A Guest in Someone's House: Exploring the Role of African-American Student-Faculty/Staff Interactions in a Community College Setting

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DePaul University

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EXPLORING THE ROLE
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT-FACULTY/STAFF INTERACTIONS
IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SETTING

A Dissertation in Education
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

Yolanda Isaacs

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2011

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

June 2011
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Abstract

African-American students are enrolling in four-year universities and community colleges in the hope of receiving a degree; however, their rate of degree attainment at the latter institutions in particular continues to be troubling. Although community colleges are making efforts to improve the graduation rates of African-American students, more institutional strategies are needed to address this concern.

The purpose of the study was to explore how the role of African-American faculty and staff can affect the success of African-American students in a community college setting. The researcher investigated African-American students’ perceptions and experiences regarding how African-American faculty and staff members have influenced them to continue their education.

Using a phenomenological research method, the researcher listened to the stories of seven African-American students regarding how their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members encouraged them to persist in college. The themes that emerged included (1) race and shared experiences matter; (2) the role of surrogate parents; (3) “a place like home”; (4) interpersonal communicative connection; (5) the importance of role models and visualizing success; and (6) interactions provide motivation. African-American faculty/staff-student interactions were viewed as essential to supporting the student participants’ academic and personal goals as community college students.
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Dedication

To my grandmother, Mattie Hutch Garmendiz, who taught me, as well as others, the importance of an education; and to my spiritual father, Brother Garfield Grace, who continues to teach me the ultimate life lesson—to believe and have faith in Jesus—which is the greatest lesson one can receive.
Chapter One

Introduction

For years, community colleges have served many diverse and nontraditional students—first-year students, returning adults, students of color, and others (Hamm, 2004). Forty-four percent of all postsecondary students attend these institutions, a statistic that underscores the importance of the educational opportunities community colleges provide (American Association of Community Colleges, 2008). Although community colleges understand the importance of providing educational access, they are faced with a greater challenge: to graduate more students, specifically African-American students.

Students of color, specifically African-Americans, are enrolling in larger numbers at these institutions; however, they are not persisting and graduating in greater numbers compared to their counterparts (Illinois Community College Board, 2008). The community college’s open door policy allows all students to enroll in community colleges; however, African-American students have not been successful in completing their degrees at these institutions. How can community colleges partner with African-American students so that they do not feel like “guests in someone’s house” as expressed by Turner (1994), who tend to leave before achieving their goals (as cited in Chhuon & Hudley, 2008, p. 17)? How can these institutions support African-American students in becoming “permanent guests”?

The U.S. population continues to grow and diversify (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Presently, the U.S population stands at 308.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau,
By 2050, African-Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and Asians and Pacific Islanders will make up more than 50% of the U.S. population, making the population even more diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Demographic patterns and future projections (shown in Table 1) indicate that it is likely that higher education institutions, specifically community colleges, will continue to experience increases in ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse student enrollments nationwide. How will community colleges help African-American students succeed while responding to the educational demands of this global, multicultural world?

Table 1. Percent of the U.S. population by race/ethnicity, 2010 and projected 2050.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2050</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American or Black</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic, any race</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, not Hispanic</td>
<td>63.7%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Higher education institutions are changing and evolving by enrolling more students with diverse racial backgrounds, academic skills, financial needs, and individual characteristics. As the population continues diversify, this change will be reflected at colleges nationally. In fact, students of color represented 19.5% of total...
student enrollment (13,819,000) in 1990 (see Table 2). By 2005, students of color represented 31% of total enrollment, an 11.5 percentage-point increase (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Percentages of student enrollment by race/ethnicity: 1990.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Percentages of student enrollment by race/ethnicity: 2005.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians/Alaskan native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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Community colleges are experiencing enrollment growth of students of color (Lewis & Middleton, 2003). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2000) has projected that the enrollment of students of color will continue to
increase drastically, creating community college campuses that are even more ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse. According to AACC (2008), community colleges’ enrollment stands at 12.4 million students nationally. Because these institutions offer an open door for all students, community colleges are significant educational institutions in America, particularly for students of color (McClenny, 2004).

The AACC (2008) has reported that students of color make up 45% of community colleges’ enrollment across the nation. In Illinois, students of color constitute 37% of the total community-college student enrollment, with African-Americans making up 15.6% (Illinois Community College Board, 2010). Rendon (1993) asserted that:

The community college is a critical institution for students of color. It is not only a place to learn; it is a place that matters. It matters because the community college represents hope, opportunity, and for many minority, as well as majority students, one last chance to succeed. (p. 4)

African-American students rank second in minority enrollments (Illinois Community College Board, 2010). Although enrollment of African-American students is growing at higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, the students’ low persistence rates continue to be alarming (Illinois Community College Board, 2010). For this study, the terms “persistence” and “success” are used interchangeably; they are defined as “a student’s continuous enrollment at a community college from one semester to another with the goal of earning a degree or certificate” (Summers, 2003, p. 65).
In the Illinois system, students of color, specifically African-Americans, had lower completion rates than their White peers (Illinois Community College Board, 2009). According to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) (2010), the average graduation rate was 14.8% for African-American students compared to the 66.8% average for White students. Moreover, during a six-year period, African-American students did not persist well compared to their counterparts (see Table 4) (Price, 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>38%</td>
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</table>


In a report titled *Traveling Successfully on the Community College Pathway: TRUCCS: The Research Findings of Urban Community Colleges Students Project*, Hagedorn (2002) stressed that community colleges deserve an “A” for enrolling students; however, these institutions deserve a “D” for increasing poor persistence rates. Hence, as the nation continues to grow and diversify by race and ethnicity, the urgency for community colleges to enhance academic programs and student services will become ever more important in supporting student success.

For years, the study of student attrition has been a consistent challenge for higher education institutions struggling to understand why students leave college;
thus, it is a major issue that warrants continuous examination. Historically, researchers have examined students’ attributes and background factors as significant predictors of academic success in college (Jones, 2001). In fact, the literature has suggested that the critical issues affecting increased attrition among African-American students may be attributed to factors such as academic preparedness, socioeconomic issues, and institutional challenges (Jones, 2001).

With the changing faces of community college students nationwide, community colleges are exploring institutional retention strategies for their diverse campuses (Wilson, 2004). Because of growing enrollment of students of color, community colleges are increasing their efforts to improve retention efforts and persistence rates, and are developing intervention strategies to help students of color succeed academically (Parker, 1997). For the purposes of this study, “retention efforts,” as defined by Jones (2001), involve a college’s continuous efforts to develop and incorporate institutional strategies such a strategic plan to facilitate college completion by students.

Not only has the focus been centered on supporting the educational endeavors of students of color, but community college administrators are also recruiting and hiring more staff and faculty members of color to reflect the student population (Bumphus & Roueche, 2007). In effect, many “community colleges’ governing boards [state] among their goals that their faculty, staff and administrators should reflect the diversity of the campus and the community” (Bumphus & Roueche, 2007, p. 82). These colleges are embracing diversity, inclusion, and respect for differences as a core value of their institutions (Bumphus
& Roueche, 2007). With these efforts, community colleges are creating a campus environment where inclusion is celebrated and students of color are welcomed.

Community colleges have created programs, services, and offices aimed at promoting academic, professional, and social engagement for African-American students. In fact, developing services and resources for students of color is a strategy implemented to address retention and attrition issues for many community colleges. These support services and programs provide students of color with a supportive environment in which academic resources (tutoring and study skills workshops), cultural activities, and one-on-one student and faculty/staff mentoring are practiced to enhance academic performance (Parker, 1997). Moreover, qualified faculty and staff members of color provide leadership in these offices, making it an environment in which students interact with these individuals daily in an informal and formal setting (Parker, 1997; Bumphus & Roueche, 2007).

Community colleges are increasing their efforts to develop and implement retention strategies to support African-American students’ pursuit of graduation. Community colleges have increased the number of programs and services to cater to the academic, personal, and professional needs of these particular students, such as clubs and organizations, special marketing to recruit students of color, intentional academic advising, orientation programs, cultural and leadership workshops, and additional financial aid resources and programs (Parker, 1997). Although these programs and services play a significant role in enhancing the students’ experiences, there is minimal evidence that they have, by themselves, resulted in significant increases in graduation rates at community colleges. Exploring other approaches,
such as the role of African-American faculty/staff members in promoting student success offers other strategies for improving success rates.

The intent of this study is to explore the role of African-American faculty and staff members in influencing African-American students' success at one Illinois community college. To examine this phenomenon, attrition models such as Tinto's (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model will serve as the theoretical framework. Student attrition, defined as “a student's failure to enroll from one semester to another” (Summers, 2003, p. 65), continues to be a critical issue. As expressed by Tinto (1987, 1993), this model can be used by college administrators, faculty, and staff as a guide for facilitating and strengthening retention programs, resources, and services for students.

This study will provide a new and innovative approach to exploring other factors in student success, while investigating institutional factors that contribute to college completion.

**Statement of the Problem**

For community colleges, the attrition of students of color, specifically African-Americans, is a critical problem that requires attention and resolution (ICCB, 2004). Although researchers have explored academic, external, individual, and social factors that affect African-American students' persistence in community colleges (Masursky, 1997), there is a need to explore institutional factors, such as faculty/staff-student interaction. Student attrition must be viewed as a shared responsibility—the student and institution must work together to ensure student success (Schuetz, 2008). Schuetz (2008) contended that “person-environment fit
could be improved if the students adapted to the institution, if the institution adapted to the students or both” (p. 18). In other words, community colleges must partner with students to ensure that they are thriving academically and personally.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of African-American faculty and staff in contributing to the success of African-American students at an Illinois community college while examining the contributions of academic and social integration to this phenomenon. Using Tinto's (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model as the theoretical framework, this study will explore the role of African-American faculty and staff members as a contributing factor in students’ success from the students’ perspective and in their experiences in the community-college context.

**Research Questions**

The research questions are:

1. What are the perceptions of African-American students regarding the roles of African-American faculty and staff member in contributing to their success at a community college in Illinois?
2. What are the experiences of African-American students in their interactions with African-American faculty and staff?

**Significance of the Study**

Because students of color are enrolling in community colleges at a growing rate, it warrants for researchers to examine these institutions and the subgroup (AACC, 2008); however, few studies examine their experiences (Lewis & Middleton,
2003). For example, Lewis and Middleton (2003) reviewed published articles in the *Community College Journal of Research and Policy* from 1990 through 2000 relating to this subject. Only 11 published articles were found. Of the 11, four were related to African-Americans in a community college context (Lewis & Middleton, 2003). As a result of this review, three emergent themes were identified: (a) environmental factors that affect student success, such as child care services and mentorship programs; (b) the importance of diverse faculty on community college campuses; and (c) administrators of color and their experiences at community colleges (Lewis & Middleton, 2003).

Future research focused on African-Americans and their experiences at community colleges is needed for practitioners who are in search of best practices to support this particular student subgroup (Lewis & Middleton, 2003). Since only four articles have been published in a ten-year period in one of the primary journals in the field, finding definitive studies is challenging for community college advocates, policy-makers, and others (Lewis & Middleton, 2003) who seek to put theory and research related to African-American students’ success in college into practice; thus, this exploration will contribute to the much-needed research of this issue.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Community Colleges: Why Are They Vital?

As the nation experiences a dramatic demographic shift, coupled with increased attention to diversity and inclusion, educational institutions will need to develop new retention and success practices. Community colleges’ leaders have stressed that these institutions should be at the forefront of each state’s agenda, because community colleges require continuous attention due to their mission and vision (Hamilton, 2003). More importantly, these institutions provide hope and an “open door” for many, including students of color, who otherwise may not attend college (Rendon, 1994). Nielsen (1991) stated:

Community colleges have arrived. We are receiving the attention of federal legislators, of private businesses and industry, and the general public. We have the opportunity to captivate and capitalize on this new role, especially since so many people are looking at the community colleges as an answer to some of the well-publicized educational challenges. (p. 46)

According to the ICCB (2010), reported in Annual Student Enrollment and Completions in the Illinois Community College System, student enrollment in Illinois during the 2010 academic year was closer to one million (985,010). Currently, 43% of all first-time college students are attending community colleges (AACC, 2008). Students enroll in these colleges because of their low costs, accessibility, and quality of education (McClenney, 2004). Although students are enrolling in community
colleges because of the promise of educational access, many are not successfully completing a degree (McClenney, 2004); this is a challenge for community colleges nationwide.

Research has shown that degree attainment is directly linked to many benefits that enhance one’s life, including employment opportunities (Hagedorn & Maxwell, 2002; Mazumder, 2003). However, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2004), “More than half of all students who do graduate from high school will enroll in college, about a third will not persist into the second year, while a third of those remaining will exit prior to graduation” (as cited in Hagedorn and Maxwell, 2002, p. 11).

African-Americans in Higher Education Since Brown v. Board of Education: A Historical Perspective

African-Americans were excluded from enrolling in educational institutions in the past (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996). Furthermore, laws were enacted that created an environment in which racial inferiority was alive and present for African-Americans (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996; Allen, 1987; Baker & Velez, 1996). In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education changed the nation’s law regarding racial segregation in public education, resulting in an education movement through which African-Americans gained access to education (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996). The Brown decision further emphasized the importance of each state’s role and responsibility in providing educational opportunities to promote social and economic mobility
Brown v. Board of Education (1954) asserted:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. (p. 483)

As the momentum of the Brown decision touched the nation, other political and social movements, such as civil rights laws, furthered the attainment of equal access for African-Americans (Kane & Spizman, 1994; Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996). The increasing enrollment was attributed to several programs and initiatives that supported African-Americans’ access to higher education. Federal financial aid programs were particularly instrumental in facilitating the enrollment of African-Americans who needed financial support (Baker & Velez, 1996). In the 1970s, the federal government initiated several financial aid programs aimed specifically at low-income students, including Pell Grants (Baker & Velez, 1996). Federal activity in awarding financial aid increased in the 1980s and 1990s through initiatives such as the Direct Student Loan program and tax deductions and credit programs such as the Hope and Lifetime Learning Credits (Baker & Velez, 1996).

