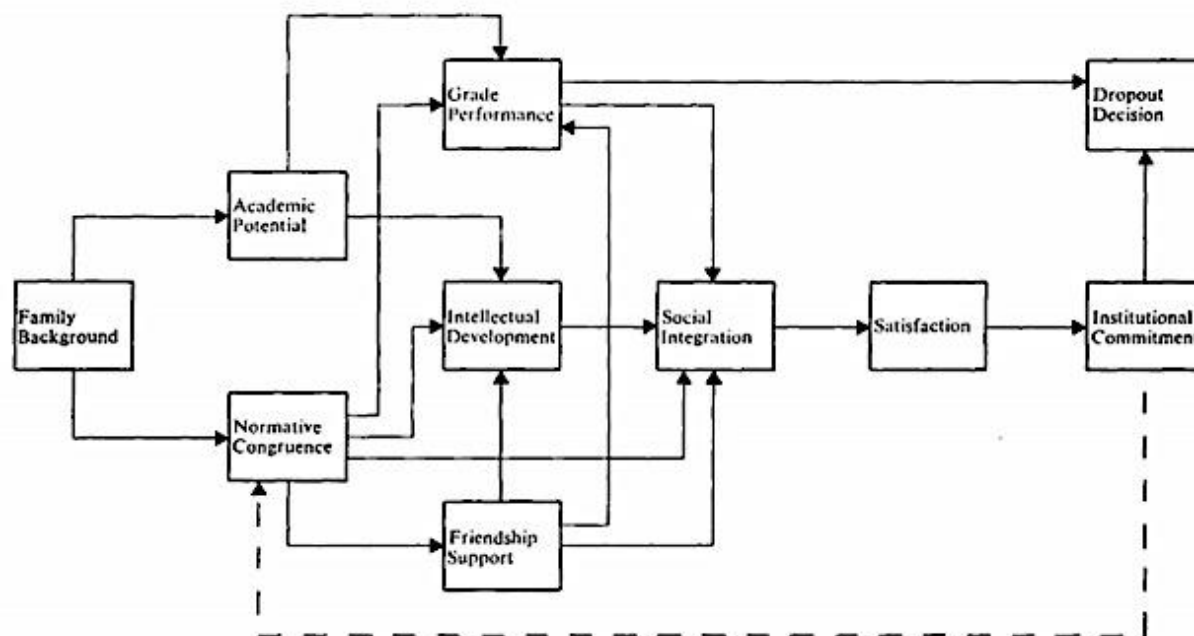
Figure 1: Spady (1970) An explanatory sociological model of the dropout process.

In simpler terms, the model suggests a student arrives at an institution with their family background, which includes family and cultural variables. The student's academic potential or normative congruence, personal attributes that influence the environment, leads to grade performance (extrinsic motivation) or intellectual development (intrinsic motivation). Normative congruence can also lead to friendship support, close relationships with others at the institution, but academic potential does not. A "successful" student then socially integrates with the college or university, which leads to satisfaction and institutional commitment. However, some students drop out because of poor grade performance, or their normative congruence is not aligned with the institution they attend. Also, "the broken arrow leading from institutional commitment back to normative congruence is particularly important as well, since it implies that the model is cyclical and flexible rather than immutable" (Spady, 1970, p. 79). The design of the model acknowledges changes within the individual can affect their decision to dropout or persist. Spade's hope for his model was, "that ideas suggested here will serve both as a reasonable

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synthesis of some of the more consistent findings on college attrition currently available, and as a

worthwhile conceptual framework for guiding further research" (p. 79). Spady's (1970) research

has informed researchers such as Tinto (1975, 1987).

Tinto: Dropout from College

One of the most known theorists who has explored student departure is Vincent Tinto.

Tinto's (1975, 1987) work was influenced by Van Gennep (1960), Durkheim (1961), Spady

(1970, 1971), and Rootman (1972). His research, like Spady's (1960) was heavily influenced by

work done in other disciplines. In 1975 Tinto created a model, he referred to as a "conceptual

schema for dropout from college". In 1987 he updated the model, "a model of institutional

departure," to include student's intentions and revamped his explanation of the academic and

social systems students experience at institutions. Tinto (1987) believed theories of student

departure before his, ignored how college and university social settings impact the withdrawal

process. Tinto (1987) argued,

> Until now we have focused our attention on the environmental condition under which
> departure is likely to occur (namely, inadequate intellectual and social integration into the
> academic and social systems of the institution) and on the delineation of the individual
> dispositions (intentions and commitments) which help explain why certain persons
> experiencing those conditions will in fact depart the institution (p. 112).

The model he created focused on the process that can lead to the differing forms of student

departure from campus. "The model seeks to explain how interactions among different

individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution leads individuals of

different characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree completion" (Tinto,

1987, p. 113). The model in displayed below in Figure 2.

PRE-ENTRY
ATTRIBUTES

GOALS
&
COMMITMENTS (T₁)

INSTITUTIONAL
EXPERIENCES

PERSONAL /
NORMATIVE
INTEGRATION

GOALS
&
COMMITMENTS (T₂)

O U COME

ACADEMIC SYSTEM

FORMAL

FAMILY
BACKGROUND

ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE

ACADEMIC
INTEGRATION

INTENTIONS

FACULTY / STAFF
INTERACTIONS

INTENTIONS

INFORMAL

DEPARTURE
DECISION

SKILLS
&
ABILITIES

GOAL'
&
INSTITUTIONAL
COMMITMENTS

GOAL
&
INSTITUTIONAL
COMMITMENTS

FORMAL

EXTRACURRICULAR
ACTIVITIES

SOCIAL
INTEGRATION

PRIOR
SCHOOLING

PEER-GROUP
INTERACTIONS

EXTERNAL
COMMITMENTS

INFORMAL

SOCIAL SYSTEM

TIME (T) ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯→

Figure 2: Tinto (1987) A model of institutional departure.

Tinto (1987) model suggest both the student and the institution impact a student's choice to persist or depart from a college or university. The model first highlights the student's pre-entry attributes, family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. The model shows how pre-entry attributes directly affect the student's goals and commitments, which include the student's intentions and goals and institutional commitments. The model suggests the student's institutional experience in the formal and informal academic and social systems will affect their ability to integrate. "Interactive experiences which further one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social life of the college are seen to enhance the likelihood that the individual will persist within the institution until degree completion" (Tinto, 1987, p. 115). The model proposes that the integrative experiences the student has affects the students continued formulation of their intentions, goals, and institutional commitments, which may include external commitments. The combination of all those forces over time plays a part in a student's decision to depart or persist. Tinto's (1987) research and model were groundbreaking and continues to inform student departure, retention, and success research.

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Bean: College Student Retention

Bean (1982, 2000) is also a widely-known researcher who explored student departure and retention. Bean (1982) highlighted the importance of considering academic and non-academic variables to understand student departure. He was influenced by Spady (1970), Rootman (1972), Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), Tinto (1975, 1987), and Pascrarella (1980). In 1980, he proposed a synthetic causal model of student attrition. Bean (1982) stressed that the "model is not a full explanation of the dropout process" but "would likely indicate that student's probability of dropping out and some of the reasons why" (p. 25). The model suggests several variables, background, organizational, environmental, and outcome and attitudinal variables along with variables for statistical control (age, ethnicity, year in school, full-time/part-time status, transfer/no transfer, U.S. citizenship, and sex) influence a student's intent to leave. In 2000, Bean and Eaton expanded on Bean's work and created the psychological model of student retention. Different types of theories including attitude-behavior, coping behavioral, self-efficacy, and attribution were considered when creating the model.

> The model falls into the general category of psychological models that are intended to explain behavior, that indicate that a given behavior is a choice, and that assume people are motivated to make choices that lead to or away from any given behavior (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 56).

The Bean and Eaton 2000 psychological model of student retention is displayed in Figure 3.
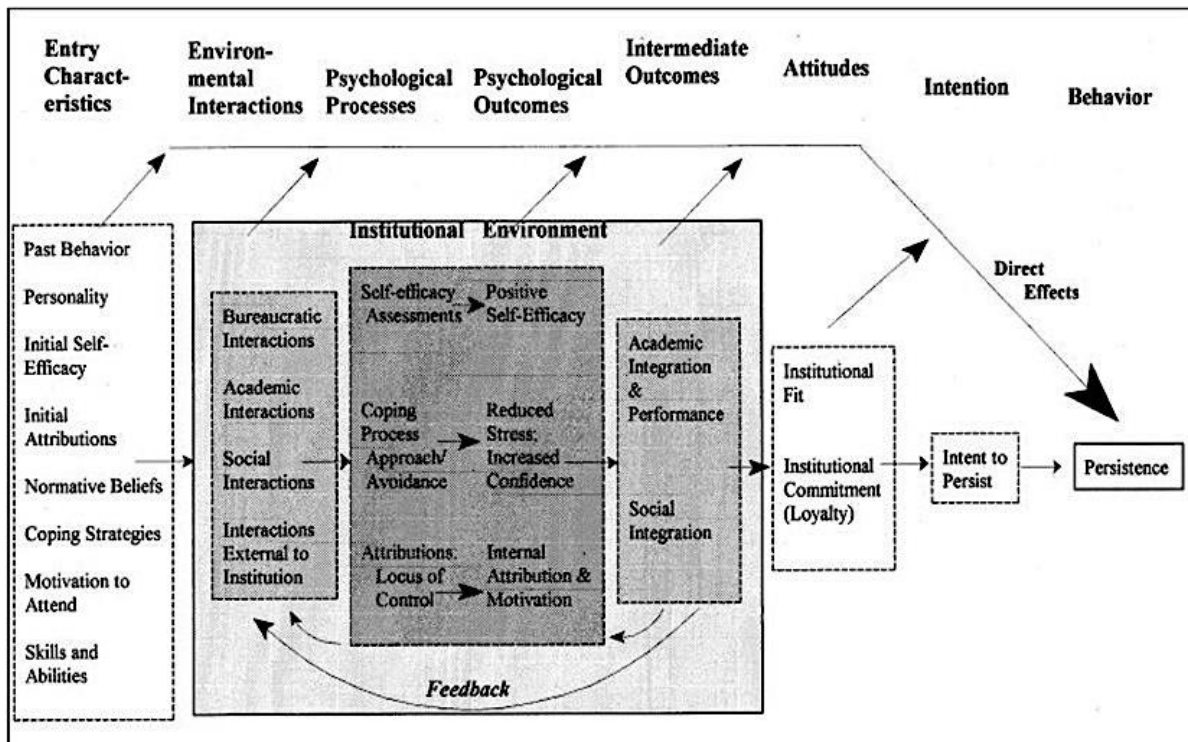
Figure 3: Bean and Eaton (2000) A psychological model of student retention.

Bean and Eaton (2000) model suggests a student's entry characteristics will be affected by the institutional environment which will determine institutional fit and commitment, and their intent to persist.

> Students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics. As they interact within the institutional environment, several psychological processes take place that, for the successful student, results in positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control. Each of these processes increases a student's scholarly motivation. These internal processes are reciprocal and iterative with continuous feedback and adjustment (p. 58).

Bean and Eaton (2000) go on to say, that internal process can lead to college persistence. According to Bean and Eaton (2000), "The model indicates that students are psychological beings and that collective issues of sociology play a secondary role. The social environment is important only as it perceived by the individual" (p. 58). Their work continues to influence research today.

The research conducted by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1987), Bean (1982), and Bean

and Eaton (2000) has informed our understanding of college student departure, retention, and success but it has also been criticized. Early research on college student departure and retention is criticized for taking a deficit approach, for failing to explore the experiences of minority students, and/or to consider the role, racial-ethnic backgrounds play in college student departure and retention (Swail et al. 2003 & Kuh et al. 2006). In the last twenty years' research by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2014) addresses those concerns. Their research takes an anti-deficit approach to understanding the experience of successful minority college students. My research builds on their work, and as a result, their research conceptually guides my study.

<p align="center">**Minority College Student Success Research**</p>

Research on successful minority students by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2014) are highlighted in this section. For each researcher there is a brief overview of a selected body of work and its findings.

Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino: Local Models of Minority Student Success

Padilla et al. (1997) sought an understanding of what barriers successful minority students must overcome to be academically successful. "The researchers sought to identify the campus specific heuristic knowledge and actions that successful minority students employ to overcome barriers to academic success" (Padilla et al., 1997, p. 126). The study looked at 28 minority students at a large southwest research institution. The students were made up of Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, males, and females who were between sophomore and senior status. The study was qualitative and used group interviews. Padilla et al. (1997) findings revealed four barriers students might have to overcome to be

successful in college: discontinuity, lack-of-nurturing, lack-of-presence, and lack-of-resources. "After this taxonomy of barriers was combined with contingent analyses of knowledge and actions data vectors, a local model of heuristic knowledge possessed by successful minority students at the focal university was developed" (Padilla et al., 1997, p. 129). The findings from the study led to the creation of the expertise model of successful students.

Padilla et al. (1997) expertise model of successful students focuses on individual institutions and what steps they can take to ensure success among their students. The model provides colleges and universities an opportunity to create a model of student success that is specific to their college or university. A local student success model for an institution is developed by examining successful students at their institutions. The findings for the model come out of the barriers successful minority students encounter and what strategies they employ to overcome them. In turn, the institution can create systems to remove those barriers to increase the number of students who are successful and graduate. The model identified four categories of barriers to student success among the students at the institution in which the study was conducted: (1) discontinuity, (2) lack of nurturing, (3) lack of presence, and (4) resource barriers. The model is displayed below in Figure 4.
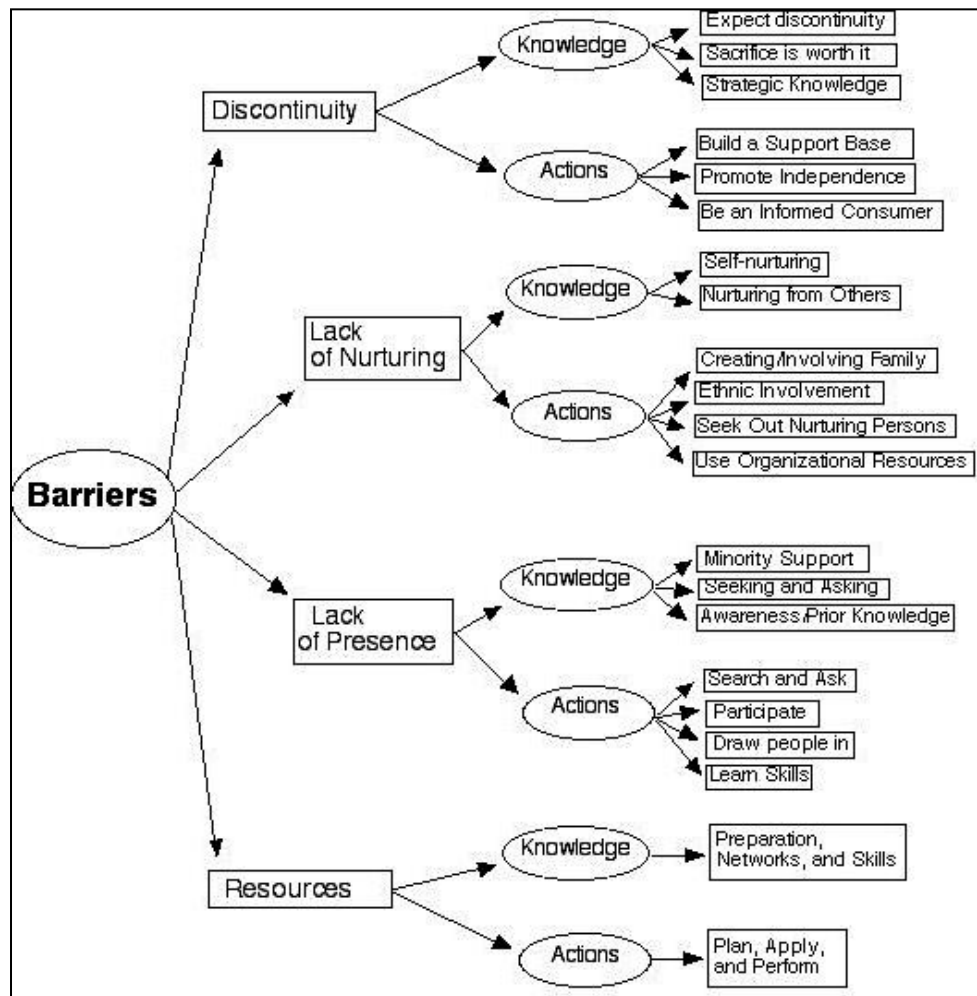
Figure 4: Padilla et al. (1997) Expertise model of successful students.

In the case of the institution studied, the students identified "lack of nurturing" as a barrier to their success. The study showed the students knew self-nurture and nurture from others would be important to overcome the "lack of nurturing" barrier. The model shows, based on what the students knew, what action they took to overcome the barrier. The actions they took included creating a family, involving their family in their lives, getting involved in ethnic groups, seeking out nurturing people, and using organizational resources to get the nurture they needed. An institution would then look at the findings and say; we need to ensure our students feel nurtured. To do so, they may provide each student with a faculty or staff mentor and create a

pamphlet listing the student organizations on their campus to assist in removing that barrier for their students.

Fries-Britt: Experiences of Gifted Collegians

Fries- Britt's (1998) study on achievement among high-achieving students sought to understand their social, academic, and racial experiences. The study examined the experiences of twelve students who were involved in a merit-based STEM scholarship program. During their senior year of college, the students were asked questions around their academic and social integration. There were two significant findings. The first, the students experienced isolation from their peers including among Black students who did not participate in the program. The second was the students felt their involvement in the "race specific" program contributed to their success both academically and socially.

> The benefits cited most often were (1) the resources offered in the program, such as money/scholarship, computer, and tutoring; (2) a community of high-ability Black students with whom they could relate and seek support, and (3) faculty who were aware of the academic ability of the students in the Meyerhoff Program (Fries-Britt, 1998, p. 560).

The findings suggest that the students experienced advantages and disadvantages as members of the scholarship program, but the benefits outweighed the drawbacks. Based on the results of the study, Fries-Britt recommends the creation of programs like the one the students in this study participated.

Swail, Redd, and Pena: Student Persistence and Achievement Model

In 2003 Swail et al. came together to address retaining minority students in higher education. "This ASHE-ERIC monograph is intended as a reference for key stakeholders regarding the realities of and strategies for student retention. It is our hope that it will serve as a "compass for those with the complex task of improving retention" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 6). The

monograph is divided into four parts, postsecondary opportunity, why students leave college, and implementation and leadership. In the first part, post-secondary opportunity, they discuss the benefits of earning a postsecondary education, low educational attainment levels of several minority groups, and the four critical junctures that require attention, to increase bachelor's degree attainment amongst the minority groups. The second part, why students leave college, focuses on factors related to student retention. The third part, a framework for retention, introduces the geometric model of student persistence and achievement. The model is a campus-wide retention model "designed to provide administrators with a strategy and framework to build a student's retention plan that incorporates the individual needs of their students and institution" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 11). The final part of the monograph, implementation and leadership, suggests a short list of essential factors needed to establish a retention program.

The monograph provides a wealth of information on how to retain minority students. According to Swail et al. (2003) researchers identified these factors in student retention: academic preparedness, campus climate, commitment to educational goals and the institution, social and academic integration, and financial aid. In addition, they introduce a model for student retention, Swail's geometric model of student persistence, which "was designed to provide administrators with a strategy and framework to build a student retention program that incorporates the individual needs of its students and the institution" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 103). The model provides insight on essential components required to create a program to retain and graduate minority students. It identifies forces/factors that affect student's experiences, including cognitive factors, social factors, and institutional factors. The model is displayed in Figure 5.
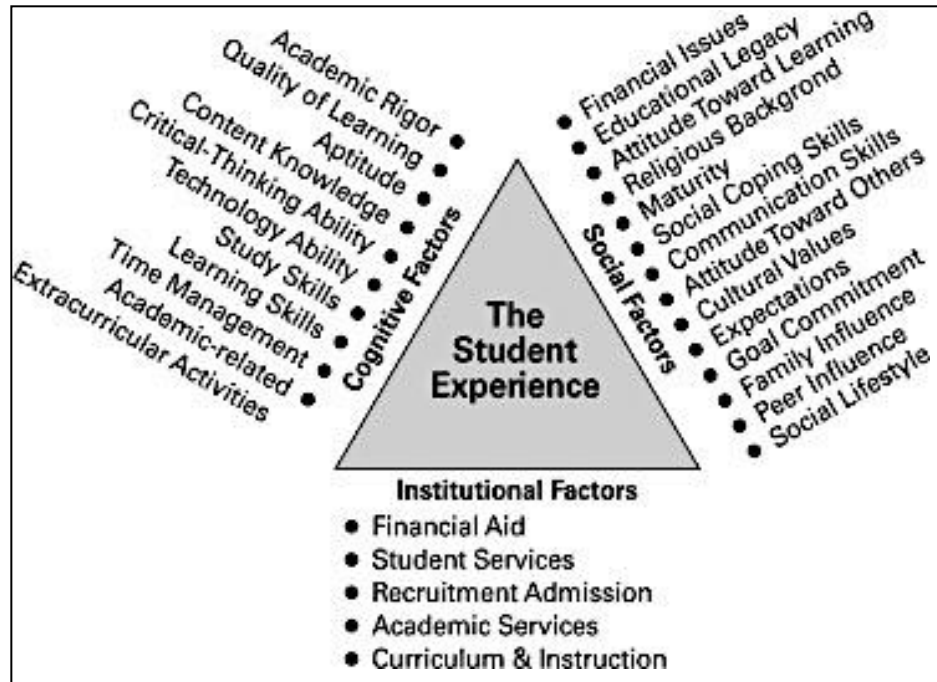
Figure 5: Swail et al. (2003) Geometric model of student persistence and achievement.

The geometric model of student persistence and achievement focuses on student's

attributes and institutional practice with the overarching premise that cognitive, social, and

institutional factors affect the student experience and their ability to persist. The model suggests

three forces or factors affect student's experiences, creating a triangle, with the student in the

center. "The triangle represents the complex set of internal processes within each student that

fosters his or her ability to persist and achieve. The area external to the triangle represents the

outside variables impacting the student's development and decision making" (Swail et al., 2003,

p. 91). One of the three factors influencing students is cognitive, which "form the academic

ability – the strengths and weaknesses – of the student such as the level of proficiency in reading,

writing, and mathematics" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 92). The second is social factors, "such as the

ability to interact effectively with another person, personal attitudes, and cultural history, form a

second set of external factors that characterize the individual" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 92). The

final is institutional factors, "refers to the practices, strategies, and culture of the college or

26

university that, in either an intended or unintended way, impact student's persistence and achievement" (Swail et al. 2003, p. 92). The factors all affect the student's ability to be successful in college.

Griffin: High Achieving Black Students

Griffin's (2006) research study explored the competing theories of high achieving Black college students. The study examined nine Black students at a large research university, males and females, freshman to senior status, and in an honors program. The study was qualitative and used a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Griffin (2006) discovered several patterns among the students who participated in the study. They were successful in high school, happy with their college choice, and their academic motivation came from an internal drive that was influenced by their families, racial background, and academic struggles. The findings from her study "challenges this mono-dimensional deficit framework, examining the motivation of nine Black high-achievers attending a large public university" (Griffin, 2006, p. 384). Griffin suggests no one theory can explain the motivation of high-achieving Black students. Instead there are three, which moves away from a mono-dimensional to a multi-dimensional framework encompassing self-determination, socio-cognitive, and attribution theories. "None of the three theories presented in this study on its own completely accounted for the motivation of Black high achievers in the study; however, each theory was helpful in illuminating different aspects of these students' motivation patterns" (Griffin, 2006, p. 397).

Kuh, Kinizie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek: Student Success Model

Kuh et al. (2006) report attempts to address the critical issues around student success by "synthesizing the relevant literature and emerging findings related to student success, broadly defined" with a goal of developing, "an informed perspective on policies, programs, and

practices that can make a difference to satisfactory student performance in postsecondary education" (p. 3). The report is divided into eight sections: the introduction, definitions and conceptual framework, major theoretical perspectives on student success in college, the foundation for students success, what student behaviors, activities, and experiences in postsecondary education predicts success, what institution conditions are associated with students success, what are the outcomes and indicators of students success during and after college, and repositions and recommendations about student success in postsecondary education. The second section highlights the conceptual framework guiding their analysis, a model created to give a "realistic portrayal of contemporary postsecondary education" (Kuh et al., 2006).

