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## Dreams Deferred: A Critical Narrative Analysis of African American Males in Pursuit of Higher Education

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Summer July 2015

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Martinique Starnes

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Dreams Deferred: A Critical Narrative Analysis of  
African American Males in Pursuit of Higher Education

by

Martinique Starnes

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2015

Dreams Deferred: A Critical Narrative Analysis of  
African American Males in Pursuit of Higher Education

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by

Martinique Starnes

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This dissertation written by Martinique Starnes, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

April 23, 2015  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my daughter London, may you find the courage to speak for those who cannot.

This work is for you.

And for the young men still in pursuit...



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## ABSTRACT

Dreams Deferred: A Critical Narrative Analysis of  
African American Males in Pursuit of Higher Education

by

Martinique Starnes

Many studies have been conducted on the achievement gap between Caucasian and minority students (Bankston & Caldas, 1998; A. Brown & Donnor, 2011; Howard, 2008; O’Conner, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007; Osborne, 1999), as this gap has been a persistent problem for decades. However, despite more students of color gaining access to institutions of higher education, there is still a severe gap in college graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011), with African American males being the least likely group to be found on college campuses (Dunn, 2012), and thus, possessing the lowest college graduation rate. St. Peter Claver Academy (pseudonym) is a Catholic, male high school located in an inner city, low-income community in the western United States. The demographic composition of the school is 65% Latino and 35% African American. Despite the fact that 100% of seniors are accepted into a college or university, the graduates of St. Peter Claver Academy have very poor college graduation rates. This qualitative study investigated the narratives of seven African-American graduates of the school in order to understand their college experiences, looking closely at attrition, retention, resilience, and persistence. Through the lens of critical bicultural theory, the voices of these former students are central to this study in an effort to seek common threads about their experiences, which can provide educators

useful insight on how to improve the college graduation rate for this underrepresented student population group.

*Keywords:* Attrition, Resilience, Minority, Low Income, Post-secondary

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Each year, at its National Commitment Day ceremony, the St. Peter Claver (pseudonym) community comes together and waits in anticipation to hear where their graduating seniors have decided to attend college in the fall. One by one, each member of the senior class steps up to the microphone in front of faculty, staff, parents, and school supporters and announces his decision. It is a sight to see; each of these male students of African American and Latino descent, all from disenfranchised communities, standing to proclaim his academic home for the next 2-4 years. This is particularly noteworthy given that research in the field indicates that this demographic of students is the least represented on college campuses (Dunn, 2012), and the college graduation rate for these graduates is generally low (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010, 2011). Despite their successful college acceptance, enrollment, and retention rate to year two of college, the persistence rate of St. Peter Claver alumni is dramatically low in comparison with the persistence rates of their peers of other ethnicities. (This information was obtained from a source that includes the name of the participating institution and is therefore confidential.)

### **St. Peter Claver Academy**

Founded in 1962, St. Peter Claver Academy is a Jesuit Catholic all-male high school located in an inner city, low-income community of a large metropolitan city in the western United States. With an enrollment of just over 300 students, this small school prides itself as being a *beacon of hope* for its students. This is the case, given that St. Peter Claver Academy, from its inception, has sought to educate students who have been

underserved both educationally and economically (Lopez, 2003). When the school was created in the early 1960s, the goal was to provide affordable Catholic education for African American students, as the neighborhood in which the school was built had a very high population of African American families who mostly migrated from the Southern United States. The school continued to serve the community faithfully until the late 1990s when the school began to succumb to the financial troubles that had been created as a result of community residents' inability to afford the cost of the Catholic education that this school provided. To keep the doors open, the Jesuits, a Catholic order of priests stepped in to save the academy, introducing a model used by a Catholic school in the Midwest. Through this unique program, students would work at a corporate internship in order to supplement the cost of attending the school. Hence, with the arrival of the Jesuits to St. Peter Claver also came this strategy, an initiative of the Christ the King Network. The network consists of a group of schools nationwide that incorporates this internship model for their students.

Currently, St. Peter Claver is among 28 other schools in the Christ the King Network that has an income criterion as a part of their admissions process. According to their fact sheet, the family income must fall below a designated financial ceiling in order for a student to gain entry into the school. At present, the average annual family income of St. Peter Claver students is \$30,750, with an average household size of 3.9. On average, most families pay \$100 per month for tuition and despite the low tuition (under \$3,000 per academic year), 60% of the students attending St. Peter Claver receive financial aid. The ethnic demographic of the school also changed from when the school opened, at which point it mostly served African American students; presently, 65% of

students hail from Latino backgrounds and 34% of students are African American. There is currently one Caucasian student who accounts for less than 1% of the population. The shift in the demographics of the school, changing from a majority African American population to a majority Latino population, is consistent with the shift in the ethnic demographics in the community in which the school resides. (This information was obtained from a source that includes the name of the participating institution and is therefore confidential.)

St. Peter Claver Academy prides itself on working hard to combat the societal ills that bar African American and Latino male students from opportunities for social mobility. St. Peter Claver's mission is to serve students who have traditionally been underserved both economically and educationally, and to provide students with college preparatory coursework that will open doors to postsecondary education. The school has indeed been successful in accomplishing this mission. Every student who attends St. Peter Claver receives some form of financial contribution toward his cost of attending the school, and from 2008 to the present, each graduating senior from the school has earned acceptance to a college or university. There is no doubt that this is an impressive feat for an inner city school, where most of the students live at or near the poverty line. This accomplishment is also extraordinarily significant since Latino and African American males are virtually invisible on college campuses (Cuyjet, 2009). In fact, African American males continue to be one of the least represented populations on college campuses (Dunn, 2012).



## **The Educational Experience of the African American Male**

For centuries, the narrative surrounding African Americans in the United States has been a tumultuous one. Arriving to this country as chattel, unaware of the language, the culture, or their futures, African Americans have experienced “some of the most brutal forms of injustice and dehumanization in U.S. history” (Schiele, 2005, p. 802). Despite their experiences, African Americans have exhibited amazing resiliency in an effort to survive (Schiele, 2005). Today, however, African Americans continue to find themselves in a struggle for equality and empowerment, specifically as it pertains to working class African American males in pursuit of higher education.

In the College Board publication titled “Transforming the Educational Experience of Young Men of Color,” Jennifer Dunn (2012) found that only 26% of African American males hold an Associate’s Degree or higher, while 45% of African American males aged 15 to 24 are either unemployed or imprisoned. Those in high school are often overrepresented in special education programs (Garibaldi, 2007) and are frequently in more danger of suspensions and expulsions than their peers of other ethnicities (Ferguson, 2001). Moreover, the academic outcome for African American males is often be dismal, especially if they fail to attain higher education.

For example, Tyrone Howard (2008) found that there are more African American males in prison than in college and that an African American male starting kindergarten in 2006 is more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system than enrolled in college 12 years later. He also noted that African American males who underperform are more likely than their peers who persist to drop out and find their way into the penal system, where incarcerated African Americans outnumber every other ethnic group. He

went on to state that according to projections made by the Department of Justice, one in every three African American men can expect to find himself involved in the penal system, either through incarceration or probation, at some point in his life.

Hence, the college attrition experiences of African American males are an important subject to study because of the vicious cycle that seems to persist in the African American community and the impact of educational inequalities on African American men who do not pursue higher education and their families and community. In addition, not only are African American males failing to receive the personal, educational, and emotional benefits of the college experience, but also the richness of the African American male perspective is generally absent in classrooms and college campuses. As a consequence, distorted beliefs, be they positive or negative, about African American males will persist without exposure to this population (Cuyjet, 2009).

African American men have been the subject of much academic research, from their underperformance at developmental stages (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012) to the impact of drugs in the community on school achievement (Jenkins, 2006), to even the anomaly of academic research on this population, namely, African American male success (Stinson, 2011). For the most part, African American males have been found to be in a state of crisis (Brown & Donnor, 2011) and, as Toby Jenkins (2006) stated, are in a state of chaos due to the society's failure to make substantial changes for the improvement of circumstances that surround them.

In the field of education, African American males have been found to be underachievers and underperformers (Garibaldi, 2007), and have even been cited as having a "backward progression in American society" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 127). There are

a number of reasons for this phenomenon, which are generally attributed to either the students or the institutions in which they are expected to learn and be educated.

For example, in her book *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ann Ferguson (2001) spoke about the “adultification” (p. 83) of African American male youths in society and, most specifically, in schools. She found that although African American and Caucasian boys equally push boundaries and break school rules, African American males tend to find themselves in more trouble for similar offenses because of the way that their actions are perceived, interpreted, and (mis)understood by school personnel. Caucasian students’ misdoings are often overlooked by school officials, assuming that “boys will be boys” (p. 80), but the offenses by African American males are *adultified*, and the innocence for which Caucasian males are excused is forgotten when the student is African American. This racializing ideology results in harsher punishment for African American male students, and the punishment usually is meant to serve as an example for African American students.

Zero tolerance policies of the 1980s and 1990s have also had an impact on educational opportunities for African American males. Zero tolerance policies were initially used to describe action toward offenders in the *War on Drugs*, which was implemented in the early 1980s during the Reagan administration and was meant to combat drugs in local communities (Webb & Kritsonis, 2006). In 1986, Ronald Reagan signed into law the *National Crusade for a Drug-Free America*, and zero tolerance strategies were used to enforce this law. Interestingly, the war on drugs dramatically increased the prison population by nearly two million inmates, 90% of whom were

African American or Latino, with one of four African American men finding themselves in the penal system (Alexander, 2010). Zero tolerance policies at the height of the War on Drugs campaign, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of African American men being imprisoned in the 1990s to the present, also made its way into the disciplinary mandates of public schools, eerily reproducing similar results in African American school aged children, most often males; criminalizing them and suspending or expelling them, thus sealing their fate before they were even old enough to vote.

Accordingly, higher suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates result in low graduation rates and low college attendance. James M. Patton (1998) found that African American males' overrepresentation in special education programs, juvenile corrections facilities, and adult penal institutions limit their access to higher education. Although there is an increased concern for the future of African American males in America, as Jenkins (2006) wrote, American society is exhibiting a "social oxymoron" (p. 128), as on the one hand it expresses a deep concern for fixing the problem that exists with African American men but, on the other, persists in the use of policies and practices that systematically reproduce oppression in this population.

Some might argue that African American males are not fading out of college campus, but rather that the rate of increase of their presence on college campuses is simply much slower as compared to African American females (Verdugo & Henderson, 2009). Scholars do acknowledge, however, that African American males are a rare population on college campuses and although college attendance has increased over the years for all groups, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic level, there remains a gap

between African American males and their counterparts of other races when it comes to degree attainment (Dunn, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite St. Peter Claver's tremendous success in college access and evidence of persistence of graduates to year two of college, very few of these students go on to graduate after 6 years of college. In reporting college graduation rates, the *Student Right to Know Act of 1990* requires institutions to report rates of students who complete their degrees within 150% of what is considered to be normal time, or 4 years. This means that institutions rates are based on 6 years for students who are pursuing a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2015) and, using this formula, 3 years for an associate's degree. Failure to complete, unfortunately, is a common trend among students of color, specifically males (Tinto, 1993). It is documented in the literature (Cuyjet, 2009) that when African American male students fail to attain college degrees, the implications can be serious. Outside of limited financial advancement and persistent social and material conditions resulting from gross inequalities in education and the job market, the lack of this presence in the professional workplace and in leadership roles works to reinforce negative stereotypes about the group's inability to achieve professional status and perpetuates institutional inequities that continue to pervade society. The disproportion between African American males and females on college campuses can also reinforce the old victim-blaming stereotype, inherent in the 1965 government report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also known as the Moynihan Report (U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965); the report concluded that African American women are stronger than men and that the weakness of the African American

male is responsible for the poverty in Black communities (Cuyiet, 2009), rather than the longstanding historical conditions that have stifled their educational and economic attainment. The Moynihan Report continues to garner praise 50 years after its publishing, despite its problematic nature (Gans, 2011).

### **Institutional Response to African American Male Attrition**

Historically, since the research on attrition of students of color has been limited, institutions of higher education found it difficult to provide the resources necessary to retain students of color, especially since research has made claims that students persist when they are committed to their goals and to the goals of the institution and when they feel connected to the school through social and academic ties (Tinto, 1975). However, research specific to African American populations has identified several ways to support African American male students through initiatives to support this population (Bush, Bush, & Wilcoxson, 2009), including academic advising, the presence of diverse faculty and staff on campus, and the availability of financial support (Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Various scholars (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Howard, 2008, O'Conner, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007; Osborne, 1999) have made reference to an achievement gap or a discrepancy between the achievement levels of students of color and the mainstream. Often in educational research that gap is used to describe the deficiencies in people of color or of lower socioeconomic groups. There are many reasons for this gap, but most often cited as the most detrimental culprit is poverty, the oppressive state created by the dominant culture or "those who are in control of the material and symbolic wealth in a capitalist society" (Darder, 2012, p. 28). The subordinate culture, or those that lack the material wealth deemed important or even essential in a capitalist society, remain in an

oppressed state that both legitimizes the interests of the dominant group and perpetuates an ideology that discredits those values, beliefs, traditions, and experiences that are inconsistent with the norms of a racialized capitalist society (Darder, 2012). Moreover, Fantuzzo et al. (2012) cited a number of factors leading to the eventual underperformance of African American boys, most of which stem from the effects of this form of oppression.

According to Richard Verdugo and Ronald Henderson (2009), however, poverty does not appear to impact the educational attainment of African American females and, regarding higher education, working class males from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to enroll in college than their more affluent peers. Although the difference between these working class and affluent African American males is only three percent, the researchers found it significant enough to investigate further, given the startling rates of attrition amongst African American males, despite their initial college enrollment.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, college attendance is on the rise for all students, with more students from each ethnic and socioeconomic group attending college than in the past 25 years, but although these students are finding themselves at institutions of higher education, there is still a serious deficiency in the graduation rates of African American males after 6 years (NCES, 2011). The literature offers some solutions to this phenomenon of attrition, many of which point to economics and the impact of precollege experiences on college performance (Arobona & Nora, 2007; Baker & Robnett, 2004). However, although the literature suggests reasons for the attrition of African American males, there is little, if any, work that focuses on the individual and collective voices behind the expert generated quantitative data. This study humanizes the

statistics, contributing to a deeper understanding of the problem that can potentially lead to creative and effective changes to improve the outlook for African American male college students.

### **Research Questions**

This study responded to a set of questions, through an investigation of college attrition from the standpoint of student voices. These questions included:

1. What are the major reasons identified by graduates from St. Peter Claver Academy for not graduating from college after 6 years?
2. What recurring feelings, events, or ideas associated with their college experiences are identified by St. Peter Claver Academy graduates that may have contributed to their decision to leave college prior to graduation?
3. What secondary and postsecondary institutional factors do graduates of St. Peter Claver Academy believe would have supported them to college graduation?

### **Significance**

This study is significant for three reasons. First, in all the research that exists on the attrition of African American male college students, only limited studies have investigated this phenomenon through student voices when identifying the reasons that African American males are leaving college without graduating. Through student voices, the statistical data become humanized, allowing for opportunities to affect change. Second, as a result of the school's rigorous college preparatory program, African American students at St. Peter Claver Academy all graduate from high school with college acceptance offers. Understanding why these students are unable to complete



college will greatly inform the preparatory practices at the high school, allowing for better collaboration with postsecondary institutions to support these students. Finally, the results of this study contribute strongly to the body of knowledge that informs retention practices at the postsecondary level.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) theorized about conscientization or critical consciousness. He posited that we develop an increasing capacity for conscientization through using “generative themes” (p. 97) to support greater awareness about the social and material phenomena that shape life conditions. As social justice educators, it is important to engage the struggles of African American male college students and work to bring solutions through critical inquiry, practice, and knowledge, which ultimately support the freedom to be in the world. The purpose of this critical narrative inquiry was to explore the reasons for high attrition rates amongst working class African American male college students who graduated from St. Peter Claver Academy and to discover what possible strategies secondary and postsecondary institutions can employ to ensure the college retention and graduation of this population.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative methodological approach that critically engaged the phenomenon of college attrition among African American young men who have graduated from St. Peter Claver Academy. To accomplish this, I documented the narratives of seven African American graduates of St. Peter Claver Academy who enrolled in college and who left before graduating or are still pursuing a degree beyond the fourth year mark.

Each participant was engaged individually through critical narratives that allowed them an opportunity to tell their stories unobtrusively. Using critical narratives also allowed for more latitude than interview questions. After providing participants with an introductory statement about the study, they were invited to share their college experiences. Data were analyzed critically for common themes and trends that responded to the research questions posed. Specifically, common experiences and institutional failures, both secondary and postsecondary, were identified that could have been prevented or corrected quickly to support these students, who may have had little, if any, experience with postsecondary educational attainment. Finally, the participants in this study offer suggestions that will illuminate policies and practices associated with college retention.

### **Critical Bicultural Theory: The Theoretical Framework**

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in the American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2)

In this passage, Du Bois (1903) spoke of a double vision in which African American people have engaged for some time as a mechanism for survival in enduring the impact of racism and poverty. This vision, acquired either through inheritance or awakening, represents the awareness that, historically, was critical for African Americans seeking education, enlightenment, and a better way of life for the culture. Unlike the dominant culture, African Americans have had to reach a level of consciousness that

would allow them to not only exist in his world as African Americans, but also understand their place in society through the eyes of members of the dominant culture who stereotypically have believed that African Americans were inferior and unable to be active participants in and worthwhile contributors to society.

