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# Examining The African American Male Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Barriers and Factors for Success

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EXAMINING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE  
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BARRIERS AND FACTORS FOR  
SUCCESS

A thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements or the degree of  
Master of Arts

By

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B.A., Kentucky State University, 2008

Wright State University

2011

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

June 3, 2011

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION  
BY Christopher James Hogan ENTITLED Examining the African American Male  
Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of barriers and factors for success BE ACCEPTED IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of  
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## ABSTRACT

Hogan, Christopher J. M.A., Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education and Human Services, Wright State University, 2011. Examining the Perceptions of Barriers African American Male Students Face in Higher Education and the Factors that Promote Academic Success

The purpose of this research study was to examine the barriers African American males face in higher education and the factors that promote academic success. This study focused on African American males who attended a large Midwestern public university. Their perceptions were collected through multiple interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. In examining the perceptions of African American males it was found that the barriers they face (academic preparedness, transition into the instructional environment and identity development) and the factors that promote academic success (peer group influence, student involvement and mentoring relationships) at the research institution are similar to the barriers African American males face and the factors that promote academic success according to the literature (Bonner, et. al., 2006). Recommendations include exposing African American males to the campus environment prior to enrollment, strategically advising African American cultural student organizations. Future research should include conducting more in-depth interviews with a more diverse group of African American males

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## DEDICATION

I stand on the sholders of two giants. I dedicate this project to my grandmother Barbara Potter, and my mom Stacy Hogan-Baxter for the many sacrifices they have made for me.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Completing college is more of a struggle for African American males than any other racial/ethnic subgroup in higher education (Strayhorn, 2008). In fact, Jackson (2006) stated that African American males are frequently labeled as the endangered population in education because of their propensity to drop out. In the United States, the ratio of African American males to White males is 1:4; however, the ratio of African American males to White males graduating from college is 1:10 (Kasier Family, 2006). Not much improvement has been made over the last 28 years in higher education for African Americans. "Black men comprised only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled in American institutions of higher education in 2003, the exact same percentage as in 1976" (Nealy, 2009, para. 25).

Education is important for African American males because of its relationship to securing high paying employment thus allowing for a better quality of life (Cureton, 2003). There are also three other reasons (Jaschik, 2006) it is important for African American males to be represented appropriately among higher education graduates. The first reason is the lack of African American males on campus takes away diverse experience opportunities from other African American students. The second reason is if African American males are not present, the result creates an imbalanced ratio of African American men to women. This can cause issues with social interactions, especially making dating difficult within the African American college community. The final reason is, "the paucity of African-American men in college translates to a scarcity of college-educated African-American men, which has equally important negative ramifications for the post-collegiate social life of African-American female college graduates" (Jaschik, 2006, para. 7).

## **Statement of the Problem**

The number of African American males enrolling and subsequently graduating from college has not improved during the last three decades (Kasier Family, 2006). “Black men comprised only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at American institutions of higher education in 2003, the exact same percentage as in 1976” (Nealy, 2009, para. 25). The difference in the number of African American males and White males graduating from college should not be so large; the ratio should be closer to the ratio of African American males to Whites in the general population. Institutions of higher education are aware of the discrepancies in representation and have implemented programs to increase the numbers of African American males who graduate. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of barriers African American male students face while enrolled in institutions of higher education and the factors that promote academic success. A better understanding of the barriers and the factors that promote success will provide further insight and awareness to the unique experience of the African American males in higher education.

## **Definitions of Terms**

The following definitions were operational defined for this study:

*Academic Disidentification* – “This occurs when students attempt to devalue the perceived importance of academic performance in an effort to protect their perceptions of self” (Griffin, 2002, p. 72).

*Academic Preparedness* – “The reading and mathematics knowledge and skills necessary to qualify for placement into entry-level college credit courses that meet general education requirements without the need for remedial coursework” (National Assessment Governing Board, p. 2).

*Acting White* – Adopting expressions or behaviors associated with White people.

When minority adolescents ridicule their minority peers for engaging in behaviors perceived to be characteristic of Whites. For example, when psychologist Angela Neal-Barnett in 1999 asked some focus-group students to identify acting-White behavior, they listed actions that ranged from speaking standard English and enrolling in an Advanced Placement or honors class to wearing clothes from the Gap or Abercrombie & Fitch instead of Tommy Hilfiger or FUBU and wearing shorts in winter. (Fryer, 2006, p. 54)

*Cultural student organization*- Recognized university student organization on the campus of the research institution. Their mission is being the voice for African American males.

*Collective Identity* – “Collective identity refers to people’s sense of who they are, their “we feeling” or “belonging.” People express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect” (Ogbu 2004, p.3).

*HBCU* – Historically Black College or University is an institution of higher learning founded with the intention of serving the Black community.

*PWI* – Predominantly White Institution is an institution of higher learning where the majority of the student population is White.

*Student involvement* – “The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Evans, 2009, p. 297).

### **Research Question**

Research Question: What are the experiences of African American males at a large PWI in the Midwest?

## **Assumptions**

Interviews were the source of data for this study. The interviewer assumed that the interviewees were open and honest with their responses. The participants were not representative of all African American males. This researcher made every attempt to exclude personal bias.

## **Positioning, Biases, and Ethical Issues**

This researcher is currently a graduate student in a Student Affairs Higher Education program. The researcher is an African American male graduate student but is not a part of the population being studied. The researcher did not have any formal relationships with any of the participants; however, being a student, the participants are peers. As a college graduate of an HBCU, the researcher assumed his experiences as an undergraduate were different from those of an African American male attending a PWI. To address confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in interviews and on transcriptions to protect the identity of participants. Participants were not asked to disclose any other identifying information. There were not any risks associated with participating in this study

## **Scope**

This study focused on the perceptions of African American male undergraduate students enrolled in a large Midwestern university. The findings cannot be generalized to other student types or to African American males in general. The findings cannot be generalized to other university settings.