Historically, Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) continue to serve many students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Currently, 313,491 students are enrolled in HBCUs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), HBCUs have graduated many African-American
students—almost 44,688 degrees were conferred during the 2008-2009 academic year. These institutions continue to serve a significant mission for less fortunate students (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996). In the report *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: 1976-1994*, Hoffman, Snyder, and Sonnenberg (1996) highlighted the principal mission of these institutions:

Historically black colleges and universities have contributed significantly to the effort to attain equal opportunity through postsecondary education for black, low-income, and educationally disadvantaged Americans. (p. 1)

These educational institutions have been successful in graduating African-Americans for years due to their commitment to educating disadvantaged students (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996). While postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, continue to strive to improve the educational experience for African-American students, HBCUs “continue to be a pivotal force in higher education, enriching a great tradition of educational choice and diversity in this country” (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996, p. 3). Furthermore, HBCUs have served as a positive educational model in fostering faculty-student interactions. Fleming (1984) asserted (as cited in Palmer & Gasman, 2008):

Males in Black Colleges exhibit the happiest adjustment to college life that can be found. Despite some ambivalence surrounding their interactions with teachers, their experience is more strongly characterized by adsorptions with role models, greater satisfaction and positive outcomes from the educational experience, and gains in assertiveness of self-expression and dealing with others. (p. 53)
African-American students feel especially connected to these institutions academically, socially, and personally (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; DeSousa, 2001; Baker & Velez, 1996). More importantly, many African-Americans attending HBCUs may experience a stronger connection to the college community compared to their counterparts who attend predominantly White institutions and community colleges because of their supportive environment (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Love 1993; Baker & Velez, 1996). Palmer and Gasman (2008) stressed that HBCUs provide an inviting environments in which African-American students are encouraged to strive for academic success (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Davis, 2006; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Although HBCUs continue to provide African-Americans access to an education grounded in promoting education and social equality, with the increased development of legislation programs, African-Americans began enrolling in predominantly White institutions as well (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

**African-American Students: Their Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).**

With the development of financial aid programs and other support initiatives aimed at enhancing minority student access and success, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) welcomed African-American students; however, many African-American students experienced institutional challenges (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2003). Fries-Britt & Turner (2003) stressed that African-American “students at PWIs are more likely to experience a disconnection between their high aspirations and their ability to be academically integrated into their institution” (p. 317).
Although African-American students may have high hopes for completing their degrees, it has been reported that resources and services offered at PWIs for students of color are limited (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2003; Green, 2001). Allen (1987) asserted that African-American students who attend PWIs “reportedly experienced considerable difficulty adjusting to a culturally different, academically demanding, and socially alienating environment” (p. 28). Green (2001) further asserted that students of color, particularly African Americans, may feel inferior to the White students at PWIs because of their race and ethnicity. African Americans may feel they do not belong as members of the college community, which can result in isolation and academic failure (Green, 2001). This sense of racial inferiority as the minority student population at PWIs has the potential of affecting not only their academic performances, but also, and more importantly, their development as college students.

Although PWIs offered African-American students an opportunity to earn a degree, community colleges also presented African-American students, particularly low-income students, similar access (Roman, 2007). Because of the mission of these colleges—to be open to every person interested in pursuing an education—these educational institutions are known as colleges of opportunity for many students.

**History of Community Colleges**

Community colleges have been referred to as "the people’s colleges" or “democracy colleges” (Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999, p. 2) due to their mission to contribute and respond to the educational needs of American society. The nation’s first public community college was established in 1901; since then, these
institutions have changed the landscape of higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1991), making attending college more prevalent today.

Since the inception of the first public community college—Illinois’ Joliet Junior College—these institutions have contributed to achievement of the American dream (Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). Many students enroll in these institutions to pursue an associate’s degree or certificate or to retool their employment skills (Horn & Nevill, 2006) (see Figure 1). Furthermore, these institutions have the responsibility of performing many roles to uphold their mission and vision to be open and accessible colleges (Brint & Karbel, 1991). Brint and Karabel (1991) postulated that community colleges:

- provide educational access to all students;
- serve as educational advocates but channel low-income and first-generation students into occupational tracks or lower higher-educational aspirations;
- provide students with a shared educational experience but sort them into curricula that is unique as compared to the four-year university experience;
- respond to the demands of stakeholders (employers, state legislators, etc.) to promote educational equality; and
- provide a general education for students while offering advanced employment training for technical fields.
Since their beginnings, community colleges have served a tough but significant role in higher education, as described by McClenney (2004):

Community colleges have inarguably the toughest job in American higher education. These are open-admissions institutions. They serve disproportionately high numbers of poor students and students of color. Many of their students are the ones who were least well served by their previous public school education and therefore most likely to have academic challenges as well as fiscal ones. (p. 11)

Moreover, community colleges continue to “serve larger societal roles by providing access [and] social mobility and thus serve a type of democratizing function” (Roman, 2007, p. 19). As community colleges continue to open their doors to
diverse students with different educational backgrounds, abilities, and challenges, they need to offer diverse programs and services to promote student success, particularly for students of color (Roman, 2007).

**Community Colleges as Gateways for Students of Color**

Due to their mission, community colleges enroll high numbers of diverse learners (first-generation, low-income, and minority students), including “those typically underserved by higher education” (Roman, 2007, p. 19). Many community college students come from first-generation households in which neither parent attended college (see Table 5) (Wilson, 2004).

| Table 5. Highest education level of parents for all community college students. |
|---------------------------------|      |
| High school                     | 45.3% |
| Some postsecondary education    | 24.0% |
| Bachelor's degree               | 38.0% |


Moreover, Lewis and Middleton (2003) reported that “African-Americans have gravitated toward community colleges as the main gateway into the world of higher education” (p. 787) (see Table 6). Furthermore, they tend to enroll directly after high school (Price, 2004).

Due to their open-door admissions and affordability, community colleges are enrolling students of color who enter with different needs. In fact, according to the American Association of Community Colleges (2011), in 2007-2008, 46% of students enrolled in community colleges received financial aid. Moreover, in a
report of the Education Commission of the States and the League for Innovation in the Community College titled *Keeping America’s Promise*, Wilson (2004) stressed that community colleges cater to a diverse student population that ranges from a displaced homemaker reentering the workforce to a high school graduate pursuing a degree. Wilson (2004) also posited that community colleges embrace all students while striving to build an inclusive environment to meet the needs of all learners. Although community colleges continue to be the first choice for students of color, specifically low-income students (Price, 2004), their completion and graduation attainment rates remain troubling.

**Community Colleges and the Persistence and Graduation of Students of Color**

Although African-American students are enrolling in these institutions due to their open admission policies, access has not resulted in success for them (Roman, 2007). The retention of African-American students enrolled in community colleges continues to be a complex issue. In recent years, researchers have explored the persistence and graduation rates of student of color, which includes African-American students enrolled at community colleges (Roman, 2007; Price, 2004; Wilson, 2004). As McClenny (2004) stated in *Keeping America’s Promise: A Report on the Future of Community Colleges*, a report was released by the American Council on Education (2003) that brought attention to the success rates of students enrolled in community colleges:

One-quarter of students who entered a public two-year institution in 1995-1996 with the goal of earning a degree or certificate had attained a credential at the institution by 2001 [six years later]. Nearly one-third (31 percent) of
students who began at these institutions transferred to other institutions. After considering transfer students, 39 percent of beginning students who entered at a public two-year institution had earned a degree or certificate within six years. . . . More than 17 percent of students who entered community colleges in 1995-1996 were still enrolled six years later, resulting in an overall persistence and attainment rate of 56 percent. (p. 11) Summers (2003) cited two past studies, Clark (1960) and Thornton (1966), that reported that 40% of first-year students were not successful, leaving the community college during their second semester or before achieving their academic goals. Moreover, the Southern Regional Education Board (as cited in Summer, 2003) reported other studies regarding the persistence and graduation failures of community college students:

. . . finding that only 45% of first-year, full-time students who intended to earn a degree or certificate graduated in the period of 1998 to 2001, and that 32% of students failed to return for their second year at a community college or enroll at another institution of higher education. (p. 64)

Attaining their degrees continues to be a challenge for community college students. Compared to community colleges, four-year institutions graduate more students (see Table 6) (Mohammadi, 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Two-year</th>
<th>Four-year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree, still enrolled</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree, not still enrolled</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While it is crucial to support the educational attainment of community college students, it is even more imperative to examine student populations that have been deemed “at-risk,” such as African-American students. As reported by the Community College Research Center data (Leinbach, 2005), African-American students’ persistence and graduation rates remain troubling.

- Fifty percent of all African-American students who enroll in community colleges drop out within a six-year period (Leinbach, 2005).
- Seventy-two percent of African-American students have not achieved academic success (earned a certificate or degree) compared with 50% of their White counterparts within eight years (Leinbach, 2005).
- Ten percent of first-time African-American students were awarded a degree within a six-year period (Leinbach, 2005).
McClenney (2004) reported that the departure rate for this population is 50% (mostly for low-income students) within the second year of their enrollment, which presents a daunting challenge for community college administrators.

**African-American Student Attrition**

Research has suggested that students of color depart college in higher numbers than Whites for several reasons (Baker & Velez, 1996). Evidence suggests that high dropout rates for African-Americans, in particular, can be attributed to factors such as academic and financial challenges (Jones, 2001). In a study conducted primarily by sociologists regarding factors that influence degree attainment in higher education, the authors cited “socio-economic and academic ability” (Baker & Velez, 1996, p. 84) as the most instrumental factors in academic success. Similarly, Lienbach (2005) contended that “Black students are often faced with barriers to their success attributable to poor academic preparation, financial difficulties, family obligations and other challenges that require a juggling of responsibilities” (p. 12).

From a four-year institutional research perspective, in a study titled “Attrition of Low-Income, First Generation African-American Students at a Predominantly White, Urban University,” Masursky (1997) summarized in the literature review selected descriptive research findings regarding factors thought to contribute to African-American students’ dropping out of college. The factors identified were (a) family background—research suggests that more dropouts come from low-income and first-generation families; (b) past academic experience—high school grade point average, standardized tests, and study skills influence college
persistence; (c) academic performance—students leave college due to poor academic performance; and (d) financial hardship—students leave college because of financial challenges. Although Masursky (1997) offered a perspective regarding the experiences of African-American students at a predominantly White, urban, four-year institution, other research has explored the barriers that impact the success of African-American students at community colleges.

Parker (1997) referenced a study conducted by the New York State Education Department to examine barriers that contributed to the low persistence rates for African-American students enrolled in a professional technical program at a community college. Using a ranked response survey, as reported by college administrators, the study identified the following barriers (Parker, 1997):

1. student job or family responsibilities;
2. location of colleges outside areas of minority concentrations;
3. lack of minority faculty or administrative staff;
4. lack of college funds for intervention programs;
5. students’ inability to afford college;
6. lack of appropriate social or cultural activities; and
7. unsupportive surrounding community (p. 14-16).

These barriers represent an ongoing challenge for community colleges that seek to determine why African-American students leave college. It has been reported that students leave because of circumstances like economic and family challenges, but ranked right below these challenges is the lack of faculty and staff members of color. Parker (1997) concluded that this factor may be more important
than funding for intervention programs and the ability to pay for tuition. In fact, hiring African-American faculty and staff members upholds community colleges’ commitment to creating a learning environment reflective of the campus and society.

Community colleges enroll diverse students with many different academic abilities (Nielsen, 1991). In "Responding to the New Student Diversity," Nielsen (1991), former President of Kirkwood Community College, asked, “How do we go about trying to serve this group and other diverse audiences that we’re asked to serve?” (p. 48). Many community college students are underprepared, low-income, and underrepresented (Nielsen, 1991). Nielsen (1991) gave credit to Dick Richardson at Arizona State University, who characterized four subgroups of students who attend community colleges as (1) “well-prepared and highly motivated; (2) poorly academically prepared with high expectations; (3) reasonably academically prepared but little to no motivation; and (4) underprepared, low expectations, and low self-concept” (Nielsen, 1991, p. 46).

Subgroup four (underprepared, low expectations, and low self-concept) describes many students who enroll in community colleges. This perspective painted a somewhat realistic picture of the academic and personal challenges students face as they enter the community college system; however, this student typology is not a realistic representation of all students, particularly students of color, who are attending higher education institutions. Community college students are diverse, with many characteristics and educational needs (Hamm, 2004; ICCB, 2004); however, this description epitomized a negative viewpoint of an entire
subgroup of students. In addition, this student typology “victimizes” diverse learners by placing the blame on their inability to succeed in college instead of exploring other barriers (Tinto, 1987, 1993) that may impede their success. This viewpoint of community college students’ characteristics highlights the importance of researchers’ undertaking studies to challenge this type of generalization and negative labeling of students of color—“victimizing” learners and placing an entire subgroup of learners in a categorical box. Community colleges must continue to explore initiatives to embrace these diverse learners while developing intentional and effective programs for African-American students.

Research has indicated that many students who attend community colleges are underprepared for the academic vigor of these institutions (Hamm, 2004). Educating academically underprepared students has been a primary issue confronting community colleges nationally. Hamm (2004) reported that almost “40 million Americans reportedly functioning at the lowest literacy levels become community college students” (p. 31). Hamm (2004) further reported the following trends:

- sixty-seven percent of students graduate from high school; however, 43% are deemed “college-ready,” meaning that they are academically ready for college (McCabe 2000);

- first-time, full-time community college students must take a placement exam to assess their math, reading, and writing skills before enrolling in credit-bearing courses. Students who test into developmental courses to improve college-ready skills must pass with a C before enrolling in credit-
bearing courses. It has been reported that 41% of all first-year community college students test into developmental courses (Voorhees, 2000); and

- students with learning disabilities frequently have been reported as being enrolled in community colleges (Voorhees 2000)

Based on these findings, it is evident that many students experience academic and personal challenges (Hamm, 2004).

As community colleges continue to explore the critical dilemma of supporting African-American students, a question remains: What institutional strategies can be developed and implemented to reduce attrition among these students? Exploring attrition models and their relationship to community college students may offer some direction.

**Attrition Models and Theories: Exploring the Conceptual Framework**

For years, the attrition dilemma has perplexed college administrators. Summers (2003) contended that “attrition has been viewed as an institutional effectiveness issue, enrollment management issue, or financial issue for community college leaders” (p. 64). In fact, attrition will continue to be complex and challenging for community colleges for years (Summers, 2003).

Summers (2003) indicated that several researchers have developed attrition models and theories to help identify factors that influence college departure or persistence. These models offered “transferable solutions” (Seidman, 2005, p. 9) for higher education institutions to address how to better educate and serve students. In other words, attrition models and theories—Astin’s (1993) Student Attrition
Model, Bean’s and Eaton’s (2000) Student Attrition Model, and Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model—offer diverse conceptual theories that examine why students leave college while exploring strategies to retain students in college.

Not only do the aforementioned models draw attention to precollege characteristics (high school grades, motivation, etc.) as contributing factors in student attrition, they also speak to other critical elements such as institutional factors that may negatively affect students during their educational journey. Although these models are not reflective of all attrition models reported in the field of education and other related fields (sociology, psychology, etc.), they do provide a theoretical framework for this research.

Capturing a suitable model to serve as a conceptual framework for community college research has challenges; however, in recent community college studies, several attrition models, such as Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Theory, have emerged as promising conceptual theories for studying the institution’s role in fostering academic success. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the following attrition models have been explored to examine this concept.

**Astin’s conceptual framework: The I-E-O Model.** Astin’s (1993) book *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* discusses how college impacts students’ experiences using the “input-environment-outcome (I-E-O)” (p. 7) elements. These elements include (a) inputs, which refer to the precollege characteristics that students have upon entry to college; (b) environments, which refer to the educational experiences that students encounter at college in their interactions with faculty, students, and institutional systems; and (c) outcome,
which refers to students’ growth and development after their educational experiences (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) reported that this model could be used to assess educational outcomes for students while exploring environmental factors that yield the greatest success in retaining students.