It is not difficult to conceptualize the idea of people existing in two worlds. Immigrants who travel to new countries must respect the norms and values of the new country's culture while continuing to remain true to what they have learned in their native culture. As members of a culturally subordinate group living in America, people of color often find themselves in a balancing act, working to understand and follow the norms of the dominant group while respecting and remaining true to their home or primary culture. This phenomenon is understood as *biculturalism* and a number of scholars have studied the topic in an effort to lead to an understanding of what it means to exist in two worlds. It is of great importance for researchers to understand the impact of this coexistence on the mental health of those who rely on biculturalism to navigate situationally, and there have at times been a great debate in the literature about what it means for members of minority cultures to exist in a society created by and for the dominant culture.

As noted earlier, in 1965, a report for the Department of Labor was written by Daniel Moynihan in response to President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. This report introduced an official cultural deficit, victim blaming notion, stating that African American people have and will continue to find difficulty integrating successfully into the fabric of American society because of their inability to overcome the residual damage caused by slavery. As a result, the norms and values that African Americans hold dear were deemed deviant and a detriment to American society (Gans, 2011; U.S. Department

of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965). Charles Valentine (1971) later challenged this theory of deficit when he introduced the Cultural Difference Model. In his work, Valentine argued that the differences among subordinate cultural groups had to be embraced, or at least understood, rather than judged negatively by the norms of dominant culture. Diane de Anda (1984) contributed to the field by proposing six factors that lead to the formation of biculturalism: the degree of overlap between cultures; the availability of others to serve as translators, mediators, and models; the amount of feedback intended to encourage or correct behaviors that may be viewed as positive or negative to the dominant group; the ability to problem solve; bilingualism; and degree of similarity in physical appearance. As a social worker, de Anda's work focused on how to successfully become bicultural and attempted to provide insight, which resulted in more research on the topic.

In his work on professionalism, James Blackwell (1987) suggested that, in order for African Americans to be successful professionally, they should attempt mainstream, which he defined as "moving Blacks professionally, economically, politically, and educationally into the social fabric of American society" (p. 81). Blackwell suggested that this is done one of two ways, either through assimilation (conforming to the traditions and the value system of the dominant culture) or through compartmentalization (the creation of rigid boundaries between both groups).

In an effort to better capture this bicultural phenomenon, the theoretical framework for this study employed Antonia Darder's (1991, 2012) critical bicultural theory. According to Darder (2012), critical bicultural theory posits that working class students of color must navigate two social environments: the primary or subordinate

culture and the dominant culture. When a person has successfully become bicultural, he/she is able to maneuver through the dialectical tension between both dominant and subordinate cultures with greater ease, which allows for access to and through institutions of education, successfully “responding to cultural conflicts” (p. 45). Doing so positively impacts bicultural persons’ ability to navigate the daily struggle of racism, discrimination, and unfair practices that can be commonplace. The bicultural process by which students from subordinate cultures find their voices (or bicultural voices) is an important step toward their empowerment and liberation, for without their voices they can more readily be subjected to continued victimization and constant experiences of injustices, without knowing how to respond effectively to these within the context of their schooling.

A common theme found in most of the literature on biculturalism is the idea that to become a bicultural individual, it is imperative to exist, survive, or thrive in the dominant culture. The work of Darder (1995, 2012) suggested that subordinate cultural groups can use their biculturalism to create opportunities for dialogue, challenge power structures, and empower the voiceless, as opposed to using it to simply get by educationally, professionally, and economically.

As such, critical biculturalism is the theory that framed this research, as it speaks to the need for people of color to not only successfully navigate this oftentimes tense landscape, which consists of overt and covert racism, social and institutional microaggressions (Pierce, 1970, 1974), inequality, exclusions, and other unfair practices in institutions that ultimately benefit the members of the dominant culture, but also use their critical bicultural understanding to create and cultivate their participation within this

potentially volatile society. Hence, a strong sense of biculturalism is “essential in the light of the many social forces of domination at work in the lives of bicultural students” (Darder, 2012, p. 44).

### **Link to Social Justice**

As a social justice educator, it is imperative for the work that I do to be explicitly connected to social justice. Through the process of gathering critical narratives for this study, it was my the goal that we, the researcher and the participants, would work together to give voice to their experiences and thus, work to transform how their lives are defined and understood. Additionally, the act of allowing members of an oppressed group to bring their voices to define their lives is directly connected to social justice efforts. Freire (1970) spoke of voice as liberation from oppression, and it is my hope that this study will contribute to the process of liberation for those suffering from unjust institutional inequities, as they seek to attain higher education and improve the quality of their lives. Through the power of what Darder (2012) termed the *bicultural voice* of the participants, this study sought to illustrate their experiences as bicultural human beings.

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

There were limitations and delimitations in this study. First, the most significant limitation was tied to the study of attrition as a whole. Research has shown that examining college *stop out* (or stopping for a period of time) and *drop out* (leaving college completely; Willet & Singer, 1991) is best conducted via a longitudinal approach (Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1998; O’Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003), as persistence is difficult to assess when measured at only one point in time. Students who may have persisted up to the point of a study may later go on to drop out, and students who

appeared to have dropped out may later resume. Scholars have suggested that a better strategy would be to understand the *when* of college attrition versus the *whether* (Willett & Singer, 1991). A second limitation is the fact that all of the data was self-reported, and although there is a significant benefit to student voice, there was the risk that not all information was completely accurate. Assumptions based on the data of individual stories can potentially result in inaccuracies that can impact conclusions. The fact that I (the researcher) have served as college counselor at the school from which the graduates have been selected (and, thus, I am the former counselor for a number of the participants) is also a limitation. Students may have felt apprehensive about opening up truthfully about their experiences because of the expectations placed upon them by the school.

Lastly, the failure to decipher the difference between African American males of high versus low socioeconomic status is a serious limitation. Vincent Tinto (1993) found that college completion is highly correlated with socioeconomic level and although systemic inequity is present regardless of tax bracket, specificity encourages accuracy, as different populations will experience oppression in similar and different ways. Despite the fact that all participants were near the same socioeconomic level, socioeconomic experiences should be fully understood to find consistency and secondary and postsecondary counseling practices should be examined in an effort to evaluate African American male students' self-efficacy and beliefs of what they have the potential to achieve.

Delimitations included the fact that the participants were all African American, bicultural, one gender, generally within the same socioeconomic level, and came from the

same high school. These constraints impact generalizability, but provided a clear, focused picture on what is occurring at this particular location.

From my perspective as a researcher, this study was important for the contributions that it will make to the work surrounding college persistence and leaving behavior. From my perspective as an educator, I am confident this work will greatly inform the daily practice of those who are charged with the task of working with this population. When I was a young person, I always knew that college attendance was my goal after high school. With the help of my mother and those responsible for educating me, I was able to attain this goal. It was not until I graduated from college and began working with students from different educational backgrounds that I understood that college is not always a guarantee for students. When I entered graduate school, I then learned that the inequity surrounding college access and degree attainment impacted certain ethnic and economic populations more than others. It was the goal of my research to identify these inequities and to ensure that steps are taken to better support these students through their postsecondary endeavors through to degree attainment.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Any critical study that seeks to provide insights into the college attrition of African American males necessitates, in addition to exploring the contemporary literature of attrition, a more nuanced understanding of the specificities of the phenomenon. Hence, to better understand the experience of the African American male in his pursuit of higher education, it is then imperative to consider the historical, social, and societal contexts that have framed his experience in the United States.

#### **African Americans in Higher Education**

Prior to the abolishment of slavery, educating African Americans, free or enslaved, was forbidden, and there were often severe punishments for the African American who requested, received, or sought out any form of education, especially in the South. Despite these warnings against education, African Americans, specifically males, were highly interested in educating themselves in order to uplift their families (Gavins, 2009).

During this time, many African Americans took it upon themselves to self-educate or to find education in Sunday schools or within African schools established by African American churches. In northern states, where there were more free African Americans by either purchase or flight, educational opportunities were more widely available, and it was in the North where African Americans were first allowed access to higher education. Despite the displeasure expressed by some members of the faculty, administration, and students of these institutions of higher education who were not pleased with the thought of African Americans attending their universities, there were

notable trailblazers who were the first to receive degrees. Among these were John Chavis, who is the first African American to have received a degree from what is now Washington and Lee University, located in Lexington, Virginia, in either 1799 or 1800 (Evans, 2009; Gavins, 2009).

Conflict in the literature exists regarding when, and even if, he received a degree. What is consistent, however, is that prior to his time there, he spent time studying under Reverend John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey, known today as Princeton University, never enrolling in the college, but rather studying as a private student. If Chavis did receive a degree, he would go on record as the first African American to receive a degree at an American university. Washington and Lee University's (n.d.) website credits Chavis as being the first African American to have "receive[d] an education" and indicates that he "completed his studies," but says nothing about being granted a degree (paras. 1, 3). After Chavis, Alexander Lucius Twilight earned a degree from Vermont's Middlebury College in 1823 and John Brown Russwurm earned a degree from Maine's Bowdoin College in 1826 (Evans, 2009). From these humble beginnings, African American men and some women began to attain degrees of higher education.

In her work on the historical success of African American men in higher education, Stephanie Evans (2009) suggested that many of those responsible for founding institutions of higher education were responsible creating curricula that distorted or eliminated important contributions and achievements made by people of Asian and Middle Eastern descent, as well those contributions of indigenous people. More specifically, the contributions of ancient scholars of African descent were not included. Through these omissions, the understanding of race was constructed, slavery was

justified, or at least rationalized, and as a result, “Whiteness was invented” (Evans, 2009, p. 37). These omissions were just the beginning of the institutional privilege that continues to prevail in U.S. colleges and universities today. In their research, Launelot Brown, Malick Kouyate, and Rodney Hopson (2009) suggested that once the education of African Americans was no longer forcibly stifled by the restrictions associated with slavery, the consoling thought amongst the dominant culture was that African Americans would become educated and, as a result, further understand their place in society; thus, becoming *socialized* as opposed to experiencing an awakening that is often considered a more transformative result of being educated.

During the Post-Civil War era, there was much concern about the number of former slaves who were now free and illiterate. Abolitionists like Samuel C. Armstrong who, in addition to believing that Whites were superior to African Americans, also believed that it was important to educate African Americans, specifically to meet the needs of Southern Whites (Anderson, 1988). He was the founder of Hampton Institute, which later became Hampton University, a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). Hampton Institute was established to train teachers to educate the newly freed slaves. Although many HBCUs were established to educate African Americans in the South, since options for African American education were limited, prior to the Civil War, some HBCUs existed in the north.

Booker T. Washington, a graduate of the Hampton Institute and a protégé of Samuel Armstrong, followed in his footsteps and opened the Tuskegee Institute. The goal of Tuskegee was to educate African Americans in the ways of industrialism and vocation. Washington agreed with Armstrong’s ideas that although African Americans

should learn how to read and write, they should not participate in the political process (Gavins, 2009).

Booker T. Washington's most public critic was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Where Washington believed that African Americans should be educated but only to the point that will allow them to carry on work to survive while remaining submissive to Whites, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that African Americans should be active participants in politics. Du Bois believed that African Americans should become lawyers and doctors. He promoted the notion of the *Talented Tenth*, which referred to a group of the African American elite who were active participants in society (Gavins, 2009). Du Bois (1903) posited that it was important for African American people to possess a "double consciousness" (p. 3) that would allow them to be active participants in society, striving to educate themselves to better themselves and further the race, all while understanding that the dominant culture, or the Caucasians, saw African American people as inferior and unable to be productive citizens. This dual awareness was the foundation of Du Bois's work, which later would be further theorized as *biculturalism*. The unique factor of Du Bois's platform was that much of the work on African American education had become a *how-to* manual, rather than understanding Du Bois's argument of this phenomenon, not only being aware of one's place and how to be successful within the confines of dominant institutions, but also to how critically understand and engage the conditions that informed it.

Whatever the case, in pursuit of knowledge, acumen, and social mobility, African Americans continued to use these institutions of higher education to advance the community, both socially and economically. There was an eventual shift, however, in the

number of African American women earning degrees compared to the number of African American men. Where previous to the 20th century, more African American males were earning degrees than African American women, in the middle of the 20th century, women were encouraged to earn degrees in order to help them gain employment, mostly in teaching, while African American men were told to forgo education in order to be able to physically work to help support their families.

During the time of the Civil Rights movement, a large number of African Americans were pursuing higher education, both male and female, with the largest increase of African Americans earning a degree occurring between 1968 and 1976 (Jiguet, Harrison, & Bonner, 2009). This increase correlated with the introduction of numerous financial aid programs established in response to the Civil Rights movement, making a college education attainable. In fact, during this time, African American high school graduates were more likely to attend college than Caucasian graduates of similar income levels (Hauser & Anderson, 1991). Between 1976 and 1985, however, there began an increasing decline in college degree attainment for African American men and women, which one could argue was directly related to the election of President Ronald Reagan and his efforts to eliminate affirmative action programs related to college admission and financial support. In fact, overall enrollments of African Americans decreased during this time period because of the reduction in financial aid funding, while simultaneously poverty was increasing (Carnoy, 1994). This phenomenon was also accompanied by the decline of grant programs and the increase of loan programs (Hauser & Anderson, 1995).

After 1985, the decline in federal grant availability created a more dramatic impact for African American males (Jipguep et al., 2009), which correlates with the explosion of the African American male prison population, a result of zero tolerance policies put in place as a directive of Reagan's War on Drugs, implemented in the early 1980s, designed to combat drugs in local communities (Webb & Kritsonis, 2006). Not surprisingly, the practices instituted by war on drugs initiatives dramatically increased the prison population by nearly two million—90% of whom were African American or Latino, with one out of every four African American men finding themselves in the penal system (Alexander, 2010). The zero tolerance policy that was the crux of the War on Drugs resulted in the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of African American men. In conjunction, punitive measures inspired by federal efforts made their way into public schools, criminalizing African American school aged children, which can determine their futures at a young age. The social, political, and economic health of the nation and the communities where African American men resided directly impacted the opportunities available (or unavailable) to them. This phenomenon, according to Alexander (2010), has been highly evident throughout history and continues to remain true today.

From 1994, the rates of African American degree attainment began to increase significantly for women continuing through 2004, creating alarming disparities between African American men and women. In fact, after 1994, the high school graduation rate of Black females increased by 30%, while the rate of African American male high school graduates increased by only 5%. Of African American males who were able to gain access to college, few graduated (Jipguep et al., 2009).

## **Theories of Attrition**

It is difficult to hypothesize regarding the concept of given the complex nature and issues associated with leaving college. Several theories attempt to explain the phenomenon of leaving college such as psychological theories of departure as a result of intellectual attributes (Marks, 1967; Summerskill, 1962); personality, motivation, and disposition (Heilbrun, 1965; Rose & Elton, 1966; Rossman & Kirk, 1970; Waterman & Waterman, 1972); and individual value placed on attendance (Eccles et al., 1983; Ethington, 1990).

In addition to psychological or personal theories of departure, environmental factors can also cause students to depart from university study, more specifically those that emphasize wider social issues including economic and organizational forces (Tinto, 1993). Conflict theorists believe that institutions of higher education are designed to serve the elite (Karabel 1972; Pincus, 1980) and structural-functional theorists view education as a merit-based competition for social attainment (Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972; Featherman & Hauser, 1978; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Alexander Astin (1999) and Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (2005) agreed that students who are involved in campus activities are more likely to persist. They posited that it is in fact the degree of involvement that correlates most strongly to student learning, and the level of this involvement is considered an essential component of persistence. John Bean (1980) employed concepts with origins in organizational studies to explain why students depart from college. In his Student Attrition Model, he posited that the turnover in the study of organizations can be used to adequately explain attrition, in that students come to college with a set of beliefs and expectations and when those expectations are neither confirmed

nor valued through campus experience, students are more apt to make the decision to leave. Lastly, economic forces have been found to be a significant cause of attrition, as costs and benefits are weighted, as in any other decision (Iwai & Churchill, 1982; Jensen, 1981; Manski & Wise, 1983).

One of the most widely referenced theories of student attrition even today is Vincent Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model. Tinto, a leading scholar on the study of attrition in higher education discussed in his work the intricacies involved with understanding how and why students decide to stay in or leave college. Tinto argued that the lack of a clear definition of attrition and the lumping together of the different reasons students leave college has resulted in gaps in the research, which will not allow for an understanding of the process that results in leaving behavior. For example, some students leave the university by their own will (voluntary withdrawal), whereas others are asked to leave because they are unable to keep up with the academic rigor of the school (academic dismissal). Not fully understanding this behavior has resulted in institutions of higher learning continually working ineffectively to arrive to a formula that will increase persistence.

Tinto (1975) also identified the gaps in research regarding attrition and ethnic and socioeconomic minorities. The central theme behind his Student Integration Model was that attrition resulted from interaction between a student and his environment, with all other factors being the same. Tinto argued that college is very similar to a society and in the same way people find difficulty in integrating into society, students find it difficult integrating into the college systems. His model has roots in the work of sociologist William Spady (1970) who initially used Emile Durkheim's (1897/1951) theory of suicide



to help explain attrition in higher education. In this work, it is suggested that similar to the way people commit suicide because of their perceived inability to integrate into society, students depart from college because of their inability to integrate into the college campus environment. Tinto connected this theory to student departure, as students who are unable to integrate into the campus environment may seek a way out. This connection has received criticism for its lack of clarity and more recently has been used less (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), particularly with respect to understanding the issues of working class students of color. Other scholars have also criticized Tinto's use of Durkheim's theory of suicide, despite Tinto's claim that his model was only loosely based on the theory, because of its suggested superficiality. McCubbin (2003) argued that the explanation that people commit suicide (or leave college) is due to their lack of ability to integrate fails to take into account the individual psychological reasons that people decide to take their lives.