## **Significance of Study**

This study documented the African American males perceptions about the barriers they face as undergraduates and the factors that help them succeed. It is important to better understand this population because of the current disparities in enrollment, matriculation and graduation

among African American males in higher education. The results of this study can be used to gain insight to the undergraduate experience of African American male students.

### **Summary**

Compared to other ethnicities, there is disparity in the number of African American males enrolling in and graduating from college. The discrepancy in enrollment and graduation rates should not be so large and should in fact be more reflective of the population in terms of percentage. The purpose of this study was to examine African American male students' perceptions of barriers they face while enrolled in higher education and the factors African American males perceive to promote success. With this knowledge, higher education institutions can increase the enrollment, retention and graduation rates of African American male students.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many factors affect the college enrollment, retention and graduation rate of African American males in higher education.

The arrival of African American students on college campuses does not guarantee that they will successfully complete the requirements for a college degree because a significant proportion of college-bound Blacks arrive on campus suffering from the consequences of prior affiliations, associations, and interactions with adverse social-situational circumstances that have left burdening emotional scars. (Cureton, 2003, p. 296)

The probability of failure for African American male college students is higher due to unique barriers which Bonner, et. al. (2006) identified as:

- academic preparedness
- transition into institutional environment
- identity development.

On the bright side, there are factors that assist African American male students in achieving academic success. Bonner, et. al. (2006) identified those factors as:

- peer group influence
- student involvement
- mentoring relationships.

### **Academic Preparedness**

One barrier African American males experience in higher education is entering college academically unprepared. This difference in lack of preparedness comes from previous the

elementary and secondary school educational experiences that favor the educational achievement of non-minorities (Cabrera, et. al., 1999). Academic preparedness can be defined as “the reading and mathematics knowledge and skills necessary to qualify for placement into entry-level college credit courses that meet general education requirements without the need for remedial coursework” (National Assessment Governing Board, 2009, p.1).

For example, in Florida, students who score below a certain cutoff point are deemed to be not academically prepared for college-level work. The thresholds of preparedness depend on the tests that students submit for consideration: The SAT threshold is 420 for verbal and 440 for math;<sup>9</sup> the College Placement Test (CPT) threshold is 83 for verbal and 72 for math. (Roska & Calcago, 2010, p. 264)

Not all scholars agree on a definition for academic preparedness, but most agree that rigorous high school classes are at the core of what it takes to prepare a student for further academic pursuits (Bedsworth, et. al., 2006).

Oftentimes, African American male youth are discouraged from participating in or simply do not have access to college preparatory curricula (Strayhorn, 2008).

Most African American students are under-represented in advanced placement and gifted programs, but over-represented in special education and discipline referrals. They are less likely to be enrolled in rigorous coursework, including the key disciplines of science and math, and more likely to drop out of high school. (Bailey, 2008, p.11)

This lack of access contributes to academic unpreparedness because “a rigorous high school curriculum has greater impact on bachelor’s degree completion than any other pre-college indicator of academic preparation, regardless of socioeconomic status or race” (Bedsworth, et. al., 2006, para. 8). By the end of their high school career, African American students have math



and reading skills virtually the same as those of an 8<sup>th</sup> grader (Cureton, 2003), contributing to their unpreparedness. Even when enrolled in college, African American male students are less likely to seek help (Roach, 2001). Academic unpreparedness has a snowball effect that tends to increase the challenge African American males face in higher education. For example, when a student has issues completing academic tasks in the first grade and those issues are never addressed, the issues for that student as a second grader are compounded by the issues not addressed in the first grade. This cycle continues throughout the academic career and the issues not addressed become bigger and bigger, thus creating a snowball effect.

### **Transition into Institutional Environment**

The transition from high school to college can be a very difficult time for all students (Terenzini, et. Al., 1994). A student's perception of the college environment strongly affects academic performance (Cureton, 2003). Unfortunately, "African American males have the burden of coping and adjusting to an environment that may be less hospitable to their presence" (Bonner, et. al., 2006, p. 35). The exposure to a climate of prejudice and discrimination in the classroom and on campus are the main factors accounting for the differences in withdrawal behavior between minorities and non minorities (Bonner, et. al., 2006). "The more a student assimilates into the college, social and academic systems, the more committed the student will be to the college" (Bonner, et. al., 2006, p. 37). A majority of African American male college bound students spent a large part of their lives prior to college in homogeneous environments or racially concentrated neighborhoods, particularly students from the inner-city. This restricted socialization may indirectly contribute to adaptation problems such as adjusting to the college environment. This is especially the case when students attend a predominantly White institution (Cureton, 2003).

The first year experience may be tainted due to prejudices or discrimination in class and in social situations. These factors interfere with a student's integration into the social and academic environments and cause dissatisfaction (Cabera, et. al., 1999). "Dissatisfaction is an important predictor and precursor to leaving college" (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 28). The challenge for the African American male in transitioning into a new environment is sometimes too great to overcome.

### **Identity Development**

Some African American males lose interest in their education during their elementary and/or secondary schooling because of academic disidentification (Griffin, 2002), internalized racism (Harper, 2006) and/or failure syndrome (Brophy, 1998). There is a fear of appearing to 'act White;' the common response to this fear is to outwardly disregard academic success. The "campus environment and a student's interpersonal factors significantly predict Blacks' academic success" (Cureton, 2003, p. 297). By the time disidentified students reach college, these behaviors may have become embedded barriers to success.