An important aspect of Astin’s (1993) model is its emphasis on students’ interactions with faculty and staff in and outside the classroom, referred to as “involvement theory” (Astin, 1993). Involvement theory discusses the significance of interactions that occur between students and faculty/staff to influence student success (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) stressed that:

Student-faculty interaction has significant positive correlations with every academic attainment outcome: GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional school, as well as every self-reported area of intellectual and personal growth such as social activism, leadership and others. (p. 383)

Astin’s (1993) model also stresses the importance of interactions with the college community through campus involvement such as participation in extracurricular activities and academic programs. Essentially, the probability of students’ persisting and graduating may be attributed to the positive interactions that occur with the college environment, particularly student-faculty interactions (Jones, 2001; Astin, 1993). Community colleges play a significant role in facilitating these interactions that create an environment that ensures that students, particularly African-Americans, feel a connection not only with their peers but also with faculty and staff members.
Astin (1993) recognized the I-E-O model’s limitations, which prompted a revision of the *Four Critical Years* in 1993. As such, Astin (1993) stressed that, with the changing demographics on college campuses and enhanced methodological research procedures, there was a need to update the research to include other variables, such as interactions measuring a student’s peer group at an institution. Although Astin (1993) recognized the need to stay current regarding the impact that attending college has on a student’s academic, personal, and social development, his studies fail to examine the experiences of racially diverse students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of Astin’s (1993) studies were conducted at four-year institutions with students who represent the majority White student population, thus limiting the research scope and largely excluding other institution types and students (Astin, 1993).

**Bean’s and Eaton’s Student Attrition Model.** Bean’s and Eaton’s (2001) Student Attrition Model uses a psychological approach to understand student attrition (Bean & Eaton, 2001). This model introduced “how academic and social integration can be viewed as outcomes of psychological processes” and provided an explanation for students’ decision to remain in or leave college (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 75). According to Bean and Eaton’s (2001) model, students have specific psychological characteristics upon entering college (precollege characteristics), which are referred to as “experiences, abilities and self-assessments” (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 75). Of these psychological attributes, three are particularly significant: “self-efficacy (‘Do I have confidence that I can perform well academically here?’); normative beliefs (‘Do the important people in my life think attending college is a
good idea?’); and past behavior (‘Do I have the academic and social experience that have prepared me to succeed in college?’)’” (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 75). As students interact with the environment—bureaucratic (student support services), academic (informal and formal interactions with the faculty), and social (social interactions with other students)—they engage in self-assessments that interface with their perceptions and attitudes about college (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Another important step in Bean’s and Eaton’s (2001) model, after students interact with the environment, involves students’ developing adaptive strategies for integrating into the college environment (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Bean and Eaton (2000) adopted Bandura’s (1997) understanding of a person’s use of self-efficacy, as “as an individual’s perceptions of his or her ability to act in a certain way to assure a certain outcome” (p. 75); copying behavior, defined as an individual’s capacity to “fit” into the environment (Bean & Eaton, 2001; French, Rodgers & Cobb, 1974); and internal and external locus of control, which refer to an individual’s responding to the new environment by using adaptive strategies. Internal and external loci of control have two distinct definitions: Internal locus of control is defined as taking responsibility for successes or failures, “whereas one with external locus control views successes or failures as fate” (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 77). When students possess a healthy internal locus of control, they tend to study and socialize with others who contribute to their academic and social integration (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Bean’s and Eaton’s (2001) Student Attrition Model emphasizes the importance of external support systems such as family, friends, and others who
could influence the persistence and attainment of students. The external factor of this model accounts well for African-American students, as they tend to remain closely connected to the family structure while attending college. For students attending community colleges, which are, traditionally, commuter campuses, this is important.

A criticism of Bean’s and Eaton’s (2001) model stated by Tinto (1987, 1993) is that it does not “enable us to understand why it is that different types of students may take on different types of leaving behaviors within the institution” (p. 90). African-Americans, Latinos, and other racially diverse students may use other coping strategies in their interactions with the informal and formal environments of the campus (Tinto, 1987, 1993). African-American students may or may not exhibit an internal locus of control due to their past experiences with racism and discrimination in the bureaucratic and social realms. However, based on this psychological process model, understanding how African-American students develop and execute adaptive strategies (self-efficacy, copying behavior, and locus of control) in responding to the campus environment (bureaucratic, academic, and social) may contribute to the institution’s understanding of persistence and departure issues for this particular student population (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

**Tinto’s Student Departure Model.** In examining the aforementioned models, Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model offers a holistic and comprehensive framework to understand student departure from a higher-education perspective. Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model not only addresses the academic and social dimensions, but also captures individual characteristics, educational
expectations, and students’ commitments to the educational institution (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model:

- focuses on the events that occur within the institution following entry and/or which immediately precede entrance to it;
- pays special attention to the longitudinal process by which individuals decide to voluntarily withdraw from institutions of higher education; and
- is longitudinal and interactional in character (p. 112-113).

Baker and Velez (1996) stressed that “students who are integrated in the fabric of the college” (p. 93) have a stronger tendency to persist in college. Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model supports this theory. Tinto’s (1987, 1993) longitudinal model (see Figure 2) of institutional departure involves a process of interactions with the academic and social structures within the college. The academic system involves the formal structure, such as classroom instruction, grades, and faculty and staff interactions, while the social system involves interactions that occur informally outside the classroom environment, such as extracurricular activities (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The process includes pre-entry characteristics, goals/commitment, institutional experiences, integration, and revisiting goals/commitments (Tinto, 1987, 1993). A student’s positive or negative interactions with the institutions’ formal and informal structures will influence his or her choice to continue or depart from higher education (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1987, 1993) further contended that “colleges, like other human communities, are highly interdependent, interactive systems in which events in one part may be felt in other parts of the system” (p. 108).
Because Tinto (1987, 1993) recognized the importance of students’ commitment to the external community, the model is embedded in the external community because that particular environment has the potential to affect whether a student departs from or remains in college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). In other words, throughout the course of students’ college careers, external involvement and commitments can influence their degree attainment (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1987, 1993) asserted that, “For commuting institutions generally and for commuting students in particular, especially those who have numerous obligations such as work and family, the model provided a mechanism for the analysis of the possibly conflicting demands [of] college, work and family” (p. 127). Thus, external commitments continue to serve as a focus of the model, ensuring that the students’ intentions, goals, and institutional commitment are explored as students progress through the model.
In Tinto’s (1987, 1993) development of the Student Departure Model, he adopted the theoretical perspectives of Van Gennep’s (1960) *Rites of Passage* when he asserted that “students must undergo ‘rites of passage,’ defined as the movement of individuals from membership in one group to that in another” (p. 92). In Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model, students undergo this movement in three stages: separation, during which one disconnects oneself from past relations (e.g., family members, local high school, etc.); transition, which involves introducing oneself to the new college norms; and integration, in which one adapts and embraces the college norms.

The model “is structured to allow institutional planners to identify those elements of the institutional environment, academic and social, which may interfere with degree completion” (Tinto, 1987, 1993, p. 113). Moreover, the model challenges community college administrators to reflect upon this question: “How can the ‘institution’ be altered to enhance retention on campus?” (Tinto, 1987, 1993, p. 113). Tinto (1987, 1993) stated:

The argument about student learning moves beyond the simplistic notion that students are alone responsible for their own efforts to the more complex notion that institutions also influence the quality of student effort via their capacity to involve students with other members of the institution in the learning process. (p. 132)

One major criticism of Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model is the student and institution type studied using this departure model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) stressed that “researchers studying college’s effects
on students tended to overlook or disregard the significance of this demographic sea change in the research and analytic designs of their studies” (p. 152). Thus, more studies are warranted to explore whether Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model is applicable to racially diverse students attending community colleges.

Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) stressed the importance of researchers examining Tinto’s model as it relates to the separation theory, specifically for first-year students. According to Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000), more exploration is needed regarding Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model and the importance of the role that the external community (parents, family, church, etc.) can play in helping students achieve college success. This is particularly important for African-American students attending community colleges, which are traditionally commuter campuses, since the separation from past communities may present a problem for African-American students. Although Tinto (1987, 1993) mentioned that students attending local commuter colleges do not need to separate themselves from past affiliations because of the structure of the colleges, he stressed that “they may not reap the full rewards that membership in college communities brings” (p. 96).

However, if a student is faced with an unsupportive external environment (family, friends, or others) in which education is not valued, “separation” from this external environment may be necessary to facilitate upward movement in college. One must note that many students of color are successful in college due to supportive family and friends (past affiliations). Moreover, Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model and separation theory are not harmonious. For example, Tinto (1987, 1993) stressed the importance of higher education institutions’ recognition of the role that
the external community can play in influencing college departure and persistence. However, Tinto (1987, 1993) indicated that students must “separate” from the external community to become fully integrated in the college community, which contradicts the Student Departure Model. Thus, Tinto's (1987, 1993) separation theory warrants additional exploration to examine how cultural differences in family dynamics and value systems can be accounted for within this model.

**Student Racial Identity Development**

The attrition models and theories presented have one common theme: They place the “institution” in the equation of the persistence and attrition phenomena. For example, Astin's (1993) model uses the I-E-O conceptual framework, in which students' interactions with the institution influence an outcome. Bean's and Eaton's (2001) model is a psychological process model in which students engage in self-assessments upon interacting with the internal institution that influence their outlook about college (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Finally, Tinto's (1987, 1993) model captures the importance of students’ connecting to the institution through academic and social integration to promote student success.

However, as college campuses across the nation continue to become more culturally and ethnically diverse, it is imperative for college administrators to examine how attrition models, coupled with racial identity theories and models such as Cross’ (1970, 1991) Model of Black Identity, may offer a new, inventive approach in examining African-American students’ experiences.

Racial identity development models emerged in 1959, during a time when the United States experienced growth in the number of racially diverse students...
The expression “the American melting pot” was an analogy (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999) used to express the diversity of America's population. Many researchers began to explore racial identity development concepts specifically for African-Americans (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). Researchers developed racial identity models to explore the “black experience” (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 41) of African-Americans. In fact, W. E. Cross (1970, 1991) introduced the first racial identity model, known as the Model of Nigrescence.

**Cross’ Nigrescence Model.** In 1970, Cross (1970, 1991) developed the Nigrescence Model—the five stages of Black identity. Although Cross’ (1991) model has remained the same since 1970, he has reexamined each stage in the light of research contributions by other scholars (Parham, 1989; Parham & Helms, 1981). In Cross’ (1991) model, African-American students go through five stages in their identity development in college. These stages include:

**Stage 1: Preencounter.** In this stage, the individual views the world as Eurocentric instead of Afrocentric (Cross, 1991). This tends to be the person's initial racial identity developed due to communal socialization (Cross, 1991). “This socialization involves years of experiences with one’s immediate family, extended family, neighborhood and community, and schools; it covers the years of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood” (Cross, 1991, p. 198).

**Stage 2: Encounter.** In this stage, the individual “encounters” experiences that influence change (Cross, 1991). In other words, the pre-encounter person encounters something that is life-changing, causing the person to reexamine his/her
identity (Cross, 1991). Cross (1991) stressed that the event/incident must be significant to be successful in transforming one’s socialized beliefs because that inner identity has been engrained in the person’s life.

**Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion.** Cross (1991) stressed that this is an important stage of the model. It represents “the state of being in between” (Cross, 1991, p. 202)—in between the past and the (new) present identity. In this stage, the person has not fully committed to this new self-identity; however, the individual is exploring the change (Cross, 1991).

In the immersion stage, the person surrounds “him/herself in the world of Blackness” (Cross, 1991, p. 203). A person in this stage is actively involved in functions and joins organizations to celebrate his/her Blackness; it becomes a daily norm (Cross, 1991). In Cross’ (1991) words, “phenomenologically, the person perceives him/herself as being uprooted from the old self and drawn into qualitatively different experience” (p. 203).

Cross (1991) further postulated that:

How to get beyond the immersion stage is likely to be different for different people, but once it occurs, it results in the discovery that one’s first impressions of Blackness were romantic and symbolic, not substantive, textured and complex. (p. 207)

In the emersion stage, known as the leveling-out phase, the person begins to reflect and experience personal growth that leads to new identity internalization (Cross, 1991). In fact, a person at the emersion stage “may pull away from membership in organizations whose activities seem designed to help one feel
immersed in Blackness and toward association with groups or persons who are demonstrating a more serious understanding of, and commitment to, Black issues” (Cross, 1991, p. 207).

A person can experience internal struggles during the transition to the internalization stage (Cross, 1991). Some of these transitional struggles may include (a) regression—the internal battle between the past identity and the new; (b) continuation/fixation—the person remains at Stage 3; or (c) dropping out—the person may choose to no longer engage in race relations because he/she views race issues as overwhelming or to depart with the intention to engage in the process in the future (Cross, 1991). Furthermore, a person may decide to drop out of race relations “because they have achieved a feel-good attitude about their personal, private, internal sense of Blackness and move on to what they perceive as more important issues in life—known as his/her ‘ethnicity phase’” (Cross, 1991, p. 209).

According to Cross (1991) many college students fall into this category. They are engaged in Black culture in college, but become disengaged after departing from college (Cross, 1991).

**Stage 4: Internalization.** In this stage, a person’s internalization brings an inner peace as an African-American (Cross, 1991). This internalized identity empowers the person and enhances his/her life by performing three functions. It:

- defends and protects the person from psychological insults that stem from having to live in a racist society;
- provides a sense of belonging and social anchorage; and
• provides a foundation or point of departure for carrying out transactions with people, cultures, and situations beyond the world of Blackness (Cross, 1991, p. 210).

Moreover, for this stage, Cross (1991) introduced two concepts: bicultural and multicultural group orientation. During the internalization stage, a bicultural orientation person continues to redefine his/her self-identity as African-American while exploring his/her fit as an American. In other words, the person explores his/her “Americanness” as an African-American in this world (Cross, 1991). Also, from a multicultural perspective, Cross (1991) argued that a “stage 4 person can vary from that of the monoculture orientation of the extreme nationalist to the identity mosaic of the multiculturally oriented Black” (p. 213).

*Stage 5: Internalization-Commitment.* In this stage, the individual celebrates his/her race/ethnicity, an ethnocentric or nationalist viewpoint (Cross, 1991). Cross (1991) asserted that this stage is the most desirable stage for African-Americans. They have a greater understanding and appreciation of their identity and commit to contributing to the African-American community as well as others. A person remains committed to Black affairs in America in this stage; however, Cross (1991) indicated that future research is needed to explore the Internalization-Commitment stage for African-Americans, specifically related to their long-term commitment goals regarding their identity.

**Institutional barriers.** Attrition models serve as a guide for higher education institutions to develop more comprehensive academic and student support services to assist African-American students in completing college. Some
attrition models, like Tinto’s (1987, 1993), have resulted in an educational paradigm shift in which students’ characteristics (i.e., family background, socioeconomic status, academic preparation) are not the only predictors of degree attainment.

Research has indicated that institutional barriers such as the lack of on-campus housing, limited resources regarding four-year college and university articulation agreements, and insufficient academic advising may play a role in impeding academic success for students (Baker & Velez, 1996; Dougherty 1991; Lee & Frank, 1990). Although many community colleges do not provide residence halls, facilitating articulation agreements between four-year institutions and academic advising are two significant resources and services offered at community colleges that support students’ matriculation (Baker & Velez, 1996). For this study, factors such as racial climate, college adjustment, and faculty/staff-student interactions, coupled with mentoring and role models, have been explored.

Due to the conceptual framework for this study, the researcher has explored institutional barriers that impede the educational attainments of African-American students. Since these factors affect student attrition, how these institutions deliver services and resources for students of color remains critically important.

“A Guest in Someone’s House”: Racism and African-American Students. For years, African-Americans have more than likely experienced and/or witnessed subtle racism, discrimination, and unfair treatment. Today, in higher education, the nation’s debates regarding affirmative action and other legal matters regarding equal opportunity remain at the forefront for policy-makers and legislators since the University of California v. Bakke U.S. Supreme Court case ruling. Although
Community colleges are not held to similar standards regarding admissions policies, the development of legal decisions validates that discrimination, prejudice, and racism continue to be prevalent in educational institutions.