Scholars have criticized other aspects of Tinto's Student Integration Model as well (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, & Bracken, 2000; Metz, 2002). For example, scholars have taken issue with the concept of integration itself, arguing that integration, or the degree to which one integrates, is subjective (Brunsden et al., 2000). Also, the focus of Tinto's model on non-traditional students is an issue of concern for scholars when creating models explaining attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

### **Attrition and African American Males**

The issue of attrition is of serious concern for institutions of higher education and has been for many years. When a student decides to depart from a college or university, the implications can be serious. College graduates earn more money; live healthier,

longer lives; and tend to avoid the penal system more frequently than those who do not graduate. Additionally, students who decide to leave college may not fully understand why they are making the choice and may see the departure as a failure, thereby impacting their social and emotional well-being. They can also be potentially unsure of what they can and cannot do in their lives (Seidman, 2004). In addition to the psychological implications of the departure, the student must repay any student debt incurred. When students decide to leave college, the university suffers a serious loss of resources. Funding is lost in the form of tuition and fees that must be now repaid and there can also be losses related to access to university services and other resources when students decide to leave (Seidman, 2005).

Attrition is on the rise for most students, and institutions of higher education are very concerned about the phenomenon at all levels. Nearly one out of five institutions of higher learning graduates less than half of its first time freshmen (Carey, 2004). In 1990, over 13 million students were enrolled in higher education; 77.5% were White and only 9% were African American. Ten years later, in the year 2000, 68% of college students were White and 13% were African American. Despite the increase in minority presence on college campuses, students of color are also leaving college at a higher rate than their White peers (Seidman, 2005).

The implications are severe when students of color, specifically African American males, make the choice to depart from their colleges and universities. First, African American males are the least represented minority group on college campuses (Dunn, 2012), so their departure seriously impacts the already dismal African American male population, significantly reducing the opportunities for other students to interact with

African American male students. This lack of interaction can result in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about African American men, or even African American people in general, and increases the likelihood of perpetuating deficit notions of African American males as educationally inferior and dominated by African American women (Cuyjet, 2009). Additionally, according to Terrell Strayhorn's 2008 study (as cited in Cuyjet, 2009), diverse interactions increase a sense of belonging amongst African American males and Caucasian males, which is critical to understanding theories surrounding student departure from college.

Scholars have attempted to cite potential reasons for attrition specifically amongst African American students, with the following reasons being cited as potential causes of attrition: lack of social support and the ability to socially integrate, financial difficulty, and racism, mostly as a result of marginalization and isolation and with academic difficulty and lack of academic support. Tinto (1993) argued that African Americans have struggled to persist through college because of the inability to integrate socially into the fabric of the campus. The lack of communities available for African American students to feel a sense of belonging and membership can result in feeling isolated. For African American students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, financial difficulties have also proven to be an obstacle to degree attainment.

Fleming (1985) and Martin (1990) have found that African American students are most likely to succeed when they believed they are supported academically, when they feel their efforts are acknowledged, and when they believe they have been assessed fairly, but researchers Donovan (1984) and Eddins (1982) have found that African American students who come from disadvantaged communities are more likely to have difficulties

meeting the academic demands of the university setting because it is likely that they will arrive with academic deficiencies. Additionally, Tinto (1975) posited how and why commitment (to goals and to the institution) is pivotal in the study of attrition. Tinto suggested that when students enter college, they come with preexisting commitment that can chart the trajectory of their academic career and these goals are formed based on attributes formed before the students enter college. Family background, predetermined skills and abilities, and educational achievement prior to college entry help form these goals that determine a student's commitment to a college, to a degree, and to an institution. Additionally, poor minority, first generation students are less likely to succeed in college than those who have family members who have had a college experience unless they are able to completely remove themselves from their home lives, fully immersing themselves in the college culture, and detaching themselves from the communities from whence they came (Tinto, 1993). In other words, from this perspective, students of color must assimilate if they are to be successful in higher education.

This type of understanding has pervaded the literature surrounding African Americans and attrition for two reasons; first, the idea that working class African Americans come to college with a deficit due to the lack of education received in their communities perpetuates the dominant culture's ideology that African Americans are inferior, and those who hail from low income communities have been educationally underserved and thus will experience difficulty in persisting. Second, Tinto's suggestion that college persistence is due to integration and assimilation has been strongly criticized to the point that Tinto's has adjusted the verbiage in his earlier work from terms like

*integration and assimilation to membership and participation* (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The suggestion that students must assimilate, or even become a part of a subculture of minority students or students of color, directly challenges that notion that students of color can be bicultural, successfully navigating both environments, which can result in a positive post-secondary experience (Darder, 2012), ultimately resulting in a transformative society.

### **The College Experience of the African American Male**

Research on African American male college graduates has posited several factors contributing to their success. These include motivation, academic achievement and preparation, self-concept and confidence, financial resources, parental education, and family influences (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2009), but African American males are subject to experiences that negate many of these factors. For example, in their article on the experiences of African American male college student, Candice Baldwin, Jodi Fisler, and James Patton (2009) outlined various factors that impact the success of this population. For example, they found that in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), African American males have lower levels of academic achievement and more problems with identity and self-esteem development than African American males who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). African American males who attend PWIs also tend to have greater adjustment problems, higher levels of stress, and higher anxiety than their counterparts at HBCUs. African American males on PWIs are more impacted by a potentially racially hostile environment that marginalizes their presence.

The absence of the contributions of African Americans in the curricula and the lack of an African American male presence on campus, either as students or as faculty and administrators, contribute to a sort of invisibility experienced by African American male students (Baldwin et al., 2009). Michael Cuyjet (2009) suggested there are invisibility factors that impact African American male college students. These include the higher achievement of African American females and the assimilation of African American males into the dominant culture, resulting in unmet needs of the unassimilated African American males by the university administration.

The literature has suggested that HBCUs could potentially be better at retaining and graduating African American males than PWIs. Baldwin et al. (2009) found that African American men who attend HBCUs tend to be more successful in personal development, persistence, and degree attainment. Moreover, they tend to have a greater sense of value for learning both in academic and social arenas. HBCU campuses also tend to be more supportive especially with the absence of elements found at PWIs such as racial overtones. HBCU campuses have a closer resemblance to African American students' home environment and professors tend to have higher expectations for the male students.

Despite offering what appears to be a more encouraging and appropriate environment for the African American male college student, researchers have found that HBCUs also face issues that can impact the persistence and eventual graduation of African American male students. These include judgment from other African American students, specifically as a result of potential confusion of what it means to be Black or African American, lack of financial support or resources, reluctance to seek academic or

personal support, and the impact of home life on academic success (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

### **The African American Male and Community College**

Very little research has been done on the African American male and his educational experiences at the community college level, in that most of the literature on the postsecondary experiences of Black males is devoted to students who attend 4-year institutions. Thus, recommendations made are generalized to all college students, even when the needs of community college students can vary greatly from the needs of students who attend a 4-year institution. However, Wood and Hilton (2012) synthesized the literature on African American males educated at the community college level and found three major barriers that this population faces: external, academic, and environmental/cultural.

#### **External Factors**

The external factors that African American males face at the community college level include lack of preparedness for college level work as a result of insufficient high school preparation, most often in math classes. Economic barriers are also considered an external factor that hinders success for African American males at the community college level, as re the conditions associated with racism that can affect a student's mental well-being. According to Wilson (2010), racism has played a significant role in the way that Whites interact with African Americans, and at the community college level, where the student population is extremely diverse and the homogeneity of the faculty population reflects the dominant culture, this incongruence can be detrimental to student success.

### **Academic Factors**

Academic factors have also been identified as barriers to the success of African American males at the community college level (Wood & Hilton, 2012). These factors most often occur once the student has arrived at the college campus, and are different from external factors, albeit related. The need for remediation, a lack of available tutoring, and poor graduation rates are cited as academic factors that hinder success for this population. In fact, Bush (2004) has argued that community colleges are almost completely inadequate in nurturing the academic and economic pursuits of African American male students, contributing to their early departure or inability to graduate in a timely manner.

### **Environmental Factors/Cultural Factors**

Environmental/cultural factors are considered to impact success as well. These factors, again related to the previous ones, point to negative institutional responses to the presence of African American males on campus, which create anxieties and alienation related to cultural identity, given the lack of harmony Black males can experience within the context of the dominant culture (Wood & Hilton, 2012). For example, African American males on community college campuses may experience a sense of cultural disconnect, specifically when differences are highlighted and abused in the academic environment (i.e., when an African American student is expected to function as the representative for all African Americans). Low academic expectations and a lack of engaged mentorship from faculty and advisors can also hinder their success.



### **Filling the Gap with a Critical Bicultural Theory**

It is essential that educators recognize that just as racism constitutes a concrete form of domination directly experienced by people of color, biculturalism specifically addresses the different strategies of survival adopted by people of color in response to the dynamics of living in constant tension between conflicting cultural values and conditions of cultural subordination. (Darder, 2012, p. 45)

The conflict that exists in the literature regarding why students fail to complete college presents a significant gap to be filled. Researchers have had difficulty pinpointing a reason for African American male attrition and I would posit that the reason for this conflict is that the issue is far more complex than stated in the literature. For example, leading scholars have looked at attrition as a serious issue facing institutions of higher education as a whole. In these studies, race, and more often, class, has been viewed as an afterthought. The issue of racism plays a significant part, but it is a complex combination of racialized and class inequalities that creates a void that has yet to be filled. As alluded to earlier, class has a serious impact on not only the outcomes of African American male college students, but also their conditioned perceptions related to their own abilities.

Since the decline of the rates of African American male entry and graduation from college, many programs have been put into place to create a place for students of color in institutions of higher education, creating opportunities for African Americans to become upwardly mobile as a result of educational achievement (Brown et al., 2009) and the resources and qualifications that come with that attainment (Hwang, Fitzpatrick, & Helms, 1998). A consequence of this mobility could be the separation from the

impoverished working class that occurs, creating a social space between poor working class and middle class African Americans (Wilson, 2010), which can potentially impact attitudinal changes. Educational opportunity allows middle class African Americans to be closer physically and socially to the dominant group, allowing them to possess the perception of perceive wealth, power, and equality, as well as a desire to identify with group that has power (Frazier, 1957), with the benefits of these desires reinforced and supported by professors and their families. For African American college students who come from African American working class communities, the lack of exposure to the dominant group can result in a lack of experience with racial hostility (Portes, 1984). If these students are attending institutions of higher education, some for the first time in an educational intuition where they are not the majority, common experiences of hostility have the potential to produce stressful experiences for working class students of color.

As mentioned earlier, Charles Valentine (1971) and Diane de Anda (1984) contributed to the early work on biculturalism. Others who have made a significant impact have been Robert Park (1928) and Everett Stonequist (1935), whose groundbreaking study of the *Marginal Man* became a strong contributor to the field of sociology. According to Park, the *Marginal Man* is

a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. (Park, 1928, p. 892)

The Marginal Man is not interested in bringing about change and this disinterest leaves him in a state of cultural crisis (Shimogori, 2013). More recently, and most specifically, as it pertains to biculturalism and the study of students of color, Armado Padilla (2006) who studied Latino children, Manuel Ramirez and Alfredo Casteñeda (1974), who studied Mexican American children, and Hakim Rashid (1981), who studied African American children, have all theorized that biculturalism is essential for these children to cope in a society where there are dominant forces at work that continually oppress minority groups.

Antonia Darder's (1991, 2012) articulation of critical bicultural theory challenges the notion that working class African American male college students must assimilate and conform in order to persist, as suggested by many authors who have researched attrition. The concepts of integration and assimilation work to suppress the human conditions faced by bicultural working class students. They assume that the reality of these students is unimportant and should be suppressed, thus perpetuating structural racism and institutional microaggressions, which have become an accepted practice and can likely be the culprit of this population's departure from college campuses. Critical bicultural theory seeks to understand the historical and contemporary struggles experienced by working class African American male college students that are often unacknowledged and overlooked, using these as the starting point for understanding the needs of bicultural students. Critical bicultural theory seeks to bring forth the knowledge and experiences of bicultural students through encouraging voice, political participation, and empowerment, which will ultimately lead to transformation, not only for students of color but also for mainstream students as a whole.

Moreover, working class students of color are not necessarily or innately equipped, without guidance, to work toward what is termed as the *bicultural affirmation* of their lives, or to function effectively within two cultural groups, even where each respects, appreciates, and understands the other. Darder (2012) postulated that educators who understand the importance of the dialectical nature of biculturalism are critical in the development of bicultural students when supporting their journey toward bicultural affirmation. This development should be understood as a series of response patterns based on how the student engages the duality that exists, while embracing his/her home culture and grappling with the oppression of the dominant culture. Darder identifies these response patterns experienced by bicultural students as cultural alienation, dualism, separatism, and negotiation.

Cultural alienation is the idea that the bicultural student rejects the primary culture and fully embraces the dominant culture; denying the existence of racism could be an example of this response. Dualist responses would embrace both the home culture and the dominant culture, existing in each separately and dichotomously. Separatist responses fully embrace the home culture, while rejecting the influences of the dominant culture. Responses akin to cultural negotiation strive to retain the primary culture while actively functioning within the dominant culture and seeking to bring forth social change. These response patterns determine the degree to which students enact responses of bicultural affirmation that are necessary to their effort to work toward self-determination and greater personal and community emancipation.

### **Goal of the Study**

It was the goal of this study to provide insights on working class African American males who have become part of the phenomenon of Black male college attrition and to understand their journey toward bicultural affirmation. Through the voices of African American men who have struggled with the issue of attrition in their lives, this study sought to contribute to the knowledge in the field in a manner that is informed by a critical bicultural perspective. That perspective is lacking in the literature, in that few studies have engaged the voices of African American men in an effort to learn, first hand, about their struggles and perceptions in contending with attrition and what factors could have helped them to persist in college until graduation.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

In C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Law's (1995) *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, professors who hail from working class backgrounds provided contributions about their bicultural existence as they pursued higher education, and the struggles they experienced maintaining this identity on campus and at home. One scholar wrote:

Until recently, I never spoke about my family at school, and I never spoke about school with my family. As a student, I knew that if I were to identify myself as working class in the English Department, I might be congratulated as an interesting exception but that their estimation of my working-class home would never really rise. . . . At home, I could not bring myself to talk about books or ideas that never intersected with the lives of my mother and brother, my cousins and extended family. To talk about my studies seemed ridiculous and stuck-up at best in a context that appeared to be as mistrustful of academia as academia was condescending to it. (Dews & Law, 1995, p. 4)

When students leave college, they are silenced and their opportunity to participate openly in ways that would allow them to learn from their experiences ceases; but even before they are able to make it to postsecondary education, African American male students who are from impoverished working class backgrounds most likely have been exposed to an understanding they are at a deficit and are “in need of saving” (Baldrige, 2014, p. 441). Students who believe that they are at a deficit may at times feel that their

lives and experiences do not matter and are unimportant, especially once they attend college and, more specifically, leave.

This study aims to bring these voices into play in an effort to develop a more grounded understanding of the experience of African American male college students who leave college prior to graduation. Through their voices, a primary objective is to engage their knowledge in ways that will allow us to better understand what working class African American men need in order to stay in college and successfully graduate. Through the use of a qualitative methodology, this study created a place for voice and participation in an unconventional forum. Without voice, their silence would persist and their perspectives and knowledge unattended, for “only autobiography is a sensitive enough instrument to register the subtle activity of a social class in a milieu in which class is supposedly a nonfactor” (Dews & Law, 1995, p. 5).

### **Qualitative Approach: Critical Narratives**

This study employed a qualitative methodological approach that provided a voice to those who have graduated from St. Peter Claver Academy, enrolled in college, but have left before graduating or are still pursuing a degree longer than expected. The purpose of this type of critical narrative was to allow those who have been silenced to have a voice, to engage in critical dialogue and to better make sense of their stories by encouraging participation. The individuals together created one powerful voice that created a shift in their understanding of the experiences of bicultural male students in college.

Storytelling, which is extremely significant in African American oral tradition (Banks-Wallace, 2002), has become a respected method of inquiry in qualitative research

(Moen, 2006). Although autobiographical stories have traditionally been considered trivial and superficial (Dews & Law, 1995), storytelling is a way to solve practically many issues and narratives help make sense of other's behaviors and experiences, in that narrative inquiry can be used as a "frame of reference" (Moen, 2006, p. 2). Narrative inquiry is also a humanistic approach (Sandelowski, 1991) and challenges positivist perspectives, which cannot fully and accurately describe or explain lived experiences.

The narrative of minorities in this country, specifically in academia, began years ago when new approaches to curricula were being discussed and created. However, significant contributions of people of color have been omitted from history books and the narrative that outlasted history was one that justified slavery, reinforced racism, and continues to marginalize a people (Evans, 2009). This dominant narrative has become a truth; students of color are unable to produce. African American men have no place in a university and the achievement gap is a result of minority families' inability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and out of their circumstances. This master narrative has had the potential to result in marginalized populations internalizing a culture of deficit with respect to their culture, language, and political capacity to transform their own lives and their communities.

Through counter-storytelling, or telling the stories of those whose stories often go untold, marginalized groups have the platform to not only challenge the narratives of the dominant culture that have become the foundation of Americanism, but also "strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).



## **Research Questions**

This narrative research studied African American male students who have struggled with persistence in college attendance or were unable to graduate on time, asking them to respond to a set of guiding questions linked to the purpose of this study.