Disidentification presents a powerful barrier to overcome for academic success. "Academic disidentification" occurs when students attempt to devalue the perceived importance of academic performance in an effort to protect their perceptions of self" (Griffin, 2002, p. 72). An example would be when a student who performs above grade level decided to stop his academic focus in order to fit in with the crowd.

Students of all races are vulnerable to academic disidentification, but African American males also have the burden of fighting negative stereotypes as well (Bonner, et. al., 2006). Almost every segment of the American population harbors a generally negative image of the Black man. Stereotypes for Black men include being dumb, deprived and dangerous. African

American males are also considered to be more muscle than mind (Harper, 2006). Constantly hearing negative assertions wears a person down mentally over a period of time and is difficult to ignore.

Such stereotypes lead to internalized racism. Internalized racism occurs when “socially stigmatized groups accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group” (Harper, 2006, p. 338). For example, by promoting Black athleticism over intellectualism feeds into the stereotype that Black males are more muscle than mind.

By the time African American males are in the fourth grade, some are subject to the “failure syndrome” in which Black males become aware that schools do not invest in their learning process. Failure syndrome occurs when a student attempts to complete an assignment and gives up at the first sign of trouble (Brophy, 1998). In other words, the student gives up the battle before it begins because of lack of confidence. Black males internalize such attitudes and develop inferior perceptions of their own abilities and aspirations compared to others (Cuyjet, 1997).

“Many African American students view academic success as a form of ‘acting white,’ and that peer pressure reduces their level of effort and performance” (Cook & Ludwig, 1997, p.256). An example of acting White is “talking proper in the community, because it would mean denying and ultimately losing one’s Black identity” (Ogbu, 2004, p.19). Another example is the anti college message on rapper Kanye West's album ‘College Dropout,’ which proposes college is overrated and not necessary for Black men to succeed. It also suggests that dropping out is cool (Harper, 2006). In summary, these issues with identity development early in the educational

careers of African American males contribute to the low matriculation and graduation rates in higher education.

### **Peer Group Influence**

A peer group is the group of people with whom a student spends time inside and outside of the classroom. For all students, peer groups are extremely important in influencing successful academic outcomes. “The single most powerful source of influence on an undergraduate student’s academic and personal development is the peer group...the amount of interaction among peers has far reaching effects on nearly all areas of student learning and development” (Astin, 1993, p. 8). African American males rely on each other to persist successfully through graduation (Cuyjet, 2006). Peers provide African American males with a sense of belonging, a place to receive constructive feedback and a place to share learning experiences (Bonner, et. al., 2006). If a student’s peer group strives for excellence and values studying then the student is more likely to strive for excellence and be studious. If a student’s peer group focuses on partying frequently, then it is likely that student will party frequently, too. A student's peer group contributes to his development of collective identity. “Collective identity refers to people’s sense of who they are... and people express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect” (Ogbu 2004, p. 3). This behavior aligns with the old saying, “birds of a feather flock together” (Bartlett, 1919, p.191).

### **Involvement**

Student involvement also fosters strong peer relationships consequently increasing the value of the college experience. Astin’s involvement theory defines involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience

(Austin, 1984). Involvement is central to the success of African American males because it allows students the opportunity to reap a return on their investment of time and to have a valuable experience (Harper, 2006). Examples of involvement include participation in student government, sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities outside the classroom associated with campus. Those involved improve their practical leadership and interpersonal skills while participating, therefore adding even more value to the college experience (Strayhorn, 2008). A campus that encourages involvement and participation will empower African American males for academic success (Brown, 2006).

### **Mentoring relationship**

Mentoring programs have positive influences on the academic and social success of students (Sutton, 2006). Mentoring can be formal in which an official university program matches mentee and mentor to achieve a specific objective or it can be informal in which an individual seeks the relationship of a mentor or mentee. “Most college students seem to benefit from the attention of a mentor in a personal relationship, and African American male students seem to benefit as much as any other students, if not more so”(Cuyjet, 1997, p. 94). Mentoring is an insightful process in which the wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied by the protégé. “The mentor can serve as an important guide... and introduces the mentee to the environment he or she is preparing to enter” (LaVant, et. al., 1997, p. 44). Not only does academic progress and professional development occur in these relationships, but also bonds are made and strengthened (Sutton, 2006).

### **Summary**

There are many factors that affect the college enrollment, retention and graduation rate of African American males in higher education. The factors that have a negative affect are

academic preparedness, transition into the instructional environment and identity development (Bonner, et. al., 2006). Some African American males arrive at the college arena unprepared for challenges and rigor. Some struggle to successful transition into the college environment, especially if they perceive it to be hostile. Others deal with issues related to their identify development which can delay their potential for academic growth.

The factors that have a positive affect are peer group influence, student involvement and mentoring relationships (Bonner, et. al., 2006). This study focused on studying African American male undergraduate students' perception of barriers and factors for success.

### **III. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

#### **Epistemology and Paradigm**

Epistemology addresses “the relationship between the researcher and that being studied” (Creswell, 2007, p. 274). The researcher approached this study as a constructivist. The researcher believes that knowledge is created; humans generate knowledge and its meaning from their personal experiences; and the truth is subjective. Paradigm can be defined as “world view” or “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). The researcher used a social constructivism paradigm for this study. Individuals who have this worldview “seek understanding of the world in which they live” by relying on the participants’ point of view (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). The qualitative method was chosen for this study instead of a quantitative method. A qualitative method is used when “a problem or issue needs to be explored... because of a need to study a group or population” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39-40).