Chhuon and Hudley (2008) cited Turner’s (1994) study in which she examined students’ perceptions and experiences regarding the campus environment at a large and predominantly White institution. Turner (1994) indicated that students reported feeling as if they were “a guest in someone’s house” (as cited in Chhuon & Hudley, 2008, p. 17). Turner (1994) further suggested that students of color may experience isolation and other challenges as members of the college community because it does not embrace their culture and ethnicity (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). To avoid this perception of being a guest, higher education institutions must strive to create an environment in which African-American students feel supported academically and personally.

Although higher education institutions are striving to create a campus environment in which diversity and inclusion are embraced, they must still respond to racism and discrimination on campus. Several racial incidents that occurred on college campuses have received media attention. In 2001, an Indiana University-Purdue student sent 100 racist e-mails to students, faculty, and staff (Carnevale, 2002). Stanford University was faced with the same problem when a student sent 25,000 racist e-mails to members of the community (Young, 1999). Manchester Community College had to respond to several racist incidents—defacing of Black Student Union posters and MCC KKK words written in open areas (Megan, 2009). The University of California San Diego has been the scene of several racially
sensitive incidents as well, from a Greek organization hosting a ghetto-themed cookout followed by the broadcasting of the student-run television show that supported the event (Khan, 2010). Moreover, as reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010), the University of California San Diego also experienced an incident in which a Ku Klux Klan-style hood was found on a statue. Finally, the college president of the University of Virginia had to address the college community calling for “unity” in response to nine racist incidents that occurred on campus (Anonymous, 2005).

These incidents represent only a few of those that have taken place at college campuses; however, they are indicative of the challenges faced by higher education institutions in responding to racist experiences. Although colleges have responded to these incidents through diversity education, sensitivity training for the students who made racist remarks and took actions, and separation from the college community, these incidents create an unwelcoming and hostile environment for African-American students that challenges their academic pursuits.

**College adjustment.** Love's (2008) study, titled “Parental Attachments and Psychological Distress among African-American Students,” suggested that, in general, college students are faced with challenges in their daily experiences as members of a new environment (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). They may experience emotional stress as they learn to adapt to the campus culture (Love, 2008; D’Augelli & Hershberger). Referencing Kalsner and Pistole (2003), Love (2008) reported that this particular period represents an important time in young people’s lives; they are exploring and developing their identities and growing into
adulthood. This critical phase affects African-American students who are “striving to understand who they are as a person and where they fit in relation to their peers, family and society as a whole” (Love, 2008, p. 31). Thus, African-American students may experience more difficulties in integrating into the campus community compared to their counterparts, because the campus culture may conflict with their background and traditions (Love, 2008; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003).

African-Americans may experience a sense of isolation that may lead to academic and emotional challenges (Love, 2008; Kalsner & Pistole, 2000), particularly for those enrolled in predominantly White institutions. Not only does the presence of African-American faculty and staff members contribute to creating an environment that African-American students perceive as welcoming, but African-American students also have more opportunities to establish connections with faculty/staff members of color to seek guidance and support before issues arise (Love, 1993). Despite the discrimination and alienation that African-American students may experience during their college years, relatively few studies have examined institutional barriers as contributing factors.

Coleman (2008) conducted a study in which he examined the academic experiences of African-American nursing students in a community college program at a predominantly White college in Illinois. Coleman (2008) interviewed 15 African-American students (14 females and one male) to capture their experiences. The following themes emerged as barriers to their success.
1. Students indicated a feeling of “displacement and otherness” (Coleman, 2008, p. 10) because their race and ethnicity did not reflect the greater campus population.

2. Students described the learning environment as “adversarial and non-supportive” (Coleman, 2008, p. 10); thus, the students used survival mechanisms to succeed in the environment.

3. Students reported a lack of peer and faculty support systems that contributed to their experience as African-American students (Coleman, 2008). Research reported that African-American students are more successful when they perceive a campus environment to be welcoming and caring (Coleman, 2008).

**Faculty/staff-student interaction.** Few studies, such as those of Parker (1997) and Coleman (2008), have been undertaken to identify the connection between institutional factors and students’ persisting and ultimately succeeding in their academic endeavors (Parker, 1997; Coleman, 2008). Several studies have cited faculty/staff and student relationships as an important contributing factor to student success, particularly for African-American students (Parker, 1997; Coleman, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; LaVant, Anderson, & Tigges, 1997); thus, additional research is necessary to explore this phenomenon. In fact, student-faculty contact at most institutions occurs in the classroom or through structured student support programs such as a mentoring program (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Although the current research points to formal faculty/staff-student mentoring as a strategy for fostering academic and social success, formal and
informal interactions can occur in many forms (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These interactions can occur when African-American faculty members serve as club or organization advisors or as tutors in academic skills centers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) cited Pascarella's (1980) study that asserted that “the impact on students of faculty norms, values and attitudes, as well as faculty members’ impact as role models, is enhanced when student-faculty interactions extend beyond the formal classroom setting” (p. 393).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) further contended that these academic and social interactions with faculty and staff members may strengthen a student’s institutional commitment, resulting in integration and persistence, which is consistent with Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory on student departure. For community colleges, it is even more imperative for African-American students to experience such interactions inside and outside the classroom because many of these colleges lack on-campus residence halls (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Underscoring Pascarella’s and Terenzini’s (1991) perspectives regarding faculty/staff-student interactions, Opp (2002) conducted a study examining the completion success of African-American students. Opp (2002) concluded that community colleges that encourage interactions among faculty/staff members and students of color reported higher completion rates.

Opp (2002) conducted a national study and surveyed Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) at two-year community colleges. Using the 1995 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Completion Survey Data as a resource and
Astin’s (1993) I-E-O model, Opp (2001) conducted a regression analysis to identify “significant predictors” (p. 147) for student persistence.

The CSAOs completed a 60-item questionnaire in which they ranked 44 of the most known factors, as cited in literature, that impact the success of African-American students, such as campus racism and lack of African-American curricula, and answered whether their institution implements specific retention approaches for this particular student subgroup (Opp, 2002). These variables (listed in Table 7) were entered into a regression equation model and then analyzed.

The variables cited as the strongest predictors of the success of students of color were having a CSAO of color, the percentage of faculty/staff members of color, and CSAO contact with students of color at the community college (Opp, 2002).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Opp’s (2002) demographic and institutional characteristics, variables, and results.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>F Ratio</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Institution provides students of color with peer tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution has people of color on boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-year located in a large city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSAO contact with students of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of faculty members of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of administrators of color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSAO of color</td>
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_F ratio greater than 1.92 significance at the .05 level._

Opp (2002) reported that faculty and staff members of color often serve as role models for African-American students at postsecondary institutions, coupled with diversifying the campus and learning environment. Validating Opp’s (2002) study results, research has indicated that the presence of faculty and staff members of color may have a positive influence on African-American students’ perceptions of a diverse and welcoming campus (Jones, 2001; Love, 1993).

When African-American faculty and staff are present on college campuses, they provide African-American students an opportunity to form mentorship relationships with them as role models (LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs, 1997). In fact, LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997) made a strong contention:

> Historically, mentoring in higher education has proven to be a valuable and effective tool in promoting interaction between students and faculty. African American men in particular have reaped the benefits of formally structured mentoring programs at colleges and universities. (p. 43)

In exploring the importance of mentorship, LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997) reported that mentoring African-American students can serve as a success strategy to retain African-American students, and, more specifically, males. LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997) examined many studies and models to share this perspective.

LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997) cited Frierson, Hargrove, and Lewis’ (1994) study in which they interviewed African-American students who enrolled in a mentorship program at a four-year institution (LaVant et al., 1997). The researchers found that those who were connected with African-American mentors
reported a positive perception regarding the institution and their academic studies compared to those who interacted with mentors of a different racial background (LaVant et al., 1997). These findings show the important role that African-American faculty members play in contributing to a campus environment in which African-American students feel empowered both academically and personally.

In another example, LaVant, Anderson, and Tigges (1997) referenced Hoyte’s and Collett’s (1993) results of a study exploring African-American students’ involvement and experiences in faculty-student mentoring programs for science majors. Students who participated in these programs were enrolled in science lab courses taught by African-American faculty members who served as mentors. The findings “[suggest] that close relations between the mentor and students and the presence of role models contribute to students’ positive attributes” (LaVant et al., 1997, p. 46). This, in turn, may affect students’ overall experiences and impressions of the college experience as well as their persistence toward graduation (Tinto, 1993; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006).

As college campuses across the nation enroll more diverse students, the presence of faculty and staff members of color can contribute to the intellectual and professional growth of students while bringing awareness of different cultures and ethnicities (Green, 1989). Green (1989) asserted that:

All students will benefit as the curriculum is broadened and different perspectives are introduced and as the teaching and learning process are adapted to meet different learning styles. The presence of minority faculty
can serve to inspire students to achieve as well as to introduce faculty colleagues to new perspectives. (p. 12)

Community colleges are recognizing the importance of recruiting and retaining faculty and staff members of color. Recruiting more such faculty and staff members has been at the forefront of community colleges’ agenda for some time (Bumphus & Roueche, 2007). However, the success rate for this recruitment effort has been relatively low. The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) has reported that in 2007 faculty members of color represent these percentages of individuals employed in higher education: African-Americans, 7%; Hispanics/Latinos, 4%; Asians, 6%; and American Indians/Alaska Natives, 1%. Administrators of color represent a collective 18%. From a statewide perspective, community colleges in Illinois are not faring well in their efforts to diversify the campus landscape (ICCB, 2010). As reported in the ICCB 2010 African-American Employment Plan Report, (see Table 8), the employee statewide average percentages of administrators and faculty (classroom instructors, counselors and administration), professionals (directors and coordinators), support staff (office clerical), and service staff (maintenance) of color are not promising.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>Hispanic/Latino</th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>Non-resident</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrators &amp; Faculty</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service staff</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the number of African-American faculty, administrators, and professionals of color exceeds those of the other racial groups, the numbers are drastically different from those of their White counterparts. Moreover, these percentages are disturbing mainly because community colleges serve as a “gateway” for many African-American students in pursuit of their educational dreams (Lewis & Middleton, 2003). Since research has shown that African-American faculty and staff members serve as role models for African-American students, which could lead to mentorship opportunities (LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997), there is obviously a mismatch of the faculty/staff-student ratio at community colleges.

As the community college student landscape continues to diversify, the need to hire staff members that reflect the student population becomes fundamentally important in creating a campus environment in which African-Americans feel connected. For higher education institutions, “campus structures that help students affirm their ethnic and cultural heritage and meet peers of similar backgrounds may provide critical social, emotional and academic resources for minority students who often experience a sense of isolation and marginalization, specifically at highly selective institutions” (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008, p. 17).

Chhuon and Hudley (2008) contended that frequent student-faculty interaction motivates students to achieve academic and personal success through involvement in the campus community. Moreover, according to Pacarella and
Terenzini (1991), frequent interactions between faculty and student contribute to the student’s growth and development.

Creating an environment that supports faculty/staff-student interactions represents a critical challenge for community colleges. Investing in resources to hire and retain faculty and staff members of color is critical (Green, 1989; Parker, 1997; Bumphus & Roueche, 2007). How can community colleges help African-American students feel comfortable and connected to the campus when the faculty and staff do not reflect the student population?

**Conclusion**

Because community colleges continue to serve as the gateway for higher education for many students (Lewis & Middleton, 2003), specifically for African-American students, these institutions need to reexamine how to meet the growing educational needs of this particular student population. More importantly, community colleges will need to reexamine how to retain, persist, and graduate African-American students, a student population deemed to be in serious academic trouble (Carey, 2008).

According to Summers (2003), there are many reasons why students leave college; factors that have been studied include students' backgrounds, academic abilities, and other aspects that impact student attrition. However, the attrition of African-American students is a phenomenon that requires continuous exploration of many variables to be completely understood (Summers, 2003).

Levinson (2005) contended that community colleges are challenged by “creating a common culture among the nation’s growing ethnic diversity” (p. 55),
specifically on their college campuses. In a recent report, *Graduation Rate Watch: Making Minority Student Success a Priority*, Carey (2008) asserted:

If there is a single factor that seems to distinguish colleges and universities that have truly made a difference on behalf of minority students, it is *attention*. Successful colleges pay attention to graduation rates. They monitor year-to-year change, study the impact of different interventions on student outcomes, break down the numbers among the different student populations and continuously ask themselves how they could improve. (p. 8)

The fundamental question for community colleges is how these institutions will make African-American students’ success a priority (Carey, 2008) today, tomorrow, and in the future.

This study aims to answer the aforementioned question by exploring African-American students’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54) in the community college setting. Capturing the “voices” of African-American students relating to their educational experiences and perceptions is a progressive approach in understanding how community colleges can proactively address this dilemma.
Chapter Three
Methodology

This chapter begins with a discussion of qualitative inquiry and phenomenological research design. It continues with a rationale of why this research method was selected for this study. In this section, the role of the researcher, the research site, the research participants, the data collection, and the data analysis will be discussed. In conclusion, the researcher will discuss the credibility and verification of this study.

The Qualitative Research Paradigm

Qualitative research is embedded in social science disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Presently, this research approach has become increasingly significant in many fields (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In fact, this inquiry is “used as a broad-brush descriptor for a range of distinct approaches,” but its foundation is rooted in particular philosophical tenets (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005, p. 98). In examining this research inquiry, Marshall and Rossman (2011) delineated characteristics that capture qualitative research. This type of research inquiry:

- is enacted in naturalistic settings;
- draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study;
- focuses on context;
- is emergent and evolving; and
- is fundamentally interpretive (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 2).
Several authors have defined qualitative research design in an effort to provide researchers a clear understanding of this type of inquiry (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). For example, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) defined qualitative research as:

A multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experiences, introspective, life story, interviews, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments in individuals’ lives. (p. 2)

Creswell (1994) offered a condensed definition that characterizes qualitative research:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 1)

A qualitative research design “places the participant as the ‘experiencer’ in the position of expert and the investigator in the position of ‘learner’” (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005, p. 99). Embedded in qualitative research, which seeks to explore
participants’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54), is the phenomenological inquiry selected for this study.

Because the researcher applied Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Departure Model as the theoretical framework, a qualitative research design was employed to engage in a holistic analysis of African-American students’ experiences with their community colleges (Merriam, 1998). Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model, as described by Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), has been used to study several four-year institutions and is mostly focused on “intra-institutional influences” (p. 53) that affect a student’s departure from college. In other words, the interactions that occur between the students and the faculty and staff serve as the foundation of this model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). By applying a qualitative methodology design instead of the traditional quantitative design, which has been used by past researchers examining attrition and persistence factors, the researcher began to understand not only the students’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54), but also some of the factors that contribute to their academic persistence in community college.

The Phenomenological Research Design

Phenomenological inquiry has been used to study education, psychology, sociology, and much more for years (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992; Swingewood, 1991; Giorgi, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1989). In fact, the phenomenological framework, which is grounded in the perspective of Husserl (1859-1938), a phenomenological theorist, emphasizes that:
Researchers search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize that intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning. (Creswell, 1998, p. 52)

According to Creswell (1998), Stewart and Mickunas (1990) identified four themes that capture the phenomenological research movement.