These questions, as posited earlier, included:

1. What are the major reasons identified by graduates from St. Peter Claver Academy, for not graduating from college after 6 years?
2. What recurring feelings, events, or ideas associated with their college experiences are identified by St. Peter Claver Academy graduates that may have contributed to their decision to leave college prior to graduation?
3. What secondary and postsecondary institutional factors do graduates of St. Peter Claver Academy believe would have supported them to college graduation?

## **Research Design**

### **Participants**

For this study, seven African American graduates of St. Peter Claver Academy were identified. Initially, I sought students who had begun college, stopped at some point, and not yet graduated. They may or may not have transferred to different institutions while in college, but were unable to persist through to graduation. I contacted the students through both email and through social media. I had access to these potential participants, who are now all adults, through my professional connection with St. Peter Claver Academy. I contacted a total of 18 students; nine did not respond and three responded but failed to complete the instructions I provided. Seven students responded

and followed up with initial instructions (See Table 1.). These seven students became my participants. Once the sample was identified, informed consent forms were distributed and collected (See Appendix A.), as was a questionnaire to gather demographic information (See Appendix B.), including graduation year, household income, type of institution they attended, length of time they attended, and other characteristics that were used to identify themes and trends among the participants. I initially sought out students whom I believed had stopped attending college before attaining a degree. However, I received students who had not yet graduated, but had not stopped. Five of the seven students were persisting.

Table 1  
*Participant Information*

Participant	Age	School	School Type	St. Peter Claver Grad Year	Years Since Graduation	Units Completed
Mike	24	Mayfield College	2-year Community College	2008	6	65
Alexander	23	South Ocean College	2-year Community College	2009	5	46
David	23	South Ocean College	2-year Community College	2009	Stopped Attending	20
Jason	22	Hosley College; Wateridge College	4-year HBCU 2-year Community College	2010	Stopped Attending	38
Marcus	20	Clinton University; Eastern College	4-year HBCU; 2-year Community College	2012	2	37*
Ranger	24	Pacific Coast College; Mullen College; Mayfield College	2-year Community College	2008	6	12
Charles	23	Olmstead College	4-year Private	2009	5	Unavailable**

*Note.* \*Marcus is relevant to this study because due to his inability to pay for school, he had to leave after a year and a half. The school will not release his transcripts until he pays what he owes. As a result, he has had to resume his education at the community college as a first time freshman.

\*\*I was unable to obtain unit data from Charles.

## **Collection of Data**

Each of the participants was engaged individually through gathering critical narratives, allowing him an opportunity to tell his stories, unobtrusively. The open-endedness of critical narratives also allowed for more latitude than interview questions. To collect these narratives, individual meetings with each of the participants were scheduled at a place of their choosing. If they were unable to decide upon a location, I made suggestions that were geographically convenient for them. Each initial meeting took 35-90 minutes. Each participant was provided with an introductory statement about the study, and was invited to share his college experiences with the use of prompts to help guide the discussion when necessary (See Appendix C.). An audio recorder was used to gather the data.

## **Transcription and Coding/Decoding of Data**

The researcher met with each participant for one session. It was made clear at the start of the session that a second session could be possible, which could occur either in person or via telephone. After the data were gathered, they were transcribed and sent to each of the participants to ensure that their stories were captured adequately and appropriately. When it was determined that no amendments needed to be made, transcripts were critically analyzed for common themes and trends in the data that responded to the research questions posed. The scripts and the stories were reviewed and the data were coded and divided into the following categories: family, pride, money, academics, institutional issues, and campus integration.

Through this process, bicultural response patterns were identified and themes collected across the narratives. Bicultural experiences while on college campuses were

understood and the way in which these experiences have shaped who the men have become today were discovered. Pseudonyms were used in lieu of names of students and institutions when reporting data.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This study gathered the narratives of seven graduates of St. Peter Claver Academy and initially sought to understand attrition and why African American males were leaving college. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 24 and five of the seven participants were currently enrolled in school (See Table 1.). To conserve the integrity of the voices within these narratives, I have chosen to present the individual narratives first and then summarize the major themes that emerged from their composite experiences.

#### **Mike, 24, Mayfield College**

I do get discouraged. I mean, many days I want to give up, and it is embarrassing to say that I've attended a [junior college for] almost 6 years now.

—Mike

Mike is a sociology student at Mayfield College, a 2-year college located in a suburb of a major metropolitan city in the southwestern United States. Mayfield was founded in 1955 and boasts that 1,200 students successfully complete their courses of study each year. According to their website, at the time of this study, Mayfield had just over 10,000 students enrolled. Mike graduated from St. Peter Claver Academy in 2008 and has been a student at Mayfield for 6 years now, having stopped for two non-concurrent semesters.

Mike grew up in what he describes as a “two-parent” household. His parents divorced when he was 7 years old, which, according to Mike, is something that is expected in African American families. His mother raised him alone until she remarried when he was about 12 years old. He did not feel as if he missed anything by not having

his father around. According to Mike, he had plenty of uncles who acted as surrogate fathers for him when needed. His mother worked nights, so he spent a great deal of time with his grandmother as well. Mike's biological father was in and out of his life and, at the time of our conversation, he had not spoken to him in a year. At 24, Mike is confident that he is at peace ok with his father's absence, as his uncles and his stepfather provided that support that he needed.

Mike grew up in an inner city community. He was raised Catholic and attended Catholic schools for elementary and high school. His mother had also attended a Catholic all-girls high school in this community (which closed a number of years ago), so she was very familiar with St. Peter Claver Academy and its history. Mike remembers that she wanted him to attend the school. Mike, however, was not as confident as she was with the decision for him to attend St. Peter Claver.

In the Catholic schools Mike attended, there were large Latino populations, and Mike, one of the few African American boys, was usually the biggest and tallest in his classes. Once he came to St. Peter Claver, however, he was among peers who were the same size and even bigger. He was intimidated by this initially, but became more comfortable as time went on:

I was scared as hell because when I got here it was intimidating. I mean, I was around boys but like—a large quantity of like—African American boys. I was raised Catholic, so I'm usually around Latino boys. I'm used to being the biggest boy around here being Black, but when I came here it was like boys taller than me, bigger than me, stuff like that.

He involved himself in sports, specifically football, which helped him come out of his shell. Based on his physical appearance, one would assume that he could handle himself on the field, but that did not come without a great deal of pain. He recalls many nights when he “came home throwing up sick” due to the strenuous workouts.

Academically, he struggled at St. Peter Claver. He believes that was because he was “a little bit slow on some things,” specifically math, but he knew the importance of attaining a high school degree and going to college. He was intimidated, however, by the process of applying to college, especially managing the paperwork and remembering dates. He chose to attend Mayfield because it was closest to his home.

Mike discussed his experience of entering a community college after his high school and adjusting to the college culture and becoming a college student:

Right after high school, I went to Mayfield College, which I am still attending now. I had little bumps here and there because of financial stuff and just being irresponsible, but I mean, everyone has that year, you know, when you first get to college and say, “Oh, I gotta go to class? I gotta do homework?” That was something new. Like all of my life in high school I had St. Peter Claver there and my parents there. When I got to college, my mom was like, “Well, you gotta go to class and have fun. That’s it.”

Mike admitted that he also struggled academically in college. He admitted that he did not want to take advantage of the services that were available to him because he did not want to appear as if he was weak. When asked about his participation in the support systems that were available at the college, he reflected:

I didn't [take advantage of services] because I was embarrassed because I [didn't want them] to be like—"Oh, he's kinda slow" or "He's just a little bit off. . . ." and I know it wasn't true, I'm very smart. Now I'm older, I'm taking advantage, but that first time I was like, "No, I'm gonna do all my classes, get ahead of myself." That's just the pride in me. I don't let people in. I think people might consider me like—oh, "He's retarded" or like "He's slow," and I didn't want to ever have that label. I know that's a horrible thing to say. I know it's not true, but that's just me. I'm a very prideful person. I want to be treated the same as anybody else, so don't treat me like—oh, I need special—I need a little more longer time, but believe me, give me a couple of days and I'll be on it too. I have a different learning method, but my method is the same way. I still learn the same way, just different way of handling it.

He went on to also discuss his experiences once he got comfortable with the support services:

I think, maybe like my second semester, they had a thing where you could take your test in a more relaxing office. It was like a little classroom. It was like more relaxing. They gave you more time, and I did take advantage of that, and I passed a couple tests using that method. It was fine. It was great. It got me where I am now.

The need for money was clear in Mike's story, and finances presented itself as a central theme in most of the narratives in different ways. For Mike, he believed that as a young man, it was imperative that he work to support himself.



You know, I have a job. My parents do help me here and there, but I'm independent. I want to have my own money, so I have to struggle with my own job. I have two jobs now. It still works out. Many nights I'm up till 5:00 in the morning doing homework or studying, and St. Peter Claver prepared me for that, because I mean, even there I was doing homework at 2:00-3:00 in the morning because I played football, so it was nothing new to me.

He continued discussing his job further:

I work at [a home improvement store]. I make \$11 an hour. . . . I've been there 4 years now, so they know that I bust my butt [there]. I had no work experience, and I told them that, but if you give me a chance—and they did, and they see that effort. I'm not a supervisor because I go to school, but many days my managers say, "If you didn't go to school, we would have gladly made you full-time department supervisor, but we know when we need something we'll call you as backup." People at my job that have been there half my life tell me, "Do not take full-time. Do not take full-time. Stay part-time." Because many days, that full-time is looking real good to me because the benefits with it and all the—I mean, I would make a little more than I make now, but they'd be like—don't take it. Do not take it.

Finances were also critical to why Mike has been in college for the length of time that he has. He reflected upon the breaks that he took from college:

I had one break when I first attended college, and then, I had another break—well, let me see. It would have to be that second year of college. That's because I was looking for a job. At the time, I needed money to get to school back and forth

because my momma—you know, she makes money too, but she makes a decent amount of money, and I realized I need to stop asking her for a bunch of money and start making my own money because of the cost of books. The thinnest book would be \$300-\$400, and let's just say, she couldn't afford it, and when she did afford it, like she'd say, "Oh, we can't pay the phone this week. . ." and I hated that, and I know she was struggling. My stepfather was there too, so he had to help out too, so many times we had to sacrifice TV for a week or cellphone. Something didn't get paid because of my books, and that hurt me so much knowing that they would sacrifice. Another thing—it's the material things, but I mean, it's something that they worked for, and when my parents come home from work, they want to watch TV, or they want to get on their phones. They want to do whatever. So it hurt me knowing that they sacrificed that. I loved them so much for that, and one day, when I have children, I want to do the same thing. When asked about the first semester after high school and why he had to wait until the spring to start classes, he offered this explanation:

I didn't pay my deadline for school. I had paid the classes off, but I didn't know that there was such a thing as student fee just for being on campus insurance-wise. . . . I didn't pay that fee, and they had dropped me from my classes, and the classes I had were all core classes like math, history, science. Those classes are hard [to get]. If you drop them, they're hard to get [back] in, especially on the wait list and especially at Mayfield.

Mike went on to discuss how his need for money impacted his ability to maintain full-time status in school, which has also contributed to the length of time that he has spent at the 2-year institution.

I'm part-time right now, but I'm part-time in the process of transferring, so I only have like a math class left. . . . I was going to take some more classes, but I figure I'm going to have to get to the big—the university, so I need to set some money aside. Even though I might qualify for all these grants and stuff like that, but there's so much money out there that you can qualify. I know I still need to save money for myself because I still have a household, I have my family, and I have a car, so I need to save up money and stuff like that.

Mike was asked about his ability to integrate into the campus community. He shared the following reflection:

Academically, yeah, [I feel like I belong here]. I'm not a student on the Dean's Roll/List, but I mean, I ain't here to quit. Socially, I don't know [if I feel like I belong here]. I had to like—you know, the college "Oh, I got the 6-pack," all the stuff like that. I didn't have that. I was fat, and I ain't no fat, sloppy person. I think I'm an ok-looking person, but I mean, I didn't have the 6-pack. I had a car, and I was chunky, and I was like, yes, I thought I didn't fit in at first, but I mean, that's just something I felt, but I realized when I got older, God gave me this, and I'm going to stick with it. I'll make it work, which I did. It was fine.

For the future, Mike plans to transfer to a state school and hopes to work with young people who have gotten involved in the criminal justice system.

### **Alexander, 23, South Ocean College**

I wouldn't say comfortable is the word [to describe South Ocean]. I would say, it's kind of like a large jungle.

—Alexander

Alexander is a student at South Ocean College, a 2-year institution that boasts their 70-acre campus and their 39 areas of study. According to their website, in 2014 they enrolled just over 10,000 students, although their enrollment can jump to 12,000 when counting their extension students. Thirty-two percent of the student body is African American and 44% is Hispanic/Latino. Fifty-three percent of students are under the age of 25 and 27% work full time. Alexander has been attending South Ocean College since the fall following his high school graduation in 2009. He is now 23 years old.

Alexander came from a two-parent household of working parents. His father is an entrepreneur and his mother is a hairstylist. Education was very important in his household, even though neither of his parents had the opportunity to pursue it fully. Like Mike, Alexander attended Catholic schools for his primary and secondary years, and he was less than thrilled when he found out that he had to attend St. Peter Claver. For his family, Alexander attending St. Peter Claver was the most affordable option and his mother was very impressed with the internship opportunity that the school offered. When asked about what he experienced in high school, he offered the following reflection:

I had a lot of family drama, and I was never really too fond of people. I can't exactly say that I was more mature than people, but I don't think I never made myself more of an example as to stand out. Like, you know, St. Peter Claver is so

small. So it's not to say that everybody knows everybody, but everybody does kind of know everybody. And I never personally kind of made myself out there to be known. So I guess a lot of people kind of underestimated me as far as like, "Oh, who's this guy? Who does he think he is? He doesn't talk. He doesn't socialize. Every time you see him, it seems like he's in a bad mood," or something like that. But I never really played too much into whatever everybody else had going on, because I felt like in a way it was like a survival of the fittest. As long as I had my things straight, everybody else really did not matter. Again I'm not really sure how a typical high school experience is, because you really don't know until you go through it. And St. Peter Claver, as you know, is not really typical.

Alexander articulated his experience preparing for college and the expectations that were placed upon him. He also expressed the challenges he felt navigating the financial aid application process and his concern for what the process represents.

I just knew it was expected for me to go somehow, some way, and I knew St. Peter Claver had a great expectation to send most of their students to college. I mean, it was always planned to go. As far as how to do it and get by, I felt like it was like a so-so battle because the experience of just applying for it is new, and it's actually still somewhat new to me, even where I am today. [My parents] weren't really open, I guess, to what financial aid had to offer. My father's reasons were more so, "Well, why do we have to give out so much personal information? The government already knows how much I make. I have to file taxes every year, so I don't see why I have to go out of my way and do this

again.” I remember [my counselor] having a meeting with us and him trying to, I guess, break it down to where my father could kind of understand and just give in. Now ironically I would think after that, things would have been a lot easier, and the first year when I [completed the paperwork while I] was still at St. Peter Claver, you would think like, okay, it worked out. But I guess when you have to apply to all over again every year, that’s when it kind of became a problem. I think personally, that’s what slowed my progress down because, as you know, college is very expensive. I definitely learned some things in college now. I mean, not to say that I’m the most educated person, but I definitely feel I’m not the same person that left St. Peter Claver either. [Actually,] I don’t agree with how you’re supposed to pay your way through college which is like pretty much you go into debt to get higher up, even though it’s supposed to be an investment. In my reality, it seems if I do this, I’m just kind of putting myself more in a different hole already than the hole I’m in right now. And I guess my main focus for the last couple of years is to, okay, well how do I balance that?

Alexander has attended South Ocean College since immediately following high school. He had considered going to other schools in order to get requirements out of the way, potentially completing his coursework sooner, but his unfamiliarity with the process of taking classes elsewhere and transferring them South Ocean was a deterrent. He had witnessed his peers’ difficulties with this plan. Also, South Ocean was close to his home, which was why he chose it, and other schools were too far for him to travel to without a car.

Alexander discussed his comfort level on campus and how well he was able to integrate into the fabric of the campus and support that he perceived on campus:

Well, as far as the support that I had from [my high school counselors and teachers], that definitely was not there at South Ocean. It was kind of like you just figure it out on your own. I had to learn on my own how to find the counselor, how to sign up [for classes], how to do this, how to do that. When I first got there, there was one counselor there that I was pretty close with, and she seemed very helpful, but unfortunately she passed on. [As far as support], I can't say that they didn't support me, but I can't really say that they did either.

Honestly the only support I really had at the time, I guess, was the two or three St. Peter Claver associates that I had with me. At the time we were, I guess, just trying to navigate this jungle called South Ocean, at the time. But as you know, college tends to bring out different experiences for everybody [as far as] how they want to navigate and how they want to move about with it. So some left and decided to pursue other ventures. For the most part, it's kind of been more so me on my own.

As an African American male, Alexander shared his experiences of what it meant to be an African American male on campus.

Everybody seems to say that this is post-racial America, so we don't supposedly experience racism or prejudice like we did in the 60s and before that. My appearance, for one—I mean—I'm not a gang banger. I'm not a drug dealer or nothing like that. But my appearance gives off that. I've been followed by cops and security at school and around here. I've been questioned. I've just been

messed with to say the least. But a lot of times it's not even them saying words. It's their body language. It's the look on their faces. It seems like, "You're Black, that's strike one for you." That's like the first strike.