#### **Goodness of Design**

**Credibility and trustworthiness.** Credibility seeks to ask, “are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants’ meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p 206)? To ensure credibility, member checking, peer review, data triangulation, and journaling were done. In member checking, “the researcher solicits participants views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). After each individual interview was transcribed the subject of that interview was asked to review transcripts to ensure accuracy. Peer review “provides an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 2007, p.208). This was done by a peer asking the researcher questions about the research process and providing feedback that would help keep the researcher honest. The researcher used a journal to record the thoughts and

feelings of the moment. Data triangulation can be defined as when, “multiple methods of data are used to study one phenomenon” (Bui 2009, p. 185). Interview transcriptions and journal notes were used in this process. The purpose was to find connections in the data, not to combine it. This allows the researcher to validate findings between the data sources.

**Transferability and dependability.** Transferability refers to the readers’ ability to “transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics” (Creswell, 2007, p. 209). Dependability asks how the study can be replicated in similar context (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To ensure transferability and dependability, the researcher has provided detailed descriptions about the participants, about how the interviews were conducted and about the environment.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability means the findings are a product of implementing research according to methods described and not because of the researchers’ bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To ensure confirmability, the researcher used peer reviews several times throughout the reviewing process. The researcher met with peers to review progress. Feedback was incorporated into the documentation of the study.

### **Research Design**

The researcher chose to use a phenomenological methodology to guide the study because the purpose is to describe the lived experiences of several individuals to explain a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenon can be defined as “a fact or event of scientific interest susceptible of scientific description and explanation or an unusual, significant, or unaccountable fact or occurrence; a marvel” (“Phenomenon,” n.d.). “The basic purpose of a phenomenology is to reduce the individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). A phenomenology is a “philosophy without presuppositions,”



meaning beliefs about what is real will be in doubt until there is evidence found (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The goal of this study was to gain understanding of African American males' perceptions of barriers experienced in higher education and the factors that contributed to their success.

### **Population**

The population selected for this study was the undergraduate African American male at a large Midwestern university that is predominately White (PWI). This population is unique because of under representation and low graduation rates in higher education.

### **Setting and Environment**

A large Midwestern PWI was selected as the setting. For convenience the researcher chose this setting because he was interested in learning about the experience of African American males at PWI since the researcher attended an HBCU.

### **Sampling Methods**

A combination sampling method of intentional random selection was used. To make the selection intentional, the researcher obtained the e-mail address of African American students who attended the research university from the African American Resource Center. The African American Resource Center is a culture resource center on the campus of the research university that promotes awareness for African American culture. All African American students, except those who opt out, are a part of their email list serve. After obtaining the email addresses of African American students on campus, the researcher sent email correspondence to recruit a variety of male participants (Appendix A). This constitutes the random sampling. To make the final selections of participants the researcher selected three African American males for this study.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Structured interviews were conducted to collect the data for this study. Questions focused on the life experiences of the participants during and leading up to their time in college (See Appendix B). For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involved in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007). Individual, in-depth, two hour, in person interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded. All audio recordings were destroyed after transcription and member checking. In a phenomenological study, “the researcher analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

Once audio interviews were transcribed, they were member checked by participants to verify validity. Transcriptions were next coded using barriers and factors that promote success identified in the literature: Peer group influence, student involvement and mentoring relationships are the themes identified as factors that promote success. Peer reviewing occurred after initial coding was complete to verify themes. The transcriptions were reviewed a second time to identify any themes not included in the literature by researcher and peers.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the African American males’ perceptions of barriers experienced in higher education and the factors that promote success. African American males who attended the research university were studied using a constructivist epistemology and a social constructivism paradigm. The researcher used a phenomenological methodology to guide the study to understand better the lived experiences of African American males who attend a PWI. The participants were interviewed to identify their perception of barriers they face in pursuit of success and the factors that promote success. Their responses were transcribed, coded

and analyzed to determine how the barriers they faced and the factors that promote success align with those identified in the literature, in addition to identifying another common theme.

Transcriptions were peer reviewed by graduate students to identify and verify the common themes identified.

## **IV. RESULTS**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the barriers African American males perceived in higher education and the factors that promote success. Transcribed interviews were reviewed to identify the common themes described in the literature. Transcriptions were also reviewed to identify other common themes as they emerged. Transcriptions were peer reviewed by graduate students to identify and verify the common themes found. The results are presented as the barriers and factors that promote success

Academic preparedness, transition into institutional environment and identity development are the themes identified as barriers. Peer group influence, student involvement and mentoring relationships are the themes identified as factors that promote success. Each theme evaluated is validated by a quotation(s) from the interviewee(s)

### **The Participants**

All interviewee names used in this study are pseudo names. Cantrell is a sophomore who has been attending the research institution for two years. He resides on campus, works off campus and his GPA is 1.9. Donald is a senior who has been attending the research university for four years. He lives off campus and his GPA is 3.4. Puffy is a graduating senior who has been attending the research institution for five years. He lives off campus and his GPA is a 2.9. Majors were not identified in order to reduce the chances of students being identified. This chapter does not include discussion of the results; however, commentaries about the results are in Chapter 5.

### **Academic Preparedness**

In response to the query about participants' feelings of being academically prepared, all felt that they were prepared, according to the operational definitions provided, prior to attending the research university. Interview quotes provide details.