The model, "what matters in student success", identifies several pathways that influence student success. The pathways start with precollege experience and move towards college experience. The college experience is impacted by the student's behaviors and institutional conditions. In the model, student engagement is at the intersection of student behaviors and institutional conditions. The final path is post-college outcomes, indicators of success. Kuh et al. (2006) state the following about the model,

> Instead of the familiar "pipeline" analogy depicted by a direct route to educational attainment, a more accurate representation is a wide path with twists, turns, detours, roundabouts, and occasional dead ends that many students may encounter during their educational career (p. 7).

The model is displayed in Figure 6.
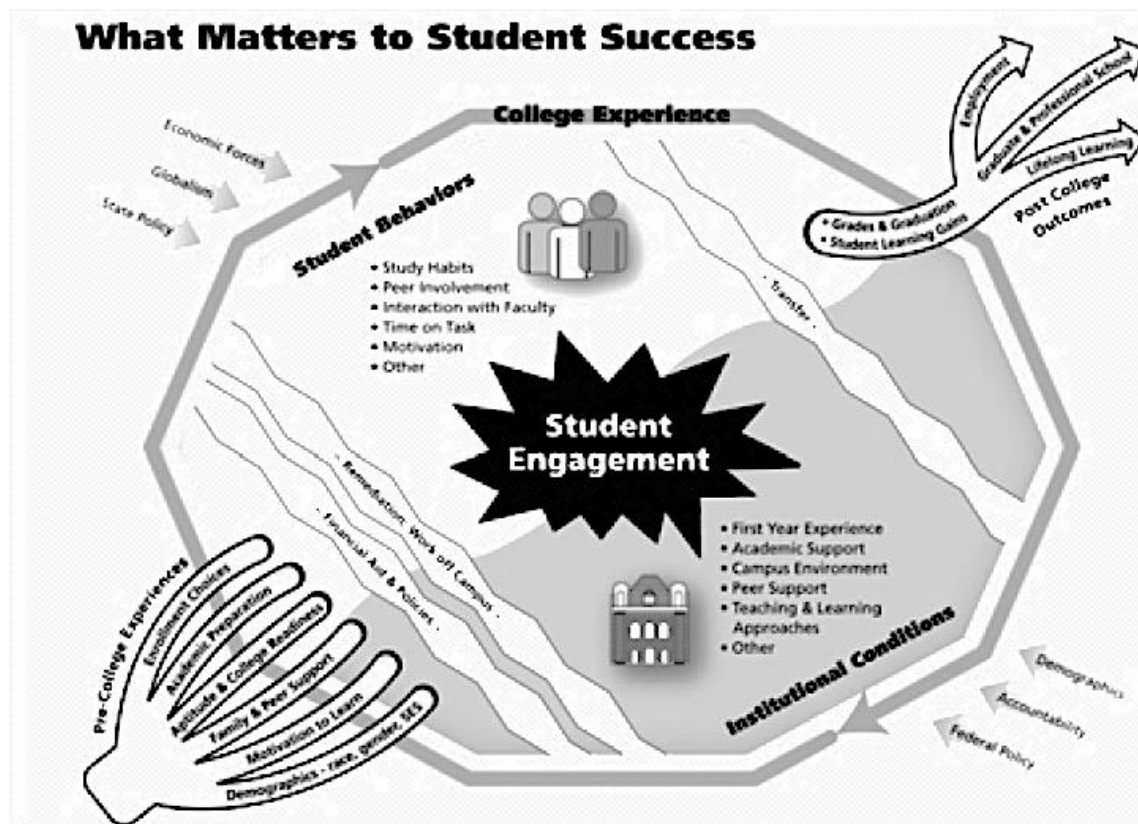
Figure 6: Kuh et al. (2006) What matters to student success model.

The model is designed to show a student's college experience and the factors that affect it. In the model, the student experience is shaped like a decagon. The first path to impact their experience is the student's precollege experience, "academic preparation in K-12 schools, family background, enrollment choices, and financial aid and assistance policies on various dimensions of student success" which directly impact the student's college (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7). Once the student enters college their experience is again influenced by their behavior (studying, involvement, interacting with faculty, etc.) and institutional conditions (first-year experience, academic support, environment, peer support, etc.). The two intersect at student engagement, where the authors focus. Kuh et al. stated,

> we focus on student engagement because it represents aspects of student behavior and institutional performance that colleges and universities can do something about, at least on the margins, whereas many other factors such as precollege characteristics are typically beyond the direct control of the student or the college or university (p. 8).

The model also shows the outside influences and challenges a student may face while in college, such as state policies and financial aid. Lastly, Kuh et al, highlight the desired post-college outcomes that are viewed as indicators of success. The model's design gives a visual representation of a student's experience, which helps institutions as they engage students and move them towards success.

Strayhorn: Grit and Black Male Collegians

Strayhorn's (2013) study on the role of grit in the academic success of Black male college students at predominantly white institutions found a correlation between grit and academic success. Grit refers to "firmness of mind or spirit, unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger" (*Merriam-Webster's*, 2017). The participants in the study were part of a larger study of Black males at 2- year, historically Black, predominantly White, and online colleges and universities. Strayhorn looked at 140 Black male students enrolled full-time at a large predominantly White research university in the Southeast. They were given a Web-based questionnaire with 50 items used to measure four major areas of a college student experience, demographic information, student engagement, student transition and adjustment, and non-cognitive traits. Strayhorn (2013) found, "grit is positively associated with academic outcomes such as grades in college for Black males at PWI's" (p. 7). In addition, "grit positively predicts achievement in challenging domains over and beyond mere talent" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 7). Ultimately, students who had more grit had higher grades while in college and tended to have higher high school grades and ACT scores than their Black male counterparts who were less gritty. "Sustained effort and hard work over time, despite setback or failure, is part, the formula for Black males' academic success in college" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 9).

Harper: Students of Color in STEM

Harper's (2010) study focused, "on understanding why Black men excel instead of adding to the already well-understood reasons why they fail" (p. 66). He originally conducted a study involving 219 Black male students from forty-two colleges and universities. According to Harper (2010),

> most empirical studies amplify minority student failure and deficits instead of achievement. As such we know little about those students, despite all that we are aware of what complicates and undermines achievement for their particular racial groups, manage to successfully navigate their ways to college and through STEM postsecondary pipeline (p. 64).

His study focused on 51of the 219 students who were STEM majors. The students had at least a 3.0 grade point average, were leaders on campus, engaged in multiple student groups, had meaningful relationships with a faculty or staff member, participated in enriching educational experiences, and while in college earned merit-based scholarships and honors. The study was qualitative and involved face-to-face interviews and some follow-up interviews. Harper found that the students had the following in common: before college they were involved in programs that exposed them to higher education, same race peers were critical in their forming a sense of belonging, student groups helped them connect with other minorities, and they had key undergraduate experiences.

The framework provides researchers with a new way to approach their research on student success among African American students. The framework is informed by theories from multiple disciplines including psychology, sociology, and education (Harper, 2010). The anti-deficit framework "includes a series of possible questions that researchers could explore to understand better how students of color persist and successfully navigate their ways to and through various junctures of the STEM pipeline" (Harper, 2010, p. 67). The model identifies three pipeline points: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-

college persistence in STEM. Within the pipelines, nine researchable dimensions of achievement are highlighted: familial factors, K-12 school factors, out-of-school college preparatory experiences, classroom interactions, out-of-class engagement, experiential and external opportunities, industry careers, graduate school enrollment, and research careers. The framework is displayed in Figure 7.
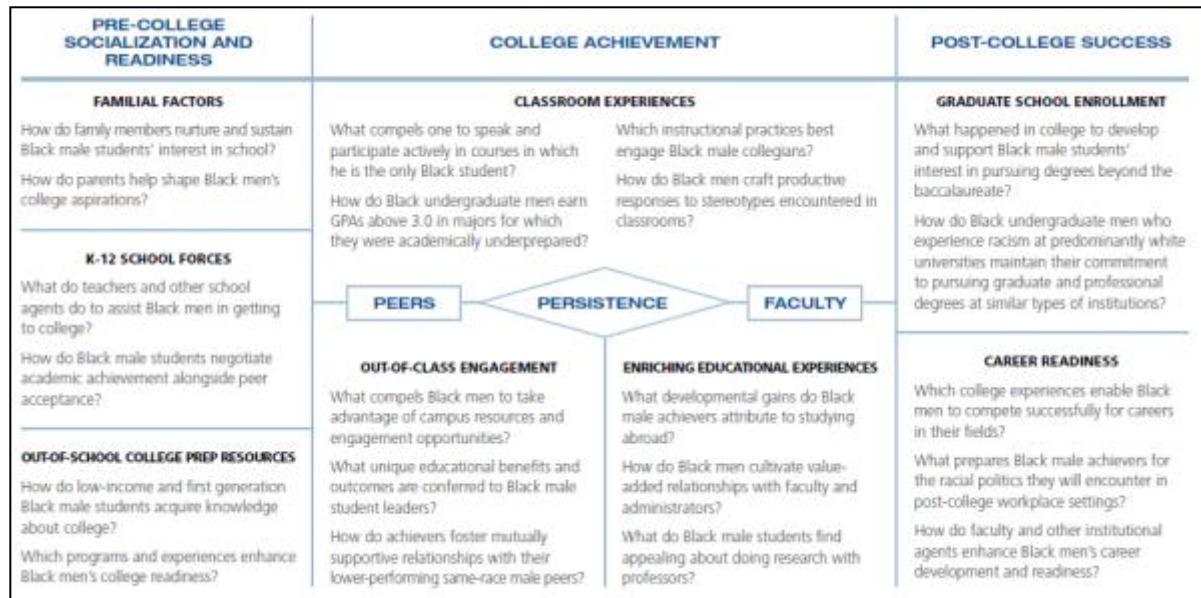
Figure 7: Harper (2010) Anti-deficit achievement framework.

The framework is designed to provide researchers with questions they can ask successful college students to understand what led to their success. The questions focus on three stages in the lives of students that impact college success. The student's responses to the questions shed light on what has led to their success in college. Harper (2010) states,

> While the sample questions provided in the framework are flexible and exchangeable, they are designed to be "instead of" queries that is instead of relying on existing theories and conceptual models to repeatedly attempt to discover how some students of color have managed to succeed in STEM (p. 68).

Harper's (2010) study not only shed light on what factors contribute to the success of Black students in STEM by looking at students who were successful, but it also provided a new framework.

The research done by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (2002), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013) has contributed to the literature on what factors lead to success among minority college students. Their research is informed by Spady (1970), Tinto (1987, 1993), and Bean (1980, 2000), among others. My research study is conceptually guided by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (2002), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013) as their research contributes to what is known about successful minority students and their experiences in college. Identifying what leads to college success among American minority populations is complex and each of the researchers mentioned above have done work to answer the question. Additional researchers have explored success among minority students and many of them could conceptually guide this study. The group chosen to guide my work were chose for four reasons; they all take an anti-deficit approach to their research by seeking to understand why minority students are successful; they focus on specific populations; they explore the student's personal attributes; and they examine the experiences of students within their environments. Combined their work offers a lot of insight into what factors contribute to success among African American students who are pursuing a bachelor's degree. My study builds on what has already been learned from their work.

Common Factors that Contribute to Student Success

Padilla et al. (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013) research, studies, models, and frameworks together provide valuable information on factors that influence student success. Their work is grounded in research by authors such as Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1993), and Bean (1980, 2000). The common factors related to student success that arose from their studies, models, and frameworks

include precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement.

Precollege Experiences

Precollege experiences include any experiences students have before college that expose them to and prepare them for college. According to Kuh et al. (2006), precollege experiences among students influence "whether they will persist and attain their educational objectives" (p. 31). Griffin (2006) found the successful students she studied experienced academic success in high school. Harper (2010) found the participants in his study were involved in programs that exposed them to college while in primary school. Padilla et al. (1996) study identified a failure to have a smooth and continuous transition from high school to college as an obstacle. In addition, Kuh et al. (2006) stressed that research shows precollege experiences affect a student's success in college. Furthermore, Strayhorn (2013) found that students who had more grit while in college not only had higher grades in college they also tended to have higher grades and test scores in high school.

Table 3: Importance of precollege experiences.

Researchers	Further Evidence of the Importance of Precollege Experiences
Padilla et al. (1997)	Successful minority students, "engaged in some mental conditioning before arriving on campus" (Padilla et al. 1997, p. 130).
Fries-Britt (1998)	The participants in the study, "had an average high-school Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.5 on a 4.0 scale, average SAT math score of 621, and the average SAT total score was 1198" (Fries-Britt, 1998, p. 556).
Swail et al. (2003)	"Completing a rigorous curricular program during high school appears to be a more important predictor of college persistence than test scores" (Swail et al., 2003, p. 12).
Griffin (2006)	According to Griffin (2006), "They all experienced significant levels of academic success at their respective high schools" (p. 390).

Table 3 (cont'd)

Researchers	Further Evidence of the Importance of Precollege Experiences
Kuh et al. (2006)	"Who students are, what they do prior to starting their postsecondary education, and where and how they attend college can all make a difference in their chances for obtaining a baccalaureate degree or another postsecondary credential" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 17).
Strayhorn (2013)	According the Strayhorn (2013) "grittier Black males also tended to have higher grades in high school and higher scores on the ACT" (p. 5).
Harper (2010)	The participants identified, "specific programs that exposed them to college and contributed to their readiness for first year math and science courses" (Harper, 2010, p. 72).

Support

Support refers to any support a student receives that aids in their successful persistence towards earning a college degree. Griffin's (2006) study found students gave their parents credit for their success because they encouraged and supported them. Harper (2010) identified the importance of same - race peers and how critical they were in forming a sense of belonging, which influenced the student's success in his study. In addition, he found student groups helped the students connect with other minorities, which was also essential to their success. Padilla et al. (1997) discovered students saw a lack-of-presence of minorities in the curriculum, in the university's programs, and in the general university population as a barrier to success. In addition, those same students found not having supportive resources on campus to facilitate the adjustment and development of minority students as an obstacle they had to overcome to be successful in college. Swail et al. (2003) identified that institutional practices and strategies influence student persistence and achievement, including academic support programming, student services, and academic services.

Table 4: Importance of support.

Researchers	Further Evidence of Importance of Support
Padilla et al. (1997)	Successful students created, "a supportive "family" on campus or involving the student's biological family" (Padilla et al. 1997, p. 131).
Fries-Britt (1998)	The participants in the study received, "an enormous level of support" from the Meyerhoff program (Fries-Britt, 1998, p. 556)
Swail et al. (2003)	Swail (2003) identifies institutions ability to provide appropriate "support to students during the college years both academically and socially" as important to student success (p. 79).
Griffin (2006)	The participants in Griffins 2006 study talked about how their families provided them with support and external motivation.
Kuh et al. (2006)	According to Kuh et al. (2006), "it appears that student perform better and are more likely to succeed when their families affirm their students' choices and encourage them to stay the course" (p. 22).
Strayhorn (2013)	Strayhorn suggested it is important for students to have support such as having supportive relationships with faculty and staff (Strayhorn, 2013).
Harper (2010)	"They also reflected on how same-race peers played a critical role in fostering their sense of belonging in STEM courses" (Harper, 2010, p. 72).

Personal Attributes

Personal attributes refer to students' skills, abilities, drive, self-efficacy, motivation, resilience, actions, behavior, and grit. Griffin's (2006) study participants claimed they came to college with high expectations and aspirations. Their motivation came from an internal drive. That internal drive contributed to their academic success. Swail et al. (2003) identified cognitive factors as a significant influence on student success such as academic ability, strengths and weakness of the student, and social factors such as personal attitudes. Strayhorn (2013) suggests, "achievement is the product of talent and effort" (p. 9). He found students who had more grit than their counterparts did better academically. Grit is a non-cognitive variable, the "firmness of mind or spirit, unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger" (Merriam-Webster's, 2017). The research shows that the students personal attributes can have an impact on their academic success.

Table 5: Importance of personal attributes.

Researchers	Further Evidence of Importance of Personal Attributes
Padilla et al. (1997)	According to Padilla et al. (1997), "successful students was reinforced by specific action strategies associated with making their own decisions, acting responsibly, and "shrinking" the social world of the university to make it more manageable and less overwhelming" (p. 130).
Fries-Britt (1998)	The participants in the study talked how being Black motivated them academically (Fries-Britt, 1998).
Swail et al. (2003)	Swail (2003), believes personal attributes impact student success. They mention maturity, self-efficacy, and self-esteem.
Griffin (2006)	Students emphasized, "the important role their own internal drive played" (Griffin, 2006, p. 391).
Kuh et al. (2006)	According to Kuh et al. (2006) student success is linked to, "self-awareness, confidence, self-worth, social competence, and sense of purpose" (p. 6).
Strayhorn (2013)	"Gritter Black males earned higher grades in college than their less gritty same-race peer" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 5)
Harper (2010)	The participants had experiences that influenced "their commitments to science research" (Harper, 2010, p. 72).

Involvement

Involvement refers to a student's involvement in student groups and activities. Research shows student involvement plays a significant role in college student success. Their involvement on campus not only gives them a stronger connection with the institution; they also develop a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2013). Students who can connect with others at their institutions tend to do better academically than those you do not. Padilla (1996) found "that successful minority students join or establish ethnic organizations, create a supportive "family" on campus, and develop their academic skills" (p. 17). The students who participated in Harpers (2010) acknowledged the importance of student groups while in college.

Table 6: Importance of involvement.

Researchers	Further Evidence of Importance of Involvement
Padilla et al. (1997)	According to Padilla et al. (1997) Successful students joined or created clubs.
Fries-Britt (1998)	The participants in the study were all a part of the Meyerhoff program (Fries-Britt, 1998).
Swail et al. (2003)	Swail (2003), highlights the importance of social factors in student success and suggest campus participation is an important factor.

Table 6 (cont'd)

Researchers	Further Evidence of Importance of Involvement
Griffin (2006)	The participants in Griffin's (2006) study were all a part of the university's honors program.
Kuh et al. (2006)	"There seems to be a link between participation in certain out-of-class activities and persistence vis increased student commitment to the institution and to earning a degree" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 44).
Strayhorn (2013)	Black males' academic success is a function of, "purposeful engagement in campus activities and student organizations" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 2)
Harper (2010)	According to Harper (2010) the participants, "established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations" (p.66).

Engagement

Engagement refers to students' interactions with faculty, staff, students, and their peers. "The more students are academically and socially engaged with faculty, staff, and peers, the more likely they are to succeed in college" (Tinto, 2012, p. 7). Swail et al. (2003) highlighted the importance of social factors to student success "such as ability to interact effectively with other persons" (p. 93). In addition, as Kuh et al.'s (2006) framework suggests, students' engagement intersects with student behaviors and institutional conditions and plays a significant role in student success. "Student-faculty interaction beyond the classroom is positively correlated with personal growth in areas of leadership, social activism, and intellectual self-esteem, and academic as well as social self-concept" (Kuh, 2006, p. 84).

Table 7: Importance of engagement.

Researchers	Further Evidence of Importance of Engagement
Padilla et al. (1997)	Successful students sought, "out nurturing persons, regardless of ethnicity, such as special friends, faculty members, staff members, or other students" (Padilla et al. 1997, p. 131).
Fries-Britt (1998)	The participants had contact with faculty and with "Black professors outside of math and science" (Fries-Britt, 1998, p. 561).
Swail et al. (2003)	According Swail (2003), "Colleges should try to promote informal contact between faculty members and students to build trust, support, and motivation during the college experience (p.103)

Table 7 (cont'd)

Researchers	Further Evidence of Importance of Engagement
Griffin (2006)	Griffin (2006) study focused on the importance of internal drive in a student's success but acknowledges he impact of external forces such as interactions with faculty.
Kuh et al. (2006)	According to Kuh et al. (2006), "student persistence and success are related to the extent to which students interact with supportive adults on campus, both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 41).
Strayhorn (2013)	Black males' academic success is a function of, "supportive relationships with university faculty and staff" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 2)
Harper (2010)	According to Harper (2010) the participants, "developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom" (p. 66).

The work done by Padilla et al. (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013) identified precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement as important to minority student success. The researchers each studied select minority populations and combining their findings gives a broad understanding of success among all minorities. For my study, the factors will be applied to the African American population to understand success among them.

Anti-Deficit Research Approach

The early research on college student departure and retention took a deficit approach to their research as they sought to figure out why students do not graduate rather than why some do. Researchers who take a deficit approach to their research look at what students have done wrong that has led to their departure from an institution (Padilla et al., 1997). Deficit thinking is the process of trying to understand the causes of failure within a person or among a group. "The deficit thinking mode is a form of pseudoscience in which researchers approach their work with deeply embedded negative biases, pursue such work in methodologically flawed ways, and communicate their findings in proselytizing manners" (Valencia, 1997, p. 10). Padilla et al. (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010),

and Strayhorn (2013) are among researchers who take an anti-deficit approach to their research. Harper even created an anti-deficit achievement framework.

Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework was created for a national Black male success study. The framework consists of questions researchers can ask study participants to shed light on three pipeline points in the college going process, in addition to eight researchable dimensions. "The framework inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition" (Harper, 2012, p. 5). Harper's framework is an example of an anti-deficit research approach. The purpose of my study is to take an anti-deficit approach to understanding student success so I adopt aspects of Harpers anti-deficit framework specifically, the examples of anti-deficit questions he provides in his framework. According to Harper (2012) the framework,

> includes some questions that researchers could explore to better understand how Black undergraduate men successfully navigate their way to and through higher education and onward to rewarding post-college options. This framework is not intended to be an exhaustive or prescriptive register of research topics; instead, it includes examples of the anti-deficit questioning employed in the National Black Male College Achievement Study (p. 5).

The questions I ask in my study are outlined in Appendix A.

Chapter Conclusion

African Americans' quest for an equal higher education has been a lengthy one. They now have the right to earn a postsecondary degree, however, most of those who set out to obtain one do not. There has been a wealth of research on why students do not graduate which is grounded in work done by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1987), and Bean (1980, 2000). More recently researchers are taking an anti-deficit approach to understanding student success among minorities but seeking to understand why they graduate rather than why they do not. Those

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researchers include but are not limited to, Padilla et al. (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013). Their work informs our understanding successful minority students and their experiences on college campuses. Their research together identifies five factors that led to success among minorities including, precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement.

My study is conceptually guided by Padilla (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013), because their research focuses on successful minority students and seeks to understand what lead to their success. In addition, I take an anti-deficit approach to my research by using three strategies; asking anti-deficit questions of study participants to understand their family, K through 16 experiences, and what they believe lead to their success, by not focusing on the barriers they may have overcome to be successful, and by highlighting the common themes they believe lead to them earning a bachelor's degree. While my research is conceptually guided by work done by others, it builds upon and contributes to the literature on success among African Americans at predominately White institutions.

My research will add to what is known about African American college students, their experiences in college, and what leads to their success at predominately White institutions. The African American population is diverse. To paint a clear picture of the experiences of all African American students several things need to be taken into consideration including, gender, personal characteristics, family, precollege experiences, high school academic achievement, institutional type, major, etc. It would be a challenge to account for all of the above, so like the researchers who guide my study I too seek to understand a select population within the African

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American community. My research study contributes to the understanding of African American, male and females of various majors, at a predominately White institutional from an anti-deficit approach. The hope is my research, along with work by others, will provide institutions with a better understanding of African American college students, their experiences, and what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among them. In turn institutions can use what is learned to provide students with environments that will give them experiences like the successful students and ultimately increase college graduation among them.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to take an anti-deficit approach to understanding what factors result in bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans. The study features the examination of eight African American students who have proven to be successful in their pursuit of earning a college degree at a predominately White Midwest institution, Urban City University (UCU). This chapter details the methods I used to conduct this study by highlighting my research questions, giving an overview of my methodology and conceptual framework, exploring my methods, data collection, data analysis, and narratives, and discussing the consideration for human subjects, my credibility and reflexivity, and the study limitations.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors do African Americans who earn bachelor's degrees from predominately White institutions identify as important to their academic success?

2. How do the factors successful African Americans identify contribute to their success?

Overview of Methodology

This research study is an interpretive qualitative design. Using an explanatory sequential design, data was gathered through in-depth interviews with eight African American students who had earned a bachelor's degree or were successfully pursuing a degree from UCU. The data was used to identify themes that contributed to the African American participants' attainment of a bachelor's degree at UCU. My study is conceptually guided by common factors that arose in studies by Padilla et al.'s (1997), Fries-Britt (1998), Griffin's (2006), and Strayhorn (2014), models by Swail et al. (2003) and Kuh et al. (2006), and a framework by Harper (2010). The

common factors identified amongst all the studies, models, and the framework were precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement.