I don't know. Maybe it's the tone of your voice. Maybe it's just the appearance or so. It's just, okay, well—it's kind of like they expect something of you. Like, I'm Black so I guess they're kind of more so on the fence like, okay, what is he going to do? Is he going to be loud? Is he going to start something with somebody? Is he going to cause some type of trouble? Or is he educated? Whereas if I was a different skin color, I felt like there would have been more interaction, more—how do I say?—more help, to say the least. It's kind of like you have to do the job as far as getting help yourself, but as Blacks, I feel like you have to do extra push. You have to always do more than what's expected of you.

Work was also very important to Alexander, and he currently has a job that takes a significant amount of his time. Alexander uses the money he earns from his job to help purchase equipment to support his burgeoning film career. Alexander's future plans include transferring to a private university in the area that has a solid film school. He has already written and sold scripts to some major entertainment companies. A writer for many years, he was able to identify that he had stopped writing while he was a student at St. Peter Claver. In reflecting on a conversation he had with a classmate he stated:

We sat down one day and we were just talking about what we wanted to do with our lives. I stated that I want to make films and he's like, "Oh, that's great. So what have you done lately?" I thought about it, because I used to do a lot of writing in elementary and middle school [but] I realized I did no writing at St.



Peter Claver. St. Peter Claver was so time consuming, I think it's amazing you found time to do anything. I mean, you were taking six classes plus [your internship], doing assignments, plus going to work and just studying for whatever had to come at the time. We just didn't have time for it. Whatever little time we had, I guess for me, just wasn't for writing. I mean, I was involved with a film club and did little stuff with them but not necessarily writing stories or books like I used to. So my friend, I guess, encouraged me to start doing it again. So I did.

**David, 23, South Ocean College**

[My] main goal was to graduate high school and pursue acting, which is what I really wanted to do. . . school wasn't really on my agenda, but I had [to hear it] from mom being in my ear, like, "Go to school. You've got to get your degree."

—David

David also attended South Ocean College and is really good friends with Alexander; they were classmates at St. Peter Claver. Unlike Alexander, however, David is no longer enrolled in school. David comes from a single parent household; his father passed away when he was very young. He attended a Christian middle school and like the other students, St. Peter Claver was his mother's top choice for high school. David was hesitant.

Despite his reservations, however, David enjoyed his time at St. Peter Claver.

When asked about his experiences he offered the following reflection:

High school was a delight, especially at St. Peter Claver. It was really cool. You pretty much get a sense of what college is when you're here. They give you your syllabus, and it's a lot different from any other school. The structure here is so

much better. And you leave with so many more tools than you would at any other public school. That's for sure. But high school was awesome.

David is pursuing a career in acting and he has been interested in the field since he was in high school. When discussing his college plans, he explained:

[My plans of attending college] were there, very, very minimal, though. I always had my hopes set on attending South Ocean College to get my generals out of the way and then transfer somewhere, but my main goal was to graduate high school and pursue acting, which is what I really wanted to do.

David went on to explain how he felt about talking about his college and career plans to during his senior year of high school.

When I was a senior, I really didn't feel comfortable expressing [my true career plans]. I mean, I always tried to get around telling people that. Like when everybody's like, "Oh yeah, what college are you going to, and what degree are you going to get?" I'm like, "Yeah, I want to go to a performing arts school and get my bachelor's degree in Performing Arts. I'm going to do something like that." Even though that's not really what I wanted to do. I just wanted to go out and just jump right into Hollywood and auditioning and things like that.

David decided to attend South Ocean College because it was close to his home and in a nice area. He had taken a couple of classes there in high school so he was familiar with the campus. He was not sure of what he wanted to do for a major, rejecting Theater Arts, ironically because of the perceived lack of earning potential, and decided upon Psychology. He spoke about his ability to integrate into the campus community:

I was very comfortable. In class, I never had a problem asking a question, because in college you're there for you. It's like it's more personal with the instructor. It's like if I don't ask this question, then I'm not going to understand and I'm not going to pass this test. I never had a problem asking questions or getting what I needed to know. I was very comfortable. The library is always there. I could always get a counselor when I needed one. So yeah, I was very comfortable in college.

Eventually, David's educational experience shifted when he got a job and although he was working, his family did not pressure him to provide. There came a time, however, when work became the priority;

I went to South Ocean College [and] I got some credits under my belt. I just went out and knocked out some of the basics like your General Health, PE, English, things like that, and somewhere down the line I decided to get a job. My first job was at Abercrombie and Fitch, so at one point I was going to school and working. And then eventually I started working more and going to school less, so I started taking breaks and more breaks, and then that one break turned out to I'm not going to school anymore. I'm just going to work and get some money. And yeah, that pretty much was that.

David has stopped school permanently and he is satisfied with his decision. He explained:

I've grown to understand that some things just aren't for everyone. I feel like school isn't for everybody. I personally I didn't think that they could give me anything that would make me happy as a person. I don't think there's anything

I'd rather do besides act, so I couldn't see myself getting a degree in any field and then graduating, getting a job in any field, and being happy. That's a part of college is finding out who you are as a person. I mean, I was comfortable in each class. It's just [that during] each class I always felt like, why am I here? I don't understand. I don't want to be here.

When asked about his master plan, David offered the following:

Well, actually, let me tell you exactly intentions. I wanted to graduate high school, secure a great acting gig or job, and secure my own income that way, and then go to college after I'm already successful. You know, that's what Terrence Howard did. That's what Emma Watson did. That's what a lot of great actors are doing and have done, and that's what I wanted to do for myself. I want to wait until I am an actor with movies under my belt, and then take a break, and then go to school and graduate, and then come back and go right back into my field. That's what I want to do. So in a way, I guess you can say I'm still waiting for that to happen. Yeah.

**Jason, 22, Hosley College, Wateridge College**

I got lucky with St. Peter Claver. I really did because probably if I went to [a local public school], I probably wouldn't have got the whole understanding on college. You've got to do this to get this. When you get there you've got to do this to get that. People in my community aren't exposed to that at all, so they're stagnant.

—Jason

Jason graduated from St. Peter Claver in 2010 and attended Hosley College starting in the spring semester following his high school graduation. Hosley is an HBCU located in the south eastern region of the United States. Hosley was founded in 1882 and has a religious affiliation. It boasts 64 acres and has a student population of just over 800 students, with 74% female enrollment and 74% state residents.

Jason, who had annual family income of \$10,000 at the time of his high school graduation, also did not want to attend St. Peter Claver, and even had plans of leaving after attending the mandatory summer orientation. He was due to attend a public school just down the street from the school. He reflected:

Actually, honestly, I didn't want to come to St. Peter Claver just because it was an all-boy's school. It's private. I was supposed to transfer out of here and go to [to a public school] my first year, but one of my friends that I grew up with got shot [and killed while he was] coming back from school, and my mom said, "No, you're going to stay where you're at."

He went on to explain that past mistakes he made in middle school prevented him from attending other local public schools. After his close friend was killed, he understood why his mother wanted him to attend school in the safe environment that St. Peter Claver offered.

When asked about what support was offered at St. Peter Claver, he commented: Personally it didn't get supportive until about junior year, senior year. That's when I think St. Peter Claver puts the most emphasis on their students because they really want to see them succeed. And then I had made those relationships with certain teachers and staff, so yeah, it was both academically and personally

[supportive] going into my junior year. Freshman year, sophomore year—it was okay. I think I was still messing up. I'm pretty sure I was academically.

Personally, I don't think I had too many problems. Teachers were okay. They were so concerned. That was pretty cool. But they were pretty supportive overall.

When asked about what he knew about college and his college plans, he discussed his exposure to college information while in high school.

The college office—they were very, very supportive. We had our weekly college visits, so that helped a lot. I didn't want to be here anymore—as in [my home state] period—so I applied to a bunch of different schools, got denied from a lot of them. I applied to an HBCU halfway across the country, got in, and just left. That was pretty much the end of the story for that.

Jason was accepted to Hosley, but deferred his enrollment for a semester. Once he made it to Hosley, Jason had the following to say about the experience:

Well, it wasn't so different because I'd been to school with Black people my whole, entire life, so it wasn't that much to get used to as far as personalities and interaction. But I definitely, definitely think that my experience would be a whole lot different if I went to a traditionally big school. I mean the support was different.

But then, something happened:

The supportive people—they actually got caught up in some type of scandal with tuition, and then we had a problem with accreditation because people were, I guess, taking money from the school. Admissions—they fought for me to get in.

They helped me a lot. Financial aid—there were problems with that, so I guess my first semester there they lost some documents for FAFSA, and I ended up having to pay probably 5,000 bucks. I tried to get help but that wasn't really working. Probably a semester later, all of the supportive people—they left. Well, they didn't even leave. They got fired because I guess they got caught and twisted up in the little tuition scandal. Pretty much from my understanding, I guess the school automatically got funds from the government when students were admitted, and they didn't give the funds back [when the students said that they weren't coming there]. So they kept all of that money and pretty much it caught up to them. Then the people that were supporting me weren't there anymore. . .[and] with the support being gone, it brought up some stuff from freshman year, and I couldn't really understand why. When I looked into it and it was like—pretty much there wasn't anything I could do. So it was either pay. . .5,000 bucks or you're pretty much out of here. So it wasn't really my choice [to leave]. If it was up to me I probably would have stayed, but I wasn't ready to give them 5,000 dollars. And then the current standing of their accreditation—it was kind of like within the balance it was like a year—they had a year to get it together. Then pretty much if they didn't get it together then they would lose their accreditation. So I really didn't want to give them 5,000 dollars knowing that.

In addition to the scandal that Hosley endured during Jason's time there, he also had the following to say about his experience on campus:

I'm going to say due to my first experience with HBCUs, I don't think I would ever go back to one. I was in [the South] where it was like a substantial amount of HBCUs, and having friends that went to [a few of] them, some of the problems are pretty much the same problems at each HBCU. [For example,] Paine was pretty easy. Coming from St. Peter Claver, it was easy. I never ever really had [good] grades like that before. The work that was given to me was a breeze. I don't even think I was going to get [assigned] a 20-page paper, 15-page papers until like senior year—my dissertation and stuff. The longest paper I wrote while I was there was five, the minimum was two. Professors always complained, “Why are you writing [so much]?” The only thing I had a problem with was math, and that's just because I'm not good with math period. Other than that, the curriculum was a breeze and I think if I would have transferred to somewhere else, I don't think it would have been an easy transition just because the workload would have been different.

[Personally], after a while [of] being in Black school after Black school after Black school, you kind of get tired of it. And then the [community] was the same exact from what I was trying to get away from. I'm pretty sure if I would have visited, I probably would have felt some type of way in because I didn't know that all HBCUs were in the hood. When I got there, it was pretty much like shell shock. One of the recruiters actually came and picked me up from the airport, so that was pretty cool, [but when] we got [to campus there were] unmarked police cars [and I'm thinking] this is worse than where I left. [Also] while I was there, we got like three school shootings. One of our students got



shot in the hand, they shot out one of the girls' dorm rooms, [and] a girl got raped on the third floor of one of our buildings. There was a whole lot going on. One of our dorms got raided. Dogs, police [raiding] a dorm. A dorm. And I was only there for a year and a half. All of this happened within a year. Just recently somebody got shot in the back. There's a lot that goes on. [Home] was safer. I wasn't really tripping because growing up in this kind of area—it wasn't really [different]—I was just on edge because it was not where I was from, so I was uncomfortable.

I don't have a problem with [HBCUs]. It just wasn't for me. But I do feel like you grow stronger as a Black person because [there is] a whole lot of history at an HBCU and you'd probably be even stronger as a Black person if you join a Black sorority or a fraternity. But I feel like just us being from or coming from wherever we're coming from is kind of comfortable or you get used to it being in this place just because you know you're from somewhere where it was hard living. So it's not too much of a big deal, but it's not the same. I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to be—I don't want to have to look over my shoulder and all of this anymore. But I just didn't like that part of it.

Hosley was just like [where] I am now. It was no different. It was in the middle of four [housing] projects. The place where it was was very low income. The ghetto pretty much. It was pretty much a mirror of St. Peter Claver. Small school, middle of the ghetto.”

But I came back to the community and it's like people are really doing the same thing. They weren't exposed. I got lucky with St. Peter Claver. I really did

because probably if I went to [a local public school], I probably wouldn't have got the whole understanding on college. You've got to do this to get this. When you get there you've got to do this to get that. People in my community aren't exposed to that at all, so they're stagnant. And they still are.

When Jason returned home, he attended Wateridge College. Wateridge is a 2-year institution that was founded in 1929. The student enrollment is just under 30,000 students and Wateridge boasts that they have the highest transfer rate to local campuses as compared to neighboring community colleges. Wateridge is about 20 miles away from Jason's home. When asked about his experience at Wateridge, he offered the following insight:

Wateridge was very different. I've never had the chance to work with other races outside of work. So to be there in a school setting, it's a whole different interaction, a whole different everything. So that was pretty different for me. [As far as] support, I mean it's a great school. I liked it a lot. It was pretty cool. Pretty much made me think about painting it in a different light because it was just so different—very, very different.

Jason was only a student at Wateridge for a summer before left to pursue employment opportunities. He had a few jobs before he settled into one in the airline business that he enjoyed, had excellent benefits, and the potential for growth. When asked if he planned on returning to school, he answered with a confident “Yeah.”

### **Marcus, 20, Clinton University, Eastern College**

I am 20 years old, and I still live with my parents. When I was younger, my goal was to be eighteen and out of the house. And to an extent, I did fulfill that goal. I

was out of the state, but to have to come back home is a humbling blow because you're like, "What am I doing with my life?" I'm about to be 21 and living with my parents, and that is not—it's not—it's not bad. Don't mistake me. But it's not where I want to be.

—Marcus

Marcus graduated from St. Peter Claver Academy in 2012. He attended Clinton University, an HBCU located in the Southern United States. Clinton was founded in 1866, shortly after the end of the Civil War. It is the oldest institution of higher education in the city and has a student population of just under 800 students, with just over 200 in the freshman class. Clinton boasts a persistence rate of 84% and a 5-year graduation rate of 52%.

Marcus comes from a two-parent household where education was very important. His mother completed high school, but his father dropped out due to substance addiction. His father has since returned to school and has earned his GED.

Marcus attended public schools for his elementary and middle school education. He reflected on his public school experiences:

I attended public schools my entire career until I got to high school and the schools were very impacted. They had little-to-no resources. They, and at the time I didn't understand this, they had zero tolerance policies. I quickly found out that the schools were only interested in test scores and who could give them the best test score at the end of the year, when it came time to standardized testing, to make their schools look good. In fact, I had a counselor one time tell me that the only reason why they did not kick me out of the school was because of my high

performance on the standardized tests. So that caused me to actually have a downward turn with my education. I stopped attending classes and started hanging out with the wrong people. I began to fight a lot. I was on a downward spiral. Luckily, I had a young man, a teacher, who cared enough about me. He knew that I was smart enough to get the work done. He knew that I was smart enough to make better choices, and he influenced me to do better than I had in my past.

Marcus explained how St. Peter Claver became an option for high school:

St. Peter Claver became part of the conversation because we actually had a young man who grew up around the corner from me who was very close to my family. . . . He was a student at another school [and] was failing tremendously. . . [so] his parents decided to transfer him to St. Peter Claver, and his grades turned around from all Fs to all As. He played football, just as I did, but when it came time to graduate, he took the route of the academic scholarship. He went to a private Catholic university and was successful there and was in the process of getting his masters before he passed away. So when my mom and my father saw his success, they felt that this was a catalyst where our son could be successful.

He remembers what it was like to interview for St. Peter Claver:

I got to St. Peter Claver, and I applied, and I went through the interview. I got the teacher recommendations and things. But due to my record—my past record from middle school, I was not awarded an acceptance. My father and a young man, who had been previously a football coach for St. Peter Claver, went in and they met with the faculty on my behalf, and they talked with them. The principal

decided that she would afford me an opportunity to go to summer orientation [and] that they would place me on a conditional acceptance. So I went through orientation and I was able to pass the classes. I got As in both classes. I did well with the [internship preparation workshop]. And then shortly after, I actually received my first job, which was working for the councilwoman of the [community], while playing football for St. Peter Claver.

Marcus reflected on what he knew about college in high school and what he experienced during the college application process:

I knew very little about college. The only guys that I seen were in college were [a good friend] and his brother and my sister. Those were the actually only three people that I knew in college. I wanted to go to Florida State. Then as I matriculated through St. Peter Claver, I thought that Morehouse would be a better suit for me. I wanted to go there. I did dream about college, but there was still that [thought of], can I actually get there? [During] my senior year, the answer became apparent to me, and that answer was yes.

They offered me an acceptance letter; however, the financial aid package was three loans, and they wanted me to go to summer school. My financial committee sat down with me and they were like, “We know you want to go to Morehouse. We know that this is what you want to do. However, it is not feasible for us to send you there.” [My parents] were my financial committee because I didn’t have a job. I was looking at [other]options because I was a football player. I was looking at going to Whittier College. However, the financial aid package, again, [was not enough]. I sat down with my college

guidance director at the time, and she was like, “Uh-uhn, you need to explore different options. That’s just not good enough”—along with my financial committee, who shared the same views. So I had to withdraw from Whittier, and I was stuck with two choices. I could either go to a community college, or I could go to one of the universities that had accepted me.

So I called a friend of mine. I called a friend of mine who attended the same university that I attended, got the number to Clinton, and they said they still had room. They said that there was still enough time for me to come out there and everything. So I filled out the paperwork and I jumped on a plane and I went to Clinton University.

Marcus enjoyed his experience at Clinton which is a stark contrast to the experience that Jason had at his HBCU. Marcus felt he integrated into the community very well.