When I came here, I decided that when I went to Indiana for HS with my mom, that I would come back to [the research institution] for college and when I get here I had to take what you would call a math placement test now...the math placement test is graded from a 1 - 7 , 1 being the worst and 7 being the best so I went to take my placement test and I got a 7. (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 96)

Classes that I took in high school; four years of English, four years of history four years of honors history. Honors government. Math 1 year of algebra 1 year of geometry and then we had something called business math, That's just learning how like you go in the grocery store and add up you know much your items are going to be or how to cut a piece of wood...I had high B's. (Puffy, April, 3, 2011, line 87)

Cantrell not only felt he was academically prepared but he places the blame for his current academic struggles on himself. "I felt academically prepared I felt that most of my academic struggles thus far from college are my own fault" (Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 120).

### **Identify Development**

Cultural student organizations help African American males adjust to the college by bringing them together. Participation in such organizations encourages African American males to develop a positive collective identity. Donald's statements provide additional details.

I'm in a lot of orgs with Black people because you have to join Black orgs on a campus with majority White people and you need to be in some type of org with Black people

even if you are not really involved, just to be around other Black people. (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 138)

I got involved with (the cultural student organization) dynamic org on campus of Black men moving forward and tackling the issues we are having such as retention things like that umm the issues in the community so I was like I am all for it this is an organization, it was my first organization I felt a apart of Black power.. Like we are in here all the freshmen I came in with in my class joined...We were in the meeting looking at the president like this is amazing. (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 122)

### **Transition into Institutional Environment**

The perceptions of the environment effect how African American males transition into the institutional environment. A student's perception of the college environment strongly impacts academic performance and motivation (Cureton, 2003). Puffy stated "[the research institution] is a good college to attend. It has its negative aspects. I don't think that there's a strong sense of community for the Blacks at [the research university]" (April, 3, 2011, line 194). "When you provide or prove that you know even though you are a Black male or Black female you are here and you do want to succeed I think you do get a lot of help" ( April, 3, 2011, line 205).

Donald stated, "the professors, the hard professors are not hard because they want to not succeed they want you to really learn the material and they care that you leave [the research institution] successful (April 11, 2011, line 260).

The campus environment was also perceived by Donald as a place to learn how to deal with life issues.

Activities on campus are amazing, the orgs we have on campus are doing a lot of things necessary for student to have a college experience orgs like rainbow alliance them being

on campus says enough especially for the Black community with the homophobic in that community but having different orgs teaches you how to work with different people especially to the quad gods preaching out of little green bibles screaming at everybody gives you an chance to learn how to deal with people who have different views even if they are extreme. (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 260)

The research institution is perceived by the Cantrell as welcoming and diverse, but racially segregated. He stated that diversity is not practiced at the research institution because there are a many ethnic groups present on camp, but they do not mix. Cantrell stated:

[the research institution] is high in diversity and it's a great university for those that are disabled they made every dorm here every floor starts on the first and second floor so people who are not able bodies can still live on campus, there are elevator, there's automatic doors and the tunnels system for when it rains. (April 10, 2011, line 303)

[the research institution] has a lot of ethnicities but we barely interact you know it's kind of like a Predominantly White High School, but people of different ethnic backgrounds don't hang out with each other and you have the few that venture out but they are no longer accepted." (Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 308)

Puffy also shared that though the research institution is perceived to be welcoming, it does not mean students do not experience incidents of perceived racism.

I feel like they thought they would not gain anything from me being there and when I did join a study group most of the time my input would not be value they would over talk me and I mean you take the punches or whatever you can get upset I mean if it was vice versa then it would be the same... (Puffy, April, 3, 2011, line 267)

## Peer Influence

The influence of peers is very powerful and it can be positive or negative (Astin, 1993). The African American males interviewed have relationships with their peers that reflect the powerful influence of peer influence. Puffy provided details about his experiences associating with a group that had a negative influence.

I just got a started hanging with people I shouldn't have been hanging with. And went and did some things in the neighborhood that we shouldn't have been doing. And got a little bit of trouble. It wasn't anything too too too bad. Walking home got arrested by police and realized that wasn't for me. (Puffy, April, 3, 2011, line 75)

His last sentence indicated he realized the group had a bad influence on him.

African American males rely on each other to persist successfully through graduation (Cuyjet, 2006), they provide each other with a sense of belonging along with a place to receive constructive feedback and a place to share learning experiences (Bonner, et. al., 2006). Donald's statements provide further details.

My friends from high school are pretty much my friends in college. I surround myself with people I enjoy talking to and people who enjoy talking to me... I mostly hang with my fraternity brothers; we bounce ideas off each other...and my girlfriend is one of my friends we talk about how each other's days are going and stuff like that... (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 296)

Peers often share common aspirations.

My friends at home were all from church ...I don't necessarily like to party, I don't like large crowds of people... which is funny since I am so involved... you know it's just I guess my friends are 180's I guess because I have friends here that love to party and just



love to do other things and my friends at home are God focused. (Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 369)

### **Involvement**

There are positive outcomes associated with student involvement. One participant was able to use involvement as his platform to practice his marketing skills and become a promotional “go to” guy on campus. This experience contributed to his contemplating business marketing as his major or minor. Obtaining a 2.5 GPA is required to hold certain leadership positions on campus and involvement is the motivation to get good grades for one participant. Participation in (the cultural student organization) and other activities helped students connect to campus and to identify with others African American males in a positive manner.