Conceptual Framework

My research study is conceptually guided by the studies conducted by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (1998), Griffin (2006), and Strayhorn (2014), models by Swail et al. (2003) and Kuh et al. (2006), and a framework by Harper (2010). The researchers use an anti-deficit approach to understand student success by looking to successful students to identify what factors led to their success. The findings from their studies, the models, and Harper (2010) framework, highlight the factors that lead to success among minority students. The factors that are common amongst them all include precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement. The factors they have in common are strengthened as they all identify them as factors that lead to success among minority college students. The common factors inform and guide my study.

Anti-Deficit Research Approach

The anti-deficit research approach I use for my research study seeks to understand why some students do graduate from college by exploring the experiences of successful students. Padilla et al. (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013), are all researchers who have taken such an approach, which is one of the reasons they conceptually guide my study. I too take an anti-deficit approach to my research. I employ three strategies when conducting my research. I first seek to understand why some African American's are successful in their pursuit of earning a bachelor's degree. I believe by understanding their experiences we may be able to create similar experiences for all African American students and increase graduation rates among them. The

second is I ask anti-deficit questions of my study participants to gain an understanding of their family and K through 16 experiences, which is aligned with Harpers (2010) anti-deficit framework. The anti-deficit framework provides questions researchers can ask participants to yield a more holistic understanding of what has led to their success. For example, rather than asking participants why African American's are not ready for college after high school, you would ask what leads to college readiness among African American's (Harper, 2010). The third is the questions I ask do not focus on what obstacles they may have overcame to be successful. Rather than ask the participants what barriers they overcome while in college to be successful, I ask them to tell me about their experience in college which will yield that information without them focusing exclusively on their struggles.

Methods, Data Collection, and Analysis

Methods

Qualitative research is the interpretation of the reality of populations as they experience it. According to Merriam (2002a), there are several key characteristics of interpretive qualitative research. The first is the researcher's desire to understand how people make meaning of their world and experiences. The second is that "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (p. 5). The third characteristic of qualitative research is the researcher's use of the data collected "to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories" which is an inductive process. "Typically, findings inductively derived from the data in a qualitative study are in the form of themes, categories, concepts, tentative hypotheses, and even substantive theory" (p. 5). The final characteristic of qualitative research is "richly descriptive; rather than using numbers like quantitative research, words and pictures are used to describe the phenomenon" (p. 5).

My research study employs a basic interpretive qualitative research design. According to Merriam (2002a), in basic interpretive qualitative studies, "the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon…" (p. 6). My study seeks to understand what commonalities exist among African Americans who graduated from a predominately White institution. To answer that question, I did semi-structured one on one, in-depth interviews with the eight participants of the study.

Interviews. Interviews took place on the campus of UCU in a private room located in the main library. The participants picked the date, time, and location on the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. There was an interview protocol that was followed during the interviews however the interviews were semi-structured, "The semi-structured interview contains a mix of more and less structured questions" (Merriam, 2002a, p. 13). The participants were asked predetermined questions about their families, K through 16 experiences, and what they attribute to their ability to earn a bachelor's degree at a predominantly White institution. Follow-up questions were asked when the participant did not provide enough depth when answering a question. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to select a pseudonym to ensure the confidentiality of their identity. After the interviews, the pseudonyms were used for the remainder of the study and in all written material.

Data Collection

To gain access to the desired research site and participants, I obtained approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at Michigan State University (MSU) and administrative officials at UCU, the institution where the research was conducted. Once I received the official documentation from MSU's IRB, I reached out to the university register. I submitted all the proper documentation to her and then she sent out an email on my behalf to students who met the

demographics of my desired population. The word spread about the study so I employed the snowball sampling technique which is when you, "obtain knowledge of potential cases from people who know people who meet research interest" (Glesne, 2011, p. 45). There were university officials and study participants who forwarded my email to individuals who met the participant criteria.

Participants Selection. Participants selection was based on whether they met the desired criteria. Participants had to meet the following criteria at the time of the interview: (1) must identify as an African American, (2) must have a cumulative grade point average of a 2.0 or higher, and (3) must academically be at a senior class standing which is 100 credit hours or more or a winter 2014 or fall 2015 graduate. The number of participants sought was six, three males and three females. Thirteen students responded and expressed interest in participating in the study and eleven were interviewed. Eight of the interviews were used in this study and three were not. One did not meet the desired participant's criteria, the other interview was incomplete, and the last one had a significant relationship with me as I had served as his mentor for several years. The final sample consisted of three males and five females.

Site Selection was specific as the goal was to conduct my research at a predominately White institution who had a low graduation rate among African American students as the hope is this study will ultimately increase the number of students who graduate from the site institution. UCU met the desired characteristics so it was selected as the site institution. UCU is a comprehensive Midwest institution located in an urban city. The total student enrollment is slightly higher than 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. It is a predominantly White institution with over 66% of the students identifying as White and a little over 13% identifying as African American. According to the *National Center for Education Statistics* (2017), among

undergraduate students at UCU, the four-year graduation rate is 9.4% and the six-year rate is 37.5%. Among African American students, the four-year rate is 1.3% and the six-year rate is 20.5%.

Data Analysis

The data for this study was retrieved from in-depth one on one interviews. The interviews were transcribed word for word and coded. The patterns and themes in the data were pulled out and analyzed.

Transcription. Transcription of the interviews was done by me. The transcriptions were verbatim and included observed pauses, laughter, and non-verbal's. No identifying information was included in any of the transcriptions; participants were referred to by the pseudonym they chose. In addition, all names, hometowns, cities, schools, student groups, programs, offices, and buildings were changed to ensure the identity of the participants were not reviled. All transcriptions included precisely what was stated by the participants. Each participant was sent a copy of their transcribed interview to review and check for accuracy.

Coding. Coding is the process of defining the data by analyzing it. I employed open coding with the data I collected. Coding allows you to immerse yourself in the data. When analyzing the data, you assign a code to explain what is going on with the data. Once the data is coded, it is grouped together based on similarities in the code. The data was further analyzed to uncover any themes among the interviews, "use the coding to generate a small number of themes or categories" (Creswell, 2009, p. 189).

Emergent Themes. Emergent themes were discovered using thematic analysis searches for themes and patterns within the data. Once the data was coded and grouped together based on similarities, it was analyzed to identify any common themes. The data is categorized to see

patterns in it (Glesne, 2011). The themes were put in charts to do further analysis which is common in qualitative research studies (Creswell, 2009). The chart helped identify the common themes and to make comparisons. The themes assisted in helping me understand what factors contributed to the success of the participants of the study and if those themes are the same as what the research shows as factors that contributed to success among African American students. Chapter five will include the themes that arose from the study.

Narratives

The compiling of the themes that came out of the interviews was important but the individual voices of the participants were just as important. Each participant's story is told in Chapter 4 in the form of a narrative. "Narrative research employs restoring the participants' stories using structural devices such as plot, setting, activities, climax, and denouncement" (Creswell, p. 184). The narratives highlight several aspects of the participant's lives as it relates to education and them earning a bachelor's degree. Rich, thick description was used when writing the narratives in addition to the introduction and findings. Glesne (2011) defines rich thick description as "description that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description) but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action" (p. 35).

Consideration of Human Subjects

In an effort to respect the rights and privacy of the participants in my study, I met with them in private spaces, I followed my interview protocol precisely and assigned them pseudonyms. Those who chose to participate in the study contacted me via email. Once they confirmed their willingness to participate in the study, they were asked to select the day, time, and location they wanted to meet. They met with me one on one in a private room located in

UCU's public library for the interview. Prior to the start of the interview, they were given a copy of the letter of consent to review. Once they reviewed the letter, the audio recorder was turned on and I recited the letter of consent to them. They were asked if they had any questions about the contents of the letter, and they gave verbal consent to the contents of the letter and the interview. In addition, they were reminded of their rights before the interview. After the interview, the participants selected pseudonyms to protect their identity. In addition, any identifying information in their responses was changed including names, hometowns, cities, schools, student groups, programs, offices, and buildings.

Credibility

The purpose of this study was to identify what commonalities existed amongst a sample of African Americans who graduated from a predominately White institution. There were two things I felt were imperative for me to do. The first was to accurately record what each participant said so their truth was heard and their individual truths are highlighted in chapter 4. The second was to tell their collective story which meant I had to understand their individual experiences to accurately identify the commonalities that existed amongst them to tell their collective story accurately. To achieve those two things, I used a form of triangulation, which was my way of shoring up the internal validity of my study (Merriam, 2002b). Gibbs (2007) stated the following about why triangulation is important, "It is always possible to make mistakes in your interpretation and a different view on the situation can illuminate limitations or suggest which of competing versions is more likely" (p. 94).

The triangulation I used included my collecting data through one on one in-depth interviews and via email. I also took notes during the interview to record non-verbal's that gave further insight into what the participants were saying. In addition, when transcribing the

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interviews, I used rich, thick description by including sighs, laughter, and pauses, which gave further insight to what the participants were saying. Lastly, I sent each of the participants a copy of their transcribed interview so they could ensure what I recorded and interpreted was accurate and they could add additional information if they felt it was missing. I did all of the above to ensure the validity of what the data that was collected (Glesne, 2011).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative research. According to Glesne (2011), "reflexivity generally involves critical reflection on how researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other" (p.151). As a result, I remained conscious of my position throughout this project. "Position tends to refer to aspects of one's person that are not necessarily embodied in the person and include both ascribed characteristics (nationality, ancestry) and achieved characteristics (educational level, economic level, institutional affiliation, etc.) (Glesne, 2011, p. 157). My research interest and understanding of student success among African American students from an anti-deficient approach is shaped by who I am as a person.

I am like many of the students I have worked with and the participants of my study. I was born and raised in a low-income inner city in a single parent household. I attended one of the top public schools in my community but at the time of graduation, I was underprepared for college. I was admitted to an institution in the state in which I grew up. The institution was comprehensive and predominately White. I graduated from that institution in four years with my bachelor's degree. At my graduation, I saw a dismal number of students who looked like me walk across that stage. I thought to myself, what were the differences between me and my Black peers who did not graduate. I then thought back to a comment an admissions counselor said to

me when I was admitted, "Based on your ACT score you will not be successful in college." In that moment, my desire to understand why some Black students graduate from college was born.

I have spent the last 14 years working in student affairs striving to ensure the success of all students. And because of my personal experiences, I seek out opportunities to help Black students in their academic pursuits. I feel an internal obligation to give back to the Black community and I do so by helping Black students understand the college-going process and reach their academic goals. While my professional experience has been in housing and residence life, I mentor Black students, do presentations on the college going process for Black students and their families, and during my personal time I offer a variety of support to high school and college students who are working towards reaching their academic goals.

In addition, I believe to understand college degree attainment among African Americans most of the research explores why they do not graduate or what barriers they overcome to be successful. I believe that approach is limiting, as there are students who graduate like me and some do not face obstacles when pursuing their degree. When we focus on obstacles we may overlook other features of undergraduate experience. My research seeks to understand commonalities among African American students who earned a bachelor's degree from a predominately White institution from a non-deficit approach. The results of my study will give a complete picture of the students' college experience, beyond the challenges they faced.

During the duration of the study there were several aspects of my position I often reflected on. There were the obvious similarities between the participants and me so I often had to check my preconceived thoughts about Black people and their lived experience. In addition, there was a power dynamic between me and the participants as I was employed by the institution at the time the study was conducted. To remove the possibility that the students would feel

pressured to participate in the study the announcement of it was sent out by university officials. I did not send anything out nor did I ask anyone personally to participate in the study. Also, those who expressed an interest in participating in the study were asked what day and time they wanted to meet and where they wanted to meet. My leaving those decisions to them was my way of giving the power back to them. In addition, during the interviews, I asked the participants the same questions and reframed from inserting my own experiences as much as possible. Lastly, there were times when the participants would say "you know" or "you already know" as they were aware of the similarities amongst us and at those times I asked them to go into more detail to get their perspective rather than me interpreting what they were saying.

Limitations

There are always limitations to research studies. The limitations of this study involve my relationship to the selected site and participants and my own personal biases and perceptions. The site is a large, predominately White, four-year public institution. It is in a low-income inner city that is known for its high poverty and crime rate. The site was selected because of its low graduation rates among African American students. Because of the uniqueness of the institution, the findings may not be true for African Americans at other colleges and universities.

The second limitation is the population and sample. The desired population was African American students who will earn or have earned a bachelor's degree from UCU in 2015 or 2016. Those who met the criteria for the study were contacted by two different university officials and were asked to participate in the study. There were 11 people interviewed and eight became study participants. There were three who were not included, as one had earned his Master's degree in 2015, the other had a significant institutional relationship with me and the interview lacked content due to it, and the final person did not answer the questions in depth and the interview

was less than 20 minutes long. In addition, not only did all the participants graduate from the same institution, they identify as Black or African American and were born and raised in similar communities with five of the eight being from the same city. The specific population of this study means that the findings may not be transferable to other populations but they are significant for similar populations and institutions.

The third limitation is my relationship to the site where I was employed at the time of the interviews. The call for people to participate in the study was sent out be two different university officials. This was done initially to ensure no one felt pressured to participate in the study.

There were two problems that arose that may be related to my affiliation with the UCU. The first was, two people reached out to me to participate in the study and were scheduled for interviews and neither of them showed up to the interview. My assumption is that once they realized who I was they decided not to participate. I had several conversations with one of them in relation to her behavior in the residence hall and the other mistrusted anyone she viewed as part of the administration. The second problem was a concern about their privacy if they were critical of the university, although they were told that everything they said would be kept confidential. There is the possibility that these participants were not as open during their interviews because of my affiliation with the site institution.

The final limitation is my personal bias and perceptions. My research interest is a result of my personal experiences which is also where my bias comes from. I believe the research that seeks to find ways to increase college retention and graduation by solely focusing on why students do not graduate or the barriers they overcome to be successful is limiting. There is a wealth of information that can be learned from students who are successful in college. In addition, only focusing on the barriers students overcome to be successful is an inaccurate

representation of what led to their success. I believe successful students make decisions that result in them avoiding some obstacles. For example, during my last two years of college, I held leadership positions that provided me with free housing. I had no financial challenges while in college because of the benefits I received from those positions. If a researcher were to only ask about the barriers I overcame they would not know about the good decisions I made to avoid a financial barrier. Knowing about the decision I made to avoid the financial barrier could be helpful to students who are striving to be successful in college who may be short on funding. Because of my experiences and personal beliefs, my research seeks to understand why students are successful in college by getting a clear picture of their entire experience.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I detailed the methods I used to conduct this study by highlighting my research questions, giving a brief overview of my methodology and conceptual framework, by outlining my methods, data collection, and data analysis, and discussed narratives, the consideration for humans, my credibility and reflexivity, and the study limitations. The methodology I used for this study is instrumental in my ability to take an anti-deficit approach to understanding what factors result in bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS

In this chapter, I introduce eight African Americans who earned bachelor's degrees from a predominantly White institution, which I refer to as Urban City University (UCU). The chapter begins with a summary of the student portraits and then goes on to offer a brief overview of each of their families, K through 16 experiences, and what they believe lead to them earning a bachelor's degree from UCU. The portraits shed light on what they believe contributes to bachelor's degree attainment among African Americans at predominantly White institutions. Each participant was interviewed for sixty to ninety minutes and answered follow-up questions via email. Some of the quotes highlighted in the student portraits were edited for clarity. The interview protocol appears in Appendix A.

Table 8: Participant portrait summaries

Participant Name	De'Ron	Valerie	Soledad	Briana	Sonny	Jeff	Danielle	Ashley
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female
Hometown	Urban City	Urban City	Urban City	Township near Urban City	Urban City	Urban City	Township near Urban City	Inner City near Urban City
High School Graduation	June 2010	June 2010	June 2011	June 2011	June 1990	June 2011	June 2011	June 2008
Semester of Enrollment	Summer 2010	August 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2011	Summer 2011	Fall 2008
Admit Type	Standard	Standard/ Readmit	Standard	Standard	Transfer	Trial*	Standard	Trial*/ Readmit
Semester/Year of Graduation	Spring May 2015	Spring May 2015	Spring May 2015	Spring May 2015	Spring May 2016	Spring May 2016	Fall December 2015	Fall December 2015
Years to Graduation	5 years	5 years	4 years	4 years	22 years UCU- 4 years	5 years	4 ½ years	7 ½ years

A Trail admit is a student who does not meet regular admissions requirements but shows potential to do well academically. They are admitted to the university and are required to be a part of the Opportunity program.

<center>**Participant Portraits**</center>

De'Ron: "You better go to college boy"

De'Ron graduated from UCU Spring semester 2015. He excelled academically graduating with a 3.75 with a bachelor's degree in Music. His academic excellence resulted in him earning the highest academic honor a student can receive at the time of graduation. De'Ron has accomplished a great deal because of the people in his life and his will to never give up or give less.

De'Ron was born and raised in an inner city that is known for its high murder rate and rapid economic decline following the departure of a major industry. He was raised by his mother but his grandmother and stepfather, who he refers to as his dad, were very active in his life. Although no one in De'Ron's immediate family graduated from college, his family encouraged, pushed, and supported him academically.

> They were generally accepting and approving of a college education. Some of them were more direct than others, you know, you better go to college boy (laughter). But they all spoke very highly of college education and of the value that would have and you know, modern day, especially my grandmother.

His family ensured that he knew the value of an education and had the tools needed to excel at all his academic pursuits.

De'Ron was fortunate to have a family that was present during his childhood. He recalls their involvement in his life early on. "Parent teacher conferences my dad was always there and for like major events," and "as far as tutoring and what not, my grandmother was always there for that. She encouraged me to do the best that I could in classes, gave me as many tricks as she knew." His father was invested in his development so he used games to contribute to his learning.

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My father had a computer and he focused very intensely on just basic development so he would get me games. All the games he would get me would have either moral supplies or they would be good for critical thinking.

De'Ron would beat a game and his father would buy him a new one. This went on for years and he credits the games for contributing to his cognitive development.

De'Ron's family contributed to his learning and his teachers and friends shaped his understanding of college, its importance, and his desire to enroll someday. During his junior year of high school, his life as he knew it changed and he started questioning whether he wanted to go to college.

"I remember in high school I actually had a bit of a personal crisis because I didn't know if I actually wanted to go to college anymore, this was right after my grandmother had passed." The passing of his grandmother forced him to explore his desire to go to college. His grandmother, whom he described as "brilliant" had not finished college, encouraged him to excel academically so he could go to college and be successful. After she passed away he struggled with why go; "I didn't know if I wanted to do college anymore because it felt like I was only doing it, basically, to fulfill her wishes." Fortunately, two teachers sat down with him and had what he called "brief but powerful" conversations with him about what he should consider when deciding if college was right for him.

They both very plainly said that there are some things that we have to do that we don't love doing because, you know, it's the way life works sometimes. You just have to gravitate and do it but if you can help it anyway, do what you love because you know, why not kill two birds with one stone as it were. So I went to college as a musician.

De'Ron began attending UCU immediately after he graduated from high school, Summer 2010. Entering college, he was academically prepared thanks to his family, the programs he participated in during his K through 12 years, his high school teachers, and older friends he visited when they went to college. In addition, he was focused; his academics took precedence

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over everything else. "I figured well, why sell myself short, why only do the less, be better than." He adjusted well to the academic rigor of college. "The first week or so of classes I will be utterly gun ho and I will be willing to get as much work done as humanly possible. By about week five I wanted nothing to do with anything else ever again relating to homework." Therefore, he adjusted and came up with a system that worked well for him. He made the decision to "knock out this big thing first and then I'll get around to the other ones maybe".

De'Ron enjoyed learning and explored a variety of subject areas, "certain subjects had begun to interest me and I kind of changed my single-minded focus from just music and started branching out into different areas". His exploration sometimes resulted in him needing additional help so he sought out help from tutors and faculty. "I figured to myself if a C is average and I'm riding right on the cusp of a C, if I am in C territory I should probably go and look at a tutor. If I'm in D territory which happened a couple times I am in desperate need of a tutor." He also found the faculty to be helpful which he appreciated especially when it came to math. "Back when I was doing physics and calculus classes for my math credit the teachers were always very supportive, encouraging. They would sit with you and even though they had their posted office hours."

De'Ron had always done well academically and college was no different. Even when he faced a challenge, he rose to the occasion like with his math requirements. De'Ron learned that while he did well on his placement exams in algebra and geometry he did not do well enough to place in basic calculus. He managed to graduate from high school without taking a trigonometry or calculus course, which was unusual. Because of his placement score, and his lack of academic credentials from high school, he was placed in a pre-calculus course. "I looked at it and saw oh pre-calculus and I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

They advised me to simply do pre-calculus because everything else I'd pass them with flying colors. So, I did my pre- calc. I basically learned trigonometry on-the-fly which was nice. Went to calculus I, passed by the skin on my nails basically. Then did my calculus II.

De'Ron ended up with an A in calculus II. Although calculus was a challenge, De'Ron took it on and went above and beyond. "I was one of the students, at least I like to think so, where I had the tenacity to say forget this, this just means I am going at it at a harder point, you know, it's not impossible."

De'Ron was serious about his education and earning good grades but he found time to participate in the student choir, work a variety of jobs during his tenure in college, and hang out with friends. The choir gave him an opportunity to do what he enjoyed and get involved in the community. In addition, he had to work for financial reasons and often changed jobs to accommodate his class schedules. He eventually started using his musical talents to make money. "I started trying things as a freelance musician and that helped, being able to play guitar at a function or whatever was always nice. Being able to doodle around on the piano or sing at something was nice." Many of his friends were involved in the arts so he spent time with them studying or just hanging out. De'Ron appreciated the people in his life and anyone he met as it presented him with an opportunity to learn.

De'Ron attributes his knowledge to everyone he has encountered. He makes it a point to learn something from everyone and he views them all as mentors to him in some way, shape, or form.

Virtually everyone that I came in contact with, or maybe it's just my personal beliefs on this kind of thing, but virtually everyone I came in contact with was a mentor of sorts you know. I personally feel that everyone that you run into will teach you something whether it's what to do or what not to do.

He learned from many people but it was his family that truly shaped him.

De'Ron's academic foundation came from his family, they offered support when they could, and their inability to support at times taught him self-reliance.

> Most of the support (from family) was emotional. My entire family is in a state of poverty in general. You know, most of the members of my family sit below the poverty line and they are all hard-working. My mother just recently was deemed unable to work because of a physical disability. So she personally sits below the poverty line but she's barely making it and she's content. She's like I worked my entire life and I've done nothing but work and my body wouldn't let me keep working. So I'm glad that there these that, you know, say hey you're not you're not worthless, you know, you're not useless you just can't do it anymore. And my father day in and day out, same job, the same thing, you know, teaches music on the side, that's nice. But basically, all the support had to come from within because they just didn't have it to give.

While his family did not have a lot to give him financially, they gave him knowledge and when times got hard and he needed a place to live his father took him in followed by his mother.

> There was a time where I'd attempted to move out, you know, try to make things work out on my own. That fell apart because I didn't have anyone to split the cost of bills with and I didn't have anyone to assist me in things. And so my father was actually very gracious and let me stay with him for a bit. I hadn't stayed with my father during the precursor to going to college but he allowed me to stay with him in order to you know, help me finish school. And my father moved near the end of my stay and so my mother lets me move back in with her at that point. Basically, because she was like you know you're already this far I don't want to see you like fail at this point.

De'Ron did not fail and it had a lot to do with his determination and his family.

De'Ron attributes his ability to earn a bachelor's degree to his grandmother, family, his own tenacity, and the variety of people he encountered. De'Ron's grandmother truly shaped his academic foundation; he gives her credit for his "academic strength". He also said his ability to earn a college degree was because he had, "the tenacity to get it done". He goes on to talk about how much of an impact peoples' willingness to help him had on his life. "So if I need something and this individual can help me, it doesn't matter their race, their class, their creed, their color, it just matters that they can help. That's what put me through and that's what got me where I am."

Currently, De'Ron is actively using his music degree. He is working with local groups and doing independent contract work. Most recently, he played in a musical. He is now considering going back to school to earn a master's degree in a field related to music. When asked if he was a successful student he said the following,

> I like to think that I was. I know I can be a bit of a perfectionist so, a lot of the time what one individuals measure of success is not necessarily mine. Yeah, some people say oh well you know, you did really great on that piece or you did really great on that assignment and I'm sitting here kicking myself on the tail end because, you know, it wasn't up to my personal standard. But on the whole, for completion sake and for achievement sake, I believe so.