Clinton was like the coed version, college-style St. Peter Claver. I felt like it was a close environment. You had the students who would ride you if you weren’t in class, and you had the teachers who would ride you if you weren’t in class. I participated in the university choir. I was an alternate for the glee club during my first year singing there. So I was involved in the musical aspect of Clinton. In fact, when I first got there, it seemed like everyone had musical talents. In fact, I would call back home and I was like, oh my God, Clinton is like the college version of Glee. It was amazing. I loved it. I am a strong lover of music.

I went there for 2 years, and the second year was the year of my financial hardship. I was unable to rely on my parents. I had to get a job. I was literally

going to class, going to work, going to class, going to work. [I] did not go anywhere. [I] did not hang out with anybody. And so, needless to say, the loans were not sufficient enough to allow me or afford me the opportunity to remain there. And at the beginning of the year, 2014, I had to return home.

When I came home, I knew that I could not just sit idly by; however, I could not attend [local state] universities because of the lack of units that I had. And so I ended up at Eastern because [the one I wanted to attend] had already started, and I started taking classes at Eastern.

Eastern College is located in an urban area and occupies 35 square miles.

According to the school profile, as of Fall 2013, it has a student population of just over 8,000 students, 68.9% of whom are female. Ethnically, the school is about 55% African American and 40% Hispanic. In the 2012-13 academic year, the school awarded just over 300 associate degrees and just over 20 certificates just over 200 transfers to the university level. When Marcus was asked about how he felt about this campus, he stated:

I do not like being there. I feel like it—sometimes I do feel as though it is a setback, but being at Eastern keeps me grounded in why I want to do what I want to do, which is to become an English teacher. It allows me to see my community in a different light. When I left [for college], I knew that my community was in need of help, but when I came back I understood why. I understood the lack, and I'd see people struggling to be better but still being in chains to the communities that they live in. I don't feel like I am a normal student that Eastern has ever seen. In fact, I believe that I am a student that Eastern has never seen and is of a

different caliber, but I do believe that I do have a purpose there in showing students that you don't have to follow social norms.

[I do feel like there is support on campus.] There are a lot of opportunities where you can reach out to counselors. They will support you. If you don't take advantage of it, however, they are not going to hunt you down. There are, on average, probably millions of students in the urban community, and they don't have the time to go knock on everybody's door and be like, "Hey, this is here for you. Take advantage of it. Hey, this is here for you. Take advantage." And so a lot of students, which is sad, only go there for financial aid. A lot of them are like, 'Did you guys get your financial aid check yet?'

Marcus is geared to transfer in the fall of 2015. He recently discovered that he owed Clinton \$8,000, and they are withholding his transcripts. He needs the transcripts to be able to transfer to a 4-year institution. He is now in the process of trying to figure out how he is going to get the transcripts from Clinton and transfer on time in order to be able to continue on his educational path.

Marcus' financial situation has not improved since he returned home. He relies on his parents to provide for him but has applied to several jobs to help support himself. He believed that his experience from the internship that he held at St. Peter Claver would afford him access to better jobs, which we heard in Mike's narrative. Marcus was proud and would not accept jobs that he considered himself to be too good for. He stated:

That was my dilemma because I did not qualify for those jobs, and I was too prideful to accept the lesser jobs. So I am now in a position where I put my pride



aside and I applied in hopes of getting what I can so that I can begin to pay off my debt and begin to advance in my livelihood.

**Ranger, 24, Pacific Coast College, Mullen College, Mayfield College**

Everybody knew that I was a pretty decent writer when I went here. But there wasn't really any way for me to go out and explore that and figure that out. You know as well as I do that I didn't like my English class.

—Ranger

Ranger graduated from St. Peter Claver Academy in 2008 and was classmates with Mike. Ranger was the oldest child in a family of five. At the time of his high school graduation, his stepfather had suffered an injury was unable to work. His mother supported the family on her annual income of \$50,000.

Ranger had attended both public and private schools for elementary and middle schools. When the topic of attending St. Peter Claver arose, Ranger, like the other participants, was not particularly excited to attend. In fact, he tried to sabotage his chances of getting in. Despite his efforts, he was accepted and initially hated the school. He soon connected with friends from his middle school, which helped the situation.

In his recollection of his high school experience, he mentioned a theme that was evident in other narratives: the idea St. Peter Claver was unable to provide opportunities for students to explore their personal interests. When describing his high school experience at St. Peter Claver, he offered the following:

[High school] was a long period of me fighting back against society. I wanted to do what I wanted to do, and I wanted to do it my way. And even if I did have the best of intentions, I wanted to make sure it would have my stamp on it. For me, I

[also] feel like there could have been more ways for us to explore what our talent and like individual talents were—like what I was good at, what I was interested in. There wasn't a lot. We didn't have an actual yearbook club or an actual newspaper that went out to the students. I feel like if there were something like that that was going to keep me like, okay, yeah, I like to write. Everybody knew that I was a pretty decent writer when I went here. But there wasn't really any way for me to go out and explore that and figure that out. You know as well as I do that I didn't like my English class.

This sentiment was also true as Ranger explored the possibility of attending college:

I knew a lot more about college than I had thought I would, especially from a lot of my friends from the neighborhood I grew up in because that was—from day one that's all we talked about here—going to college and how many people from St. Peter Claver went to college and went on to be successful. And they made it sound so easy, and it can be easy. But it took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do and I feel like I didn't know what I wanted to go to school for, what I wanted to major in, when I was leaving. I knew I was able to get in school, but even still I didn't know—like why do I want to go here? It's a relatively decent school, but I don't know what I want to major in. And because of that, I have changed my major like six times.

Ranger ultimately decided to attend Pacific Coast College because he felt it was a good school and because it was a feeder to the state school that he ultimately wanted to attend. Pacific Coast was founded in 1927 and has two campuses that total close to 150 acres. According to their school profile, in Fall 2013, just over 31,000 students were

enrolled. It is an ethnically diverse campus, with 46% of students reporting Hispanic/Latino backgrounds, 18% of students identifying as African American, 17% identifying as White, and 14% identifying as Asian. Fifty-four percent of the student population is female.

Ranger started off as a Theater major because he thought that it was an easy major at which he would succeed. He began to rethink his decision after a difference of opinion with a professor.

Me being hard headed and—like the teacher—he was pushing me out of my comfort zone, and I was like—because I went through a lot of intro classes—intros to acting and stage writing and screen writing and stuff like that, and he wanted me to pursue acting on stage and kept having me play these parts that were really mean. They were really unpleasant to play. I was never the nice person. I was never in distress. I was always somebody in power who was an asshole. And so I decided I was going to change my major. Theater wasn't for me.

Ranger changed his major to Psychology, which piqued and eventually lost his interest. At the time, his parents were having trouble and had separated, but were inquiring about his plans. He told them all of things he wanted to do including moving out of state when his mother told him that he should just focus on school. She also reminded him that he was a great writer and he should consider majoring in English.

So Ranger changed his major once again to photojournalism. Each time he changed his major, he was able to do so online. It was difficult to see a counselor and

when he did, he found that he was not given enough time, and he was not able to discuss why he wanted to change his major.

Ranger also did not necessarily feel a part of the culture of the school. He recalls that “there was nobody pulling me into being involved in campus life, and like, ‘Let’s go to these rallies,’ or ‘Let’s go to this club or go to this tutoring session.’” He did feel, however that by being a Black man on campus, he was represented.

Ranger eventually did move to a northern city in the state where he was raised. While he was there, he lived with his aunt, who had also attended Mullen. Mullen is a 2-year institution that was also opened in 1927 and has an enrollment of just over 11,000 students. Ranger’s experience at Mullen was quite different than what he experienced at Pacific Coast.

Mullen was a completely different experience. I feel like that was as close to college life as I have had gotten because I was away from home. I didn’t have to check in with my mom, I didn’t have any of that, so I was pretty much getting to school by myself, coming from school by myself, having to be responsible for all my classes. It was nobody but me and I was—actually at Mullen was where I felt like more like—okay, I’m in a college. I’m in college. I’m going and talking to counselors. The counselors seemed to know what they were talking about. They have my transcripts. They sat down, went over my transcripts with me, and helped me pick out classes. And that was the first time a counselor, since St. Peter Claver, had sat down, and helped me go through classes.

Ranger was doing well and thriving at Mullen, but then he got a call and decided that he needed to return home.

My mother actually got sick. She was having strokes. She had a series of strokes, and I decided I was going to come back, and that was about 2 ½ years ago now. Two years ago. And she was on bed rest for a long time. She's still not all the way better, but she's doing a lot better than what she was. So I was pretty much taking care of her. I moved back out here. I didn't enroll back in school, and I just started working.

Ranger worked a series of jobs and then after he mom was better, he began spending time with a friend who was attending school in a city south of where he lived. He spent a great deal of time on her 4-year campus, even sleeping on her couch. That experience encouraged him to go back to school.

I was there when I started thinking about it. I was just going to be content with going and doing a certificate program, like being a phlebotomy tech and go from there. So I was ready to get life started. But it was about this time last year I was like, okay, I need to go back. There's no excuse. Mayfield College was literally within walking distance from my house. So I went and I kind of like procrastinated for a while because I wasn't sure. I'm older and I didn't think I would be able to do it. But it took a lot of coaxing from my mom and even my dad. But I felt like now I am more prepared. I have more of life—I've lived a little bit of an adult life. I knew that I need to go back to school and I had a better grasp of what I'm going to do.

In the future, Ranger would like to transfer to UC Berkeley and ultimately teach English. He stated, "I want to write, and I can do all of that. I know I can do all that. And I'm confident that I can. I'm more confident now than I was 5 years ago."

### **Charles, 23, Olmstead University**

My whole life I've always been pretty smart, but when I got here, everybody was like beyond smart. I'm talking about like when I came in—like my freshman class—somebody had already written a symphony that was being performed and somebody was a published author at 18 years old...like that type of smart. So I was just like, “Hmm, I'm smart and all, but you all are a little bit different than I am.”

—Charles

Charles graduated from St. Peter Claver in 2009. He comes from a two-parent home and he has a younger brother. He considers his household to be “middle class.” His mother was serious about education and keeping him and his brother out of trouble. He has a large extended family so he considers himself to be very family oriented.

Charles attended public and private schools for elementary school, both of which consisted of mostly African American students, and was placed in accelerated programs due to his academic performance. When he reached middle school, however, his mother placed him a school with the majority of the population being of Caucasian decent. He recalled his experience at the middle school:

So when I got to middle school, it was different, just number one, just fitting me in. The first day I'm at school, I'm like, “Oh, wow. All these White kids.” I had never been around White kids. I have no idea how to interact. As a kid, you understand that you interact with them the same way you would anybody else, but it was just an adjustment period, figuring that whole thing out. A lot of those kids were like really, really smart. And, again, like I was in the accelerated programs

just because, from where I was from, I was a little bit smarter. But when I got there, these kids were—that was like normal to them. And even less so, they were even smarter than that. So when I first got there, that was a big adjustment for me as well, just getting used to that. I do remember I did have some problems with some teachers who were like low-key racist when I was there, which was again just straight weird for me. That was something I had never been through. My mom had to go up to the school a couple of times. So I had to deal with that on top of getting acclimated to a new academic environment.

Charles explained that the racism he experienced came from one teacher who, he believed, gave him more detentions than other students, and often marked his work incorrect even though it was not. He recalled that all of these changes were directed toward him once he braided his hair.

When Charles and his family were looking for high schools, his mother introduced him to the idea of attending St. Peter Claver: an idea about which he was not excited because the school was all male. Despite his reservations, he conceded defeat. His mother was confident that St. Peter Claver was the best place for him. Ultimately, he enjoyed his time at St. Peter Claver, finding the school very supportive.

I honestly wouldn't be, I mean, people say this all the time, but I wouldn't be here if I didn't go to St. Peter Claver. I don't think I would have done as well academically. I wouldn't have even applied to some of the schools that I applied to just because I didn't think that would be—I didn't think I was smart enough to get into a lot of places. So it was definitely a benefit of me going to St. Peter Claver that I ended up where I am now. I think some of the times when I was at

St. Peter Claver, I didn't appreciate it for what it was, because I was 17 years old, but, that was definitely one of the greatest experiences I've had. Just from the corporate internship program, the supportive teachers, the small environment, everything. It definitely made me—it was a big part of who I am—who I like to think that I am now.

Initially, Charles was unfamiliar with the college application process. He was the oldest child in his family and his older cousins did not attend college. So he believed that he learned everything that he need to know from St. Peter Claver. Additionally, his mother made him research schools and programs, even enrolling him in some outside college programs. His plans had always been to attend college, as his mother left him no other option, so he worked very hard with his family, his counselors and his mentors to find the best place for him.

Charles ultimately decided on Olmstead University, a highly selective 4-year institution located in a northern city of the pacific state where Charles resided. According to their website, the 8,000 acre campus has an enrollment of just over 7,000 undergraduate students and 9,000 graduate students. Ninety-six percent of undergraduate students live on campus. The student population is 53% male and 43% Caucasian. Asian students are the next largest group represented. African American students account for 7.5% of the population. Charles decided to major in Mechanical Engineering, a field in which he was always interested.

I've always been like a technology buff. So it was just like a natural fit for me. I mean, it was just something I could see myself doing for a career, more so than anything else at the time. And when I actually came up to Olmstead and saw



some of the stuff that they were doing for the engineering program, it was just like a light bulb went off in my head. So that was definitely what made me decide to do that. It was just always something that I'd just been interested in ever since I was little.

Charles also was able to earn a spot on the basketball team by trying out as opposed to being a high school recruit. Charles recalled his experience at Olmstead and the support he felt on campus, and the implications of failing to make academics a priority.

It was different for me, just coming from St. Peter Claver, because you go from a classroom with 15 to 20 people, and in freshman and sophomore year, in general, you're taking a lot of general and requirements in bigger classes. So you have like 200 to 300 kids in your class, which was completely different. Olmstead itself is very supportive actually as far as making sure that kids feel like they have the resources that they need and getting the help that they need. But I don't think that extends as far as it maybe should into the classroom. A lot of the professors are doing research and doing things outside of the classroom, so a lot of the time, they really don't have as much time as they would like and they're not as involved in the classroom part as much as maybe one would like. But of course, at the end of the day, it's on the student still to make sure that they're doing what they need to do, which was, I think, a big problem of mine. I was just focused on too many other things other than what I should've been doing. I was on the basketball team, so that took a lot of time. [I was also] partying, [spending time with] girls, and drinking to be real. I've never gotten into like drugs or nothing

like that, but just drinking and partying was a lot bigger part of my life than it should have been [during] my first couple of years. Of course, I hardly do any of that now, but, you know, hindsight is 20/20. But that was a big distractor for me, especially having the major that I had, I just made it a lot more difficult on myself than I needed to. But as far as like Olmstead itself, I do actually feel like it's a really supportive environment.

Charles felt like he was a member of the community. He felt that Olmstead was a warm environment and that he belonged. There were times when he faced microaggressive behavior that could have stemmed from a difference in backgrounds, potentially brought about by severe race and class disparities.

Everybody here is of course cool—well, I'm not going to say of course because there are a lot of campuses where it's not really a warm environment. But I will say Olmstead in general is like a really warm environment. Everybody wants to know everybody else for the most part. But still, when I look at everybody else, I am a lot different, both in terms of the color of my skin and just like me as a person. There are a lot of like rich kids that go here, which is not in and of itself a problem or anything like that, but just coming from a completely different background from the majority of people that go here makes things a little difficult sometimes. [For example during] my freshman year, I lived in the "Black dorm." So, I mean, of course it's not exclusively Black. There are other people that live there, too, but just small little learning moments, like a girl asking about another girl's [in an offensive manner]. It actually was a big thing. We talked about it as a dorm; everybody sat down in the dorm house, and we had a 2-hour or 3-hour

discussion about it. But there were just a couple of situations like that. It was never any blowups or anything like that. I never had confrontations with anybody, but there were definitely some things said, both to me and to other people, that I had to just figure out how to deal with it.

Academically, Olmstead was challenging, and although Charles struggled, he did not take advantage of all of the resources that the university offered. Part of the struggle was that his pride would not allow him admit that he needed help beyond what was expected of him.

I went to tutoring a couple of times. For the most part, all of our classes have office hours outside of regular class times, so you can go and talk to your professor any time. So during office hours, I've had tutoring before. I definitely didn't take advantage of it as much as I should have when I was here in my first couple of years. I probably should have taken advantage of that a little bit more than I did. And part of that I think was pride a little bit. I did go to it, but I don't think I wanted to admit to myself that I needed it as much as I did. And also a lot of it was I should have been trying harder than I was. And I knew that. So tutoring can't necessarily help that. Sometimes you just have to get up and do what you need to do, and I wasn't doing what I needed to do. So it was a little bit—it was a mix of both in that regard.

After 1.5 years, and at the suggestion of his advisor, Charles made the decision to leave. When he left, he planned on returning, and stayed in communication with his advisor from Olmstead. He worked, took a couple of classes, and took some time to reflect upon his next step. His family was supportive throughout, as was his Olmstead

advisor. Charles reflected on how he knew it was time to return and how he was able to navigate the reenrollment process:

I knew that I was ready to go back just because after being out of school, working nine to five, going to school part-time, I knew that I didn't want to do that anymore. That definitely made it a lot easier for me to decide to get my act together when I did go back. Also, just knowing that I needed to graduate. Like I never had a plan to not graduate and not finish school. It was just time. I needed time to get myself and my life set, just knowing that I had to graduate, both for myself and for my family. Once I decided that, then I just had to reenroll. I sent them my reenrollment form, which was a list of the classes that I needed to take and what—I think what order I needed to take them in, what quarter I planned on graduating. I had to write up a personal statement of why I left and why I wanted to come back and had to meet with my advisor. At that point, that was pretty much all I had to do, aside from like reapplying for financial aid.