1. Philosophical framework is at the forefront of this inquiry (Creswell, 1998). This movement capitalized on the return of the “Greek conception of philosophy that searches for wisdom” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).

2. An inquiry without pre-judgments (Creswell, 1998). With this approach, the researcher begins the study with an open and clear mind (called epoche) until the truth is revealed through interactions with those experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

3. “The intentionality of consciousness” (Creswell, 1998, p. 53). The consciousness is focused on the phenomenon (object); the “reality of the object is inextricably related to one’s consciousness” (Creswell, 1998, p. 53).

4. “The refusal of the subject-object dichotomy” (Creswell, 1998, p. 53). Connected to the “intentionality of consciousness, the reality of the object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of the individual” (Creswell, 1998, p. 53).
In phenomenology, the researcher’s goal is to understand an individual’s experience regarding a phenomenon while exploring how this experience has shaped his/her understanding and meaning (Creswell, 1998). Thus, it was the researcher’s hope to gain invaluable and insightful information that would contribute to African-American student success at community college. Distinct characteristics of a phenomenological inquiry shape the exploration:

- It seeks to reveal more fully the essence and meaning of human experiences;
- It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behavior and experiences;
- It engages the total self of the research participants, and sustains personal and passionate involvement;
- It does not seek to predict or determine causal relationships; and it is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experiences, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105)

This methodology provides researchers an opportunity to explore a subject that has been historically difficult to understand (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Understanding African-American students’ experiences at one Illinois community college is important to this research, but so is understanding the “intent and impact” (Spiengelberg, 1982, p. 82) that this experience has had on their academic and social success (Creswell, 2003).

It was also imperative to choose a method that supports the importance of a topic that is significant for the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) asserted that this method “is rooted in questions that give a direction and focus to
meaning, and in themes that sustain an inquiry, awaken further interest and concern, and account for our passionate involvement with whatever is being experienced” (p. 59). Because there are few studies examining African-American students’ attrition relating to their experiences and interactions with African-American faculty and staff members in the community college setting, this study offered an alternative method for studying this phenomenon.

Role of the Researcher

Defining the role of the researcher is important in conducting qualitative research. Additionally, in phenomenological inquiry, understanding the role of the researcher is fundamentally important because the research process itself involves specific components that shape the methods and procedures for this type of inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, this inquiry involves a personal component. For example, “in phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104).

For many years, these questions have been of grave concern and interest for the researcher.

1. What are the perceptions of African-American students regarding African-American faculty and staff roles in contributing to their success at a community college in Illinois?

2. What are the experiences of African-American students in their interactions with African-American faculty and staff?

During my tenure as an administrator at a community college, I served as the director of multicultural student affairs. In that role, I was responsible for
advocating and supporting students of color in pursuit of their educational and professional goals. Currently, as a dean at a community college in Illinois, my passion for understanding the experiences of students of color continues to grow, specifically since African-American students’ attrition is a nationwide crisis.

In recognizing that, as the investigator, I possess knowledge regarding the role of community colleges and the dilemma of African-American students’ attrition, my phenomenological inquiry offers a comprehensive process to acknowledge prejudgments and biases. In fact, one reason I chose this research method was because of the safeguarding process referred to as *epoche*. It is a “Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33).

Since this topic has and continues to be relevant to my role as a community college administrator, this method allowed me to view the topic with a fresh, new outlook. Moreover, the facilitation of the *epoche* empowers investigators to engage in phenomenology in the hope of seeking a wealth of profound knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) further contended that, “In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33).

**Gaining Access to the Research Site**

To gain access to one Illinois community college site where the study was conducted, the following procedures were followed.
1. A copy of the research prospectus, along with an introduction letter, was e-mailed to the community college president. In the introduction letter, a request for a meeting to discuss the research and the methodology was addressed.

2. Upon approval of the college president, as well as my dissertation chair, a letter of agreement was executed before proceeding with data collection.

3. The researcher received the approval and guidance of the college president in identifying designated point persons at the college to assist with the data collection strategy (i.e., knowledge of classes taught by African-American faculty, a quiet and comfortable room to conduct interviews, etc.). The researcher worked in collaboration with minority student support offices (Multicultural Student Affairs, Project Achieve, and Counseling Department—Project Success) to help identify student participants for the study.

**The Research Site**

As the third-largest community college system in the nation, the Illinois community college system, with 39 districts that house 48 community colleges statewide, continues to have high student enrollments (ICCB, 2010). The Illinois community college system is currently serving 74.1% of all credit-earning student enrollments in Illinois (ICCB, 2010). Because of their relatively low tuition, community colleges serve as the primary provider of the higher education experience in Illinois (ICCB, 2010).
Due to my rapport with several community college presidents in Illinois, identifying a community college to participate in this study was feasible. Moreover, because African-American students’ attrition is a critical topic at the forefront of community colleges’ agendas, the college president was eager for the institution to be selected for this study and saw the potential value in being a participant.

The research site is a comprehensive institution offering associate’s degrees and certificates for students while serving as a cornerstone for workforce training and development. As a community college rooted in tradition, this community college continues to serve as a major educational vehicle for educational and training opportunities in the district. The college prides itself on remaining committed to its mission and core values. The mission of the community college centers on providing affordable, accessible, and good-quality programs with the goal of preparing lifelong diverse learners.

With a minority student population of at 26% at the research site, according to its Institutional Research Office (2009), the demographic make-up of the college is an important issue. African-American student enrollment increased by 10% in one year, from 1,356 in 2007 to 1,495 in 2008 (Institutional Research Office, 2009). African-Americans make up 10% of the population and Latinos comprise 14%, followed by Asian Americans at 2% and Native Americans at 1%. Female students continue to dominate the enrollment at 56% (Institutional Research Office, 2009). The student landscape is diverse; however, the college continues to strive to diversify its faculty and staff to reflect the changing student demographics.
Community colleges are critically examining how to enhance their recruitment and retention efforts to hire more faculty and staff members of color to reflect the student population. The research site has committed to several efforts to diversify its workforce. The college has established a Diversity Leadership Council that will be appointed by the college president to partner with the college’s Executive Leadership Team to develop strategic priorities in infusing diversity and inclusion in recruitment and retention (Institutional Research Office, 2009). Other initiatives, such as enhancing search procedures to ensure fundamental fairness and equality for employment searches, have contributed to the college’s efforts (Institutional Research Office, 2009). Table 9 reflects the percentages of full-time employees of color at the research site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>Hispanic/Latino</th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The diversity makeup of the faculty and staff was an essential consideration in selecting the research site. Each year, community colleges in Illinois publish a Facts and Figures report to document past, present, and future student enrollment and demographics. Moreover, the Illinois Community College Board produces annual publications such as the Data and Characteristics Report and Performance
Measures Report. Thus, the researcher used those resources to review enrollment and retention trends as well as faculty and staff diversity.

Although the employee percentages of faculty and staff of color are not significant, the student participants were clearly connected to the small number of African-American faculty and staff members at the college. They spoke highly of their interactions with these African-Americans as a relevant source of their success at the college. At the research site, several programs and services have been established to support students of color, including the Multicultural Student Affairs office, Project Achieve, and Project Success. These programs served as an excellent resource for identifying students to participate in the study.

Research Participants

Because phenomenological research involves identifying participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998), a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) was used to identify African-American students who met specific criteria.

Creswell (1998) asserted that criterion sampling is the best sampling strategy for researchers who engage in a phenomenological inquiry. In fact, since this research involves African-American students and their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members at community colleges, the following criteria were used.

- Participants must be African-American.
- Participants must be full-time students.
- Participants must be of traditional college age (18-24 years old).
• Participants must be currently enrolled at a community college in Illinois and must have attended that institution for the last two consecutive semesters.

• Participants must have accessed minority student support services during the last seven months and/or been enrolled in or completed a course taught by an African-American instructor.

Seven students participated in the study. An overview of the participants is presented in Chapter 4.

Protection of Human Subjects

Before gaining access to the research site and student participants, the researcher followed the Institutional Review Board and Human Subjects Review guidelines and submitted the proposal for review and approval. The following information was shared and the following steps were implemented to uphold the protection of the human subjects.

1. A Human Subjects Consent to Participate form was reviewed with each potential participant (see Appendix C). The consent form included a confidentiality statement, description of potential risks for participants, study purpose, time commitment, and right to not participate in the study at any time during the process.

2. An overview of the data collection and analysis process, which included audio-taping, transcriptions, and field notes, was discussed with the participants.
3. To protect the participants’ confidentiality and identity, they selected pseudonyms.

**Identification of Participants**

With the approval of the college president at the research site, the researcher partnered with minority support services offices—Multicultural Student Affairs, TRIO Project Achieve, and Project Success. Multicultural Student Affairs is a department under the auspices of Student Development that provides educational support and resources for students of color. Two other departments also worked in collaboration with the designated point persons to recruit students to participate in the study: TRIO Project Achieve, a grant-funded academic supplemental program for first-generation, low-income, disabled, and veteran students, and Project Success, a retention and intrusive academic support program facilitated by the Counseling Department. These offices have access to student data, demographics, and resources to assist with the identification process.

The participant letter (see Appendix A) was e-mailed to each designated point person with the demographic (see Appendix B) and consent forms (see Appendix C). The designated point persons e-mailed and/or spoke directly with students about the study. Upon students’ expressing interest in participating, the designated point persons e-mailed the interested students’ contact information to the researcher.

The researcher followed up with each interested student by telephone to introduce herself and explain the study in more detail, such as the time commitment
and the benefits and risks associated with being a participant in the study. Appointments were scheduled for each student participant.

The researcher sent a follow-up e-mail to each interested participant to confirm the appointment. The demographic form and consent form were e-mailed to each participant for his/her review prior to the interview; directions to the location where the interviews would be conducted were provided as well.

The in-depth participant interviews occurred at the research site in a comfortable and quiet area near the Counseling Center. The researcher created a relaxing and comfortable environment for the participants to encourage them to share their perceptions and experiences regarding the role of African-American faculty and staff in contributing to their success as community college students. Each interview was two to three hours in length. Light refreshments and mini-breaks were incorporated into the schedule to ensure a warm and welcoming environment.

The sessions began with the researcher introducing herself to the participant and then reviewing the consent form to secure his/her signature. An opening statement (see Appendix D) was read to provide clarity of the study and to ascertain that the participant clearly understood his/her role as a study participant.

**Data Collection**

For a phenomenological study, Burnard (1991) recommended that data collection should encompass in-depth interviews to capture the participants’ voices and their life experiences (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). According to Moustakas (1994), “the phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process
and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). Marshall and Rossman (2006) underscored Moustakas’s (1994) statement by stressing the key benefits of phenomenalological interviewing:

It permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experiences combined with those of the interviewees. It focuses on the deep, lived meaning that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide action and interactions. (p. 105)

To capture the phenomenological in-depth interview process, the researcher utilized open-ended questions (Creswell, 1998), and took notes and used an audio recorder to record participants’ responses; however, the questions changed slightly as each participant (Moustakas, 1994) shared his/her experience, creating a more informal and interactive interview (Moustakas, 1994). Due to the length of time required to conduct the in-depth interviews (Polkinghorne, 1989), the purposefully selected sample population included seven participants. In fact, many authors have recommended that, for a phenomenological study, the number of participants should be three to 10 (Dukes, 1984; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Originally, the goal of the researcher was to interview only four students; however, after conducting the first three interviews, the researcher was inspired to listen to more students’ voices about their perceptions and experiences at the college.

Because of the consistent and concise communication between the researcher, designated point individuals, and students, the participants were well-prepared for the interviews. The Human Subjects Consent and demographic forms were e-mailed to the students prior to the interviews; thus, many of them had
completed and signed the demographic and consent forms before the in-depth interviews took place. Also, the researcher reviewed the consent forms with the participants and confirmed their signatures before the interviews commenced. Also, the researcher reminded them that the interview would be recorded.

After the conclusion of the interview, the researcher reminded participants of the member-checking process, in which the transcription would be shared with them to ensure that each interview was captured correctly. The demographic form was reviewed to confirm the contact information, as well.

For the member-checking process, the researcher e-mailed the transcriptions to each participant and scheduled follow-up phone discussions to clarify and/or rectify the write-ups. The member-checking process was successful, as the participants did not request any transcription revisions, with the exception of one participant who wanted to clarify a statement. Those revisions were e-mailed directly to the researcher and noted on the master transcription documents.

Each in-depth interview produced insightful and rich dialogue from the participant. The participants shared their experiences and perceptions regarding how African-American faculty and staff members have contributed to their persistence as students enrolled at the community college. The next section provides an overview of the data analysis for the study.

**Data Analysis**

According to Moustakas (1994), a number of steps are involved in the data analysis for the phenomenological approach. Before reviewing the transcribed interviews, the researcher engaged in *epoche*, setting “aside prejudgments, biases,
and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). This process consisted of clearing the mind and welcoming the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). It was important for the researcher to set aside her own experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of interactions with African-American faculty and staff members during her formative years and focus on reading and listening to the participants’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54). In other words, epoche involves “[e]ntering a pure internal place, as an open self, ready to embrace life in what it truly offers. From the epoche, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness, and new understanding” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86).

The second step involved “horizontalization of the data or phenomenological reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). This step included the researcher’s finding statements that capture how the respondents experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). “Significant statements” captured during the interview were used as data (Creswell, 2003, p. 191). These statements were coded and treated equally (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) asserted that “when we horizontalize, each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence” (p. 95). In using this method, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts to capture the true essence of the participants’ experience. The researcher read each transcript line-by-line using open coding (Creswell, 2003). Each time the transcriptions were read, the researcher identified several significant statements, which were highlighted using different colored highlighters. Codes were written on the page margins to document the emerging findings.
The third step involved the “synthesis of meanings or meaning unit of a cluster of meaning” (Creswell, 1998, p. 55). This involved grouping (clustering) the statements into “meaning units” (Creswell, 1998). At this stage, the researcher recorded the themes and common categories (Moustakas, 1994) and wrote “textural descriptions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 55) of the experience. Textural description involved the researcher’s clustering themes through the use of verbatim examples from the participants (Creswell, 1998). In a computer document, the researcher documented the significant statements found in the second stage. Using the significant statements, the researcher began to cluster the themes and common categories using examples from the participants to validate the emerging findings.

The fourth step involved the researcher’s engaging in “imaginative variation or structural description” (Creswell, 1998, p. 150). During this process, the researcher reflected on the emergent themes and used imaginative variations to search for meaning about the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). In other words,

The task of imaginative variations is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions with the goal of arriving at structural descriptions. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97)

During this process, the researcher reflected on the emerging themes and made appropriate revisions based on the imaginative variation process. The researcher viewed the emergent themes through the eyes of a student, a faculty member, etc., to form structural descriptions (Creswell, 1998).
The fifth and final step involved the construction of the “overall description of the meaning and the essence of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 150). At this stage, the researcher married the textural and structural descriptions to arrive at the participants’ experience (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, six themes emerged as a result of the final step:

1. race and shared experiences matter;
2. the role of surrogate parents;
3. “a place like home”;
4. interpersonal communicative connection;
5. the importance of role models and visualizing success; and
6. interactions provide motivation for African-American students.