De'Ron's story is inspiring as his sheer determination, willingness to learn from others, and support systems not only led to him earning a bachelor's degree but the highest academic honor a student could receive at the university. In an email message De'Ron stated, "One thing that I should hope is that, through your research, other aspiring students may see a bit of themselves in my words and experiences and become confident to pursue a higher education with that sense of camaraderie."

Valerie: "I'm going to Rome"

Valerie is a Fall 2015 graduate of UCU. She graduated with a 3.1 in International Business. Valerie's paternal aunt's refusal to let her fail and the students and staff she surrounded herself with pushed her to persevere and achieve.

Valerie and her older brother were born and raised by her mother in Urban City. Her father was not present during much of her childhood as he lived in California. While she did not have a significant relationship with her father, she was close with his family whose academic influence proved to be instrumental in her success. Valerie's mother has an associate's degree, her father has a high school education, and her brother has attended college off and on over the

years but has yet to earn a degree. Valerie was encouraged by her family to get good grades and she knew early on that she wanted to go to college and earn a degree.

Valerie's desire to go to college grew out of what she observed among her family members. Most of Valerie's maternal family members did not have college degrees and they worked in the medical field specifically in nursing homes. In contrast, most of her paternal family members are college educated and include a psychologist and lawyer. Valerie decided early in her life she wanted to follow the example of her paternal family members and go to college. "I made a decision that looking at both sides that, I don't wanna say I directed my own educational goals but, I kinda saw both paths and decided which way". Her desire to go to college and the latter part of her K-12 experience played a major role in her earning a college degree.

Valerie attended public schools through middle school but in the ninth grade, she was admitted to a charter school. Her experience at the charter school started to prepare her for college. "K through eighth, I was in public school and I would say, and I mean there was no preparation for college." "But then when I went to Charter School, that's (college) pretty much all I heard about. It's like, you know, that's when ninth grade they started giving us syllabus." The charter school she attended was truly college preparatory. The teachers pushed the students academically and put measures in place to ensure each student had access to college by requiring students to gain admission to a college before they could graduate. Valarie earned good grades while in high school but was not involved in any extracurricular activities for a significant amount of time. "I wasn't involved in any activities consistently. Like (silence) nope. I was kinda forced into basketball because I'm so tall (laughter) but I just never really liked basketball. I quit, so I just, I never did anything."

Valerie always knew she wanted to attend college near her home and that made her decision to go to UCU easy. She was familiar with UCU because she had friends in the university's early college program. She spent a lot of time on campus hanging out with her friends so she knew a great deal about UCU's campus. Valerie's mother did not know much about college so she was not necessarily helpful when it came to applying to and selecting a college. "Well for me like, cause my mom isn't really... she knows about college and she tries to look up stuff." Valerie decided on her own to apply to UCU because she was familiar with it and it was close to home. "I lived in Urban City, you know, I was also, as a high school student, exposed to UCU because I have friends that go to Early College, that went to Early College. So I was, I kinda knew where things were on campus and I was like why not, you know."

Around the time she applied and was accepted to UCU, the home she shared with her mother was burglarized. Valerie's mother was concerned about her safety, as the Urban City community they lived in was deteriorating. Valerie's mother encouraged her to live in a residence hall off campus that was privately own.

> I was living with my mom, and we were living on the north side of Urban City where she had owned a home for I don't know, 18 years, for as long as I can remember but the neighborhood got progressively worse. So when we were, I was 17 and like our house had got broken into and they took our stuff and we just kinda didn't wanna stay there. So mom, she like encouraged me, really encouraged me to live in an Off-Campus Residence Hall while she figured out wherever she's gonna do.

The independence Valerie experienced her first year of college proved to be more than she could handle, "I applied, got accepted, moved into the residence hall, and then lost my mind".

The freedom of living on her own and surrounding herself with the wrong group of people lead her down the road of academic dismissal. Valerie always knew she wanted to go to college and be in the same sorority as the women in her paternal family. As a result, during her first year of college, she surrounded herself around other students who also wanted to join the

sorority. Those students were not a good influence and with her growing up in a very strict household, she consumed herself with her new social freedom rather than her academics. She was a UCU student, lived in a residence hall, had friends with similar interests, worked at the mall, but she also failed several courses during her first year of college which resulted in her being placed on academic probation.

Valerie spent the summer after her first year of college working at Amusement Park in Ohio and during that time, she decided she was not going back to college. Fortunately, Valerie's aunt decided she was going back to college and forced her to go to Urban City Community College (UCCC).

> Yeah well, freshman year... I was 17, in Off-Campus Residence Hall, probably failed six classes. My first year went to go work at Amusement Park. Came back, decided I was just not gonna go to college and it just wasn't for me (laughter). And then my Aunt who was city attorney at the time, she like forced me to go to Urban City Community College because I was on academic probation here for failing like ten classes or whatever I failed.

Although she was resistant, she enrolled in UCCC and could continue living in an Off-Campus Residence Hall.

Valerie's time at UCCC and the people she began to surround herself around changed her life. While living in Off-Campus Residence Hall she met an international student from African Country who she eventually started dating. She credits him for being a positive academic influence on her. "Seeing someone who was super studious I guess it just kinda influenced me in a way, in a positive way because I was, constantly drifting away from academic work (laughter)." "I don't think, I would have been as successful, because I am also competitive and I feel like, I was competing (laughter). So I don't know if I would have been as successful if I had not met him when I did." After one semester at UCCC, she applied to UCU and was readmitted. She went back to UCU and this time around, she was focused.

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I stayed there for a semester and I realized that I do not want to be at UCCC, at all. And then I reapplied at UCU and I got back accepted here. And then after that, it was pretty much a game of catch up. Trying to get my GPA where you know I thought it was acceptable from, you know, having a first year that was terrible.

Valerie began to thrive, she was living in a residence hall near campus, developed a great social circle, was studying often, got a job on campus, got involved in a student group, and had her Aunt's support, so she was on the right track.

Valerie found herself intrigued by different cultures so she started to explore, which changed her life forever. She started to learn about different cultures and ultimately changed her major from psychology to international business. She landed a job in the international center, and while working there, her supervisor turned mentor encouraged her to study abroad. Valerie reflected on her mom's response to her decision to study abroad, "I went home to my mom, I'm like mom, I'm going to Rome. She's like, (laughter) where is Rome! You don't have a passport, you never been on a plane! Where! Who are you going with? Oh! I'm going by myself. No, no you're not!" Valerie stepped outside of her comfort zone and went to Romania alone for seven months and it changed her. Valerie studied abroad, participated in student groups, developed significant relationships with faculty and staff, and worked hard academically.

Valerie loved her major and the class sizes afforded her the opportunity to truly engage with faculty and other students in and outside of the classroom.

In the business school, they were not that big, I don't know about other schools on campus. We have a pretty small class size, you know, about, maybe the biggest class I've had was like 40 students but usually there around the average should be around like 20. I've had classes of 10 before.

She also established significant relationships with her faculty. "I went to office hours a lot. I still talk to a lot of my professors. They mostly know me by name because I ask a lot of questions (laughter) so yeah, I was very interactive with my professors."

Valerie began doing well academically once she adjusted her approach to college level work. "I don't think it was... any harder than my high school work. Like I think it was just like I said, I just really had to learn my habits of studying". In addition, she utilized tutors often, even when she did not need one for the purpose of developing relationships.

> For most math classes I went to see a tutor consistently. A lot of the business classes I actually went to go see a tutor. Cause, not every time was like I desperately needed a tutor but it was kinda like it's good to. I learned that it was good to have a relationship with a tutor so that they understand, you know, how your learning or what your level is so when you really do need to go to them they're not trying to learn you and teach you something at the same time.

She also spent a lot of time in the library studying alone or with her friends.

Nearly four years after enrolling in UCU for the first time, she graduated with her bachelor's degree with honors. She identified support systems, engaging with a diverse group of people, and self-motivation as factors that helped her earn her bachelor's degree. When asked if she was a successful student she said, "I think I was successful for the most part, besides my first year as I was telling you. I just kinda, I was 17, and I just probably lost my mind for a year (laughter), I did, but, yeah, I was successful." After graduating, she earned a job in Urban City as a clerk in the Planning Department, a job she started working just before she graduated. She has since earned a promotion and is a graduate student.

Soledad: "Stay in them books"

Soledad majored in psychology at UCU. The Spring semester of 2015 she graduated with her bachelor's degree after four years with a 3.75 grade point average, which is considered high honors. Soledad spent her childhood trying to reach her grandmother's high academic expectations and as a result, she excelled academically throughout her entire academic career.

Soledad, her younger sister, and older brother were raised by their grandmother in the heart of an inner city that is known for its high crime and poverty rates. Her grandmother was a

registered nurse and her grandfather did not earn a high school education and worked a blue-collar job. Although she was not raised by her parents, she knew her mother earned an associate degree or two and her father is a minister but she does not know what level of education he attained. Soledad's grandparents pushed her to excel academically. "My grandfather would always say, "Stay in them books!" She goes on to say he is from Mississippi and when he moved to Urban City to work at local industry her grandmother had to fill out his application for him. Her doing well academically was important to her grandparents and her grandmother expected nothing but the best from her. "She wanted me to get good grades. B no, B+, A-, no, you're not, that's not something that's acceptable. And I always wanted to live up to her expectations." She said, "When I bring home the report card I would make sure it was like A+'s, 4.0's".

The pressure Soledad received from her grandmother was overwhelming and she wanted to get away so she could be free. She attended a high school in Urban City where fights and behavioral issues were common. "I went to Urban City High School and it's like, not the best school. It could be better but they did not, I feel like they didn't really prepare me for college like I had to prepare myself". She knew her only way out of her grandmothers' house was going to be college so she worked hard to ensure she would be able to go to college. Soledad was not allowed to participate in non-academic extracurricular activities during her K through 12 years. She was not allowed to go to dances, including her prom, so she used academic programs to get out of the house. She reflects on that time in her life, "She would want me to get involved, with the academics. And I wanted to get involved so I could get away from home (laughter) because I didn't have any like, really like any social life at all, so I tried to get involved." Soledad was a part of Student Council, National Honor Society, Gear Up, Youth Explore, and a program

through UCU for high school students who were interested in a profession in healthcare. In addition, she sought out every opportunity to learn to ensure she could go to college. "I would ask my counselor; can I take this ACT book home. And I would just like go home and study it because I knew how important that was to like get out."

The pressure Soledad received from her grandmother, her own drive to get out of the house, and the support she received from a high school counselor and a teacher made college attendance a reality for her. Soledad's high school counselor gave her an out. She would allow Soledad to help her with projects outside of the classroom, which provided her with experience and opportunities to get out of the house. "I would help her with blood drives and stuff. Volunteer, volunteer things that we did." Soledad applied for every scholarship that she came across and her English teacher helped her with her applications. "When I was writing my scholarship papers I would send it to her and she would look them over and tell me what I need to change." Soledad earned so many scholarships that with additional financial aid like grants she graduated from college with no student loan debt. "Yeah so, I was really downing myself but I was like I have nothing to lose cause, I go home, do nothing, you know, so I'm just gonna write instead so I applied for many scholarships and I had my whole undergrad paid for through scholarships and grants."

The aid she received from UCU and their nursing program is the reason she decided to attend UCU. Soledad was familiar with UCU's nursing program because she participated in a precollege program they had. In addition, she participated in a summer program in Urban City that provided high school students with jobs in the summer and Soledad worked as a teaching assistant at UCU. "I wanted to become a nurse so UCU had a great nursing program and I got accepted to other universities but they weren't giving me enough money. So I was like, I'm just

going to UCU cause it would be cheaper." UCU gave her an opportunity to go to college for free in a familiar environment that was close to her home. Soledad decided to attend UCU and eventually graduated from high school with a 3.85 and a 23 on her ACT. She enrolled in UCU in the Fall of 2011.

Although Soledad lived near UCU she decided to live in the on-campus residence hall so she could be free from her home life. "I lived like 15 minutes away. Never really went home because... my life, the home life, wasn't really something. I just wanted to get away." Soledad reflects on the day she moved out of her grandmothers' house and into the residence hall. "It's funny because the day that I moved into the dorms, is another day that my grandmother and I got into like an argument, and I was like yeah, I'm just ready to leave like I've been waiting for this day." Soledad would spend the next four years of her life at UCU excelling academically and staying focused on her goal to graduate. Her desire to never move back home, to be a good role model for her siblings, and her personal goals kept her motivated. She learned a lot while in college and faced some obstacles but she did not let anything stop her from accomplishing what she set out to do.

Her first year of college went well as she focused on doing well academically. "Well, my freshman year I just went to class and went to my room (laughter) cause I didn't really know anyone and I didn't want to fail, so I made sure I studied and like did well. I studied as much as possible." She "stayed in them books" and did not have much of a social life but it paid off for her academically. She did well despite earning a C+, which haunts her to this day. "I had that C, that C+ and I regret it cause I could've like graduated with a 4.0." The limited knowledge Soledad had about the college going process resulted in her working harder rather than smarter. She did not understand the college-going process so she found herself in situations that were not

ideal. "I had chemistry at eight in the morning and that was the worst class ever. I didn't have

the book, oh my goodness, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know any resources on

campus." Despite the challenges, she faced she learned quickly and adjusted to college life.

The academic rigor of college was not a challenge for Soledad as she learned at a young

age that studying is what you had to do well academically. When asked how she felt about

college level work she said, "I felt like for me, I thought it was easy, maybe it was just my

classes". She talked about a course she had with a professor that was difficult and everyone told

her not to take.

> Everyone talked about like, do not take him you're going to fail, blah, blah, blah. He is so
> hard. He was hard but I still passed with like an A but he did a curve for that (laughter).
> So I don't know what I would have got but it was really difficult. I just had to like study
> and I had to like meet up with people in the class and stuff. As long as you like put your
> effort in and make time for it.

By this time, Soledad understood not only what it took to be successful academically she was

aware of resources that could help her. She also began to interact with her peers academically

and socially.

Soledad was involved in several different student groups including Major Student

Organization, Psi Chi, and Christian Fellowship. "My sophomore year, I got involved with

different organizations, like I got involved with the Major Student Organization and then I found

like friends through that and then I knew of more, like honor societies, so I like got involved with

Psi Chi." Soledad's faith in God was important to her so she joined a Christian student group.

> Christian Fellowship, now that really helped me out. I had like a small group Bible study
> that we would have and we would reach out to people. And I was too shy to do that but I
> would meet new people through that, in the dorms and also on campus, to develop the
> leader in me. And then we went on different mission trips so being able to go aboard, that
> really opened my perspective on different things.

Through Christian Fellowship, she developed a stronger relationship with Christ, found spiritual support from her peers, met new people, continued to grow out of her shyness, and traveled abroad to Jamaica and Japan. For the first time, she had a social life that was not necessarily connected to academics.

Soledad had good relationships with many faculty and staff members through the classroom, student organizations, and campus jobs. The most significant relationship she developed with a faculty member was with Dr. Heinz, a psychology professor.

> I did an internship and she's my internship professor (Dr. Heinz). We had an internship class and it was just like how she would check up on me and then how she would write feedback and stuff. I would talk to her about everything. I still talk to her now. So it seem like, just seeing a women in psychology, because I wanted to go into psychology, with her doctorate teaching. Successful just very like together with her life, I was like I want to be like that.

She also developed a close relationship with a staff member who was her supervisor and she sees as a mentor.

> Tammy Pace is as a very good mentor because she's strong in her faith as well. And she's just, how passionate she is about the students there and like how she makes time and she stays late for work and I see all the things that she does. She takes on a lot and like she's like the, I feel like the glue of the office.

The relationships she developed with faculty and staff was much more important to her because she did not have a healthy relationship with her grandmother or parents.

Soledad excelled academically, developed significant relationships with her peers, staff, and faculty, and grew in many ways as a person. Her experience at UCU was life changing. She graduated from UCU with high honors and she attributes her success to getting involved, meeting with faculty, and using resources. Soledad believes she was a successful student because "I've had a lot of hardships that I dealt with at home and where I grew up. Just making it through college. I know some of my siblings, they are not doing the best. So being an example for

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them." She goes on to say she attributes her success in college to, "branching out of my comfort zone. Like being a part of different organizations even though I didn't know anyone. Meeting with my professors and my just getting, using the resources on campus."

Today Soledad continues to aim high and achieve higher. She works in student affairs at one of the top public research institutions in the world. In addition, she will begin working towards her master's degree in the top student affairs program in the nation in the very near future.

Brianna: Big Shoes

Brianna graduated from UCU with a 3.2 in the Spring of 2015. She earned a bachelor's degree in Healthcare Administration in four years. Brianna was destined to be successful. She grew up with supportive parents, a great role model in her brother, was involved in a precollege program that prepared her for college, and she had a great network of friends.

Brianna was born in and spent most of her life in Urban City Township. Her parents raised her along with her older brother and younger sister, in the same household. Her parents were involved in every aspect of her life and encouraged her to do well academically. "If I could describe my parents (laughter) involvement, they should have a plaque in every school that I went to, for the most involved parents from kindergarten all the way until 12th grade." Her father and brother both attended college so she had family that could help her understand the college-going process. Her father attended a university but dropped out after his father passed away. He recently earned an associate's degree in business from a local community college. Her brother has earned a bachelor's and master's degree and is now working on a doctoral degree. Excelling academically was expected in her family so she often felt pressure to do well. "It (education) was stressed from every angle in my family, from my mom side to my dad's side to my brother." She had big shoes to fill with her brother being successful and had to be a great

role model to her younger sister who also was an excellent student and the top of her class. Her involvement in a precollege program through UCU proved to be helpful as she strived to meet all the academic expectations set before her.

Brianna's understanding of college and its importance was shaped by her family and the precollege program, Motivation Scholarship Program (MSP) through UCU. The MSP program exposed middle and high school students to college. She started the MSP program in middle school and participated through college. She met some of her best friends and study partners through the program.

> MSP was a college prep program. Like we did the ACT prep all the time. Every Saturday, getting up early on a Saturday to come down here and study. They had us like, we had different assignments every year from Mr. Brace. He would have us writing, making sure that you're doing the right format if you understand these formats, you know. We had tutoring available. The office was always open for us to come in if we had questions. They hired personal tutors if you need help with a specific subject.

In addition, one of the advantages of being a part of the program was if a student fulfilled all the requirements, they were admitted to UCU and awarded a scholarship that paid their tuition and fees for at least four years. While in high school, Brianna was also involved in other academic based programs and she played sports. Her involvement in activities outside of the classroom had a positive impact on her socially and academically.

Brianna always knew she was going to go to college so there was never a doubt that she would go. "I just always have been surrounded by people who were like, get an education, it can get you a lot further." She graduated high school with a 3.5. When it came time to decide what college to attend UCU rose to the top for several reasons. The MSP program made UCU look very attractive as it provided her funding to attend and exposed her to the academic side of college. Her brother showed her the social aspects of college life at UCU as he was a student

when she was making her decision about where to attend. Lastly, UCU was close enough to her

home that she could live there while taking classes.

> So it was a scholarship, familiarity, and comfortability. Like, I felt like this was a good
> start for me. And I don't like big. Like Main Campus is very beautiful but I don't like
> big I need small. It's more personable to me like I can go to a professor and have that
> conversation and the professor knows my name. At other schools, I feel like you really
> have to fight hard to get that relationship. And here it was easier for me to just go to their
> office hours and they remember my name.

Brianna was accepted to UCU for the Fall 2011 semester.

Brianna was prepared for college but her first semester she encountered challenges that

she fought to overcome. Brianna knew the UCU campus, understood the college going process,

and knew what she needed to do to do well academically, however, she struggled in the

classroom. Brianna started her first semester in college as a biology major and quickly learned

she did not want to pursue a degree in that field.

> I was bio before healthcare administration and the bio classroom environment, I went
> from having, being in a small classroom to having 199 students. Classrooms were very
> full, people fighting over seats, one professor, and an hour and fifteen-minute class,
> where the notes aren't on the board.

She also struggled because one of her biology professors had made it clear he did not like

teaching, which made it hard for her to learn.

> And it was hard because my professor was not the nicest professor in the world, he was
> very aggressive and kinda of rude. I tried to understand the reason he was like that. He
> didn't like teaching in the classroom, he was a field biology professor. But they had him
> teach every semester in the classroom. And he was like this is my semester to teach and I
> really kinda don't wanna be here so. It was one of those situations so I'm like okay.

She also found math to be a challenge but the math faculty were more understanding and helpful

than the biology faculty.

> Her first year of college also brought other problems in the classroom. My first semester I
> did have a very, I don't know how to put this without saying, don't want to say racist
> situation. The chair of the department, so she had an issue, with myself, another friend of
> ours, and three people who came from the scholarship program with me... And we had a

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situation where she made a comment saying that she wanted all the black people to stop sitting together. But we were kinda confused because none of us were sitting together. And she constantly picked on us five specifically every class, no matter what."

There were a few meetings to discuss the climate in the classroom and the fairness of the grades different students received. Brianna made it through the course but that was not the last of her encounters with the chair of the department.

And then when I moved along and I decided to change my major and then I realized I had to deal with her again, I'm like I can't, like I, I just can't. So I tried to be cordial because at the end of the day it's really not about her it's about me and my education as long as I'm taking care of my business it really didn't matter how she felt about me. And she eventually went on to apologizing but is still kinda didn't do enough for me.

Brianna did develop positive relationships with additional faculty members that she still talks with today. "There are multiple people that I met outside of my department and within my department that have contributed to a good college experience for me. I did have issues and when I had the issues, I took it to those people and they helped me figure it out or communicated better."

Brianna took her education seriously so she took advantage of campus resources. She went to tutoring, participated in study groups, and learned to trust her team members. Brianna failed one of her biology courses her first semester and when she took it a second time she passed it because of a tutor. "I did retake Bio 111 and I passed because of him." She also studied with her friends. They used flash cards and gel pens to study. "And me and Jessica just checking each other like okay so you remember this, we'll study in the University Center before an exam. Study the night before, we make flashcards." She later learned the importance of trusting her classmates because her higher-level courses required her to work in groups. "I learned how to work with other people, depend on other people and that's kind of what I do at

my job now. We have to work as a team, it's a team effort, one team handles this part and then you move on to the next team."

She was involved in several student groups, developed significant relationships with faculty and staff, and worked on campus. Brianna was involved in student groups that gave her an opportunity to do service and give back to others. "Cultural Major Student Organization and Sigma Gamma were my main and PT (Physical Therapy) were my main things cause it involved giving back." She also developed positive relationships with faculty members that she still talks to today.

> I got to know the different professors in that specific department. To the point where, if I'm not in class their like, where were you at today so. Specifically, like Dr. May like she's amazing and she like wrote me a letter of recommendation, told me if the ever need anything just let her know. Dr. Price she's one of those people. There are multiple people that I met outside of my department and within my department that have contributed to a good college experience for me.

She also worked on campus in a childcare facility and the research office. Those jobs helped prepare her for her career. "Talking to people, talking to little kids, getting consent, kinda like, it tied into my major cause it's HIPAA like you can't disclose this information." Brianna's involvement, experiences, and relationships made her college experience a positive one.

"My college experience it was actually one I will put in the books as great but there were some rough times." When asked what factors she would attribute to her ability to be successful in college she stated,

> Support. That's like, I figured you were going to ask that question and I've been thinking about it all day, like what factors that contribute and then I thought about like it was really the support and then me personally. The type of person that I am, I don't like failure. If I don't get it done no one else will. And for me, I don't like failing, like it's just something that I grew up on. Like, I don't like not getting it done. I don't start something and not complete it. I started school for a reason, I need to finish it.

When Briana was asked if she was a successful student, she said the following, "I think I am (a successful student) because I'm happy and I'm debt free, so that's also awesome. It's great." Brianna currently works for a specialty pharmacy in patient membership management solely focusing on oncology and cancer patients. She was recently accepted into a Master's program at a nearby university.

Sonny: "I was tired of community college."

Sonny graduated from UCU in the Spring of 2015. He earned a bachelor's degree in social work. Nearly seven years after graduating from high school Sonny found his place at UCU. The combination of his determination, encouragement from his wife, the support of faculty and staff, and his peers looking to him as a leader resulted in Sonny graduating with honors. He earned his college degree but the journey to get there was not an easy one and took some time.