[Being] involved (the cultural student organization) under the leadership of [ ], ... was a great experience to me involved with university activities bored. Currently the president I am the president of (a student org) and the journey here has been I think provided me with a lot of experience a lot of determination I would say. (Puffy, April, 3, 2011, line 115)

I am involved in Black Student Union (BSU) currently I have been getting more involved with (the cultural student organization) RCA and Association of Black Business Students (ABBS). umm..I was involved with UAB last year and possibly maybe involved again with them again next year, I plan on getting involved with SGA next year as well and the director of diversity well the associate director of diversity position so hopefully that works out. (Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 29)

I got involved with (the cultural student organization) dynamic org on campus of Black men moving forward and tackling the issues we are having such as retention things like

that umm the issues in the community so I was like I am all for it this is an org, it was my first org I felt a apart of Black power like we are in here all the freshmen I came in with in my class joined... We were in the meeting looking at the president like this is amazing. (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 122)

A common experience for all participants was they identified a mentor through their involvement in student organizations.

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring programs were positive influences on the academic and social success of students (Sutton, 2006). The students interviewed perceived these relationships to have a positive impact on their college experience. One relationship described was intentionally initiated by the university.

I have about five. My [university appointed] mentor, I still keep in touch with him. This guy who graduated a few years ahead of me in my engineering program is in a master's program and I keep up with him. That guy hits me up on chat, text, Facebook... with the visions mentor I was paired, with the other guys I met them. (Donald, April 11, 2011, line 306)

The other two students' mentoring relationships were initiated through mutual agreement.

Officially, no, like I am not a part of a mentor program or that but I have mentors... [ ] past president of (the cultural student organization) when I first got here he took me under his wing.. [ ] a member of alpha phi alpha took a lot of time with me to mentor me... [ ] Phi Beta Sigma took some time mentoring me and they all have different personalities and they grow different parts of me. (Puffy, April, 3, 2011, line 283)

He is the advisor of (black business student org). He is very involved with that org and with me being on the e-board, it was a different way to get to meet the dean and now I introduce other Black business student to the dean.. I feel like when you get to meet the dean of your college, it gives you more motivation that is what I noticed. (Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 247)

[ ] was the president of ABBS when I had got involved and [ ] is the president of BSU and they both have helped become a better person academically and socially they both tell me things.. well they tell me things without telling me things they will say stuff that they laugh about and I can take something from it like Shawn will honestly attribute I focus more on my appearance because of [ ] focus more on my professionalism because of [ ] you know so I guess they both have helped me with the interview process.

(Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 387)

The lack of exposure to the institutional environment prior to attending the institution was the only barrier to emerge from the transcriptions. Both Cantrell and Puffy had little exposure to the research institution prior to enrollment.

I actually passed [the research institution] six times before I knew it was [the research institution]. I had no idea what the Nutter Center was and the funny thing was I passes the school and I didn't pay any attention to so now when I think back, there wasn't any perception of [the research institution] prior coming here I didn't even find out what [the research institution] looked like until my gradation. (Cantrell, April 10, 2011, line 295)

Prior to coming to [the research institution] the only thing I knew was that my teacher went here or whatever. He's a well-regarded teacher to me... Prior to that I knew that I had friend from high school that went here. (Puffy, April 3, 2011, line 179)

## **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to use phenomenological theory to describe the lived experiences of African American males and to identify common barriers they face in higher education and factors that promote success. The participants interviewed shared their life experiences spanning from high school to the present day. The barriers African American males face in higher education are academic preparedness, transition into institutional environment and identity development. The factors that promote success are peer group influence, student involvement, and mentoring relationships (Bonner, et. al. 2006).

The results of this study support the literature reviewed, with the exception that students felt they were academically prepared. All participants interviewed perceived they were academically prepared. Involvement in student organizations, especially the African American cultural student organization, yielded positive experiences including assisting in identifying a mentor and building supportive relationship with African American peers.

## V. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUMMARY

### Discussion of Results

The participants studied were African American males with different ages, classifications, and majors who attended the research university. No other demographic qualifications, including grade classification, were taken into consideration. Participants were asked questions (see Appendix B) about their perceptions of their experiences. As previously stated, the themes explored were identified from the literature review. Themes about barriers are academic preparedness, transition into institutional environment and identity development. Themes about factors promoting success are peer group influence, student involvement and mentoring relationships. Open ended and guided interview questions were designed to explore those themes, and interviews were coded to determine the participants' perceptions of the themes as they related to their experiences at the research institution.

Academic preparedness has been defined as “the reading and mathematics knowledge and skills necessary to qualify for placement into entry-level college credit courses that meet general education requirements without the need for remedial coursework” (National Assessment Governing Board, p. 2). According to the interviews, the participants do not perceive academic preparedness as a barrier. Donald was academically prepared for college according to functional definitions previously provided because he scored the highest score possible on the math placement test as a freshman. His current GPA is 3.6. The other participants believed they were academically prepared for college, though their GPAs are 2.7 and 1.9. Cantrell attributed his current lack of academic success to other factors such as lack of motivation and Puffy, to over extension due to participating in student organization.

Transitioning into the institutional environment was the second theme discussed. The transition from high school to college can be a very difficult time for all students (Terenzini, et. Al., 1994). “The more a student assimilates into the college, social and academic systems, the more committed the student will be to the college” (Bonner, et. al., 2006, p. 37). All participants had different paths with similar experiences in transitioning into the institutional environment. Donald's transition was eased through participation in a program the research university provides to increase the enrollment of African American students. This program exposed Donald to the campus layout, other prospective students and the academic rigor of a college before school started.

All the participants felt welcomed when they arrived at the research university. They also perceived the research university to be very diverse; however, they perceived it to be ethnically segregated. There are various ethnic groups present, but they are all divided. A student's perception of the college environment strongly affects academic performance (Cureton, 2003). Puffy shared he had trouble adjusting in class due to his race. Being the only Black student in a class of 50, he found it hard to become a part of a study group. Even when he was a member, he perceived his opinion was not valued. Unfortunately, “African American males have the burden of coping and adjusting to an environment that may be less hospitable to their presence” (Bonner, et. al., 2006, p. 35). The exposure to a climate of prejudice and discrimination in the classroom and on campus are the main factors accounting for the differences in withdrawal behavior between minorities and non minorities (Bonner, et. al., 2006).