This phenomenological data analysis process offered the researcher a fresh and innovative approach for exploring and understanding a phenomenon holistically. It offered the researcher a structured analysis process that is reflective and grounded in “rich, thick descriptions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 203; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Underscoring this statement, Moustakas (1994) asserted:

Through phenomenology a significant methodology is developed for investigating human experience and for deriving knowledge from a state of pure consciousness. One learns to see naively and freshly again, to value conscious experience, to respect the evidence of one’s sense, and to move toward an intersubjective knowing of things, people, and everyday experiences. (p. 101)
The data analysis stages discussed here were significant. Because this study focuses on the role of the “institution's environment” in influencing African-American success, the researcher began to identify the academic (formal) and social (informal) systems (Tinto, 1987, 1993) within which successful and/or unsuccessful interactions have occurred for African-American students. In other words, Tinto’s Student Departure Model (1987, 1993) was used as a guiding framework to begin identifying institutional systems (departments/offices such as Academic and Student Affairs) in which successful academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993) occurred for African-American students.

Finally, the researcher also explored Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory regarding the need for students to disconnect from external support systems. Because this study is focused on African-American students’ experience at a commuter campus, this theory warrants additional exploration.

**Issues of Credibility and Verification**

Issues of validity are important to examine and address when one is conducting research. In an effort to proactively address any potential issues related to validity, the researcher used several methods to maintain trustworthiness and creditability (Creswell, 1994, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 1980).

Lincoln and Guba (2008) presented terms to explore issues of validity specifically for qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (2008) stated that “terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria on internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 33). Eisner (1991) also introduced the term “verification” as an alternate term for
“validity” (Lincoln & Guba, 2008). Creswell (1998) underscored Eisner’s (1991) perspective and asserted that researchers should:

> View verification as a distinct strength of qualitative research in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness to participants in the study all add to the value of a study. (p. 201)

In supporting these perspectives, the following procedures were used to counteract any potential threats to validity and reliability.

**Member checking.** In a phenomenological study, the researcher captures each participant’s understanding regarding the experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 1998); thus, for the study, the researcher followed up with participants to share data to ensure the accuracy of what was communicated during the interview (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

**Peer review and support.** Because the researcher has experience and familiarity with the phenomenon, participating in a peer-review process and debriefing with an outsider to the study provided an external check (Creswell, 1998). This external supporter is a “devil’s advocate” as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) (as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 202) who keeps the researcher grounded and focused on the research process. To support this peer-review and debriefing process, the researcher is currently participating in a dissertation support work-group. A member of the group was identified as the peer reviewer for this study. Because this individual has experience with the phenomenological research design
as a recent doctoral graduate, she served as a resource to critically review the researcher’s process and progress.

**Role of the researcher revisited.** As a community college professional, I have knowledge regarding community colleges’ mission, academic, and extra-curricular systems; thus, bracketing my own biases (Creswell, 1998) was addressed in the “Role of the Researcher” section of this chapter. Also, the phenomenological process provided the researcher with an opportunity to engage in deep reflection regarding bias and opinions about the phenomenon being explored. Merriam (1998) stated that “the researcher comments on past experiences, bias, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). In addition to member checking, peer review and support, and defining the role of the researcher for this study, the researcher also utilized other procedures to address issues of credibility and verification:

- “rich, thick descriptions” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). In capturing the participants’ voices, the researcher also used verbatim examples to communicate the study’s findings. Also, a thorough description of each participant was shared (see Chapter 4); and

- prolonged time at the research site (Creswell, 2003). The researcher spent many hours and days exploring the research site to become acquainted with the setting, environment, and students (Creswell, 2003). Because of this prolonged exposure, the researcher was able to provide a thorough description of the research site as well as the participants.
Although these approaches offer insight regarding how the researcher addressed issues of validity, they also helped to shape a research design that is dependable (Creswell, 1998). The central question, "How do we know that the qualitative study is believable, accurate, and right?" (Creswell, 1998, p. 193), can be answered with confidence because of the methods established and executed for this study.
Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter begins with a discussion of the study's participants. The chapter includes an overview of the participants' demographics and a profile of each African-American student. The participant profile provides a brief synopsis of each participant's educational and professional goals. Other relevant information is reported, including participants' accessing minority support services and/or being taught by an African-American instructor, which were criteria for this study. In this section, the researcher also reviews the criteria used to identify students to participate in the study. Finally, the six emergent themes from the data analysis will be discussed. Statements from the participants will be used to discuss the emergent themes. Those themes include: (1) race and shared experiences matter; (2) the role of surrogate parents; (3) “a place like home”; (4) interpersonal communicative connection; (5) the importance of role models and visualizing success; and (6) interactions provide motivation.

The Participants

Seven students (four males and three females) participated in the study: David, Vincent, Akira, Nicole, Monique, Scott, and Michael. These names are pseudonyms; to create rapport with the participants, the researcher invited them to select their own pseudonyms instead of assigning them herself, an opportunity that the participants welcomed. In fact, some of the participants selected names that they had admired during their childhoods.
These participants were selected based on the criteria established for the study:

- participants must be African-American;
- participants must be full-time students;
- participants must be of traditional college age (18-24 years old);
- participants must be currently enrolled at the community college’s research site in Illinois and have attended that institution for the last two consecutive semesters; and
- participants must have accessed minority student support services during the last seven months and/or been enrolled in or completed a course taught by an African-American instructor.

With the exception of Michael, all the participants met the criteria. Michael is not a traditional college-aged student; he is a 27-year-old adult student. Michael was allowed to participate in the study because the researcher was interested, as a point of comparison, in listening to the experiences and perceptions of an adult student. Because this study focused on traditional college-aged students’ experiences and perceptions in the community college setting, exploring other student subgroups, such as the adult student population, may serve as a focus for future research.

As a part of the study, the participants were required to complete a form that captured demographic information about them, so the researcher could be sure that each participant met the required criteria of the study. Table 10 summarizes the descriptions of the participants.
The participants’ personalities, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and family backgrounds were slightly different. However, these students have a common thread: they have and continue to be involved in minority student support services and extracurricular activities at the college. For this study, the term “active student” is defined as a student who is participating in resources and services (i.e., academic advising, tutoring, cultural enrichment programs) offered at the community college. Active students tend to meet with staff members to discuss their academic progress as well as partake in activities to enhance their educational experience, such as note-taking workshops and leadership seminars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Degree Major</th>
<th>Semester in College</th>
<th>Transfer Intent</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Construction Management</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time/Reverse Transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time/Reverse Transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Childhood Development</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Culinary</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>4-year</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the criteria for participation in the study was that students must have accessed minority student support services during the last seven months and/or enrolled in or completed a course taught by an African-American instructor.
Minority student support offices are defined as departments, such as Multicultural Student Affairs and Project Achieve, that provide supplemental support to students of color, first-generation, low-income, and disadvantaged students. For this study, “first-generation student” is defined as living in a household in which neither parent attended college (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students tend to enroll in community colleges instead of four-year institutions (50.5% compared to 29.5%) (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). “Low-income student” is defined as a student or his/her family living below the poverty line. “Disadvantaged student” has many definitions, such as a student residing in a single-parent household; a student with a physical or learning disability; and a first-generation student. At the research site, the Multicultural Student Affairs office and Project Achieve provide academic and personal support such as tutoring, leadership programs, mentorship, and career exploration. Table 11 captures the additional demographic details of the study's participants.

Table 11. Additional demographic information of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akira</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3 provides a chart view of the demographic information for all participants. As noted in Figure 3, all of the participants are involved in extracurricular activities and have accessed minority student support services. Additionally, six of the seven participants are from single-parent households. Three of seven have been enrolled in a course taught by an African-American in the community college setting.

The participants had many commonalities in terms of their decision to attend a community college. As reported in the literature review, many students enroll in community colleges for reasons such as the open admissions policies and reasonable costs (Wilson, 2004). Consistent with the literature, the researcher found that the participants enrolled in the community college for similar reasons. One of the participants pointed out, “There are actually a lot of different reasons why I chose to attend a community college. One, of course, being financial. . . . Here, I
take four classes for the same price that I’d be paying for one class at a university. I actually live here in the area, so I’m not that far from home.”

Two of the seven participants were enrolled at four-year institutions (reverse transfer) before enrolling in the community college. Although they chose to attend a four-year institution after high school, they found that their experiences at the community college have been more rewarding and beneficial. Akira, a reverse transfer student, shared,

When my friends graduated from high school, they chose to come here. And they said it was a really nice school, so when I got here, I was like, “Yeah, it actually is pretty nice.” So, I kind of like it, as opposed to when I went to [the other school]. I felt—the [the other school] was a beautiful campus, but it felt really cold and empty. It was just too big. I felt like a number versus a person. Here, you actually see some of the same people on a daily basis. People actually get to know your name, and it makes me feel more comfortable. It makes me feel like I want to be here; I want to come [here] every day.

The participants did not hesitate to share their experiences; in fact, many of the interviews were lengthy because the students seemed to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perceptions regarding their interactions with other African-Americans on campus. These participants were unique, as were their stories. The following is a brief synopsis about each of these exceptional African-American students.
Participant 1: David—Establishing a sense of purpose. David is a 22-year-old student majoring in construction management at the community college. An active participant in minority support services at the college, David is a full-time student who has been enrolled at the community college for two semesters. He was scheduled to graduate in May 2010 and aspires to transfer to a four-year institution.

David is a bright, articulate student with a passion for urban development and politics. In fact, it is David’s desire to pursue his educational journey at a four-year institution and complete a master’s degree in urban development. David’s professional aspirations include working as an urban planner in underdeveloped and deteriorating communities to restore and strengthen those urban areas.

David attended the community college after completing high school at an alternative institution. For years, before enrolling in college, he thought he would be another African-American male “statistic”—failing and dropping out of high school. In other words, he indicated that he was headed down the wrong path and that education was not a priority in his life. David shared,

In high school, I wasn’t the model student. I also did a lot of moving around and I guess a lot of that has to do with my background, where I come from. I guess I fall into the . . . another number, as a statistic, coming from a broken home, and things like that, which, I didn’t understand it then, but I understand better now, is that a lot of the things that I went through, a lot of the things that I had to deal with was because of my home situation. Sad to say, my father left and so I kind of grew up a knucklehead.
Although David faced many challenges, once he enrolled in college, he established a sense of purpose for his life. As he prepares for graduation, he continues to reflect on his experiences at the community college and how he has grown not just as a student but as an African-American male.

Participant 2: Vincent—Conquering adversity and achieving success.

Vincent, a 20-year-old, full-time honor student, is majoring in nursing. Vincent is a smart, high-energy student with a bright smile. He has been actively involved in minority support services. In addition to his involvement with the Honors Program, Vincent has been involved in other extracurricular activities such as Latinos Unidos, the Phi Theta Kappa National Honor Society, and the Psychology Club. Vincent has been enrolled at the college for four semesters. He is scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2011. Although he is majoring in nursing, Vincent has aspirations to attend medical school and work as a physician.

As an athlete during his formative years and in college, Vincent viewed his academic career, as well as his life, as a “failure.” Vincent shared, “Even though, when I first came here, I thought I was a failure, but, you know, that’s just how atmospheres and environments can change the way a person thinks about themselves.”

For years, he was only interested in playing sports and was not interested in pursuing higher education to its fullest. As Vincent continued his educational journey at the community college, coupled with his life experiences, he began to challenge himself academically and personally. Vincent’s appreciation for higher
education was directly related to his passion for learning and inspiration from his interactions with family and African-American faculty and staff members.

**Participant 3: Akira—Embracing the support of others.** Akira, a 22-year-old female student, is pursuing a degree in psychology with a minor in sociology. A soft-spoken and somewhat shy student, Akira works with minority support services to pursue her educational goals. In addition to her academic life, Akira is a member of the Black Student Union and the Psychology Club. She has been enrolled at the community college for four semesters. Akira is also a 2010 college graduate.

During Akira’s high school years, she attended an alternative school. She was surrounded by many African-American faculty and staff members who encouraged her to remain enrolled in high school and to attend college. Because of Akira’s experience at the alternative high school, she was able to articulate the role of African-American faculty and staff members in helping her to achieve academic success from high school to the present. She was fortunate to interact with high school instructors who really cared about her progress—academically and personally. Akira shared,

> My teachers, when I was in high school, called me every morning to make sure I got up for school. Those are the teachers that still call to check up on me today, because those are the ones that I’m like, “You really cared.” And they still care. You know, so, knowing that you have that kind of interest in me will make a bigger impact.

Akira is a serious student with many aspirations. After graduation, Akira’s goal is to transfer to a four-year institution and eventually to pursue a master’s
degree. She receives significant support from her family as well as African-American role models and mentors at the college.

**Participant 4: Monique—Welcoming faculty/staff connections.** Monique, a vibrant and fun-loving student, is 21 years old. She has been enrolled at the college for five semesters. Majoring in childhood development, Monique’s tenure at the college has been prolonged due to financial challenges. With the goal of graduating in 2011, Monique is planning to transfer to a four-year institution. She has a passion for working with young children; thus, Monique seeks to manage and own a daycare center in the future. Monique has been involved in many extracurricular activities, such as organizations to promote academic excellence and a campus environment supportive of women of color to promote leadership and unity.

Monique’s experiences and perspectives regarding her interactions with African-American faculty and staff are quite diverse. She has enrolled in courses that were taught by African-American instructors in high school and at the community college, and had accessed minority support services. In fact, throughout the interview, she made a point of expressing that she seeks to enroll in courses taught by African-American instructors because she feels more comfortable in their classrooms. Monique shared,

I don’t know what it was, or if it was just a different connection. I just wanted to be in the [African-American instructor’s] class because I felt that she was like me. I just knew my teacher was White and she was Black. I just wanted to be in the Black teacher’s classroom.
Monique has a deep appreciation and respect for the community college. She enjoys the solid faculty/staff-student relationships that she has established. She attributes her academic persistence to those established relationships and expressed her gratitude throughout the in-depth interview.

**Participant 5: Nicole—Valuing interpersonal connections with others.**

Nicole is a 20-year-old full-time student pursuing a physical education degree. She has been enrolled at the college for four semesters. Nicole is a mature, outgoing, and friendly student. She is involved in minority support services and serves as a member of the cheerleading and dance teams. Nicole is an ardent believer in health and fitness; therefore, she is planning to transfer to a four-year institution in the fall of 2011 and continue her pursuit of physical education.

Nicole’s experience in high school was very different from those of the other participants. Unlike the others, she attended a predominantly White high school. Nicole thrived in this diverse environment and connected with teachers and higher administrators for support. Nicole focused on her academics and sports. She shared, “But basically, my high school experience was good. I had lots of counselors, lots of friends. I also was good friends with lots of the deans and teachers as well.”

Nicole expressed that she enjoys attending the college. She expresses gratitude for the support that she receives from the African-American staff, specifically in the minority student support office. Nicole shared, “I’ve enjoyed my time at the college. . . . I feel that [the African-American staff member] has helped me—he pushed me to be where I’m right now.” When Nicole’s mother became unemployed, she had to work and contribute to the household; however, with the
support of and through ongoing interactions with key individuals at the college, she has continued to flourish academically and personally.