Sonny was raised by his mother in a single-parent household. He grew up in Urban City which was not only known for employing many blue-collar workers and its high crime rate but also producing legendary athletes. In Sonny's community, there were three different paths people took; engaging in criminal activity, working in the local industry, or playing college sports. Sonny chose to play sports in hopes he would go to the NBA. His mother always encouraged him to do well in school and played an active role in his education during his early years. "She would make me sit in my room and study my spelling words. And then I would sit at the foot of the bed and then she reads them off to me. Prove I know them." Sonny's mother was college educated as she earned an associate's degree after he graduated from high school and his father had a high school education. Sonny's desire to go to college was not created by his family, community, or K through 12 experiences but it came out of his involvement in sports.

Sonny's exposure to college as a child was limited. When asked what messages he received about education and going to college, he stated, "not much about college cause in my family a lot of people didn't go. Like everybody worked at like local industry and none of them went to college". His lack of interest in school was apparent as he failed the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade and had to attend summer school to be promoted to the next one. He did not see the correlation between what he learned in school and what is needed in everyday life. "When I go to school they teach me things about Abe Lincoln and the Civil War and all that kind of stuff. And when I would see my mom who is struggling to pay bills, not apply any of this stuff that they are teaching me to make a family go I always felt like school was kind of useless." Sonny had the ability to do well in school as he always completed summer school and he even made the honor roll his eleventh-grade year. He just did not see the importance of getting good grades aside from being eligible to play sports.

Sonny played basketball at every level during his childhood and attended a high school that was known for producing great athletes. While in high school, college was discussed often because playing college basketball was the next step an athlete needed to take to go to the NBA. "When I got to high school, college was talked about a lot because you know, obviously you know, that's the next step educationally and also its the next step as a basketball player you know, if you want to go play college basketball too." He also reflected on watching other athletes at his high school read letters they had received from different colleges and them making decisions about what college to attend on signing day. Sonny longed for his chance to read letters and make a choice.

Sonny was recruited by several colleges and with limited understanding of how to select one. He ended up choosing a college that had a losing record so he could start as a freshman and

help them win. Unfortunately, he did not choose a college that was a good fit for him. He went from a predominately Black community to a small predominately White college. A combination of culture shock and lack of academic preparedness resulted in him leaving the college. He went home and began the cycle of going from one community college to the next without ever completing a degree.

After years of taking classes at different community colleges, and with the support of his wife, he was ready for a university experience. "I was tired of community college. And I was ready to step up to the challenge of the university". Sonny applied to UCU and initially was declined admission but the guidance of an admissions counselor helped him and he was admitted the second time he applied. The admission counselor said, "Go over to Urban City Community College, take 12 credits, that should put your GPA about right where you need to be to reapply. So I was like okay." Sonny took twelve credit hours and earned all A's in his courses.

> I was on again off again with college just trying to just go through just for a long time. And just with this last time it just took all this life experience for me to really see and to gain like this, really value in education. And I had some values myself that could be useful to someone so like, with this last time you know, I just seemed to get everything right.

Sonny then applied to UCU and was accepted.

Sonny's start at UCU was great and he continued to soar academically. He established a great relationship with the professor of the first course he took.

> The first course I had was actually on campus with professor Jackson. It was a really good relationship. With her, I mean, when the course was over you know, she really supported me as far as me getting into the Social Work program. She was like, you know, when it's your time to apply for the program, I'll be here to help you any way that I can, so that meant a lot to me.

Sonny did well his first year at UCU and that was the reassurance he needed to show him he could be successful at a university. "I don't think it was ever a question of could I do it or not. I

never thought about it that way. My study habits were good and my grades good when I started to go here. I needed that success too because there was some doubt." Sonny's academic success continued, "I've been on the Dean List every year".

Sonny was ultimately admitted to the social work program. The social work program was challenging but Sonny's determination, love for reading, and willingness to seek out resources helped him. "I've always been a big reader. Even as a child. I still believe that's probably my academic saving grace. Even when I didn't like school, or find it interesting, I always liked to read." He also stated, "A love for reading just kinda helped through Social Work. You have to do a lot of reading." Sonny also took advantage of campus resources such as the Writing Center. "I used the Writing Center often, as much as my schedule allowed." He took full advantage of what a university community had to offer and got an opportunity to study aboard.

Sonny was provided the opportunity to study aboard after he raised the funds he needed through a GoFundMe account. That experience gave him a new perspective on life.

> It like really threw me out of my comfort zone and I was able to look at the world and life here in America in a different light. Because when I go places here, when I walk in a room, the first thing people see is that I'm a Black man you know. And when I was in Europe it wasn't like that. It's like, you know, I walk in the door and I start to speak the first thing people notice is that I'm an American and being Black is secondary to that.

He said while he was in Europe he had an incident in a bar where he tried to order a drink and the server ignored him. He was shocked and asked a man in the bar who was from the Netherlands, "why people so cold over here". What the man said to Sonny gave him a new view of how people see Americans.

> And so he was like you want me to be honest with you? I was like please do. And he was like, people are standoffish about Americans he said. When you let Americans into your circle they take over and then your culture is not yours no more and we prefer to keep our culture the way it is and don't let Americans in.

Sonny faced challenges aboard and learned about himself and how other people view Americans but he also faced challenges at UCU.

Shortly after Sonny's interview, he sent an email about a negative experience he had with a professor. He said nearly two hours after the interview he read an email response from a professor. He had emailed the professor inquiring about why he did not receive full credit on an assignment and while the professor's justification was appropriate, the additional comments he made were not.

> The reasons for the reduction in my points were valid, but the reply seemed to open an opportunity to harshly critique me personally. The email questioned my leadership skills and implied that I am attention seeking among other things. It also suggested that I am over the top as far as my delivery is concerned with other students.

Sonny goes on to say, "All I ask for was comments on one assignment, and got blasted". "If I was not as mature and grounded in my faith, this would make me question myself and my purpose."

Sonny, fortunately, had great relationships with other faculty and staff so that email did not detour him and he continued to strive academically. "I've had a wonderful relationship with the social work department. And so that's enhanced my experience here." Professor P is one of those people. "Professor P, keep in contact with her for sure. She's really an important part of what I do. She kinda helped me with my plan you know, my framework of what I should be doing and what it should look like. That's what I learned from her." Sonny not only had positive experiences with faculty he had them with student organizations.

Sonny was active in the classroom and involved in several student organizations. He was a part of the Social Work Club and Phi Alpha. "The social work club has been awesome. It is kind of like my bread-and-butter (laughter). I'm the president you know. I'm president so it's

offered me an opportunity to help a lot of people, to learn a lot." Sonny also took advantage of

any opportunities to get involved in out of class experiences. "I try to just be involved with like

everything in the social work department. Anything that's going on, like recently I was asked to

lead a training on diversity." He also participated in campus-wide activities.

The assistance of faculty, staff, the writing center, his peers looking up to him, and

tutoring led to his academic success. When asked what mattered most in his ability to earn a

bachelor's degree he talked about the university experience, his wife, perseverance, and exposure

to individuals in the field. He believes he was a successful student, "Yes, I do. I make the

grades, enjoy my time here at UCU. I engage in the community and university, being involved

in certain clubs and organizations, volunteering at events." Today Sonny is a graduate student

working on his Master's Degree in Social Work at a selective university.

Jeff: "Supporting cast"

Jeff was conditionally admitted to UCU in the Winter of 2015 and graduated with honors

with a bachelor's degree in Psychology. He progressed from an average high school student to

an above average college graduate. Jeff's journey to academic success was driven by an internal

motivation to be an example to others.

Jeff, his older brother, and two sisters were raised by their mother in Urban City. He grew

up in a low-income community and it was rare for youth from his community to go to college.

"My everyday environment, yeah I didn't know a lot of college people. I would say probably

from my neighborhood I'm like one of let's say, three or four who went to college." While Jeff's

mother stressed the importance of getting an education, she was not a college graduate. Jeff's

mother and brother did go to college but did not graduate. He did have a half-sister who

graduated from college. "My sister on my father side she went to Urban City for Profit

University and graduated. So that was something cool to look at it". Jeff's exposure to college was limited. Jeff was very involved in his church growing up and his pastor was the only other person besides his mother who stressed the importance of going to college.

> My pastor would always talk about those who were going to college. He would always bring up grades. That is a big thing with him to this day, you know. Now every time college kids come home, he points them out, you know, says how proud he is of them, stuff like that. So that's a motivating force as well.

Jeff often heard people say college "was needed and that I should work my hardest." Going to college became one of Jeff's goals although he did not apply himself academically.

Jeff lived in Urban City but attended a high school in the suburbs. While in high school, Jeff did just enough to get by.

> Honestly, throughout high school, I did not take school seriously. I never got above a 3.0 until I got to college. So in high school, I knew I could do stuff, I just didn't apply myself. I hated studying. I still hate it now. So I've always been a very big procrastinator in a lot of ways. I've always been like the average student that if I had to, if I got good grades or better than average it was cause I really worked hard on it.

His only motivation to get good grades was to ensure he was eligible to play football, which was evident because during the offseason his grades were not as good. Jeff was a social butterfly and everyone knew him and that he played on the football team. "I played football and yeah, I was just very social. I didn't really do much of anything. I was just kinda like the kid who knew everybody. I was on the football team. Didn't really play much on the team, but I was just there." He was not the best player on the team but he was friendly, which made him popular. He enjoyed playing football and was exposed to college through the sport. "While in high school, college was discussed a great deal among the star football players but aside from that it was not talked about much." Despite Jeff's limited exposure to college, he wanted to go.

Jeff continued to get by in high school and it was not until his senior year that he started to take steps towards enrolling in college. He received a text message from a friend that would

change his life. "My friend texted me and said that they (UCU) were waiving their application fee so it's like I don't have to pay that like $40, $50, I'm about to apply there." Jeff submitted his application and was conditionally admitted to UCU. "And then once I got in, the Trial Program is the reason that I was admitted to the campus." Jeff had achieved his goal of going to college thanks to a text from a friend and UCU's Trial Program.

Jeff was admitted to UCU as a "Trial" student, a student who did not meet the academic requirements to attend UCU but showed some potential. The students who were a part of the Trial program had to meet several requirements including earning a 2.0 grade point average during their first and second semesters of college, attend weekly meetings and programs, and other academic tasks. Jeff exceeded all the expectations of the program during his first year, finishing with a 2.5. He also held down a campus job while commuting to class. The Trial program not only helped him reach his goal of going to college, it gave him a better understanding of the college-going process and the support he needed to do well academically. He also developed significant relationships with the professional and student staff that worked with the Trial program. Jeff acknowledges that the Trial program staff was a major asset to him. "They were just very supportive, they've always motivated me when it comes to grades cause that's a big thing to them."

Jeff had always been an average student and while in college he continued to do what he needed to do to stay in college because he wanted to be a role model for the people in his life. "I learned to apply myself because I knew people were looking at me and then also I have little sisters that I feel like I have to pave the way for in a sense because you know if I show them that I can do it then they can do it." He went to class for the purpose of getting good grades but not

necessarily to learn anything new. "A lot of times though I will admit I went to class strictly for the grade and not really the learning." He did have positive experiences in the classroom.

> I think I've only had one teacher that I didn't like and that's because they didn't teach. You know you just kinda show up to class. He would say what we did in the last class, which was nothing. He would talk about future classes and he would pass like the third or fourth PowerPoint and the students would literally like, it would be a student led conversation, just like very, very little input from him. Other than that though, I've been cool with the professors, even if I hated the class. Like I hate math but the professor was still nice, I don't have problems with him, I just don't like math. A couple philosophy classes I didn't like just because of the material but the professors were still you know really cool people or helped me out a lot.

Jeff not only sought out help from the faculty and the Trial program staff, he learned to study. "I learned to study throughout college and that was very important." Jeff was adjusting to college life and learning the skills he needed to be a good student.

Jeff had always been an average student but after his first year of college, a student group inspired him to be above average. "One of the reasons I started excelling is because I joined my fraternity". Jeff joined Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated (Phi Beta Sigma), a historically Black fraternity, the summer after his first year of college. One of the requirements for joining his fraternity was to have a 2.5 grade point average. Jeff had a 2.5 after his first year but his membership in the organization made him want to go above the minimum expectation.

> Joining my organization, ever since then my grades have went up. I think the first semester though after I still had a two something and then I got like my first three, it was like a 3.01, 3.10, something like that. You know it was like a humongous accomplishment for me because like it's something I never experienced.

He became a 3.0 student, above average. Jeff's membership in the organization also taught him a lot about himself and the obligation he had to the African American community. In addition, after joining the organization, a lot of students started to look up to him so felt the need to be a positive role model to other students, especially African American students.

There was not a significant number of African American students at UCU and Jeff was

among a hand full of African American males attending the university. As a result, he felt an

internal obligation to be a good person and student. "Being a leader on campus, knowing that

other people are looking at me. And then, being a Black man on campus, you know, were

sometimes so very short and few between." He was also motivated to do well by his experiences

in the classroom.

> I did notice though that the higher up I got, it was like, probably like at max five Black
> people per class. And that was something to look at. Like, I didn't really feel slighted by
> it. It was like I know I have to continue pushing because if I, you know, mess up it's like,
> now like the majority of the Black kids mess up because I'm the majority.

His peers also pushed and motivated him to succeed. They would give him the extra push he

needed to get through.

> The people around me definitely helped motivate me. Like its been times when people
> have like just randomly messaged me saying, like, you know, I really look up to what you
> are doing. And it's just like a motivating force to help me keep going. So within, without
> my fellow peers, I wouldn't be who I am today because they help me keep going. They
> look up to me and I look up to them.

Jeff was motivated by his family, pastor, peers, faculty, staff, and his girlfriend but most

importantly himself to succeed in college.

Jeff believes he was a successful student in college for a number of reasons including

how he did academically and his social involvement.

> I would say yeah (I was a successful student), I've grown a lot speaking from a GPA
> standpoint. My first GPA in college was a 2.46 and that was kinda normal from high
> school and now like I haven't got below a 2., I haven't got below a 3. in like the last
> couple years. So I feel like that's a big upcoming. When it comes to student bonds, I'm
> still a guy that knows everybody but now I'm like the guy who knows everybody who
> can help you out more.

Jeff does acknowledge that he could not have been as successful without support from several

people in his life. Jeff talked about different people that supported, encouraged, and pushed him

along the way. When asked what attributed to his success he said, "Black administrators, student involvement, and optimism. Like attitude, that would probably be a better way put that into a measurable scheme, an attitude, positive attitude." He also stressed the importance of taking breaks while in school such as taking few or no courses in the summer.

Jeff acknowledges his family, pastor, girlfriend, peers, mentors, the Trial program staff, his jobs, fraternity, leadership roles, faculty, and staff that influenced him in a positive way in earning his bachelor's degree. He talked about the importance of, "Just having like people in my corner". He valued the people in his life as they motivated and pushed him to go reach his full potential.

> It was more along the lines of just having that supporting system. That was the most important thing to me. I always knew I could do the work, no matter, you know, even if it was a struggle. I always knew I could do it but just having that supporting cast.

Today Jeff is job searching and exploring graduate programs in Student Affairs. He is interested in working with college students, as he knows what it takes for college students to become graduates. Jeff went from a conditionally admitted UCU student to earning a bachelor's degree with honors in five years, a true success story.

Danielle: "Never good enough"

Danielle graduated from UCU with a 3.87 and the highest academic honor a student could receive at graduation. She attributes her success to pure determination and her parents. Danielle was encouraged by them and chose to succeed which resulted in her graduating from UCU and landing a job in her field.

Danielle was born and raised by her parents in Urban City Suburb. Her mother was a dental hygienist and her father worked in the auto industry. Her mother completed a two-year specialty program, her father started college but never finished, and her older brother is a college

graduate. Although her parents were not college graduates, they stressed the importance of

postsecondary education.

> My parents, they really instilled the value of education in my life and my brother's life.
> They just always made it a point of how important it was to go to school and to do well
> and get good grades and just like such a step up for your future. Yeah they always
> pushed college, there was no option of not going to college it was always the goal.

Danielle knew early on she was going to be a college graduate and with the support of her

parents she did just that.

Danielle's K through 12 years prepared her academically for college level work. She had

family support, attended great schools, and was involved in college preparatory activities outside

of the classroom. Danielle attributes a large part of her overall success to her parents. "They

helped me throughout with my homework, my projects, anything, they were there. Student

conferences, they were there, all my award ceremonies. They have just been there through every

step of the way." She also attended a high school that gave her the academic foundation she

needed to do well in college. In addition, her out of the classroom activities, basketball, track,

DECCA (a precollege program), and National Honor Society provided her with additional skills

that prepared her for college. There was one program that made going to college possible and

educated her on the college going process, Deciding to Succeed (DTS).

DTS was a precollege program offered by UCU. Students who participated in the

program for multiple years during high school and completed all the program requirements were

offered scholarships to UCU that covered tuition and fees through graduation. The program

engaged the students throughout the year and exposed them to college life in and outside of the

classroom. "DTS, I was in there from tenth grade or maybe ninth grade until my senior year. In

addition, that was a precollege program here at UCU. And they offered full ride scholarships if

you complete the program to the students that are in it." The scholarship alone was motivation enough to want to meet all the program requirements.

> So the program like you'll have it during the school year and we would have like workshops on leadership and resume building. Just different things to help you prepare for college, like essay writing and then we will have a summer portion where we would have to, do like a summer program. So that would include, we would have classes like math, we had like theater class. Just different classes to make sure we didn't lose our skills over the summer time. So that was a good influence.

The DTS program was one of the main reasons Danielle chose to attend UCU and why she did so well academically.

The scholarship offered for completing the DTS program made Danielle's decision to attend UCU easy. DTS taught her about college inside and outside of the classroom, exposed her to new places and things, familiarized her with the campus, faculty, and staff, and provided her with the means to pay for college.

> Through the DTS program that helped me out and that was a very good. Helped make the transition process easier. I was familiar with UCU because of being exposed in that program it was here so I was familiar with the campus. I was familiar with some of the faculty and just some of the classes that I probably will be taking.

Danielle enrolled in UCU in the Fall of 2011 and the DTS program stayed with her through her first year of college in the form of the Leaders Institute (LI). LI provided DTS scholarship awardees with information, resources, and support to ensure they would do well academically and keep their DTS scholarship. "We have to maintain a certain GPA to make sure we keep our scholarships and throughout the year. We would have meetings and they would have different workshops on leadership, you know, does stuff like that again. And we would volunteer for different places".

Danielle wanted the full college experience. She lived on campus although her home was less than twenty minutes from UCU. She worked hard in class, developed relationships with

faculty and staff, and was involved in several student organizations. She participated in LI, Cultural Major Student Organization, Golden Key International Honor Society, National Honor Societies for healthcare organizations, Eta Sigma Gamma health education honorary, Epsilon Phi Delta a health administration honorary society, Health Care Administration Student Organization, among other organizations. In addition, she did three different internships and worked as a research assistant at UCU. Although she was heavily involved outside of the classroom, she excelled in it. "I'm really big about my grades, I'm always really concerned about my grades in my class, always want to get A's".

Danielle was academically prepared for college but still had room to learn what the college student experience was like. Her first year of college she earned B's in a couple courses, which for her was not good enough.

> College kinda threw me off a little bit because... like when we would have an exam, some of the instructors when I first got here, my freshman year, some of them wouldn't give you study guides. And you know, that threw me off from high school cause you get handed those things like you know, without a doubt and in college, you don't sometimes, you do sometimes. And you don't really know what material to really focus on and study on so you really just have to learn everything. So I think that's where some of, a couple of the B's came from.

The DTS program stressed to her that when you need help, ask for it, and Danielle did just that. "I believe that if you feel yourself like if you don't understand something, you'll never understand unless you ask so I would always. If I had a question I would definitely go to office hours and try to get that worked out."

Danielle was fortunate and had amazing faculty members. "My instructors were very, very great, especially in the department of public health and health sciences. Our instructors were great, very helpful, always there when you needed them. I can't think of one negative experience that I've had from them, at all." Danielle felt so comfortable with the faculty who

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taught her courses she would talk with them about their teaching methods so she could figure out

how to do well in their courses.

> I remember having a discussion with one of my professors. I had a business course my freshman year because I thought I wanted to minor in business. So I remember just going to him and just asking him you know, basically like, kinda like, figuring out what his methods of instruction were like, how he taught in class.

She also utilized campus recourses if she needed to, using the Writing Center often.

> Danielle came to college with several goals, soaked up as much as you could to ensure

she was successful in life, got excellent grades, stayed away from anything that could be

distracting, and graduated. She truly worked towards those goals and was serious about not

allowing anyone or thing to distract her. She talked about why she chose not to pursue a serious

romantic relationship while in college.

> Nope, I didn't (laughter) I've been single since high school. No, I haven't had any boyfriends throughout college, which was a good thing. Not in undergrad. I yeah, good thing, those can be just distractions as well. I've seen a lot of those happen and a lot of people falling off track because of that. I'm happy that I didn't really get too involved with people like that during the past four years. Helped me remain focus on what's really important.

She had no boyfriend and had a full of friends but there was one other person who was not a

family member that was significant in her life, Dr. Hopson.

> Dr. Hopson, you know Dr. Hopson. So that's my mentor, he has been for a couple years now. And that was the best relationship that I have gained definitely from a faculty or staff member at UCU. He's always there when you need him, always constantly. He really has your best interest at heart and really looks out for you and he really can be really hard on you. Like when I first came to him, my GPA was a 3.7 (laughter) and it's just like it was never good enough. Get it up, you need a 3.9, you need a 3.8, then when I got my 3.8 it's like you need a 3.9. It was never good enough which is a good thing. He always constantly pushed you. And he helped you, just opening your mind to like, different resources, and different things that are out there for you. So he was yeah, a very great influence.

Dr. Hopson was the one distraction she allowed in her life because he pushed her to aim higher

academically.

Danielle had a positive college experience because she strived. "I think I had pretty good college experience. At UCU it really is what you make it. Like you have to take advantage of the resources and different things that they have to offer here." She also said,

> I was a successful student because I mean, I've always been a successful student since, as early as far as I can remember. And I always kept, maintained a very good work ethic and I believe that just, I was preparing myself for like higher education, you know. In junior high maintained a good work ethic and that helped me in high school, in high school I did the same thing, and then it really helped me in college so, yeah.

Evidence of her success in college is her graduating from UCU earning the highest honor a UCU student can earn. In addition, shortly after graduating she was offered a full-time job in her field of study. Danielle attributes all her success in college not only to working hard but to the support she received from her family and mentor. Today, Danielle works in the healthcare field and is planning to attend graduate school soon.

Ashley: "Replaced those E's with A's"

Ashley enrolled at UCU in the Fall of 2008. She graduated seven and half years later in Fall of 2015 with a bachelors degree in Social Work with a 2.5 grade point average. Ashley's journey to earning a college degree was long and trying but she persevered and graduated.

Ashley was born and raised in an inner city that is nearly twenty minutes from Urban City. The city she is from is like Urban City as over eighteen percent of the population lives in poverty. Ashley and her little brother were raised by their mother in a single parent household. Her father was a part of her life but their relationship was strained, "My dad and I, well, we have a complicated relationship. We have a love-hate thing, mostly hate." Ashley's father works in the medical field at a hospital and while unsure, she believes the highest level of education he obtained is a degree from a community college. Her mother is a registered nurse and earned her credentials from a community college. Although both of Ashley's parents attended college,

neither of them imparted much knowledge of college or the college-going process to her.

During Ashley's K through 12 years, college was rarely a topic of discussion. She recalls briefly being a part of a youth group, the Ivy Leagues, which was affiliated with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated (AKA), a historically Black sorority. The youth group was elite and only young girls who received personal invitations could participate. Ashley's grandmother was a member of AKA and Ashley had a good grade point average so she was invited to be a part of the group. During her membership with the group she learned the importance of going to college and community service. While Ashley thought the group was positive, she felt it was not for her so she discontinued her affiliation after one year. Ashley would not think about college again until her junior year of high school.

It was during Ashley's junior year of high school when she made the decision to go to college. She recalls a conversation she had with her mother. "When I was in high school, probably bout the eleventh grade my momma told me you are getting out this house and you going to college". That is when Ashley realized she had to go to college but she was unsure of what she needed to do to so. Ashley's parents did not talk to her about college and she did not hear much about it at school until her senior year. It was her senior year of high school when she heard students talking about being accepted to college. Ashley learned that several college and university representatives were in the cafeteria during lunch accepting student's applications and admitting them onsite. Around that time, she also found out from a high school guidance counselor that her high school would pay for college application fees. She did a little research about each college and university present at her school. She decided to apply to UCU as she thought she had the best chance of being accepted there. Ashley was accepted to UCU for the Fall of 2008, however, she was admitted as a Trial student.