To leave and come back almost 2 years later was a humbling step for Charles.

Many of his friends have since graduated, but that is not the only difference that Charles experienced:

It also was different because like before, when I was here, I was kind of having a little bit too much fun, so also when I'm back this time, it's a little bit fun on my part of course than it was before. It definitely is a little bit more business this time. So just a little combination of both, but it is definitely a different experience than I had when I first got here.

Charles plans on graduating from Olmstead in the spring of 2016 with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Product Design. In the meantime, he has been focusing on schoolwork and internship opportunities. He is happy. “I’m glad for the time it took to get here. I’ve had a little growth period, but I definitely learned a lot. And I am happy with where I am now.”

### **Summary of Major Themes**

I identified five key themes from the narratives illustrating major challenges these African American males face as they work toward postsecondary degrees: family, pride, money, preparedness, and institutional issues. These themes are summarized here and will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5.

#### **Family**

Throughout the narratives, the family was presented as a support system for the young men in college. Regardless of the family structure—single parent, remarried parents, or the traditional nuclear parents—the family was not found to be a deterrent to the young men’s pursuits. In two of the narratives, however, illness within the family created a diversion, and as a result students felt the need to prioritize the needs of the ailing parent over their needs as students. Jason and Ranger both had mothers who faced illness. Jason’s mother’s illness did not result in an immediate return, in fact, Jason’s mother was ill before he left, which played a part in him deferring his acceptance for a semester. It was his brother, along with mentors from St. Peter Claver, that urged Jason to attend. In Ranger’s case, his mother’s illness brought him home, as he was the oldest son, and he needed to assist with the younger siblings, as his mother was separated from her husband.

## **Pride**

Issues of pride were evident throughout the narratives, and it manifested in very different ways. Pride was tied very closely with academics, in that most of the instances of pride came as result of the feeling of academic incompetence. For example, Charles always thought of himself as a smart person, but when faced with academic challenges that he could not solve on his own, his pride would not allow him to seek help. Mike struggled with a learning difference and although the resources were available and he was aware of them, he didn't want people to "think that he was slow." With the experience gained from St. Peter Claver's internship program, Marcus believed that he should be able to find a job in college that would pay him what he believed he was worth, due to that experience. When offered jobs that were more appropriate for a college student, Marcus felt as if he was better than those jobs and turned them down.

Pride was also linked to the family, in that all but two of the participants thought that it was important for them, as men, to work and at least provide for themselves to take the burden off of their parents. This pursuit of income could be a strong deterrent to on-time completion.

## **Preparedness**

Preparedness manifested itself in various ways throughout these narratives. First, lack of academic preparation was present in many of the narratives. Mike and Johnny both expressed their challenges with coursework, specifically with math, with even Mike mentioning math as a contributor to the length of time he has spent in school.

Conversely, Jason felt his academic preparation at St. Peter Claver was far greater than what he experienced in college. The lack of rigor raised his suspicions about the quality

of his institution. He felt that the academic rigor was less than what he experienced at St. Peter Claver. Beyond insufficient academic preparedness, students asserted that they were not prepared to enter college in other ways. For example, Alexander expressed that he was a writer and had been writing for many years, but he was not exposed to any topics at St. Peter Claver that would help nurture his interest in writing. The same was true for David, the actor. David was not comfortable expressing his career plans, because he believe that his career goals were not aligned with the school's mission; thus, he enter college unprepared to achieve his goals. Ranger was also underprepared for college. He was not sure what he wanted to major in and he was not completely sure what school he wanted to attend.

### **Money**

The theme of money was present throughout the narratives and it was manifested in several different ways. First, there was the need for money as a commodity to exchange for goods and services. For Mike and Alexander, it was essential for them to work to earn money to pay for their classes, books, and other essential materials, so they sought jobs for this purpose. For Jason and Marcus, money kept them out of college. Both of these young men were unable to pay fees that were requested of them, and because of this, they have not been able to obtain their academic records in order to start over.

### **Institutional Issues**

The institutions that the students attended also contributed to their lack of degree attainment. The hope is that college campuses are a safe place where students can go and learn without fear. For Jason, that hope was far from reality. Jason entered a hostile

environment where the campus was unsafe and the administration was accused of unethical and illegal practices.

### **Chapter Summary**

In keeping with the spirit of narrative research, this chapter has focused intently on the voices of the participants of the study, with an effort to highlight, as much as possible in their own words, their perspectives on and insights into their college experience. This presentation of their narratives also provides a rich representation of the struggles and aspirations that these African American men hold for their futures. In Chapter 5, emphasis is placed analyzing what these narratives, in combination with the literature in the field, have to say about these African American men and their pursuit of a college degree.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

In his often-cited writing on higher education, Tinto (1993) suggested that the likelihood of postsecondary persistence can be determined by the degree to which students are able to integrate socially and academically. This integration is more likely to happen, according to Tinto, when a student comes to college with predetermined skills and abilities that can determine his/her commitment to college and to the goal of attaining a degree. Tinto also suggested that students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to possess these qualities and thus are less likely to persist. However, authors whose work has focused on the African American male postsecondary experience have argued, in direct contrast to Tinto, that institutional context and opportunities and resources found across different types of institutions are better predictors of success than are income level and predetermined skills and abilities (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, & Commodore, 2012; Lewis, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012). In fact, authors call for more extensive research of African American males to better understand their complexities and the diverse perspectives they bring to the higher education environment.

In this chapter, I discuss in greater detail the themes found in the narratives that illustrate the complexity of the African American male experience across institutional contexts. These themes speak, more specifically, to actual indicators of success for this population. Herein, the themes of the literature surrounding African American males and their experiences in higher education are connected to the narrative responses of participants in this study.

At the conclusion of this chapter, I investigate at resilience as a theme that was not initially considered to be part of this study. At the beginning of my data collection and after meeting with my first two participants and learning that they were still in college, however, I had to make the decision whether to keep their narratives as a part of this study or to discard them because they were not absolutely aligned with what I had established the purpose of the study to be. But when I discovered that these two students had been enrolled at 2-year community colleges for 5 and 6 years, this new information supported my the decision to include these students. Later, I also discovered that three more of my participants were still trying to pursuit higher education, despite difficulties over the years. The emerging theme of resilience then became an unexpectedly critical element of this study.

### **Preparedness**

The issue of preparedness, often discussed in the literature (Tinto, 1993; Wood & Hilton, 2012), was substantiated in the narratives of participants in this study. Wilson (2010) and Wood and Hilton (2012) described persistence as related to preparation in academic subjects, specifically math, which was cited by the men in this study as a major factor in their inability to graduate from college in a reasonable time. Wood and Hilton also found that students who enter postsecondary institutions underprepared do, indeed, have challenges in degree attainment. This point was corroborated by the voices of the African American men who participated in this study. Mike, for example, mentioned his struggle with math 17 times in his narrative, beginning with his experience with math in high school. Mention of academic underpreparation was also found in the narratives of Alexander and Charles. Many of the study's participants entered college underprepared

to handle college coursework and found themselves in non-credit-bearing remedial classes. In fact, the narratives illustrated that participants were still struggling to succeed in core academic subjects at the time of this study.

Additionally, students are leaving St. Peter Claver unsure of the career paths that they would like to take. This lack of preparation has also had an impact on students' trajectories and the time that it has taken them to graduate from college. The issue of preparedness also seems to negatively impact their ability to be full participants in the college culture, becoming deeply involved in academics and society, and possessing the ability to find and use their bicultural voices (Darder, 2012) within that context in ways that might better enhance their learning and achievement. However, rather than simply understood as an individual phenomenon that blames the student for their lack of preparedness and inability to perform academically, Darder (2012) argued that we must understand the difficulties bicultural students face as an institutional phenomenon. This is to say that their difficulties in completing college are linked to larger structural factors tied to the assimilative curriculum and pedagogy that is prominent in both the high school and college classroom.

### **Impact of Finances**

The literature highlights that finances play a significant role in the persistence of college students (Griffin et al., 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Tinto, 1993), and it is reasonable to assume that the same would be true for African American male college students, specifically the participants of this study who come from working class communities. Within the context of this study, I have identified four major issues related to finances that arose in the narratives:

- The perception that money was necessary to contribute to supporting the family or themselves;
- The need for money to pay for the cost of college;
- The implications that searching for a job had on schooling; and
- The impact of money on college choice.

All of the participants from this study come from low-income neighborhoods and their families' finances are considerably poor. As stated previously, it is a requirement that students who attend St. Peter Claver Academy fall below an income ceiling in order to qualify for admission to the school.

An African American student truly embracing his biculturalism and having those responsible for educating him fully respect his bicultural perspective requires that university personnel recognize the severity of the issue of finances and its impact on students' lives, beyond the superficial. This is to say that an understanding of culture must move beyond merely a simplistic two-culture interacting approach and, instead, contend with deeper questions of culture and power, as they manifest for subordinated bicultural populations (Darder, 2012). Inherent in Darder's (2012) critical bicultural perspective is an understanding that both class and culture, in combination, shape students' educational experiences, needs, and opportunities. Again, this aspect surfaced in the narratives.

In all of the narratives, the participants expressed a sense of urgency about the need to work, either to help provide for the family or to provide for themselves so they could alleviate the financial pressure felt by the family. As Mike put it, "I needed to have my own money and my car because I was becoming a man." The young men in this

study made serious sacrifices in order to earn money to support themselves and their families, which at times seemed of greater priority than attending college courses. Additionally, Wilson (2010) has posited that African American males are subject to the lowest wages, regardless of education level, but especially for those with no more than a high school diploma. This was also very evident from the narratives. David, for example, noted, "I began to work more and go to school less." In his narrative, Mike stated that he stayed out of school for a semester in order to find a job so he could pay for his college classes. Furthermore, to sacrifice class enrollment in order to be able to earn money is indicative of the severe state of need that these African American male students are experiencing in their lives.

### **The Role of the Family**

In his work on African American male educational success, Conchas (2006) has argued that there is a cultural relationship between family and home life and a positive school experience. All of the participants of this study had, or perceived, some deep level of familial obligation. In his work on African Americans in the inner city, Wilson (2010) suggested that, in addition to structural forces that impact economic mobility and racial equality, cultural forces (i.e., traditions, beliefs, values, and worldviews) have an impact as well. Both structural forces and cultural forces have had an impact on the well-being of the families of the men in this study. Hill (1972) also articulated that, culturally, their sense of family goes beyond those found in the home and can extend to close friends, neighbors, and others in the community. For example, Mike and Charles spoke of extended family that has served as important parts of their support systems.

Parental financial resources appeared frequently in the narratives, in addition to the role of finances as described earlier. The financial situation in the family without doubt impacts persistence directly in structural and cultural ways. For example, Marcus was unable to receive enough financial aid to attend college, which is a structural force, but the pursuit a degree was so important to him and his family that they decided they would figure out how to finance a different, less expensive school, which still proved to exceed the family's financial ability. Alexander's parents, specifically his father, were distrustful of the financial aid application process—not an uncommon phenomenon among working class families of color, particularly lately with the impact of exorbitant rising student debt (DeParle, 2012). Alexander also took issue with the contradictory ideology of borrowing money to get farther ahead in life. The costs of college were also an issue for Charles's parents, who were the least economically burdened of the group; although it was a strain, they were able to afford the university tuition and fees.

Tinto (1993) argued that family background impacts commitment to an institution and noted that poor, minority, first generation students are less likely to succeed in college than those who have family members who have had college experiences, unless they are able to detach themselves from their home and community lives, immersing themselves in the college culture. This idea has been heavily critiqued by researchers looking at the experience of bicultural, minority, and African American college students (Conchas, 2006; Darder, 2012; Hargrett, 2014). Such scholar have argued, instead, that the role of the family is an essential component in the academic success of bicultural students and that bicultural students should feel comfortable expressing familial concerns with the staff of support systems established on a college campus.

Further, bicultural students, including the participants in the study, belong to supportive families who were committed to the goal of degree attainment. The data in this study suggest that this familial commitment can be as strong, as evidenced by the cases of Marcus and Charles. One of the cultural forces that impact poor African American families is the value of education itself and its importance to the advancement of the family as a whole, which also speaks to the expressed commitment to such goal attainment by the family and community.

According to Wilson (2010), economic mobility is important to working class African American families; however, the participants' narratives failed to illustrate a push by the families for students to attend a specific colleges to ensure financial mobility, *per se*. Instead, in some of the narratives, college was at times seen as a commodity that would have to wait if the student was unable to afford it at the time. Additionally, in the narratives, the pressure seemed less about the type of institution itself, and not even really about degree attainment (there was no mention in the narratives of parents pressuring their children to graduate—perhaps this was more an implied aspect and thus not captured in this study), but more about the fact that they were attending college. Charles, for example, was encouraged to take time, refocus, and then return to school after his mother helped him gain clarity about his goals.

Lastly, Tinto (1993) has argued that familial obligations negatively impact persistence. The only clear evidence of obligations presenting themselves as a hindrance to the participants' degree attainment was in the narratives of Jason and Ranger, whose mothers, both single, had fallen ill, causing the young men to leave school and return home. Ranger was the oldest in the family and so it was decided that he was needed at

home. Jason made the decision to return despite the fact that his returning contradicted his mother's wishes, who wanted him to remain in college. Despite having an older brother who was local, Jason believed that his mother would be better served if he were home.

### **The Impact of Pride**

Pride was a constant theme in each one of the narratives and manifested itself in several ways. Pride is an underresearched topic as it relates to African American males, especially those pursuing higher education. According to Williams and DeSteno (2009), pride often has a negative connotation, and although they theorize that its meaning can have duality, and even at times be a positive emotion, research on the benefits of pride is limited. Majors and Mancini Billson (1992) have written extensively about pride in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, where they explain:

Pride is of colossal importance to Black males. They engage in an unyielding drive toward the pursuit of pride. Pride, dignity, and respect hold such a high premium for Black men that many are willing to risk anything for it, even their lives. (Majors & Mancini Billson, 1992, p. 39)

The term *pride* was used extensively in the narratives. For example, in high school, David was too proud to articulate what he truly wanted in life, and that sentiment was also evident once he entered college. He made the decision to leave because he felt the school could not teach him what he needed to know in order to have a successful acting career. Jason was too proud to seek assistance from his high school in order to solve problems at the college level, and due to his corporate internship experience, Marcus was too proud to take an entry-level position to help his financial instability.



What is more interesting is the impact of pride on academic performance. For instance, Mike and Charles did not want to seek or use academic help because they thought they could figure resolve their own academic challenges. Eventually, both used the help provided to them and found relief from the stress of their inability to solve these problems alone. Alexander refused to seek help to figure out how to take classes on other campuses and transfer the credit back to his school. He had seen the negative impact seeking classes at other schools had on his friends and expressed he was too proud to allow that to happen to him.

Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) researched the topic of school belonging and its impact on self-efficacy, or the confidence in ability that a student has to complete academic tasks. They argued that students who feel attached to the school or those who have had positive interactions with school personnel have more confidence in completing academic tasks. The word *pride* was used several times throughout the narratives, but I would argue that students could have perhaps been experiencing a lack of confidence due to not feeling as if they truly belonged to their academic communities. Given the repeated expression of pride by the participants in this study, pride, belonging, confidence, and efficacy are topics that should be researched further, especially in terms of their impact on the degree pursuit of African American males.

### **On Community Colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

One of the most important commonalities of all the stories was that, at some point, each of the participants attended school at the community college level. This is significant because the research has stated that African American males tend to struggle more than any other group to attend the community college system (Bush, 2004; Wood &

Hilton, 2012) for the following reasons. First, finances appeared to be a serious barrier to students pursuing a degree at the community college level. Issues with diversity of faculty and staff as well as a lack professional preparation and the need for professional development by those hired to instruct and support students has presented themselves as hindrances to African American male completion. The lack of sufficient academic advisement and counseling has also proven to be a barrier for these students seeking degree attainment at the community college level. Throughout the narratives, the issues of understaffed and underprepared counselors were recurrent.

According to current literature (Baldwin et al., 2009; Gasman et al., 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), African American males are most likely to succeed in HBCUs. However, the narratives do not substantiate this claim across the board, at least where poor working-class male students are concerned. Both participants who attended HBCUs left because of their inability to pay. Jason believed that he had paid his debts and institutional failures prevented him from being able to prove so. Jason also feared for his safety and believed he was being educated in a subpar academic environment, which struggled with integrity and providing a safe campus community. In contrast, Marcus, who was forced to leave due to his inability to afford the fees, loved his experience at the HBCU. He felt as if he was a part of a strong community to which he felt accountable. He misses the experience and would return if given the opportunity.

The vast differences that exist from campus to campus and student to student, even those who are educated in a similar type of institution (i.e., an HBCU), suggest that it is inappropriate to generalize what is right or wrong for students in these contexts. This discrepancy was evident between Alexander and David, who attended the same school

but had very different experiences. It would be more useful for institutions that are interested in supporting African American male students to adopt strategies proven to effectively support African American male students through to degree attainment. Some of these strategies would include campus initiatives that focus on supporting male students (Bush et al., 2009), strong academic advising (Wood & Hilton, 2012), and hiring African American faculty and staff to serve as mentors to whom the students feel accountable.