Participant 6: Scott—Embracing the wisdom of others. Scott, a mild-mannered and soft-spoken student, has been enrolled at the college for four semesters. At the age of 23, Scott is pursuing an art degree. He is interested in transferring to a four-year institution to continue his educational journey in graphic design. He is currently employed at a company in his field of study and participating in an internship to enhance his personal and professional talents and knowledge. Scott is a member of the Student Government, serving as the “voice” for students enrolled at the college. He has also been a member of Brothers 2 Brothers, an organization that provides leadership development opportunities for male African-American college students, such as attending workshops and conferences to improve their communication and conflict-resolution skills and providing mentorship connections with professionals in the world of work.

Scott identifies his mother as the driving force in encouraging him to attend college. He stated that his mother was unable to attend college; however, she instilled in him the importance of receiving an education: “Most definitely, my mom has been a support mechanism. She’s really always on me about education because she never went to college. She wants me to succeed.”

Scott learned valuable lessons from his siblings about the do’s and don’ts in the academic world by observing their educational pursuits. Scott has used those valuable lessons as a source of motivation as a learner. In fact, Scott is very intentional in his interactions with African-American faculty and staff members at
the college. In other words, he seeks the support and guidance of African-American staff and faculty members because he sees himself in them. Scott finds that he thrives on those interactions because their stories are reflective of the challenges and successes that he experiences as an African-American student, particularly as a male of color. In fact, Scott has learned to navigate the college community while building strong mentorship relationships with several African-American staff and faculty members.

**Participant 7: Michael—Valuing “give-back” to others.** Michael is a 27-year-old adult student. He has a strong personality and is very expressive in his communication. Michael is a full-time student pursuing a culinary degree and is actively involved in minority support services. Although he is a full-time student with a job, he still finds time to be involved in campus life. Michael is a member of the Black Student Union, a student organization that celebrates Black history through programs and events, and Brothers 2 Brothers.

Interested in transferring to a specialized school to master his culinary knowledge and skills, Michael prides himself on “beating the odds” and enrolling in college. As one who was introduced to the “streets” at an early age, Michael uses his experiences to educate others by encouraging them to pursue an education. Michael explained, “If I can mentor someone else not to step in those challenging footsteps that I did, maybe they won’t. I can stop somebody from doing it the hard way by listening to my story.”
Michael understands the value of an education and speaks candidly about his educational experiences as an African-American male enrolled at a community college.

As community college students, these seven participants are striving to achieve academic and personal success now and in the future. Although they are similar in terms of their race and their enrollment at a community college, they all have a story to tell regarding their perceptions and experiences regarding the role of African-American faculty and staff. Listening to their voices regarding those perceptions and experiences resulted in the researcher’s identifying six emergent themes for this study.

**The Emergent Themes**

Here, the researcher reports the findings of the data analysis through which I explore the two research questions. The accounts of the participants’ interactions and experiences with African-American faculty and staff were captured during the in-depth interviews, resulting in the emergence of six themes. These participants’ stories came alive and helped the researcher to shape the themes in exploring how African-American faculty and staff members influence the success of African-American students.

The ultimate goal of this study was to capture African-American students’ interactions with African-American faculty and staff members at one Illinois community college regarding their roles in contributing to African-American students’ success. The opportunity to listen to their “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54) and explore their perceptions regarding those interactions was not only
fulfilling but also educational. The themes, as stated previously, are: (1) race and shared experiences matter; (2) the role of surrogate parents; (3) “a place like home”; (4) interpersonal communicative connection; (5) the importance of role models and visualizing success; and (6) interactions provide motivation. These themes provide a working framework for exploring the experiences and perceptions of African-American students in their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members.

1. Race and shared experiences matter. This is because African-American students perceive that they share a common bond with African-American faculty and staff members and as persons of color.

2. The role of surrogate parents. African-American faculty and staff members provide guidance and support for African-American students, serving as surrogate parents to help them adjust to college.

3. “A place like home.” The presence of and interactions with African-American faculty and staff members create a warm and inviting learning environment for African-American students.

4. Interpersonal communicative connection. African-American faculty and staff members provide interpersonal communicative connections for African-American students. African-American faculty and staff members were clear, concise, and receptive.

5. The importance of role models and visualizing success. African-American faculty and staff members offer African-American students the opportunity to see role models in leadership positions. African-American
students can visualize themselves being successful because of their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members.

6. Interactions provide motivation. African-American students are motivated academically, professionally, and socially through faculty/staff-student interactions. Interactions with African-American faculty and staff members are significant for African-American students as they pursue academic and personal success.

**Theme 1: Race and shared experiences matter.** Six of the seven participants indicated that they perceived that African-American faculty and staff members understand their educational, personal, and social needs, as the following excerpts illustrate.

[African-Americans] have the same background [as me]. They understand on a more, I want to say on a more personal level, the things that we might go through. Like, they may have encountered some of the things I went through in my past, or I may be now encountering some of the things they went through in their past, and they can help me to get through [those challenges] because they've experienced it... And other teachers, they just [have not experienced those issues]. [Nicole]

Being a student of color [and attending college], having people of color in some of the staff makes a big difference. You're not even aware of it; you feel more accepted. You're more comfortable. If you're going to a certain area, and there's nobody of the same race of you, you're in a foreign country. You can't relate to nobody, no matter how hard you try, so, I guess just having the
atmosphere of having people of the same race, it makes a difference.

[Vincent]

Although many of the participants commented on the rich diversity at the college coupled with their appreciation for differences and inclusion, the importance of interacting with faculty and staff members who “look like them” was also apparent during the in-depth interviews, as David, Monique, and Akira expressed:

[I’ve had] African-American faculty and staff push me to [achieve academic success], who believed in me, but I’ve also had Caucasian and Latino staff who pushed me and say they believed in me. But when it’s coming from the African-American, somebody who looks like me, who knows what I’m feeling and who’s gone through some of the things that I’ve gone through, there’s something extra there. Because we share that common characteristic, that common trait of being African-Americans, there’s something more there. You know, “I want all of my students to make it, but I want you to make it.”

[David]

I will [seek] them out. I [would] prefer African-American teachers. If I could have all of my teachers be African-American, I—I’m not going to say that. Because I—I do love diversity. But at the same time, I just feel there’s a more in-depth connection, that it’s not just educational. [Monique]

[She said,] “You’re [going] to be fabulous,” and she’s White, and she makes me feel just as good as [African-American staff member] does. But [African-American staff member] is what led me to her in the first place; he helped me
to see her. So I believe it’s possible to build these same relationships [with other races] but I think it’s something about the fact that [African-Americans] look like me, and you’ve gone through this, and it just, it makes it seem so much closer to home. And it lets me know I can do it too. [Akira]

The fact that all of the participants indicated that they could envision achieving success because of someone who “looked like them” inside and outside of the classroom environment is powerful, but it also validates the significance of racial connectivity for African-American students. This shared experience was expressed as a universal theme by a majority of the participants. From many of the participants’ viewpoints, sharing the same race and ethnicity as the African-American faculty and staff members equates with a strong sense of a “shared experience” that only African-Americans can understand and appreciate.

As the African-American staff and faculty members shared their stories—their successes and challenges—the participants learned life lessons from the faculty and staff members that extended outside of the classroom environment, thus creating, to some extent, surrogate parental support for many of the participants.

**Theme 2: The role of surrogate parents.** Many of the participants viewed the role of African-American faculty and staff members as that of surrogate parents who provided them with unconditional support. Thus, many of the participants reflected on how they have received ongoing support from African-American faculty and staff members that resulted in their persistence in college, including Akira:

I need somebody to take interest. When I was younger, my mom had my younger sisters, and so she couldn't be there, and then my father isn't really
in the picture. So there really wasn’t anybody who was invested in me: “Hey, [Akira], how’s it going with...?” you know. “How’s this going with you?” Or, “How’s that going?” And you know, “How do you feel about this?” So when I come here and I get that, it makes me feel a lot more relaxed, and it makes me able to branch out and experience better things, newer things. [Akira]

Referring to a particular African-American staff member from a minority student support department, Nicole said:

He is a big help to me. I can’t express how much help he has given me this year and last year as well, because my mom lost her job last January, and we had been struggling. I had to work and attend school, and I was failing in my classes, but he kind of helped push me along to get back to where I needed [to be]. And he’s still doing that as well. He kind of placed out stepping stones to get me to where I am now. [Nicole]

Several of the participants have faced adversity due to family and financial challenges; however, because of the ongoing support provided by African-American faculty and staff members, they were resilient and persisted in college. They view African-Americans as supporters encouraging them to remain in college even when they face personal challenges. The participants expressed that many African-American faculty and staff members serve as surrogate parents—an extended family—in helping them to achieve college success. In addition to providing the participants with familial guidance and support, another theme included the expectations that African-American faculty members will provide them with “a
place like [a] home” environment where they can feel a sense of belonging at the community college.

**Theme 3: “A place like home.”** In addition to exploring the importance of African-Americans’ presence in the community college setting, the participants described the campus as inviting and welcoming with supportive faculty and staff members. The following excerpts capture these perspectives:

I enjoy being at home because my family is really welcoming. They are a support system for me, and I feel like this school is a big support system. I feel that, basically, when I come here, I’m getting the same support that I need to get at home, so I’m not ever out of my element. The campus environment here is fun. Everybody is pretty welcoming, you know. I enjoy being here. [Nicole]

The atmosphere here, it’s warm, welcoming, and inviting. So, yeah, it’s really what you make [of your time in college]. [David]

I like it. It’s inviting. It’s always helpful. I’ve never—only one time I can say I’ve had a bad encounter with a faculty or staff [member] that I didn’t care for. But they’re always giving a helping hand. It’s like they try to make it so you can’t fail. That’s how I look at it. I could say it’s something like a home environment. I would say this school, it would be my home away from home because I could come here and go to the [the minority student support department] and study like if I was to go in my room and close my door. So it is similar to my home environment. It does give me that same feeling. . . . [Monique]
Nicole’s classroom experience is one example of how the presence of an African-American instructor can influence one’s motivation to engage in the learning process:

When I walked into the classroom initially, I had a welcoming feeling. Like, when you walk in your home and everybody’s like, “Hello, how are you? How was your day?” I had that feeling when I walked into [the African-American instructor’s] class, so it made it so much better. It made me feel comfortable. I sat in the front seat because I’m usually so used to sitting in the back, but when I walked into her class, I was right directly in the front so I could listen and be attentive to her. [Nicole]

All of the participants feel a sense of belongingness—a part of the community—in college. All of the participants commented that the presence of African-American faculty and staff members on campus enhanced their positive experience at the college. They also commented on feeling comfortable communicating with African-American faculty and staff members.

**Theme 4: Interpersonal communicative connection.** Every participant interviewed spoke about his or her connection with African-American faculty and staff members at the community college. They feel comfortable interacting and engaging in insightful dialogue with African-American faculty and staff members. A particularly important aspect regarding those interactions between the African-American faculty/staff members and the students centered on communication.

Referring to African-American staff members, Monique, Scott, and Michael said:
It’s the language. I can’t pinpoint the differences, but—it’s just the way he [communicated to me] to make sure I understood. But on the other hand, when I spoke with the non-African-American advisor, [I did not understand]. I don’t know, the way [African-Americans] explain things, or the way it’s told to me, it’s understood. [Monique]

Anytime I have a problem or when there’s something on my mind I want to talk about, I feel real comfortable talking to [the African-American staff members] about it. It helps me stay up and stay motivated. It makes me feel good when I [leave] this school. I feel like, “OK, I need to start doing this. I need to start doing that.” And...I, I never fail to say that once—once the conversation is done. [Scott]

I think my main support and help that I have came from not even the teachers itself; it’s the advisors, and the African . . . African-American advisors [staff] members] at the college. I go there to them, it’s like, I can talk to them. It’s like, “I’m not doing well.” [The African-American staff members are respectful to me]. They’re like, “Man, you know you’re going do better.” The [African-America staff members] just keep it plain and simple; they don’t try to feed me no line, no nothing. [Michael]

In addition to interpersonal communicative connections, the participants feel that, because of these characteristics, background, and traits, African-American faculty and staff members share a common understanding and perspective regarding their experiences in college. In turn, the students view African-American faculty and staff members as role models.
Theme 5: Role models and visualizing success. All seven of the participants expressed that they have a good rapport with African-American faculty and staff members. Serving as role models and motivating students to persist in college is perceived as an important role for African-American faculty and staff members by the participants, particularly when those interactions occur between African-Americans. Not only do they believe that African-Americans should be role models, they also stressed that providing proper guidance and referrals to trustworthy faculty and staff members for support was also important. David, Vincent, and Monique shared:

[African-Americans] come from the same communities. We’ve gone through the same experiences, in life. So, if they’re really pushing me, which . . . I know they’d be pushing all their students, but because we come from similar backgrounds, from similar communities, and they’re “Look, you got to do it. You got to do it.” I know they’re giving me the extra oomph. [David] When they see you doing something good, or bad, whatever it is, they’ll get you back on the right track. They guide you; they give you guidance. [Vincent]

[The African-American staff member is] always communicating [with me]. Making sure I’m on top of things. [The African-American staff member] does it all the time. “I spoke with your teacher.” And just that . . . it lets me know that you’re checking up on me. That make me stay on guard, make me continue to be on top of the things that I have to do. They . . . like I said, they’re always there to give help. [Monique]
Three of the participants indicated that, while they have a great appreciation for other races and cultures, they recognized that the presence of African-Americans in the college provided them role models and leaders in action. They are motivated because they can visualize being successful in their future professions because of the presence of and their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members, as expressed by Nicole, Vincent, and Scott:

Being here with one race is one thing, I think, but adding to all the races it definitely helps, but having people of African-American race, it kind of helps you feel like, well, if they did it, you can do it too! If, you know, they are at this level of their education, if they’re at this professional level, then I can maybe one day be at this professional level, and I can strive to be there one day. [Nicole]

Just having one person of . . . represent something . . . of color, of the same race, it makes them feel like, “I want to do that too. I think I can do it.” But, then, you know, in your mind, you’re thinking like, “You know, I don’t think I could be a biology professor. I don’t think I could be a doctor. I don’t know any Black doctors. I don’t know any black lawyers,” you know. But when you see one doing that, you think that you can aspire to do those things too. [Vincent]

You know, you’re seeing a successful African-American right there in front of you. And you don’t really get too many of those right now in today’s world. So it’s just like . . . it’s like you can really get advice; you can get good,
comfortable conversations. You can [discuss] anything with [the African-American staff]. [Scott]

Michael indicated that, if more African-American faculty and staff members were hired, African-American students would have a stronger support system in college—more people to talk with to receive guidance and support, as this excerpt illustrates:

So I feel if there were more African-American teachers at the college, I think, as an African-American student, we would be able to have someone to go talk to, and get understanding and help, that guidance of keeping us just on the right path, just giving us that positive energy, “Go ahead, tiger.” [Michael]

In addition to the participants’ expressing the importance of role models in the community college setting, they also received encouragement to pursue their goals from African-American faculty and staff members that motivated them.