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The Trial Program is for students who do not meet traditional admissions requirements but demonstrate the ability to do well in college. As a Trial student, she had to attend meetings, programs, maintain a certain grade point average, and complete other academic requirements. Ashley's experience at UCU was challenging in the beginning. The classroom environment at UCU was different for Ashley. She grew up in a predominately Black community and attended a predominately Black high school so being one of a few Black students in her classes was an adjustment for her.

> My classes, the majority of them, (silence) there was only three or four people who looked like me. And when I mean look like me, people that I think identify as African-American. So with being in the minority in the classroom, it's like you have to kinda represent the population. And there were a lot of people who it seemed like had way different viewpoints. Probably because they had different upbringings than I had.

During her first year of college, she did well in school, met the Trail Program requirements, worked an on-campus job, and partied with her friends. She did not utilize any campus resources, nor did she engage with faculty, or get involved with student activities outside of the Trial Program requirements. She made it through her first academic year of college and decided to take summer courses.

Ashley not only made the decision to take summer courses, she also decided to move off campus, and that is when her life began to spiral out of control. She had to work three jobs to pay for her off-campus apartment while taking classes. She struggled and failed all her summer courses so she was placed on academic probation. To make matters worse she found out she was pregnant. Despite her challenges, she stayed in school but was unable to rise to the occasion and failed fall semester, which resulted in her being academically dismissed from the university. She was down but not out. She made the commitment to get back on track for her unborn son. "Before he was born, when I was pregnant I decided that I wanted to change my life."

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Therefore, she enrolled in Urban City Community College (UCCC) and flourished, making the

Dean's List.

> When I started off here at UCU and then I went to Urban City Community College and I
> just was like what is this, am I back in high school. I felt like the community college
> level was so. I know I just got kicked out, but it was so beneath me I felt. So I was like I
> have to go back to UCU because I'll be around more intellectually stimulating people
> than this.

Ashley was ultimately readmitted to UCU in the Fall of 2012.

Ashley's experience at UCU was much different the second time around. "The first time

around you know I didn't really do too much. But in 2012, I feel like I got more of a college

experience." She became engaged on campus and had an established support network. She

joined a sorority, attended programs and activities, and worked an on-campus job. She also did

much better in the classroom. She said the following about why she struggled academically after

her first two semesters of college,

> It was definitely because I didn't apply myself. And one of the reasons why I know that
> for a fact is when I first came back I had to retake about three of the classes that I got E's
> in and then I replaced those E's with A's. And it was like why couldn't you do this the
> first time Ashley, why couldn't you just focus. And yeah, it was just me.

Ashley learned her lesson and applied herself. She was earning good grades and working but she

continued to struggle personally and academically.

Ashley gave birth to her second son shortly after she was readmitted to UCU and

continued to pursue her education. She faced some personal issues as people looked down at her

because she had two children.

> I've heard people say things about me. Like oh, she just gonna drop out and have a
> whole bunch of kids and never do anything with her life. And that was like the thing, that
> was, the stigma they were trying to push on me. But I surround myself with people who
> were trying to, push that stigma away from me and didn't want to put that on me.

It was support from her family, friends, and staff and wanting a good future for her sons that

helped and pushed her. Her father paid her rent for several months when she was dismissed from school, her first son's father supported her financially when she lost her financial aid, her sorority sisters pushed her to study when she lost focus, and a staff member offered her scholarships when she needed financial assistance the most. Ashley also had supportive faculty members who helped her during her journey.

> I can say that I've had some really great and understanding professors. I try not to use excuses but life happens and I've had some professors who really tried to help me through. Like during my pregnancy I had some complications and I had a lot of professors to work with me. I've gotten some extensions on things but I think the faculty's good here.

Ashley made some decisions that made her journey to earning a bachelor's degree much more difficult but she kept pushing forward thanks to a supportive group of people in her life.

Ashley identified several people whose support was instrumental in her ability to earn a bachelor's degree. Those people included family members, the father of her oldest son, her sorority sisters, peers, staff in the department she worked in, African American staff, and the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. When Ashley was asked what she attributed to her ability to be successful in college, she talked about, God, determination, being humble, being involved on campus, and support systems. She went on to say while she was not always successful in college, over time she became a successful student.

> I wasn't always a successful student like I said I got academically dismissed in 2010 so I obviously didn't do anything. But, as of now, I would say I am successful, cause right now in this current term I have all A's as of now. It's almost midterm time, but I've been doing good. And I have two kids and I'm working full time so I'm managing life and balancing everything. So I will say I am successful as of right now.

Today Ashley is a full-time employee in an academic department at UCU and a graduate student in one of the schools. Ashley's journey to earning a bachelor's degree was challenging,

but she did it and says she would not change any part of her experience if given the opportunity.

Her hope is not only that other students will go to college but that they will graduate.

> College is the time when you really find yourself. You find your passion in life, what you want to do and sometimes it takes molding to help you find that. And a lot of my experiences mold me but I learned a lot of things the hard way. And I think if students could learn some things the easier way without having to go through hardships and struggle to realize the importance of college that will be so much easier and so much better for so many students. If they could find some way to feel empowered like they matter, they have a voice, and help them to mold their dreams.

Chapter Conclusion

The portraits in this chapter provide contextual information for better understanding of the commonalities that exist among African American students who attained a bachelor's degree at a predominately White institution. The students' experiences share some commonalities, and of course there are some differences. It was important that each student's individual story be told and the portraits provide that opportunity. In addition, Ashley's portrait is proof that an anti-deficit research approach can draw out obstacles a student may overcome to be successful without asking deficit questions or asking about barriers they may have encountered. The next chapter further examines the participant's lives and experiences by identifying the themes that emerged among the eight participants which led to their earning a bachelor's degree from UCU.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings of the study. The findings are organized thematically. Direct quotes and paraphrases are used to support the explanations of the themes that came out of the study. The themes were identified during the analysis of the data and each arose during multiple participant interviews. In this section, the key findings are discussed in two parts. The first part will highlight the primary themes that emerged among all the participant interviews: self-efficacy, support, resilience, involvement, and faculty staff engagement. The second part will explore other themes that were not salient amongst all the participants but at least half of them: precollege programs, on-campus employment, and spirituality and religious participation.

Table 9. Summary of themes.

	Ashley	De'Ron	Valerie	Soledad	Brianna	Sonny	Jeff	Danielle
Precollege Program Participant		X		X	X			X
Self-Efficacy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Support	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Resilience	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Involvement in Student Groups	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
On Campus Employment	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Faculty/Staff Engagement	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Spirituality and Religious Participation	X		X	X		X	X	X

Primary Themes

The eight participants of this study are very different as revealed in their profiles in the previous chapter. However, they did have some things in common. They are African American and earned a bachelor's degree from Urban City University (UCU). In addition, their attainment of a bachelor's degrees can be attributed to positive self-efficacy, emotional and financial support

they received from a host of people, their own resilience, getting involved in positive organizations and activities on campus, and engaging with faculty and staff. Also, more than half participated in precollege programs prior to going to college, were employed on campus, and were spiritual and/or participated in religious activities. Each theme is explored below.

Self-Efficacy

There was someone or something that planted a seed in the lives of the participants that grew into a desire to not only go to college but graduate. While the participants were not always sure how they would reach the goal, they did what they believed would lead to them successfully reaching it. They believed in themselves and their abilities and described themselves as having tenacity, self-motivation, willpower, determination, and perseverance. The descriptors they used spoke to their self-efficacy, "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Their self-efficacy played a major role in their ability to earn a college degree. De'Ron, Danielle, and Soledad not only wanted to graduate they wanted to do so with high academic honors and they each did so by earning the highest academic honor a student can at Urban City University. Brianna wanted to do as well as her older brother academically and set a high academic bar for her younger sister, which she did by exceeding her brother and graduating with high honors. They each acted and did what was necessary to reach their goals.

De'Ron's grandmother started talking with him about the importance of going to college at a young age. In addition, she would help him with homework and teach him "many tricks" such as memorizing. What his grandmother taught him was ingrained in him. After his grandmother passed away, he continued to take heed of what he had learned from her. De'Ron talked about how he approached college.

I decided okay well I'm gonna try this 4.0 student thing. I'm going to be valedictorian and I'm gonna do all this great stuff. And then, came calculus and that idea quickly flew out the window and so I said yup, forget that plan. But at the same time, I figured well you know why sell myself short, why only do the less, be better than. I'm still paying to go here meaning this stuff still has some value to me so why not go for it anyway. So I still studied, I still focused. And then I found out about different educational opportunities or different awards in things that came from came from such an institution so I figured okay I'll go for those instead.

De'Ron was internally driven to excel. While his grandmother encouraged him to go to college, after her passing he considered not going to college but ultimately went and graduated not just for her but also for himself. When asked why he believes he was successful in college he said, "basically just the tenacity to get it done." De'Ron is like the other participants. His internal motivation was the driving force that led to him earning his bachelor's degree.

Danielle's desire to go to college and academic strength was developed and nurtured by her family. Like De'Ron, her internal motivation to do well led to her success. Because Danielle was determined to do well academically, she would reach out to faculty to learn more about them at the start of the course. "So I remember just going to (a professor) and just asking him you know, basically like, kinda like, figuring out what his methods of instruction were like, how he taught in class." The grades she earned was very important to her so if she was unsure about a topic or something her professor said she would meet with them.

I'm really big about my grades. I'm always really concerned about my grades in my class, always want to get A's so. And I believe that if you feel yourself like if you don't understand something, you'll never understand unless you ask so I would always. If I had a question I would definitely go to office hours and try to get that worked out.

Danielle did not reach out to her faculty because someone made her or told her to. She reached out because she wanted to do well. There was something in her that wanted to be successful. Soledad had that same desire but she knew what that something was that pushed her.

Soledad's faith is important to her so her drive to do well so the source of her motivation was God. "I know I have a bigger purpose so talking with God knowing that okay in order to fulfill your purpose I have to, you know, get my degree and that's a part of your purpose." Knowing that part of her purpose in life was to earn her degree, when she started college her main focus was doing well academically. "My freshman year I just went to class and went to my room (laughter) cause I didn't really know anyone. And I was just like, I didn't want to fail so I made sure I studied and like did well. Studied as much as possible" Soledad was not forced to study, she did it because she wanted to do well academically and graduate. Brianna also had an internal desire to do well but that was just who she is.

Brianna was raised by her mother and father along with her older brother and younger sister. Her parents always stressed the importance of education and going to college. As a result, she and her siblings rose to the occasion. Brianna found herself trying to fill her brothers big shoes and bring a role model to her sister who was in the top of her class throughout her academic career. The combination of upbringing and the pressure from her siblings prompted her ambition.

> The type of person that I am I don't like failure. If I don't get it done no one else will. And for me, I don't like failing, like it's just something that I grew up on. Like, I don't like not getting it done. I don't start something and not complete it. I started school for a reason, I need to finish it. And I don't care how I did it, I was going to do it. So it was having that support, motivating myself on days where I didn't even feel like doing anything. I didn't feel like going to my internship, I didn't feel like doing any of this stuff but I did it. And now that I look back on it, I'm glad. There were times when I complained every day. Telling my friend that I'm dropping out, knowing I wasn't gonna drop out, cause I just, I can't do it, it's not who I am.

Like Brianna, the other participants had similar feelings. Failure was not an option and that mindset, the internal motivation, drove them to be successful.

Support

All the participants in this study talked about the support they received from family, significant others, community members, friends, mentors, faculty, staff, and/or other students. For this study, support refers to any action of an individual that aided in the participant's successful persistence towards earning a college degree. The support the participants received ranged from emotional to financial. Each of the participants identified multiple people as contributors to their success including family and friends and in some cases faculty, staff, and significant others. While they all identified the support they received from others as a factor that led to their success, they did so for a variety of reasons.

Ashley received financial support from her father with whom she had a "love-hate" relationship. Ashley spent her first year of college partying with friends and failing to focus on her academics and as a result, she was academically dismissed from the university. Because she was no longer a student, she was not allowed to live on campus and had to find an apartment. Although Ashley felt her relationship with her father was strained, he stepped in to help her financially during her time of need. "I was living in the dorms, you can't live in the dorms and not attend classes so I was going to move back home and my dad was like if I go back home, I'll never leave. So he helped me get my first apartment." She went on to say he paid her rent for six months and gave her a car to use. The financial support her father gave her during that time provided her with a place to live and transportation. In turn, she continued her education at the local community college, which ultimately led to her transferring back to UCU and earning her degree.

De'Ron also fell on hard times and needed financial assistance so father and mother stepped in. De'Ron was nearly finished with his college degree when he was on the verge of

becoming homeless. He was living off campus and was unable to find roommate(s) to split his

living expenses with. His father allowed him to move in with him, he had not lived with his

father in the past. His father moved just before De'Ron was to finish his degree so his mother let

him move in with her. De'Ron was trying to finish his degree and experienced a crisis that could

have derailed him but his parents were not going to allow him to fall off so they provided him

with the financial support he needed.

Valerie like Ashley spent her first year of college hanging out with the wrong crowd and

was placed on academic probation. The summer after her first year, she made the decision not to

go back to college but her aunt stepped in and made her continue her education.

> Freshman year, I was seventeen, in an off-campus residence hall. Probably failed six
> classes my first year. Went to go work at an Amusement Park, came back, decided I was
> just not gonna go to college and it just wasn't for me (laughter). And then, my Aunt who
> was a city attorney at the time, she like forced me to go to Urban City Community
> College because I was on academic probation here for failing like ten classes or whatever
> I failed. And she forced me to go to Urban City Community College. I stayed there for a
> semester and I realized that I do not want to be at Urban City Community College at all.
> And then, I reapplied at UCU and I got back accepted here. And then after that, it was
> pretty much a game of catch up.

She went on to talk about how her Aunt and mentor supported and encouraged her while in

college.

> Our relationship was like, just encouragement, it's like, just, I don't know. I
> procrastinate, get to thinking like, oh I can't do it or something. But they were just kinda
> there to encourage me. Pretty much it was like, you know here are the resources, you
> know. Where mom couldn't provide the resources they were here to say well you have
> this resource.

Valerie's Aunt not only pushed her, she supported her by being there, encouraging her, providing

her with resources, and stepping in when her mother could not.

Jeff received support from what he refers to as a "supporting cast" which included his

family, faculty, staff, pastor, peers, and significant other. While they all were important to his

success, his peers kept him going. "Without my peers, I wouldn't be who I am today because they, they help me keep going." Those peers included a mentor, a student who worked in an office he frequented, and his girlfriend.

> Devin Brown, he's one of the fraternity members, brother, fraternity brothers (and mentor). So, I met him like my freshman year and every time I would look up he was just always around, kinda like how I am now. So he was, I was always around and he just like you know, talking to me about random things, not necessarily dealing with the fraternity but just like helping, pushing me forward. Saying how much you know, he believed in me, stuff like that. He was a really good kick starter.

Jeff goes on to say, "Devin Brown, he always pushed me to aim higher and not just shot for the average because you know, he just, he was that type of person to do that for me so." Jeff viewed Devin's presence and encouragement as support and he appreciated the support, using it to keep achieving.

Jeff also found support in several other students but Kevin Miller and Michelle Williamson were two of the most influential. Kevin worked in an office on campus Jeff frequented. "A guy named Kevin Miller was a psychology student, he helped me lay out my psychology path for me so, that was a benefit. Just having like people in my corner." Another person Jeff found support in was his girlfriend, Michelle. "I have been dating a girl named Michelle and she's been one of my strongest motivating factors. She helps me look towards the future. She helps me lay things out. She's like the, my peaceful center." Jeff like the other participants in the study, had peers who were instrumental in his ability to be successful in college because they were there for him and that support was priceless.

The participants each talked about the people who supported them. The support they received ranged from emotional to financial. The emotional support they received included pushing them to achieve when they wanted to give up, listening to them, and offering words of encouragement. Valerie's aunt did not allow her to drop out of school and made her go to

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community college. Without her aunt pushing and supporting her, her path to graduation may have been different. In addition, Jeff had people all around him to listen to him but also encourage him by telling him they looked up to him and believed he could do it. Ashley and De'Ron received financial support from family members and without it, they may have been homeless or working more hours than a college student should to afford housing. The financial burden also could have led to them taking a longer time to graduate or not graduating at all. All the participants had people around them that wanted to see them succeed so they supported them financial and/or emotionally.

Resilience

The participants used words like self-motivation, determination, tenacity, perseverance, being goal oriented, finishing, getting it done, and/or wanting it to describe the factors that contributed to their academic success. They were referring to internal motivation that would not allow them to quit no matter what. Their internal drive pushed them to strive to accomplish a goal or task despite what they encountered. That internal drive is resilience, the ability to endure and adapt when encountering stressful situations (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003). The participants each showed resilience when encountering obstacles that stood in the way of their academic success or ability to graduate.

The participants each have unique backgrounds and experiences, however; they discussed resilience in the sense of not giving up when faced with an obstacle. Ashley, De'Ron, Briana, and Sonny each encountered roadblocks that could have stopped them from earning their degrees but their resiliency pushed them to fight and overcome.

Ashley talked about the time when she ran out of financial aid and was no longer receiving financial support from her child's father. She knew she had to finish school and was

going to find the funding she needed despite being discouraged. Ashley went to the financial aid office and they told her that her only option was to take out a personal loan. She was unable to get a personal loan but she was determined to find the funding she needed to complete her degree.

> One of the things I actually did on my own was I started to look at different things on the UCU website. And one of the things that I found was a grant, the critical difference grant, which I had never heard of. I've never seen out there, anything. I was just like I have to get it, I have to finish school. So I was just looking up anything and when I was doing that I found that grant. And it's like if you're at a critical time where it's going to make or break your college they'll give you $300.

The $300 was helpful but she was still short.

> I ran out of aid. And I almost didn't make it this last semester. I owed almost $800 and I don't have $800. I just had a baby, just like horrible timing but I reached out. I talked to the Senior Administrator and she paid my tuition. But it's like had I not reached out I probably would've had to drop out my last semester.

She adds, "I talked to her, I told her my situation and then the next day I got a call from the financial aid office and they said they had some extra grant money and they paid my tuition and paid for all my books." Despite the financial obstacles she faced, she did not take no for an answered and sought out resources until her need was met.

De'Ron talked about the time he realized the inner city public school he attended did not prepare him mathematically so he had to "go at it harder". De'Ron somehow graduated from high school without taking a trigonometry or calculus course, which was unusual. On his college placement exam, he did well in algebra and geometry but was not quite ready for calculus, so he was placed in pre-calculus. Trigonometry was a course that laid the foundation for understanding calculus and De'Ron had not taken it but he did not allow that to stop him. He took learned trigonometry while taking pre-calc. He passed pre-calculus and enrolled in calculus II and earned an A. De'Ron reflected on the experience.

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I of course, put it off for a little while because I looked at it and saw oh pre-calculus and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. But it basically kinda showed me, you know, like the way the system is set up isn't perfect. It's not perfect and students can fall through the cracks and there are ways to work around it. But I was one of the students, at least I like to think so, where I had the tenacity to say forget this, this just means I am going at it at a harder point, you know. It's not impossible, but I don't know if every other student is going to feel that way. And I don't know if you know, every other student can come out of that kinda condition and say, oh now I suddenly need to learn an entire subject in a semester, you know. A year's worth of a subject in a semester's time, at a rapid speed at that, and still come out of it.

De'Ron learned Trigonometry on his own and went on to earn an A in calculus II because he worked hard and did not give up.

Briana talked about a faculty member she had a negative experience with during her first year of college and how she had to take another class with her to finish her degree. She stated, "my first semester I did have a very, I don't know how to put this without saying, don't want to say, racist situation. With a professor, who was, strangely enough, was the, what are they called, department heads." The professor was the chair of the department.

We had a situation where she made a comment saying that she wanted all the black people to stop sitting together. But we were kinda confused because none of us were sitting together. And she constantly picked on us five specifically every class, no matter what. We come to class, on time, sat down, it's always something. And I ended up getting a C+ in her class. And to this day she still has not fixed my grade even though we had the conversation very long time ago.

Brianna later encountered her again and instead of avoiding her or trying to find a way out of taking her course she set her feelings aside and completed the courses.

And then when I moved along and I decided to change my major and then I realized I had to deal with her again. I'm like I can't, like I, I just can't. So I tried to be cordial because at the end of the day it's really not about her it's about me and my education. As long as I'm taking care of my business it really didn't matter how she felt about me. And she eventually went on to apologizing but is still kinda didn't do enough for me.

Briana, like other participants, came up against unnecessary roadblocks but continued to strive, demonstrating great resilience.

Sonny had spent years at community colleges and when he finally decided to pursue his education at a university, he was told no but he did not let that stop him.

> I was tired of community college. And I was ready to step up to the challenge of the university. And I applied here... And she (an admissions staff member) called me in, called me into her office. She told me like, they pretty much had declined me, you know. They had said I was, that my record, my academic record prior, wouldn't be good enough to go to school here or whatever, so like okay. And so, she could have sent me that in the mail, like you know, like they do everybody else but she called me to talk to me about it. And it just wasn't to decline me, she offered a way that I could get in. So she said hey, you take, go over to Urban City Community College (UCCC), take 12 credits. That should put your GPA about right where you need it to be to reapply, so I was like okay. I was really, I felt really rejected, you know. But I said alright. So I went over to UCCC, I did the 12 credits, got all A's, and transferred in.

Sonny did not let a no stand in his way and now he is a graduate of a university.

The participant's internal drive, motivation, resiliency, were factors in their ability to be successful in earning their bachelor's degree. There was no hurdle, roadblock, crisis, or tragedy that stood in the way of them becoming college graduates.

Involvement

The participants each talked about their experience in college and highlighted their involvement on campus. Involvement refers to a student's participation in student groups and activities. The participants each talked about the positive impact their involvement had on their pursuit of earning a bachelor's degree, specifically their activities in student organizations.

All the participants belonged to one or more student groups that had a positive impact on them while in college. Ashley and Jeff were in historically Black Greek letter organizations, Soledad was involved in a Christian student group among others, Sonny was president of an academic college group, Briana, Danielle, and Valerie were members of ethnic student groups and De'Ron was a member of an arts group. Soledad, Jeff, Ashley, and Valerie talked in depth about how a student group they were involved in contributed to their success.

Soledad's religious beliefs are important to her and she talked about how her faith helped her be successful in college. When asked what attributed to her success she said, "I would say like my faith because I know I have a bigger purpose so talking with God knowing that okay in order to fulfill your purpose I have to, you know, get my degree and that's a part of your purpose." With her faith being important to her, it was important for her to connect with others who felt the same way. Being able to connect with others was that much more important because she had a strained relationship with most of her family. Fortunately for her, she found those connections through her involvement with Christian Fellowship.

> Christian Fellowship, now that really helped me a lot. Like I had like a small group like Bible study that we would have and we would have to reach out to people and I was too shy to do that but I would meet new people through that. In the dorms and also like on campus. To develop the leader in me. And then we went on different like mission trips so being able to go aboard, that really opened my perspective on different things.

Jeff grew up in a single-parent household with his mother and three siblings with two being younger than him. During his K-12 years, he was a C average student but very social. When he went to college, he continued to be very social and an average student academically. He worked on campus in a high traffic area so he got to know a lot of people. His life academically took a turn when he became interested in a student group, a historically Black fraternity.

> My first semester I got a 2.46 so it started off I guess rough and then my second semester I got, I think like a 2.7 or a 2.8 and that brought me above a 2.5 and that's important because you needed 2.5 to join Greek life on this campus and nationally. So that pushed me to the level where I was able to join my organization. So joining my organization, ever since then my grades have went up.

Jeff also stated, "One of the reasons I started excelling is because I joined my fraternity. That's one of the reasons and scholarship is one of our principles. So that's also something that if you're not implementing it, you cannot, you know, promote it necessarily so."

Jeff's involvement in his fraternity also gave him a sense of responsibility. He felt

obligated to succeed because he was one of a few African American males on campus who was

doing well.

> Being a leader on campus, knowing that other people are looking at me so. And then
> being a Black man on campus you know, we are sometimes so very short and far
> between. All that, so like, you know, I have to be a leader in the Black community as
> well, not just the necessary student life aspect cause you know, it's so easy to become
> another statistic. You know everybody dropping out or this, that, and the third. So that's
> something that always pushed me.