Identity development was the third theme discussed. When asked the question, “If you could implement or develop any services for African American males on a college campus, what

would they be”, Puffy responded “breaking down the barrier of being uncool.” (Puffy, April, 3, 2011, line 128)

Many African American students view academic success as a form of ‘acting white,’ and that peer pressure reduces their level of effort and performance” (Cook & Ludwing, 1997, p.256). Cantrell provided insight regarding the fear African American have of acting White. Though he personally felt there is no way to act a specific race, he explained Black students do not venture out of their race to interact with White people openly because of fear of being rejected by their race for acting White. He thought the fear of being perceived of acting Black was the fear White students have.

Some African American males lose interest in their education during their elementary and/or secondary schooling because of academic disidentification. By the time they reach college, this lack of interest may become an embedded barrier to success (Griffin, 2002). All of the participants in this study articulated a desire to achieve academically which contradicts the concept of academic disidentification as a barrier.

Black males are often mistaken for the stereotypes such as being more muscle than mind (Harper, 2006). As a result, internalized racism is a barrier for some African American males. Internalized racism occurs when “socially stigmatized groups accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group” (Harper, 2006, p. 338). Cantrell's experience defused that statement. He was pushed to participate in academic extracurricular activities and excelled. As a student at a career preparation high school, his program of focus was business. During his junior and senior year at the research institution, he participated in an academic competition hosted by Business Professionals of America. He placed both years, winning trips to

Houston and Columbus. This example defuses the stereotype that African American males are always revered for their physical capabilities rather than their academic capabilities.

Involvement is central to the success of African American males because it allows students the opportunity to reap a return on their investment of time and to have a valuable experience (Harper, 2006). Involvement in student organizations yielded positive results for all the participants. Involvement provided them with cultural support, friendship and mentoring. The first student organization they all joined was the African American cultural student organization. The benefit of involvement for Cantrell was exposure to an economic opportunity for using his marketing skills to produce fliers for different student organizations. His involvement in the African American cultural business student organization afforded him the opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship with the advisor of that student organization who is the Dean in the School of Business at the research institution. This relationship now serves as a part of his motivation to succeed. Involvement for Puffy provided him with needed economic support. He mentioned paying for college through his participation even though he previously stated his over involvement also contributes to his current low GPA.

Peer influence is “the single most powerful source of influence on an undergraduate student’s academic and personal development,” (Astin, 1993, p. 8) and it can be positive or negative. While in high school, Puffy was associated with some people he should not have. As a result, he got into some trouble with the police. Donald uses his friends for support, constructive criticism and to bounce ideas off each other. Cantrell and his friends share common spiritual interest and provide each other with support in that realm. Since arriving on campus, peer influence was identified as positive for all participants because it provided the participants with a sense of belonging and a place to share experiences.



Mentoring for all the participants also yielded positive outcomes. Mentoring is important because “the mentor can serve as an important guide introducing the mentee to the environment he is preparing to enter” (LaVant, et. al., 1997). Puffy found his mentor through involvement in the African American cultural student organization. His mentor checks up on him often via Twitter, Facebook, phone and email. He provides him with encouragement and support. Cantrell found multiple mentors through involvement in the cultural student organization and a business student organization. One mentor, the advisor of the business student organization and school of business Dean, has provided Cantrell with a sense of connection to the university and motivation to succeed academically. Another mentor, former president a different African American cultural student organization, has also helped Cantrell become more professional. His third mentor, current president of a different cultural student organization, has helped him become more social and self-confident. Donald found his mentor through a mentoring program sponsored by the research university. His mentor helped him academically by showing him classes to take and the mistakes he made as a student.

The theme regarding lack of exposure to the specific research institution environment emerged during the second review of the transcriptions. Puffy and Cantrell did not have physical exposure to the research university, with the exception of Cantrell visiting the athletic facility at the research institution for his high school graduation. Coincidentally, the same two participants have lower GPAs. There could be a correlation between lack of exposure and low GPA's. However, the research university was also the second post high school option for both participants; so perhaps they did not have the time or resources to investigate their second option thoroughly.

## **Researcher Reflection**

The reason I was interested in this study was because as a graduate of an HBCU I wanted to better understand the experiences of African American males attending a PWI. I am aware generalizations cannot be made from three interviews.

The transition into the institutional environment is one difference I noticed in comparing my experience at a HBCU to the experiences of African American males attending a PWI. I believe my transition was easier because I perceived the environment to be welcoming and not discriminatory in any fashion. I was never the only African American male in any of my classes which helped me feel like I belonged.

I was amazed to discover the factors that promote success (involvement, peer influence and mentoring) were positive for me as they were for the participants. As an undergraduate student, I was able to identify my mentors through involvement in student organizations, just as the participants in this study. My mentors also had a positive influence on my life because of their encouragement, ability to challenge me to grow and willingness to show me the ropes. Peer influence also had a positive influence on my success.

Prior to conducting this study, I was under the influence that things were getting better for African American males in regard to higher education. I was in disbelief when I discovered not much has changed in regards to the number of African American males enrolling and graduating from college and “black men comprised only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at American institutions of higher education in 2003, the exact same percentage as in 1976” (Nealy, 2009, para. 25).