### **The Issue of Resilience**

What started out as a study about attrition ultimately became more of a study of resilience, tenacity, and grit. In their work on learning, Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) defined resilience as the “capacity of individuals to overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental adversities effectively or the ability to thrive physically and psychologically despite adverse circumstances” (p. 63). Wasonga, Christman, and Kilner (2003) found that resilient youth possess “adaptive characteristics that enable them to improve their health, social, academic outcomes” (p. 63). They went on to state that resilience is cultivated rather than genetic; it negates the commonsensical notion that young people have no other option than to be victims of their circumstances. Additionally, as stated previously, despite the dehumanizing historical past that African Americans have endured, this population “continues to survive with remarkable resiliency” (Schiele, 2005, p. 802). In sum, the participants in this study exemplified how their resilience served as a means for survival for them.

In his work on African American families, Hill (as cited in Hargrett, 2014) identified characteristics that contribute to resilience in African Americans, including

adaptive family roles, kinship networks, and work ethic. Mike and Alexander have been at a 2-year college for 6 and 5 years, respectively, with no significant breaks during that time. For these young men, difficulty in attaining classes, making sure fees are paid on time, navigating math courses, and jobs have hindered their progress toward graduation. Their feelings were mixed; Mike was more defensive, justifying the length of time it has taken by pointing to others for whom it has taken longer. He also has not fully come to terms with his learning needs, admitting to using services, but making the decision that he no longer needs them. Mike also has a need to provide for himself and his family, and although this can appear as a hindrance, this need may fuel his drive to continue. Working has become critical for him to feel that he can provide for himself, treat his girlfriend to nice things, and help his family. He understands that a college degree will lead him to economic advancement and for this reason he stays. He stated, "I'm not a student on the Dean's List, but I mean, I ain't here to quit." This work type of work ethic fosters the resilience that he needs to continue.

With aspirations of working in the film industry, Alexander, who has been at the 2-year college for 5 years, works to provide for his material needs, but also to purchase equipment that helps him work on his craft. Alexander is not fully comfortable with the idea of the financial aid process and taking loans to pursue a bachelor's degree, so he is working to save money to transfer. One might even argue that he is stalling to save enough money so that he will not get into serious debt working toward a higher education degree. He is confident that he would like transfer to a private university's film school, a dream of his since high school. Along the way, Alexander has met like-minded

individuals that have encouraged him to continue to work toward his goals. This kinship keeps him motivated to continue toward his goal.

Marcus found himself in an unfortunate situation at a school he could not afford. As soon as he made it to campus he was looking to find ways to earn money. As his counselor, I remember Marcus' circumstances. According to the federal government, his family income was sufficient enough that he did not need much financial aid. This is the situation experienced by many lower middle class families from St. Peter Claver: they are not needy enough to get aid, but they are not wealthy enough to finance their education on their own. Now, Marcus is indebted to the school and cannot move forward at another 4-year institution until he pays the money he owes and the school releases his transcripts. In the meantime, he is taking courses at the 2-year college, hoping to find a job so that he can earn money to pay off his debt and move forward. Marcus has dreams of becoming a teacher, and as a college student, he is exposed to opportunities that get him closer to that goal. Marcus is also very strong in his faith, which has led him to where he is. The church has proven to provide hope, leadership, and support for those who believe (Hargrett, 2014). Marcus finds his strength to persist in his faith.

Ranger is comfortable at the point in his academic career and although he feels anxious about being an older student, he appreciates the journey that got him to where he is today. Ranger has grown from his experience and is more focused than ever. Throughout Ranger's journey, he has formed a network of allies, including family, friends, and mentors, who have supported his every step. Ranger's goal is to transfer to UC Berkeley and work toward a degree in English. He has aspirations of becoming an English professor.

Charles, the only student who attended a highly selective institution, has also grown from his experiences. He entered the university intimidated by the achievements of his peers, but that did not motivate him to work hard. Charles believed that he was smart and that he would be able to take on as much as he wanted: a difficult major, a place on the basketball team, and of course, partying, drinking, and girls. However, Charles found himself in a difficult situation academically and had to stop, return home, and regroup. Charles' university, however, remained as committed to Charles as he was to them. He continued to work with an advisor who got him back on track. Charles is now back at his university and on track to graduate next year with a degree in Psychology.

When I began this study the expectation was that I would meet with students who started college and decided to stop, and the reasons why would be clear and direct. What I found in my research is consistent with what one of the limitations clearly pointed out in the introduction to this study; attrition cannot be studied accurately at one point in time in the college process. Instead, it must be approached longitudinally. Two of the seven participants completely stopped college and are now pursuing careers that do not require a university degree. The other five—Mike, Alexander, Marcus, Ranger, and Charles—are currently enrolled. In different ways all of the participants have exhibited resilience, as they have struggled mightily to navigate the obstacles to their graduation.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study sought to understand the reasons why African American graduates of the all-male St. Peter Claver Academy, who all graduate high school with college acceptance, fail to graduate college within the generally expected 4 years' time or

community college within the expected 2 years' time. Seven participants who have not graduated from college were invited to share their experiences through this narrative study. All were at different points in their educational career, with two having completely dropped out of college. The other five were still pursuing their degrees, albeit very slowly.

Scholars who study persistence tend to suggest that low income African American students, especially males, fail to persist through college due to deficits, including lack of academic preparation, lack of financial resources, and lack of family support. In fact, however, bicultural students come to college with different levels of preparation, resources, and support, and it is unfair to assume that these students arrive with deficiencies. It should be the role of the postsecondary institution to identify the strengths and needs of students (of all backgrounds) and work to ensure their academic success.

For African American male students, as for other bicultural students, one of the ways to ensure their academic and social success is to encourage and create places for them to have a consistent voice on campus, in classrooms, in the dorm facilities, and in all places where their experience can enhance the knowledge and the experiences of the entire campus and surrounding community. For those who attend community college, great care should be given to ensure that the institution is genuinely meeting the needs of these students, many of whom are working class students and must engage more intensely with economic stressors, as did the participants in this study. On the one hand, working class African American male students should, be held to the same high academic standards as other students, whereas on the other hand, they should receive the assistance

and access to resources necessary so they can be fully prepared to participate fully in their learning and academic success.

Moreover, it is critical that African American male students have a firm understanding of what their postsecondary objectives are and that parents, secondary teachers and counselors, family, and friends support them in the process of meeting their objectives. As has been discussed in this study, working class college students of color who are not confident in their preparation to navigate the university environment are more likely to depart. Hence, it is just as important for postsecondary institutions to prepare their campuses to address the academic and social need of these students so that they may enter into safe, secure environments that are primed for their academic persistence and success. Toward this end, the following recommendations, grounded in what has been learned from this study, are focused on secondary institutions and postsecondary institutions, and are organized by theme. They are meant to provide a starting place for dialogue and to serve as a guide on how to better serve African American male students on both the high school and college campus.

### **Recommendations for Secondary and Post-Secondary Institutions**

Schools like St. Peter Claver that rely on foundations and outside financial contributions thrive on successful outcomes of their students. It is imperative that secondary schools nurture the student, as an individual, carefully considering his needs and the needs of his family to ensure that he is socially, emotionally, and academically prepared for the next step of his journey.

It is critical that postsecondary institutions work closely with secondary schools to understand how best to serve their bicultural students, especially African American male



students. Postsecondary institutions should ensure that they provide a safe, comfortable environment where students can successfully transition and thrive socially and intellectually. Colleges can be viewed as a training ground for actions and behaviors that are appropriate and significant in preparation for student futures. As such, postsecondary institutions should foster an environment of respect, tolerance, collaboration, and cultural relevance and sensitivity. The following are specifically themed recommendations that secondary and postsecondary schools can use to support African American college students:

### **Preparedness**

1. It is imperative that secondary institutions who work to send their students to college fully understand what students' interests and goals are, even when those goals may appear to be inconsistent with the overall goal of the school, especially when student shows commitment to work toward meeting these goals.
2. Ideally, the secondary school should nurture different interests that students may have and create opportunities to introduce students to new opportunities. For example, at schools like St. Peter Claver, the curriculum is not flexible and students do not have options to take different types of classes. There is, however, a robust extracurricular program that can be used to expose to students to new opportunities for learning. These clubs and extracurricular programs should be purposeful and should encourage participation in activities that can pique their interest and that students can explore further when they move to postsecondary educational environments.

3. The secondary school should work to ensure that students are prepared to handle college-level coursework, in an effort to avoid remedial classes. This entails both a rigorous and supportive curriculum that creates the space for students to develop their voices and participation in the process of their own learning. Secondary school should closely analyze their math curriculum and instruction practices to ensure that students have a firm handle on the subject matter and are prepared to move on to college-level math coursework. The secondary school should encourage students with learning disabilities, or those who struggle academically to advocate for themselves in the classroom and on campus, so those skills will continue to develop on through college attendance.

### **Institutional**

1. The secondary school must work to ensure that the African American male student enrolls in an institution that is the best fit for him. As a counselor at St. Peter Claver, often times I see students pick an institution because it presents the best financial situation for the family. It is imperative, though, that these school also be the right fit with respect to the academic goals of the student and his aspirations.
2. Postsecondary institutions should have resources in place to support bicultural students at every level, but especially African American male students who have some of the highest college attrition rates. These resources should be promoted across the campus constantly and focused efforts should be made to attract students to these resources throughout the academic year.

3. Postsecondary institutions should employ crisis management techniques for engaging students when they are facing major challenges, both external and internal.
4. Postsecondary institutions should work to employ a diverse faculty and staff that includes African American employees.
5. Postsecondary institutions should ensure that students live and learn in a safe environment, implementing security measures so that students feel safe and secure.
6. Postsecondary institutions should help students to identify interests, particularly within the community college level. The narratives in this research suggested that counseling support was not offered consistently or effectively at the 2-year institutions they attended.
7. Postsecondary institutions should employ community outreach techniques for students who struggle academically, presenting opportunities in an open, non-threatening way. They should also promote of services for students who struggle with learning differences or disabilities in ways that do not leave students feeling stigmatized.

### **Family**

1. Postsecondary institutions should engage the parents of African American male students to support them in making degree attainment a family achievement. Parents, especially those who have not attended college, should be encouraged to see the pursuit of a postsecondary degree as a positive contribution to the student as an individual and to the larger community.

2. Postsecondary institutions should employ initiatives to designed specifically to support African American male students. These initiatives should be developed based on research and should provide mentorship, academic advising and counseling, and financial support.

### **Money**

Secondary counselors should ensure that parents are fully comfortable with financial obligations to the postsecondary institution their student chooses to attend.

### **Transition**

1. It is important for secondary and postsecondary institutions to realize that there is a severe need for transition programming for African American male students exiting high school and entering college, especially first generation students. This programming should focus on the various needs of students as they engage this process, specifically locating academic resources, finding success at living away from home, becoming involved in activities, and making friends. It is imperative that bicultural students are also exposed to culturally relevant programming to help them transition to the new environment.
2. The secondary school should reach out to alumni in college and encourage them to seek help from their high school mentors at the school when they find difficulty in college.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In the future, I strongly recommend that researchers investigate more closely the relationship between African American males and community college attendance. The

lack of data on that topic manifests as a void in the field that is in dire need of being filled, especially considering the large number of African American male students that attend community colleges. The topic of resilience should also be further explored to understand the relationship that exists between African American male students and the number of years they spend working through the college degree process, even at the associate degree level, as was the case with the majority of participants in this study.

Furthermore, I would suggest that researchers investigate the differences in class level among African American students in general, as this can provide insights about the specific needs of this population, specifically pertaining to transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. As discussed earlier, another area of potential study is that of the phenomenon of pride in African American men and the meanings and impact that this concept has on their lives. Lastly, a more in-depth look at African American male experiences in different institutional contexts can provide much needed contributions to the field.

### **Epilogue**

I have learned much as an educator from conducting this study. Initially, I was puzzled by the number of students who were not graduating from college. The graphs and charts that would land on my desk would leave me in a perplexed state and I wondered where I was going wrong. It was rare that I would have the opportunity to engage these students once they left the high school. Most of the students who enroll in college move through the process at a rapid pace, taking advantage of all of the benefits their campuses have to offer. It is a rare occasion that students who are struggling to

complete their college experience, especially those who leave the university, return to visit, share how they are doing, and talk about what did not work.

Conducting this study has afforded me the opportunity to put a voice to the college dropout numbers that land on my desk. Through these powerful narratives, I am now able to better understand the hardships that working class African American male students encounter in their efforts to remain on the college campus. In turn, their stories allow me to better prepare the students with whom I currently work, who soon are approaching that next step—transition to college. I designed and implemented our first transition workshop: a daylong workshop where senior students were exposed to a variety of topics that would ensure a successful freshman year, including identifying and locating academic resources, involvement, networking, and money management, as well as social topics like drugs and alcohol, consent, and living away from home. Additionally, I have made it a part of my job to regularly reach out to alumni in order to remind them that we are still with them, that we are cheering for them, and that we are here for them, even after they have graduated. When they leave the campus, they have not left our hearts. Moreover, I want them to remember that they still carry the values of St. Peter Claver and that we continue to expect them to be true to their own greatness, just as if they were still ours: because, in fact, they are.

## APPENDIX A

### LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT FORM

*Note: This form is only a template and is invalid without information particular to a proposed research study. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator (PI) to complete all blanks prior to submission.*

Date of Preparation \_\_\_\_\_ June 27, 2014 \_\_\_\_\_

**Loyola Marymount University**

(Title in Lay Language)

- 1) I hereby authorize Martinique Starnes, MA to include me (my child/ward) in the following research study: Dreams Deferred: A Critical Narrative Analysis of African American Males in Pursuit of Higher Education
- 2) I have been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to understand the reasons why low income African American male college students leave school before graduating. I understand that my conversation with Martinique Starnes will last 60-90 minutes, but may be longer if necessary. I also understand that I can be asked to meet with Martinique Starnes for a second or third time if she needs additional information.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that Martinique Starnes is studying African American males from the school of which I am a graduate and I am an African American male student from that school. (e. g., I am a student, female, etc.)
- 4) I understand that if I am a subject, I will participate in conversations that will become narratives for the purpose of this research. The investigator(s) will provide me with a transcript of our conversation to ensure that my voice has been captured adequately and appropriately and that I am in agreement with how I am represented.

These procedures have been explained to me by Martinique Starnes, a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University.

- 5) I understand that I will be videotaped, audiotaped and/or photographed in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: speaking about potentially sensitive topics, including race, class, gender, and income level.
- 7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are to help inform secondary and postsecondary institutions on how to support low income African American male students through college.
- 8) I understand that the following alternative procedures (and/or drugs) are available. The reason these are not being used is: None.
- 9) I understand that Martinique Starnes who can be reached at [REDACTED] will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 10) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.
- 11) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice to (e.g., my future medical care at LMU.)
- 12) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 13) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 14) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 15) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 258-5465, [david.hardy@lmu.edu](mailto:david.hardy@lmu.edu).
- 16) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

OR

Subject is a minor (age \_\_\_\_\_), or is unable to sign because \_\_\_\_\_



Mother/Father/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**

**PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Participant information will remain anonymous

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Email address: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Phone: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Year of high school graduation: \_\_\_\_\_
5. College (s) attended: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Number of college units completed: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Family size (at the time of high school graduation): \_\_\_\_\_
8. Family income at the time of high school graduation (If known): \_\_\_\_\_
9. With whom did you live at the time of high graduation? (Circle all of the options that apply below)
10. Both parents | Mother | Father | Stepmother | Stepfather | Legal Guardian | Other (please explain)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. List additional people who lived in your house at the time of your high school graduation and their relationship to you:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. Mother's highest level of education? (Circle one)  
Unknown  
Below high school  
Some high school  
High school graduate  
Some college  
Associate's Degree  
Bachelor's Degree or beyond

13. Father's highest level of education?

(Circle one)

Unknown

Below high school

Some high school

High school graduate

Some college

Associate's Degree

Bachelor's Degree or beyond

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Tell me about your family. What is your home life like?
2. How important is education in your family?
3. What type of elementary and middle schools did you attend?
4. What made you choose St. Peter Claver Academy for high school?
5. Tell me about your high school experience.
6. Did you find high school to be a supportive place?
7. What did you know about college while you were in high school?
8. In what year did you graduate high school?
9. Did you have plans to attend college during your last year of high school? If so, what were they?
10. Did you ever attend college? If so, which one (s)?
11. What factors impacted your college choice?
12. What did you study in college?
13. Why did you choose that major or why was it difficult to choose a major?
14. Did you live on campus? Why or why not?
15. What was the campus environment like?
16. What was the classroom environment like?
17. Did you feel comfortable on campus?
18. Did you feel like you belonged?
19. Did you feel academically supported on campus? Personally supported?
20. Were there any support systems (like peer tutoring, support offices) in place at the campus for you? Did you take advantage of them?
21. Did you get support from your family?
22. Did you have familial responsibilities while on campus?
23. Did you ever feel as if you were neglecting your family?
24. How comfortable were you discussing your college experiences with your friends and family?
25. What type of financial aid package did you have?
26. Was your financial need met?
27. Were you financially comfortable?
28. Did you have a job? If so, what did you do?
29. How many hours did you work?
30. How long did you attend college?
31. What factors caused you to leave?
32. What could the college have done to keep you there?
33. When you left, did you have plans of returning? Why or why not?
34. (If a participant has transferred) What prompted you to go back to school?
35. Where did you attend? Why did you choose that school?
36. Where there any support systems (like peer tutoring, support offices) in place at the campus for you? Did you take advantage of them?
37. How long did you stay in school the second time?
38. Why did you leave?

39. How long were you out of school?
40. Did you ever attend another college?
41. What are your plans for the future?

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