Ashley and Valerie both came to college but did not focus on their academics, were not

involved on campus, and found themselves in academic trouble. They left Urban City University

and went to Urban City Community College after being informed by the university they were not

doing well academically. In both cases, the participants talked about being around the wrong

crowd and not being involved in positive activities at the time in which they left the university.

However, when they returned they both got involved with student groups and began to improve

academically. They each talk about how their involvement pushed them to want to do well

academically.

Ashley was academically dismissed because she was not applying herself. When she

returned to the university she got involved in two student groups and she began to excel

academically. Ashley talked about how she knew her lack of effort had an impact on her

academically during her first two years,

> It was definitely because I didn't apply myself. And one of the reasons why I know that
> for a fact is when I first came back I had to retake about three of the classes that I got E's
> in and then I replaced those E's with A's. And it was like why could you do this the first
> time Ashley, why couldn't you just focus.

She also talked about the role her sorority played in her applying herself and doing better

academically.

Let's see, what helped me graduate from UCU? Oh, my sorority also helped. Cause I'm in a predominantly African-American sorority and you know, you have to have a certain GPA to be in, to join and to maintain, to be active. And they really helped me a lot like when I was becoming an interest (expressing interest and the members acknowledging you). I was just coming back to the university so my GPA started at what I left off with, which was like a 1.0. And they really helped me. They would sit with me and help me study. And I would get distracted, "oh so what about that homework". And they would help me.

Valerie had a similar experience her first year of college. She was placed on academic probation after her first year because like Ashley, she was hanging out and was not focusing on her academics. After spending a semester at a community college, she came back and got involved on campus. She talked about what she did after being readmitted to the university. "Trying to get my GPA where you know I thought it was acceptable from, you know, having a first year that was terrible and you know I started to talk to a lot of people. I got involved in the International Center." Her involvement in the International Center not only resulted in her grades improving she also earned a job there and it exposed her to studying abroad which she did.

All the participants acknowledged how their involvement in student groups had a positive impact on them personally and academically.

Engagement

The participants were engaged with faculty and staff on campus. Engagement refers to student's interactions with faculty, staff, students, and their peers. The participants talked a lot about the faculty and/or staff they developed relationships with and their interactions with them. When asked to talk about their interactions with faculty and staff members they each talked about at least one faculty or staff member who pushed, encouraged, supported, cared, listened, and/or helped them. While they all had established a relationship with someone, Sonny, Danielle, Soledad, and Briana talked about theirs in greater depth.

Sonny developed a relationship with a faculty member, Professor D. Sonny had taken one

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of Professor D's courses and he connected with her style of teaching and how she related what they were learning in the classroom with what they would do in the field. "It really didn't seem like coursework and I would learn more from, not from the book, I would learn most from listening to her speak about her previous experiences and things that we'll need to do in the field to be successful." The positive experience he had in the classroom with her led him to establish a mentor-mentee relationship.

> Professor D, keep in contact with her, for sure. She's really important to what I do. She kinda helped just with the whole, helped me with my plan you know, my framework of what I should be doing and what it should look like. That's what I learned from her. This is what being a social worker and what it should look like. I keep in contact with her you know.

Soledad also engaged with faculty and staff on campus, which was important because she did not have a positive relationship with her family. She grew up with her grandmother who was not very loving and she did not have a relationship with her mother or father. As a result, the relationship she established with one of her professors was that much more important to her. When asked if she made meaningful connections with any faculty or staff members she stated the following,

> Dr. Hensley because she would… I did an internship and she's my internship professor. We had an internship class and it was just like how she would check up on me and then how she would like write feedback and stuff. And I would talk to her about everything. I still talk to her now. So it seems like just seeing a woman like in psychology, because I wanted to go into psychology, with her doctorate teaching successfully just very like together with her life. I was like I want to be like that.

Jeff had also developed a meaningful relationship with someone on campus but this person was a staff member. Jeff grew up in single parent household so when he connected with a Black male staff member it meant that much more to him. He stated this about that person,

> I'll randomly stop by in his office and not talk about anything specifically just talk about you know my plan. That's, since my, let's see probably my second, third, no my second year, he's been asking me what my plan was. And I've been building it ever since then.

So he's really big on looking towards the future. I would say, probably, without James there it would be a lot less Black kids at this campus because a lot of us look towards him.

He helped me just like I said, I would just randomly just stop by Henry's office at any point of time of the day and have a, you know, 30-minute conversation about anything that comes across the mind. So he has just been somebody that really pushes you, you know, he keeps it real with any situation he'll definitely let you know how it is so. It's just good to have that blunt person who will put a foot in your butt when you need it and also you know, pick you up and keep you going.

Danielle was struggling with what major to declare when her friend told her about a faculty member she had met who was "great". Danielle decided to schedule an advising appointment with him. She said they talked about different things and he helped her determine a major. That initial meeting resulted in a mentor-mentee relationship. She said the following about him,

Dr. Hopson, so that's my mentor, he has been for a couple years now and that was the best relationship that I have gained definitely from a faculty or staff member at UCU. He's always there when you need him, always constantly, yeah. He really has your best interest at heart and really looks out for you and he can be really hard on you. Like when I first came to him I had my GPA was a 3.7 (laughter) and it's just like it was never good enough, get it up you need a 3.9, you need a 3.8, then when I got my 3.8 it's like you need a 3.9. It was never good enough which is a good thing. He always constantly pushed you. And he helped you, just opening your mind to like, different resources and different things that are out there for you. So he was yeah, a very great influence.

Briana developed a significant relationship with a staff member who ran the UCU precollege program she participated in. Mrs. Pat is someone she had known since her sophomore year of high school. Briana talked about Mrs. Pat as one of the staff members who supported her during her tenure at UCU. "Mrs. Pat, the whole office in Support Office actually, they are like on it all the time making sure everything is good. Just to check up on you and I appreciate that cause it's not just always, sometimes it's more personal then focus on academics and they knew how to intertwine both of them, and I love that." She goes on talk about her relationship with Mrs. Pat.

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I could go in her office and pour my entire life out on her while she's worried about MSP (Motivation Scholars Program, a precollege program) stuff. And she'll stop and just listen to me and let me vent and then give me advice that I sometimes needed. Sometimes it was harsh criticism, like okay you need to do this, you need to like, you know, get it together. So if I could call anybody on this campus I would say, Mrs. Pat.

While Briana had an extensive support system, the support she received from Mrs. Pat was very important as she viewed her as a mentor.

The participants in this study each engaged with at least one faculty or staff member that had a positive impact on their college experience.

Additional Themes

Precollege Programs

Half of the participants in the study participated in programs while in middle and/or high school. The goal of the programs was to prepare K-12 students for college and the programs are commonly referred to as precollege programs. Three of the participants, Soledad, Brianna, and Danielle were involved in such programs through Urban City University (UCU): Motivation Scholars Program (MSP), Deciding to Succeed (DTS), and Nurses Training Program (NTP). NTP operated during the summer and focused on careers in nursing. MSP and DTS were open to students from middle school through college, there were different components students participated in during the whole year, and any students who met all the program requirements earned a scholarship that paid their tuition and fees through graduation. The participants acknowledged the role the programs they participated in contributed to their success in college.

Soledad was involved in the NTP, a program designed to expose high school students to the medical field. When Soledad was asked if she participated in any programs, groups, or activities that prepared her for college she talked about NTP. She said,

Yeah NTP, cause I was gonna go into Nursing." She went on to say, "I really think that like helped me cause I was like okay, I will go to the university during the summer, in

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which I would attend classes, and I was like okay, like, I can get use to the university like it's not hard I think it will be.

During the summer, the program exposed her to the field of nursing, the academic rigor of college level work, the college classroom experience, and UCU's campus and faculty. Her participation in the program gave her an advantage over UCU students who did not have the opportunity to be a part of a program like NTP.

Brianna also participated in a precollege program through UCU called MSP. She was involved in the program from eighth grade through college. The program exposed youth and their families to college life from middle school to high school and all throughout the year. During the academic year, they attended meetings and programs and in the summer they lived on campus, went to class, and participated in programs. Briana stated the following after being asked how MSP prepared her for college,

> MSP was a college prep program. Like we did the ACT prep all the time every Saturday getting up early to come down here and study. They had us like we had different assignments every year from Mr. Brace. He would have us writing, making sure that you're doing the right format, if you understand these formats, you know. We had tutoring available. The office was always open for us to come in if we had questions. They hired a personal tutor if you need help with a specific subject.

She went on to say, "And they dedicate two hours to me after school or after a meeting. So it was just various things like that that really prepared me."

Briana also talked about how the program prepared her for the college classroom experience. "MSP they give us these rules, you know, prior to starting college you know. If you can, sit in the front, ask questions, don't sit together, don't be on your phone, you know they gave us all the stuff, and we, it was embedded in us." The "stuff" that MSP "embedded" in her prepared her for in and out of classroom experiences.

Danielle was a part of DTS, Deciding to Succeed, which is a lot like MSP. Danielle talked a great deal about the program.

> I was in there from tenth grade or maybe ninth grade until my senior year. And that was a precollege program here at UCU. And they offered a full ride scholarship if you complete the program. So they always, well huh. I'm trying to think. So the program like, you'll have it during the school year and we would have like workshops on leadership and like resume building. Just different things to help you prepare for college, like essay writing. And then we will have a summer portion where we would have to do like a summer program. So that would include, we would have classes like math. We had like theater class, just different classes to make sure we didn't lose our skills over the summer time. So that was a good influence.

She continued to talk about how the program continued to support her while in college.

> Well, I'm going to speak on a DTS again. I was in a lot of things but this was the most important thing I think since I did end up going to UCU. So after we get the scholarship, we get into this program called, LI, Leaders Institute. And so we are in that from our freshman year to our sophomore year. So it's to make sure that they, basically keep an eye on us, you know, on us, make sure that our grades are up to par. We have to maintain a certain GPA to make sure we keep our scholarships. And throughout the year we would have meetings and they would have different workshops on leadership, you know.

The students who participated in the precollege programs talked at length about how the programs aided in their success as it prepared them for college and the staff from the office the programs came out of supported them the entire time they were in college.

On-Campus Employment

The participants in the study were all very involved on campus and all but one of them held on campus jobs at some point while in college. Several of them developed meaningful relationships with the staff they worked with and in some cases, they made connections with faculty, staff, and students. Jeff, Soledad, and Valerie worked on campus in positions that only contributed to their success in college.

Jeff started working on campus as a receptionist in the student university center, which is

a high traffic area, during his first year of college and worked there until his senior year. His

receptionist position exposed him to lots of faculty, staff, students, and visitors.

> I would say that (working on campus as a receptionist in the student university center) had a bigger impact on my college career then I really thought because with working at the receptionist desk at the student university center, that was a way for everybody to see me. So everybody knew my face so even if they didn't know me they thought they knew me.

Jeff was asked lots of questions while working as a receptionist and over time students began to

look to him for guidance and support which made him want to strive and do better.

> Jeff also worked in Support Office. He received an immense amount of help from his

those he worked with him in Support Office.

> And then those that had a more direct influence will be the fraternity, of course, both workplaces. Support Office, they helped me with joining my fraternity. They were just very supportive they've always motivated me when it comes to grades cause that's a big thing down to Support Office.

He goes on to talk about how his experiences in Support Office helped him grow as a person.

> And then working at Support Office, it helped me with the enhancing my leadership and maturing capabilities because we work with high school students so if we want to mentor them properly and put them on the right path we have to somewhat kinda somewhat be on the right ourselves.

Jeff's on campus jobs gave him exposure and helped develop the leader within him.

> Soledad earned a job working on campus her second year of college in Support Office.

The work she did for Support Office was challenging because it took her out of her comfort

zone.

> I worked in Support Office and huh yeah, it was a lot. I felt like it was so much work to do like I was a mentee for different like freshman students. I had to, I was part of like Peer Group, you know what Peer Group is? Huh, I'm trying to describe it, but it's like when different majors come together and be like resources for each other. So when I was a part of that I was like, making up meetings, emailing people, doing things that I never

would do, and that was like my sophomore to junior year so. It was a lot of responsibilities they put on you like calling people like I didn't want to talk on the phone.

While Soledad did not like the work, it helped her grow as a person. She was shy and spent her first year of college in her residence hall room, library, and class. Her job with Student Support got her out of her room and pulled her out of her shell.

She also worked in the Student Activities Office. Her job in student activities had a significant impact on her life, as that is where she met her supervisor who would later become her mentor and where she was given her first full-time job and a chance to work in Student Affairs, her chosen career path. "And then I worked in the Student Activities Office. And working there and just that environment. And like, I guess moving up my responsibilities and working as a temporary in the office, really developed my skills in meeting other people." Soledad's work on campus in both positions challenged her and took her out of her comfort zone.

Valerie worked on campus in the International Center. Her experience there impacted her in many ways and resulted in her meeting a mentor, changing her major, and studying abroad.

> I was working at the International Center my last year and a half which I was, I think working at the International Center. And being a part of CSA (Cultural Student Association) and even living in Off-Campus Residence Hall were all like, they kinda shaped my college experience and just kinda made me figure out like what I wanna major in. I came in the university as a Psychology student, so I left an International Business major so.

She later talked about the mentor she met while working there and how she encouraged her to study aboard. Valerie's on campus job changed the course of her life just as Jeff's and Soledad's did.

Spirituality and Religious Participation

Five participants, Ashley, Soledad, Jeff, Valerie, and Danielle alluded to spirituality or religious participation during their college years. Spirituality is a belief system that guides the behavior of an individual (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Religious participation is "private and public religious participation" (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Individuals who participate in religious activities may also be spiritual however, someone can be spiritual and not participate in a religion (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Many participants in this study referred to their spirituality and/or their involvement in religious activities, including attending church services and participating in a student group.

Soledad and Ashley both referred to a belief system during their interviews. When Soledad was asked about student success she talked about how faith in oneself can lead to weakness. "I feel like that it is in just where you're putting your faith in. If you're putting your faith in yourself and only striving to get along in yourself, by yourself, you eventually feel weak". She goes into more detail about what she means by faith after being asked, if there was anything else she would like to share about what contributed to your success in earning a college degree. Her response was, "Well I would say like my faith because I know I have a bigger purpose so talking with God, knowing that in order to fulfill your purpose I have to, you know, get my degree and that's a part of your purpose." Ashley also references to God when asked why she believes she was able to earn a bachelor's degree. Ashley stated, "It was nothing but God. He whoa... he'll do it. He really will." Soledad and Ashley's spoke to their belief systems when asked about their success.

Jeff and Valarie talked about attending church services and how their pastors acknowledging and encouraging the college students and graduates motivated them during their

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time in college. Jeff stated, "I've always helped with my church and that's just cause you know it

was, it was a big part of life." He goes on to say,

> My pastor would always talk about those who were going to college. He would always
> bring up grades. That's big thing with him to this day, you know. Now every time
> college kids come home, he points them out, you know, says how he is proud of them,
> stuff like that. So that was a motivating force as well.

Valerie had a similar experience at her church with her pastor.

> My church played a big role. My pastor was big on acknowledgment. And I think that's
> important with someone in undergrad. Realizing that, you know, there are people out
> there rooting for you and you're not doing, going through this alone, so, I think that
> played a big role.

They both found support and encouragement from their Pastors and church family.

> Soledad was also involved in a student group that she says had a positive impact on her

personal, social, and spiritual wellbeing.

> Christian Fellowship, now that really helped me got. Like I had like a small group like
> Bible study that we would have. And we would have to reach out to people and I was too
> shy to do that but I would meet new people through that. And then we went on different
> like mission trips so being able to go abroad, that really opened my perspective on
> different things.

Later she goes on to talk about how her involvement in the student group helped her grow as a

person,

> The Intervarsity was very diverse too. And then they had like the Christian background.
> So, like having people that are very likeminded and keep me on track with my spiritual
> life and also with my social life and being very supportive and not even knowing them.
> That helped me a lot like they were like my support system.

Soledad found a group that not only supported her but also had the same beliefs as her.

> Danielle also participated in religious activities. When she was asked about people who

had a positive impact on her while college, she talked about a staff member who worked in an

office she frequented and taught her first-year experience course, and who later became her

Pastor. Soledad and Danielle were actively in religious activities while in college and a study by

Walker and Dixon (2002) found that African American students who reported "higher levels of spiritual beliefs and behaviors" had higher grade point averages and academic honors. Soledad and Danielle graduated from Urban City College with high honors and earned the highest honor a student can receive at the time of graduation.

Discussion of Findings

The common factors identified through the research are in line with the eight themes that arose amongst the study participants and are displayed in Table 10. There were five common factors that came out of the research: precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement. The themes that arose amongst the eight study participants were self-efficacy, support, resilience, involvement, engagement with faculty and staff, precollege program participation, on-campus employment, and spiritual and/or religious participation.

Table 10: Common factors from research and themes from findings.

5 Commons Factors from Research	Precollege experiences	Support systems	Personal attributes	Involvement	Engagement
8 Themes from Findings	Precollege program participation	Support	Self-efficacy Resilience Spirituality and/or religious participation	Involvement in student groups Spirituality and/or religious participation On-campus employment	Engagement with faculty and staff

Chapter Conclusion

The participants in this study were African American and earned a bachelor's degree from a predominately white institution. Their attainment of bachelor's degrees can be attributed to positive self-efficacy, emotional and financial support they received from a host of people, their

own resilience, getting involved in positive organizations and activities on campus, and engaging with faculty and staff. Nearly half of the participants also participated in precollege programs prior to going to college, were employed on campus, and were spiritual and/or participated in religious activities. The findings from the study were in line with the research that conceptually guided my study as shown in Table 10.

CHAPTER 6: STUDY REVIEW, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the study and conceptual framework, discuss the key findings, provide recommendations for practice, and suggestions for further research.

Overview of Study

This research study is an interpretive qualitative design. I used a sequential design; data was retrieved through semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight African Americans who have earned bachelor's degrees from a predominately White institution, Urban City University (UCU). The data collected from the interviews was used to create portraits for each of the participants, which are presented in Chapter 4. The portraits offer a brief overview of each participants' family, K through 16 experiences, and what they believe contributed to their earning a bachelor's degree. While each of the participants are unique and had different experiences, there were similarities amongst them which are referred to as "themes". The primary themes that were salient amongst all the participants were self-efficacy, support, resilience, involvement in student groups, and engagement with faculty and staff. Three additional themes arose amongst at least half of the participants, experience in precollege programs, on-campus employment, and spirituality and/or religious participation. The themes inform our understanding of African Americans and what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among them.

Conceptual Framework

My research study is conceptually guided by research by Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (2002), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013). Additional researchers have explored success among minority students and many of them could conceptually guide this study. The group chosen to guide my work were chosen for

four reasons; they all take an anti-deficit approach to their research by seeking to understand why minority students are successful; they focus on specific populations; they explore the student's personal attributes; and they examine the experiences of students within their environments. Combined their work offers a lot of insight into what factors contribute to success among African American students who are pursuing a bachelor's degree. The factors that are common amongst them include precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement. The factors they have in common collectively are strengthened as they all identify them as factors that lead to success among minority college students. The common factors inform and guide my study.

Anti-Deficit Research Approach

The approach I take to my research is anti-deficit. I believe the research that aims to increase academic success among African American's tends to start with deficit thinking as it focuses on why students do not graduate rather than why they do. "The deficit thinking model is a form of pseudoscience in which researchers approach their work with deeply embedded negative biases, pursue such work in methodologically flawed ways, and communicate their findings in proselytizing manners" (Valencia, 1997, p. 10). While knowledge can be gained from such research, I believe more can be learned by using anti-deficit approaches.

I employed three anti-deficit strategies when conducting my research. First I sought to understand the family and K through 16 experiences of African Americans and what they believe lead to their success. I believe by understanding their experiences we may be able to create similar experiences for all African American students and increase graduation rates among them. The second is I asked anti-deficit questions of my study participants to gain an understanding of their family and K through 16 experiences and what they believe lead to their success, which is

aligned with Harpers (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework. The anti-deficit achievement framework was designed by Harper (2010) to gain a better understanding of how successful students of color navigate college. The framework was created for a study involving Black males and was adapted for a study on students of color in STEM. The framework consists of anti-deficit questions a researcher can use to "better understand how students of color persist and successfully navigate their way to and through various junctures" while in college (Harper, 2010, p. 67). The third is the questions I asked did not focus on what obstacles the participants may have had to overcame to be successful. Rather than ask the students what barriers they overcome while in college to be successful, I ask them to tell me about their experience in college which will yield that information without them focusing exclusively on their struggles.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the study are:

1. What factors do African Americans who earn bachelor's degrees from predominately White institutions identify as important to their academic success?

2. How do the factors successful African Americans identify contribute to their success?

Significance of Study

Research concerning African American students who have successfully persisted towards earning a bachelor's degree can provide a wealth of useful information that could lead to an increase in college degree attainment among them. Researchers have been exploring student departure, retention, presistence, and success for decades, including Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1987), Bean (1980), Eaton and Bean (2000), Padilla (1997), Fries-Britt (1998), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013). Their work has contributed to our current understanding of success among minority students. The goal of this

study is to build upon their work and provide institutions with a better understanding of African American college students, their experiences, and what leads to bachelor's degree attainment among them. In turn institutions can use what is learned to provide students with environments that will give them experiences like the successful students and ultimately increase college graduation among them.

Summary of Key Findings

My research revealed five primary themes among the eight study participants and three additional themes among at least half of them. The primary themes that were salient amongst all the participants was, self-efficacy, support, resilience, involvement in student groups, and engagement with faculty and staff. The three additional themes were participation in precollege programs, on-campus employment, and spirituality and religious participation.

The participants in this study all possess the personal attribute of positive self-efficacy, "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). They each believed they could reach their goal of becoming a college graduate. This belief was an internal one that grew from their belief that they can do anything they put their minds to and people around them who told them they could. Their self-efficacy was even more important as there were not many people within their community who were college graduates nor were there an abundance of faculty, staff, or students who looked like them at the institution they attended. None of the participants had people within their immediate family who had earned a bachelor's degree when they began college. There were times when they were discouraged or faced an obstacle they were unsure of how to overcome, but their internal belief in themselves pushed them to achieve.

The participants also had some level of support while in college. Support refers to any action of an individual that aided in the participant's successful persistence towards earning a college degree. Each received a different type of support. Some of the participants received emotional support from family, significant others, community members, friends, mentors, faculty, staff, and/or other students. The emotional support came in the form of encouraging words, listening ears, and helping hands. In addition, a few of the participants received financial support from family and/or significant others. In some cases, when they needed financial assistance they received information on where they could go to get the help they needed. They all talked at length about the emotional and/or financial support they received from others that contributed to their successful persistence towards earning a college degree.

Each of the participants had some level of resilience. Resilience is the ability to endure and adapt when encountering stressful situations (Waxman et. al., 2003). The participant's resilience developed over time and was nurtured by their desire to achieve and support from people in their lives. They each faced challenges that could have resulted in them giving up and not finishing their degree. The challenges included but were not limited to finances, lack of family support, problems with faculty in the classroom, understanding the college going process, and the academic rigor of college. The participants overcame their challenges because they refused to give up and in many instances avoided some challenges because of the good decisions they made.

All the participants were involved on campus. Involvement refers to a student's participation in student groups. Each participated in at least one student group. There were two subjects who came to college, were not involved on campus, and found themselves on academic probation. They each left the university and attended a local community college before returning

to the university. In both cases, when they returned they got involved on campus and started improving academically. The participants all discussed how the support they received from other students in the student groups they participated in was instrumental to their success in college. Also, some of them credit their above average academic achievement to their involvement in student groups.

The participants were engaged with faculty and/or staff and developed significant relationships with them. Engagement refers to student's interactions with faculty, staff, students, and their peers. Each of the participants developed a relationship with a faculty or staff member whom they believed were partly responsible for their ability to earn a degree. There were faculty who were willing to meet outside of the classroom to give academic instruction, guidance, or support. In addition, there were faculty and staff who provided a listening ear, shared resources, gave encouraging words, and tough love. The participants spoke highly of the faculty and staff they believe helped them.

The participants in the study all participated in sports, programs, and/or activities during their K through 12 years. Half of them participated in programs while in middle and/or high school that helped prepare them for college. Those programs are commonly known as precollege programs as their goal is to prepare K through 12 students for college. The participants who were a part of such programs talked about how the programs to some degree helped them prepare for college academically and gave them a better understanding of the college going process. Also, some of the students were familiar with the faculty and campus because the precollege program they were a part of was affiliated with the university they attended. They all talked about how the programs helped prepare them for college and how the program staff supported them while in the program and throughout their college tenure.