I am also surprised to discover that the barriers African American males face have not changed though knowledge and resources are available to promote success. This fact leads me to

question the true commitment colleges and universities. I believe Colleges and universities know about the disparities in enrollment and graduation rates that exist for African American males compared to other ethnic groups, especially White students. These research results provide further evidence that there is still work to be done to improve the enrollment and graduation rates for African American male students.

### **Implications for student affairs practitioners**

This study described the experiences of African American males in higher education in an effort to identify the barriers they face and the factors that promote success. This study has various implications for institutions because a better understanding of the experience of African American males can help eliminate the current disparities in enrollment, matriculation and graduation among African American males in higher education. There are three implications for student affairs professionals regarding increasing the enrollment, retention and graduation rates of African American Males.

To increase enrollment, universities should increase African American male exposure to the institutions prior to application. Institutions can increase the African American male exposure to the research institution by intentionally recruiting more African American male participation in summer camps hosted at the university.

To increase retention rates universities should statically advise African American cultural student organization. Institutions can strategically advise the African American cultural student organizations by leveraging their current influence and presence on campus to remove the perceived barriers African American undergraduate males' face and to continue support for the factors identified as supporting the success of African American males.

Finally, institutions should initiating mentoring relationships and encouraging extracurricular involvement because they increase the chances of African American males being successful.

### **Limitations of Study**

One limitation with this study was that the sample size was small. Though African American males can be identified as a homogenous group based on gender and race, diversity is present in characteristics such as classification, major and social economic status. Being more intentional in sampling a diverse group may yield richer results. Another limitation is students were only interviewed twice and more information about their experience could be collected to gain a better understanding of their experience. Finally, using the themes from the literature guided the interview protocol. Though one additional barrier was identified, using the themes identified in the literature review limited discussion and may have prevented additional barriers or additional supports from emerging in the interviews and coded transcriptions. Future studies should be more intentional on collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to measure where academic preparedness problems exist. Furthermore, more research is necessary to better understand the impact of transferring to and from various environments (e.g. transferring from a homogenous environment to a non-homogenous and from a non-homogenous to a homogenous environment).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to gain better understanding about African American males perceptions of experiences in higher education at PWIs. In conclusion, the perceptions of barriers African American males face and the factors that promote success at the research institution are the same barriers African American males face and the factors that promote

success according to the literature reviewed. Those barriers are academic preparedness, transition into institutional environment and identity development. The factors that promote success are peer group influence, student involvement, mentoring relationships (Bonner, et. al. 2006).

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself?
2. Tell me about your high school experience?
3. Tell me about your journey to become a college student?
4. Tell me about your college experience, since becoming a student?
5. How do you spend your time outside of class (while in college)?
6. How are you doing in college currently? What are the reasons?
7. Compared to your high school experience, how is your college experience different or the same?
8. Define academic success. Are you successful according to this definition? Why or Why not? What is your motivation to be successful?
9. If you could implement or develop any services for African American males on a college campus, what would they be?
10. What was your perception of [the research institution] prior to coming? What is your perception of [the research institution] now?
11. Are there services that have helped you succeed academically?
12. Who are your primary friends?
13. What impact has college had on your perception of self?
14. Do you have a mentor?

(Additional follow-up questions may be necessary to expand on the issues presented in the interviews and to elaborate on items presented in the initial questions)

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruiting Correspondence**

The purpose of this correspondence is to recruit students to participate in a study. My name is Christopher Hogan and I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership, Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Wright State. I am in the process of conducting a study to understand the experience African American males by analyzing their perceptions of barriers faced in higher education and factors that promote academic success.

No names, ID #'s, or any other identifiers, except a signature on the consent form without the actual printed name, will be used in the study. You will be asked for permission to tape the interview; however, no recording will be made without your approval. In the case that the audio-recording is not approved, researcher notes will be the only documentation of the interview. Any names, places or other identifiers mentioned in the focus group will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Any actual names, places or events mentioned in the interviews will be changed to a pseudonym; no actual names or identifiers will be used in the transcripts. Recordings and transcriptions will also be kept on password protected computer hard drives. Once the interviews have been transcribed and the transcriptions checked for accuracy, the audio-recordings will be deleted.

You have the option of stopping your participation in the interview at anytime during the process if you so choose. The actual time for the total participation in the interview will be about 2 hours. If you would like to participate or have any questions about this research study, you can contact the researcher, Christopher Hogan at Hogan.31@wright.edu. You may also call the [the research institution] Institutional Review Board at (937) 775-4462.

## Appendix C

### Participant Consent Form

My name is Christopher Hogan and I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership, Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Wright State. I am in the process of conducting a study to understand the experience African American males by analyzing their perceptions of barriers faced in higher education and factors that promote academic success. The purpose of this study is to gain insight to the undergraduate college experiences of African American males in order to better service them.

No names, ID #'s, or any other identifiers, except a signature on the consent form without the actual printed name, will be collected in the study. You will be asked for permission to tape the interview; however, no recording will be made without your approval. In the case that the audio-recording is not approved, researcher notes will be the only documentation of the interview. Any names, places or other identifiers mentioned in the focus group will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Any actual names, places or events mentioned in interviews will be changed to a pseudonym; no actual names or identifiers will be used in the transcripts. Recordings and transcriptions will also be kept on password protected computer hard drives. Once the interviews have been transcribed and the transcriptions checked for accuracy, the audio-recordings will be deleted.

You have the option of stopping your participation in the interview at anytime during the process if you so choose. The actual time for the total participation in the interview will be about 1-2 hours. If you have any questions about this research study, you can contact the researcher, Christopher Hogan at Hogan.31@wright.edu. You may call the [the research institution] Institutional Review Board at (937) 775-4462.

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Signature

Date