More than half of the participants in this study worked while in college. All but one of them had on-campus employment during their time in college. They all reflected on how their employment on campus gave them opportunities to connect with staff and students. In many cases, the participants talked about how those connections provided the support and direction they needed while in college. Those connections led to financial assistance, spiritual support, encouragement, and life changing experiences.

Some of the participants credited their spirituality and/or religious participation for their ability to earn their college degree. Spirituality is a belief system that guides the behavior of an individual (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Individuals who participate in religious activities may also be spiritual. However, someone can be spiritual and not participate in religion (Walker & Dixon, 2002). There were participants who talked about a higher being making college graduation possible. There were others who talked about the support they received from participating in religious activities as being significant to their ability to be successful.

Conceptual Framework and Findings

The findings from this study are aligned with the research that conceptually guided it. Padilla et al. (1997), Fries-Britt (2002), Swail et al. (2003), Griffin (2006), Kuh et al. (2006), Harper (2010), and Strayhorn (2013), collectively identified precollege experiences, support systems, personal attributes, involvement, and engagement as factors that lead to minority student success. The eight themes that arose amongst the eight study participants were self-efficacy, support, resilience, involvement, engagement with faculty and staff, precollege program participation, on-campus employment, and spiritual and/or religious participation. Table 11 shows the alignment of the common factors that came out of the research that guided this study and the themes from the findings.

Table 11: Common factors from research and themes from findings.

5 Commons Factors from Research	Precollege experiences	Support systems	Personal attributes	Involvement	Engagement
8 Themes from Findings	Precollege program participation	Support	Self-efficacy Resilience Spirituality and/or religious participation	Involvement in student groups Spirituality and/or religious participation On-campus employment	Engagement with faculty and staff

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from this study provides timely and useful information for UCU and institutions who want to improve the college graduation rates of their African American students. The findings from this study suggest institutions of higher education interested in improving graduation rates among African American students can benefit from learning from African American students who earn a degree from their institution. This study found African American students who attend UCU are more likely to graduate if they possess self-efficacy, resilience, they receive support from one or more people in their lives, are involved in student groups, and engage with faculty and staff. In addition, participating in precollege programs, working on-campus, and spirituality and/or religious participation can impact success. The findings from this study are aligned with the research on student success that guided it.

The findings from this study are significant and do inform our understanding of what leads to degree attainment among African Americans at UCU. The findings apply to all institutions, but there are some differences among institutions and the students they admit. I recommend institutions do one of two things to increase success among African American students based on the findings from this study. The first is use the findings from this study to

create a first-year experience course that provides students with the information and tools they need to be successful and earn a degree. The second is institutions retrieve data from their students through exit interviews and noncognitive variable questionnaires to create a first-year experience course utilizing local knowledge that will meet the specific needs of their students.

Recommendation 1: Utilize Study Findings

The first recommendation is to create a first-year experience course using the findings from this study. A first-year experience course is an ideal way to orientate students to an institution and educate them on what they need to know and do to be successful in college. Cohen and Jody (1978) identified the need to orientate students to an institution beyond orientation and recommended institution create freshman seminars. In addition, they stated, "Students' need to understand their new environment and their role in it can no longer be left to chance. A programmatic effort by an institution in this direction not only benefits students but also serves the institution's needs to keep its students" (Cohen and Jody, 1978, p. 8). It is important that first-year experience courses do all of the above and to design a course that meets the needs of the students and provides them with the information and tools they need to be successful.

First-Year Experience Course. My first recommendation is to create a first-year experience course that will orientate students to the institution but also incorporate the findings from the study: self-efficacy, resilience, support, campus involvement, and faculty and staff engagement. The course should stress the importance of engaging with faculty and staff, offer tips on how to engage with them, and require the students do an activity or assignment that would involve them engaging with multiple faculty and staff members. The course should also inform students on ways they can get involved on campus and require them to participate in an

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activity or student group and reflect on their experience. In addition, the students should identify their support systems, and if they do not have any, they will learn how to create one which they will do before the conclusion of the course. Lastly, the course should encourage, reinforce, and further develop the student's self-efficacy and resilience through activities that require self-reflection and exploration.

The course should be taught by a faculty or staff member who is well trained and receives credit for teaching. This study identified the importance of students engaging with faculty and/or staff members so either of them teaching the course would be an asset to the students. The instructors of the course should be trained and I recommend they receive 40 hours of training which could occur over several weeks. In addition, the instructors should receive credit for teaching, ideally one to two hours of teaching credit. The recommended instructors, training, and teaching credits are common and is reflective of many institutions who have first-year experience courses including University of South Carolina and Community College of Baltimore.

Recommendation 2: Utilize Local Findings

The second recommendation is more robust and involves creating a first-year experience course based on data retrieved from exit interviews and noncognitive variables questionnaires thus providing institutions with valuable local knowledge. I suggest institutions do three things:

- The first is administer exit interviews to graduating seniors to gain an understanding of what factors lead to their success.
- The second is administer noncognitive variables questionnaires to incoming students to get a holistic picture of who they are as a cohort and their attributes.
- The third is to use the information gathered from the exit interviews and non-

cognitive variables questionnaires to create a first-year experience course.
The suggestions I have made require institutions to assess graduates to understand what lead to their success and to assess incoming students to understand who they are and their attributes. The information gathered will be used to create a first-year experience course that will provide the students with the information and tools needed to be successful at their institution. What I am suggesting institutions do is reflective of Astin (1993) input, environment, and output (I-E-O) model of assessment.

Astin's (1993) I-E-O model is a conceptual guide for the assessment of higher education activities and is displayed in Figure 8. The model consists of three major components, input, environment, and output. According to Astin (1993) the outcomes "refers to "the "talents" we are trying to develop in our educational program" (p.18). The inputs "refers to those personal qualities the student brings initially to the educational program (including the student's initial level of developed talent at the time of entry" (Astin, 1993, p. 18). Lastly, Astin states, "the environment refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program" (p. 18). If my second recommendation were inserted into this model, the outcome would be African American college graduates, the inputs would be the incoming students, and the environment would be a first-year experience course.
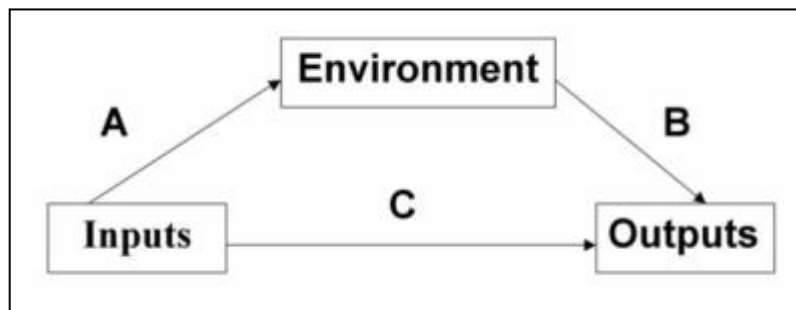
Figure 8: Astin (1993) Input environment output model.

Figure 9 shows how the suggestions for practice could impact student success. The output

is the college graduate. I am suggesting we start with the college graduate and learn from them

through exit interviews. The inputs are the incoming students and I suggest noncognitive

variables questionnaires be used to gain an understanding of the attributes that make up the

students. The results of the exit interviews and noncognitive variables questionnaires are

compared to identify the incoming students attributes by using the results of the questionnaires

and what would lead to them earning a degree based on what is learned from the exit interviews.

The information gathered will be used to create a first-year experience course which is the

environment. What happens next is the incoming students (input), would take the first-year

experience course based on their attributes (learned from the noncognitive variables

questionnaires) and what they need to be successful (learned from the exit interviews). Over time

those students would become the output, college graduates.
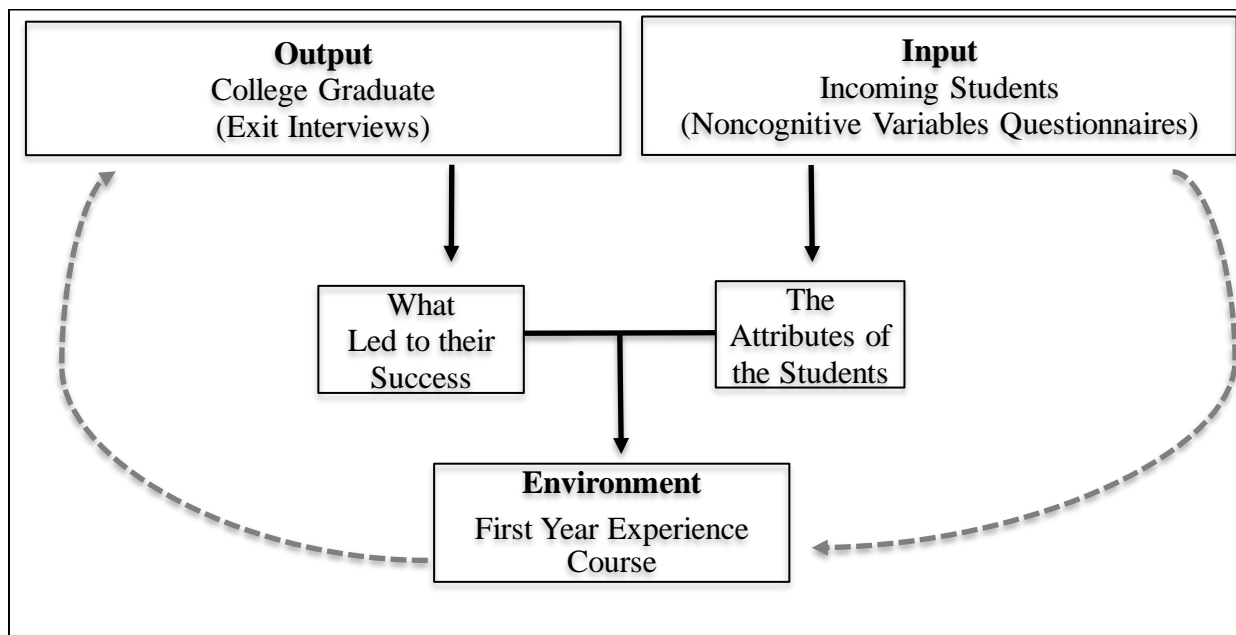
Figure 9: Assessment to action.

Senior Exit Interviews. The goal of institutions of higher education is to educate and

graduate students. The number of African Americans who go to college and graduate is low. I

believe those numbers can be increased by learning from those who graduate. I recommend

institutions gather information about the experience of African American students who are near graduation. An effective way to collect such data is to require students to complete an electronic exit interview before they can submit their application for graduation. According to Lefkowitz and Katz (1969), an exit interview is, "a formal or informal, structured or relatively unstructured information-gathering session with departing employees" (p. 445). The exit interview should consist of open-ended questions that allows students to describe their college experience and what led to their success (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000). Questionnaires based on open-ended questions is a qualitative research method which gives a voice to students (Harper, 2007). Face to face interviews and focus groups could yield more information but to do so would require resources an institution may not have. Exit interviews as described are sufficient. The data collected will inform practice and provides the content needed to create a first-year experience course that could lead to success among all students.

Noncognitive Variable Questionnaires. In an effort to get a detailed picture of an incoming class of students attributes I suggest institutions utilize noncognitive variables questionnaires as a part of the admissions process. Noncognitive refers to "variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, rather than relying solely on the traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas typically measured by standardized tests" (Sedlacek, 2004, p.7). In 2004 Sedlacek argued institutions should move away from only using standardized test to identify student attributes and their ability to be successful in college and utilize noncognitive variables. Sedlacek identified eight noncognitive variables: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, successfully handling the system, preference for long-term goals, availability of strong support person, leadership experience, community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field. Also, he created questionnaires institutions can use to measure

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those variables. I suggest institutions use some form of Sedlacek non-cognitive variables questionnaires within their admission process. The use of such questionnaires will not only provide institutions with more information about the attributes of their students; they are great predictors of student success (Sedlacek, 2004). I believe by taking what is learned from senior exit interviews on what leads to success and what is learned about incoming students through noncognitive variables questionnaires, meaningful first year experience courses can be created.

First-Year Experience Course. The first-year experience course represents the environment, which institutions have the most control. According to Renn and Reason (2012), "the "E"-environment-is the element over which higher education leaders have the greatest influence" (p.82). The primary focus of the first-year experience course is to orientate students to the university and provide them with the information and tools they need to be successful. The information gathered from noncognitive variables questionnaires and senior exit interviews can assist institutions with creating intentional courses. The courses would literally meet the students where they are and provide them with the information and tools known to result in degree completion.

The findings from this study suggest institutions of higher education interested in improving graduation rates among African American students can benefit from learning from African American students who earn a degree from their institution. This study found African American students who attend UCU are more likely to graduate if they possess self-efficacy, resilience, receive support from one or more people, are involved in student groups, and engage with faculty and staff. In addition, participating in precollege programs, working on-campus, and spirituality and/or religious participation can impact success. The findings from this study are aligned with the research on student success that guides it. Based on the findings I recommend

institutions do one of two things to increase student success. The first is create a first-year experience course based on the findings from this study that provides students with the information and tools they need to be successful and earn a degree. The second is retrieve data from their students through exit interviews and noncognitive variable questionnaires to create a first-year experience course utilizing local knowledge that will meet the needs of their students. This study and recommendations provides timely and useful information for UCU and institutions who want to improve the college graduation rates of African American students.

Ongoing Data Collection

If an institution is interested in gathering data on their students experiences over time to gain an understanding of what leads to success among them, they could collect data in a few different ways. The institution could collect data when students register for courses, confirm their attendance for the upcoming semester, and during mandatory online trainings each academic year. The students could be required to answer a series of questions before they are given access to any of the above activities. The questions asked could give insight to institutions on their students experience each year. The data collected would not only provide information on their students on going experiences it could inform other institutional practices.

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Suggestions for Further Research

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The research done by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1987), Bean (1982, 2000), Padilla (1996), Fries-Britt (1998), Griffin (2006), and Strayhorn (2013), Swail et al. (2003), Kuh et al. (2006), and Harper (2010) has informed my research. There are other researchers that explore student departure, retention, persistence, and success but there is more work that can be done in those areas. I have three suggestions for further research which include, continue to explore what leads to college graduation among African American students, what institutions can do to

develop desired attributes in students who lack them, and exploring the impact staff have on student success.

African American Student Experience

My first suggestion for further research is to continue to explore what leads to college graduation among African Americans. The African American population is diverse and so are institutions of higher education. The more research done on different populations within the African American community at different institutional types and academic programs, the better our understanding of what leads to their success. There are several things I believe researchers could do to further our understanding of what leads to college degree attainment among African American's. The first is to acknowledge the past research on student departure, retention, persistence, and success and build upon it. The second is to take an anti-deficit approach to their research by looking to understand the experiences of successful students. There has been a wealth of research on why students do not graduate and not enough on why they do. The third is to use Harper's (2010) anti-deficit framework to develop questions for study participants. The fourth is to not go into research seeking to only understand the barriers students overcome to be successful. That approach is only reflective of a fraction of successful student's college experiences. It is possible students avoid obstacles because they make good decisions and that information should be highlighted. The four recommendations made will lead to findings that help us further understand what leads to college degree attainment among African Americans.

Developing Personal Attributes

Personal attributes refer to students' skills, abilities, drive, self-efficacy, motivation, resilience, actions, behavior, and grit and are believed to be a factor that can lead to student success. The research that conceptually guides my study and my findings all identify personal

attributes as important to student success. In this study, I identify personal attributes as characteristic of an individual that are inherently a part of who they are, are developed over time, and shapes their behavior. If someone starts college and lacks personal efficacy or resilience, can institutions help them develop those attributes? The question goes back to the nature verses nurture argument. Can personal attributes be developed? Or are they a part of someone's genetic makeup? Or are they developed over time as a result of someone's lived experiences? There is a wealth of research that suggest students who have more grit, resilience, and/or self-efficacy are more successful in college. If that is true can institutions help students develop those attributes? I believe there is a need for further research on personal attributes and the ability to develop them in college students who lack them.

Impact of Staff

The participants in my study all credited support from others as a factor that contributed to their ability to earn a college degree. In addition, they all identified one or more staff members who they developed meaningful relationships with that supported them while in college. There is a wealth of research on the benefits of engaging with faculty and building a meaningful relationship with them. There is much less on the impact of engaging with and building meaningful relationships with staff. The findings from my study suggest engaging with staff is just as important. Also, as a former college student and a current university staff member, I know first-hand how much a positive impact a staff member can have on students experience and their ability to graduate. I suggest there be further research on the impact of staff on college student success.

Concluding Remarks

I was born and raised in a predominately Black inner city and in a low-income single

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parent household. Where I am from only a small percentage of people who go to college earn a degree. When I was a high school senior, a college admissions counselor told me based on my ACT scores I would not be successful in college. I went on to attend that very same college and I graduated as a student leader with honors. I have achieved above and beyond what my ACT scores indicated I was capable of. Because of my experiences in college I have dedicated my life to a profession that works to educate and graduate students and in my spare time I enjoy helping high school students and their families understand the college going process. While I work hard to educate and graduate all students, there is a special place in my heart for African Americans who come from a similar background as me. I understand where they come from and a lot of their experiences and I feel an internal obligation to help them be successful in life. My hope is through my actions and research I can help all students graduate and help African American students find success in life.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: In-depth Interview Protocol

My name is Qiana Perrean Smith and I am a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, within the College of Education. I am currently working on a research study for my dissertation, looking to learn what factors lead to African American college student success. The purpose of the study is to examine successful African American students to learn what factors contribute to their successful persistence towards earning a college degree.

Today with your permission, I would like to engage in a conversation with you about you and your experiences in college. I will ask questions to gain an understanding of what factors have led to your success in college.

I ask that this conversation remain confidential. I will use a pseudonym in all written materials to ensure each participant's identity is not revealed.

This interview will last between forty and sixty minutes. I will audio-record our conversation and will take reflective notes. I will transcribe the interview verbatim and provide a copy to you for your review and records.

I am about to begin our conversation. If at any time you do not want to continue to participate in the conversation, do not want to answer a question, or you want to take a break please feel free to do so.

In addition, at any point during the conversation please let me know if you need further clarification on a question.

Do you have any questions before we start our conversation?

Ice Breaker
1. Recent Graduates: Tell me what you have been up to since you graduated from college.

   Soon to Graduate: What are your plans after graduation?

2. Tell me about your life as a student.
   a. What type of student were (are) you?

Family Background
3. Tell me about your family and the highest level of education they earned.
4. As a child, what types of messages did you receive about education and going to college?
5. How involved was your family in your education during your K-12 years?
   a. Did they help you with your homework or projects?
   b. Did they attend parent-teacher conferences and school programs and activities?
   c. Did they show interest in the grades you earned or your report cards?

Precollege
6. How did your K-12 educational experiences prepare you for college?

a. What was your classroom environment like? Were you able to learn in the classroom? Did you think your teachers were interested in teaching and were they able to teach?

b. What resources did you have in the classroom? Computers? Textbooks? Paper, pencils, pens, crayons, markers etc.?

7. During your K-12 years what programs, groups, or activities were you involved?

a. What messages did you receive about college from those programs, groups, or activities?

b. How did those programs, groups, or activities prepare you for college?

8. How did your teachers, counselor, or other staff prepare you for college?

a. What messages did you receive from them about college?

b. What did they teach you that prepared you for college?

c. What did they do to help you get to college?

9. What was your highest ACT and/or SAT score when you graduated from high school? What was your cumulative grade point average?

Student Success

10. How do you define student success?

11. What makes a college student successful?

a. Do you believe you were a successful student? Why or Why not?

College

12. Tell me about when you decided to go to college.

a. Walk me through what happened to make college attendance a reality.

13. Why did you decide to attend the Urban City University?

14. Tell me about your time in college.

a. What was the classroom environments like?

i. Tell me about your interactions with faculty.

b. How did you feel about college level work?

i. What were your grades like from your first year of college through graduation?

1. Why did you earn the grades you did?

2. What did you do to earn the grades you did?

a. Tell me about your study habits.

b. Did you utilize the resources on campus? For example, did you use tutorial services, the writing center, go to the writing center, join study or writing groups, go to faculty office hours etc.?

c. Were you involved in any clubs, groups, organizations, or programs? Please tell me about your experiences with them.

d. If you worked while in college, tell me about your job(s) and their impact on your college experience.

e. Tell me about your interactions with staff.

i. Did you have any meaningful relationships with any of them?

ii. Did you have an experience with any of them that affected you in any way?

f. Tell me about your interactions with other students, your peers, and your friends.

g. What type of support did you receive from your family while in college?

   i. What did that support look like?

h. If you had a mentor, who were they and tell me about your relationship with them.

i. Is there anyone or a group of people that you feel played a big role in your ability to be successful in college? If yes, tell me about them.

15. What was your graduating cumulative grade point average at the time of your graduation?

16. The graduation rate among African American students at the Urban City University is low. Think about the African American students you entered college with that have yet to graduate. Why do you think you graduated and they have not?

Research Questions

17. a. What factors do you attribute to your success in earning a bachelor degree at a predominately White institution?

18. How do the factors you identified contribute to your success?

Other

19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about what contributed to your success in earning a college degree?

APPENDIX B: Letter of Consent

Dear Urban City University Student:

My name is Qiana Perrean Smith, a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University in the College of Education, Department of Educational Administration in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program, and I am conducting a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine successful African American students in an effort to learn what factors they contribute to their successful persistence towards earning a college degree.

You are invited to participate in a research study that allows me to explore what factors successful African American students believe contributed to their successful persistence towards earning a college degree. Your participation will give a better understanding of successful African American students and may improve the educational practices for serving African America students.

The study involves a forty to sixty-minute time commitment. You will participate in a forty to sixty-minute individual in-depth semi-structured interview. The total time commitment is approximately one hour. The data analysis will be conducted by Qiana Perrean Smith and follow standard qualitative procedures.

Participant's identities will be protected to the maximum extent possible however our initial communication will not allow for complete anonymity. Participants' personal identities will be protected at all times. Each participant will choose pseudonyms after the one-on-one interview and all identifying information will be changed to the pseudonyms prior to analysis and distribution of data to participants.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time, with no penalty. You may also choose not to answer individual questions but to answer others. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. You may request at any time that I turn off the audio recorder.

If you have any questions about this study or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Steven Wieland, HALE Department, XXX Farm Lane, XXX Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, XXX-XXX-XXXX, xxxxxxxx@msu.edu, or Qiana Perrean Smith, XXX-XXX-XXXX, xxxxxxxx@msu.edu. Also, if you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights and role as a research participation, you may contact anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at XXX-XXX-XXXX, Fax XXX-XXX-XXXX, or e- mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at XXX Olds Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan XXXXX.

I will ask you for both written and verbal consent. At the time of your interview, I will review the consent form information and will then obtain written consent from you. I will ask for your verbal consent before our one on one interview. The participants acknowledge they voluntarily agree to participate in the research study, and agree to have responses audio-recorded. Prior to your scheduled focus group, please review this consent form and do not hesitate to contact me

via email at xxxxxxxx@msu.edu or phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX with any questions, comments, or concerns.

Thank you,

Qiana Perrean Smith
Ph.D. Candidate
Michigan State University
College of Education
Department of Educational Administration
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program
Cell: XXX-XXX-XXXX
xxxxxxxx@msu.edu

APPENDIX C: General Recruitment Email

My name is Qiana Perrean Smith and I am a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, within the College of Education. I am currently working on a research study for my dissertation, on what factors lead to African American college student's success. The purpose of this study is to examine successful African American students in an effort to learn what factors contribute to their successful persistence towards earning a college degree.

The details of my study are below.

Participants
Study participants must be recent or soon to be graduates of the Urban City University and identify as African American and/or Black.

Individual Interviews
Participants must be willing to participate in a forty to sixty-minute in-depth individual interviews. I will audio-record the interview and take reflective notes. I will transcribe the interview verbatim and provide a copy to the interviewees.

If you choose to participate in this research study, your identity will be confidential. Participants will choose pseudonyms to ensure confidentially.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns please feel free to contact me at xxxxxxx@msu.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Qiana Perrean Smith
Ph.D. Candidate
Michigan State University
College of Education
Department of Educational Administration
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program
Cell: XXX-XXX-XXXX
xxxxxxx@msu.edu

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