**Theme 6: Interactions provide motivation.** Each of the participants expressed that interacting with faculty and staff members motivated them personally. From an inspirational word to a handshake in the hallway from an African-American faculty member, the participants feel that those interactions motivated them to want to do more—to want to succeed in college. David and Scott pointed out that, when they interact with individuals who have similar backgrounds and race, they feel inspired. However, all of them expressed that the presence of African-Americans in the community college setting makes a difference in their lives in different ways:
A professor here at the college really encourages me. Every time he sees me in the hallway, where if I see him first, or every time we pass in hallway, he walks up to me and hugs me, shakes my hand, and tells me, “I’m proud of you. Keep doing it.” He told me the other day, he said, “Every time I see you, it warms my heart.” He said, “When I look at you,” he said that, “I know one day I’ll be able to rest.” And so, when you hear things like that, I cannot lose. You see what I’m saying? I cannot lose. You know, there’s so much riding on this. I cannot lose. [David]

One time I had a conversation with [an African-American staff member from the minority student support department]. It was that time where I felt like, “Do I have what it takes to be successful?” I guess it’s that fear in me. And that’s when I asked him that same question, you know, when he was my age did he [have] that same situation. And he told me, which is true, that everybody experiences that, and that’s what helped [to] motivate [me] to become successful. [Scott]

Those interactions, they’re more—they’re more open and friendly. Like, I know in Project Achieve, anyone in that office, whether it be school-related or personal, I can talk to them, no matter what the situation is. And, one thing that I noticed, with all staff [members], like, my African-American teachers, they are more willing—I’m not going to say more willing, they do, always—if I was to see them in the hallways, they speak. As versus, other teachers don’t. They might look, but they don’t speak, unless I speak. I’m not
going to say they don’t speak unless I speak, but that’s just the way it seems. That’s just my perception. [Monique]

Although many of the participants faced adversity and challenges prior to and during college, they continued to stay focused on achieving their goals. Feeling inspired to remain in college was attributed to their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members. Therefore, empowering and inspiring African-American students to remain focused and committed to education served as an imperative role for African-American faculty and staff members. Monique shared:

[I said,] “I’m quitting. I’m done. I give up.” And [an African-American faculty member from the minority student support department] said, “No, you’re almost there. Why are you [going to] quit now?” And that was just the extra motivation and that extra boost that kept me going, that keeps me determined. And then to see [an African-American faculty member] as a prime example, to see him at a young age, not too much older than me, and he’s in a [prominent] position. So just to see that gives me the motivation, like, “Dang, he made it. I can do this, so let me get my stuff together.”

[Monique]

I can remember in the mornings, when I would come through the door, [the African-American staff member] would be standing there waiting on me. And she would tell me, she said, “I believe you’re going to do all right.” She said, “I believe in you.” She would [place] her hand on my shoulder and say, “I believe you’re going to do all right,” she said, “but you’ve got to believe in yourself.” [David]
This interaction contributes to African-American students’ feeling a sense of belonging and motivation. The motivational factor was expressed throughout the in-depth interviews for each participant; however, only a few excerpts were shared here. The participants perceived and experienced this as they interacted with African-American faculty and staff members at the college. For many, those interactions ultimately “saved” their educational careers because they were considering dropping out. It is those interactions—encouraging words and proper guidance—that have the potential to guide a student to continue college.

The researcher documented the participants’ final thoughts during the conclusion of the in-depth interviews; one final question was asked to bring closure to the interview. Although the interviews were semi-structured, this question captured the essence of the research study and provided the participants with the opportunity to summarize their thoughts regarding the African-American faculty/staff-student interactions. The question was: “From your perspective, do you think it’s important for African-American students to interact with African-American faculty and staff members? Why or why not?” From the answers, the researcher was able to glean each student’s perspective on why those interactions are important, coupled with exploring the question of whether those interactions truly mattered. With the exception of one student, Michael, who commented, “I believe that it is important for any student to interact with any teachers here. . . . It doesn’t matter if [that person is] white, black, green, blue, or whatever,” the remaining six participants feel strongly about African-American faculty/staff-
student interactions. In fact, many of them indicated that it is essential for those interactions to occur both formally and informally:

"It's vitally important. It's a different experience. It could be portrayed in several different views, but without that, it's just . . . something missing. I can't say because I have had that experience, so it would be . . . I just can't even imagine, I don't know, what would be the perspective of a student that hasn't had an African-American teacher. [Monique]

It is critical. I believe that it is critical. Because if you don't have that type of exposure or the stimulation. . . . Let's face it. We have, you know, throughout history, Black people that are now trying to create their own past and their own culture. [Vincent]

I think it's definitely important, one hundred and fifty million percent important. Just because of what I said earlier about being able to know that there's somebody who's gone through what you're trying to go through now, and seeing that it can be done, it's possible [Akira]

Definitely. I feel that they should have interaction because it helps us to, you know, like I said before, feel like we're at home. When we're with the African-American community, you know, there's a sense of, I guess, belonging and purpose. [Nicole]

These interactions that the participants experienced affected the participants' feelings of being integrated into the college community. Tinto (1987, 1993) posited that student integration equates to student persistence in higher education; therefore, since these participants feel a sense of belonging as members
of the academic community, they have been able to connect with faculty, staff, and students to help them persist in college.

**Summary**

The previous section reports the participants’ perceptions and experiences in their interactions with African-American staff and faculty members. The six themes are noteworthy in exploring how community colleges can help African-American students achieve success. Overall, these participants have strong perceptions regarding the roles of African-Americans in the community college setting in terms of supporting their success. Not only do they expect African-Americans to support their endeavors, but many of the participants also stressed that their presence on campus contributed to them feeling comfortable and at home. In addition, their experiences with African-Americans faculty and staff members have encouraged them to strive for success.

These six emerging themes are a testament to how seven African-American students view the role of African-American faculty and staff members at the community college. The participants shared that race and shared experiences matter for them as students. Not only does the presence of African-Americans make a difference for these students, but they also see the role as parental, a part of their “place like home” as community college students. Moreover, they feel comfortable communicating with African-American faculty and staff members because they view them as role models. In turn, they can see themselves (visualizing) walking in their shoes, serving as a leader one day, because of these interactions. Finally, participants value those connections (interactions) with African-American faculty
and staff members because they motivate them to reach their academic, personal, and professional goals.

The findings that emerged indicated how African-American students perceive that African-American faculty and staff members influence their academic and personal success as community college students. The participants’ perceptions and experiences regarding the role of African-American faculty and staff members were, overall, very positive. In the next chapter, the researcher analyzes and discusses the six emergent themes and their relationship to the research literature.
Chapter Five
Analysis and Discussion

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research questions and the emergent themes. The researcher also revisits the research questions and answers them. This chapter continues with a reconsideration of Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model. The researcher provides an analysis of the model and its relationship to the study’s findings. Each stage of the model will be discussed, along with an illustration of how the model can be used as a framework for exploring student persistence at community colleges.

Revisiting the Research Questions

The questions that guided the research study were:

1. What are the perceptions of African-American students regarding roles of African-American faculty and staff in contributing to their success at a community college in Illinois?

2. What are the experiences of African-American students in their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members?

The following is a summary responding to these questions. African-American students’ perceptions regarding the role of African-American faculty and staff members in contributing to their success are:

- that African-American faculty and staff members share a common bond due to their race and shared experiences; therefore, African-American faculty and staff members are perceived as relating better to the needs of
African-American students through their communication and interactions;

- that African-American faculty and staff members serve as “student advocates,” providing them support and contributing to an inviting campus environment; and

- that African-American faculty and staff members are perceived as role models for African-American students.

All the participants have experienced positive interactions with African-American faculty and staff members that have contributed to their academic and personal successes at the community college. Several of the participants stressed that interacting with African-American faculty and staff members is critically important because of the impact that those interactions have on their development and growth as students and future leaders. The following section further discusses the themes in relationship to the research literature.

**Race and shared experiences matter.** Six of the seven participants indicated that race and shared experiences matter in their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members because they feel that the African-American faculty and staff members have a better understanding of their personal needs. All of the participants, with the exception of Michael, expressed that they felt more comfortable connecting with faculty and staff members who “looked like them.” Michael, on the other hand, expressed that, while he welcomes the opportunity to connect with African-American faculty and staff members, it is not a necessity. Michael is more open to building a rapport with faculty and staff members,
regardless of their race, who embrace his uniqueness as an African-American student.

As indicated in the literature review, Tinto (1987, 1993) and Cross (1970, 1991) asserted that students come to college with pre-entry attributes that shape their development: academic abilities, family background, socioeconomic status, and other factors (Tinto, 1987, 1993). While all students come to college with pre-entry attributes, African-American students may experience pre-encounter incidents that shape and affect their perceptions and experience relating to their race (Cross, 1970, 1991). In other words, they face challenges such as tokenism, racial identity development, and racism.

For many of the participants, race and shared experiences mattered. Furthermore, another factor mattered for several of the male participants: gender. In exploring this perspective further, it should be noted that all of the African-American male participants interacted mostly with African-American male faculty and staff members. In a study titled “Staying the Course: Narratives of African American Males Who Have Completed a Baccalaureate Degree,” Warde (2008) cited McClure (2006) Harper (2006), who found that African-American males who interact with African-American college faculty, staff, and peers of the same gender tend to experience greater satisfaction in college. Warde (2008) further stressed that these supportive relationships help African-Americans remain resolute in pursuing their goals to graduate.

The participants clearly believe that one’s race and cultural background play an important role in the college setting. In fact, several of the participants indicated
that they seek to connect with African-American faculty and staff members because of their race. They have a perception that African-American faculty and staff share a common bond—race and culture. This common bond “is a surface-level manifestation based on what we look like yet has deep implications in how we are treated” (Chavez & Guido-DíBrito, 1999, p. 40). The participants assume that these individuals (African-American faculty/staff members) have a better understanding of the challenges and issues they encounter as African-American students.

The role of surrogate parents. A surrogate parent takes on the characteristics and responsibilities of a parent in his/her interactions with others. This role can best be described as a supportive relationship between two or more people. All the participants welcomed and thrived upon these supportive and trustworthy relationships. This type of relationship has the potential to help African-American students’ flourish and develop while supporting their college integration. For example, for African-American males:

Research suggests that family support is likely the most critical contributor to helping African-American male students to successfully overcome some of the obstacles to academic success, such as cultural and social isolation and fears of academic success. (Warde, 2008, p. 60)

Although Warde (2008) is referring to a biological family support system as a contributor to college success for African-American students, this family support system frequently extends outside the biological family realm. Research indicated that “African-Americans tend to ascribe to a collectivistic, extended family structure that emphasize[s] cohesion, support and intimacy” (Love, 1993, p. 33). For many of
the participants, the community college played a critical role in helping them remain focused and motivated, particularly during difficult times. They sought the guidance of African-American faculty and staff members to navigate the college environment when they were facing challenges in school and at home.

As reported in the research literature, many first-generation and low-income students attend community colleges (Roman, 2007). Wilson (2004) asserted that students who are in a subgroup such as low-income and first-generation are considered “at-risk” and may not achieve their academic goals. Moreover, research has indicated that “student background characteristics that were found to correlate to successful achievement include family income level, educational level of parents, and student’s academic preparation” (Jones, 2001, p. 11).

The majority of the participants (six of seven) were raised in single-parent households, and five of the seven are first-generation college students. Parents who are college graduates can assist their children in navigating the college environment while “providing invaluable psychological support and encouragement and informal suggestions. . . .” (Jones, 2001, p. 11). Although five of the participants could not reap the same benefits as those with parents who have attended or graduated from college, they were still successful at connecting with African-American faculty and staff members who served as their surrogate parents.

Many of the participants faced personal challenges, from Vincent feeling like a failure to Nicole dealing with her mother’s losing a job. In overcoming these challenges, Vincent and Nicole explained that they had turned to their community college support system to help them cope and respond to these challenges. As
documented by Warde (2008), when African-American students have supportive relationships, particularly with same-race faculty and staff members as well as their peers, they build stronger resilience skills to achieve success. They were resilient in facing these challenges; in turn, they continued to flourish in college. As such, many of the participants view their connection with African-American faculty members as an extension of their homes.

These participants received guidance, support and follow-up, and follow-through about their academic performance and personal challenges from African-American faculty and staff members. Not only did the participants receive positive reinforcement to remain in college, there were also moments when they experienced “tough love” from African-American faculty and staff members to keep them persisting; this type of tough love is often shared between a parent and his/her child. Because of this supportive surrogate-parent rapport, the participants indicated that the college felt “like home.”

“A place like home.” “A place like home” is an expression indicating that one feels comfortable in an environment. This comfort level is similar to how one feels in his/her home and community. The participants felt comfortable in their daily encounters and interactions as members of the college community. All the participants stressed that the campus is welcoming and inviting, which contributes to their positive experiences at the community college. A participant explained this perspective thus: “I enjoy being at home because my family is really welcoming. They are a support system for me, and I feel like this school is a big support system. I
feel that, basically, when I come here, I’m getting the same support that I need to get at home.”

African-American students may perceive that a campus is inviting and welcoming when African-American faculty and staff members are represented, visible, and active on campus (Love, 1993). Jackson (2001) stated, “The presence or lack of African-Americans in administration of a college or university provides a sense of whether an African-American student will or will not feel welcomed at the institution” (p. 94).

Love (1993) and Green (1989) asserted that having African-Americans on college campuses can inspire African-American students to achieve college success. Because African-American faculty and staff serve as mentors for African-American students, they play a role in creating a welcoming campus (Love, 1993). In fact, the presence of African-Americans is important for the participants because it created an environment in which they felt at home.

African-American students benefit from interacting with African-American faculty members because they feel welcomed and motivated. More importantly, these interactions can provide African-American students a chance to establish supportive relationships with faculty, staff, and other students. In turn, these interactions benefit them by enhancing their college experiences while fostering their leadership, independence, and academic goals. In addition to providing support for students, faculty and staff will benefit from the colleagueship of African-American faculty and staff members, as expressed by Branch (2001):
African-American faculty members benefit their institutions in ways that are qualitatively and substantively different from European ethnic groups and other ethnic groups. African-American faculty members bring to the university valuable resources, perspectives, critical reasoning skills, and problem-solving abilities. . . and ways of dealing with students that are unique to them as African-American faculty. (p. 177)

**Interpersonal communicative connection.** Many of the participants expressed that they felt comfortable engaging in conversations with African-American faculty and staff members. One participant stated, “It’s the language. I can’t pinpoint the differences, but—it’s just the way he [communicated to me] to make sure I understood.” The style in which the African-American staff member communicated was understood and embraced by the participant. Every participant expressed that he/she felt comfortable communicating with African-American faculty and staff members. This comfort level between African-American faculty/staff and the participants created an environment in which interpersonal communicative connections were developed and maintained, resulting in the participants’ building a rapport with African-American faculty and staff.

In *African-American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture* by Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003), the authors introduced African-American communication in the form of a rhetorical question. The question was adopted from the work of Richard Wright, a sociolinguist, who asked, “If communication can be defined as the universe of forms, processes, and structures that governs how we
relate to the world, then aren’t there forms, processes, and structures that are particular to African-Americans?” (p. 1).

Without a doubt, African-Americans, as well as those of other ethnic groups, may view the universe differently and relate to it through different lenses and perspectives (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) asserted that to fully understand African-American communication, one must explore other factors such as “cultural values, norms, mores and beliefs that inform communicative behaviors” (p. 1). It should be noted that African-Americans do not have one universal communicative form; however, understanding what influenced the study’s participants to express this communicative connectivity might be related to the African-American staff and faculty members’ racial identity.

For years, researchers have sought to explore and understand the communication differences between racial groups (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Orbe, 2004). Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) viewed cultural communication as an important factor in the interaction that occurs between African-Americans. In fact, they asserted that culture and communication play significant and related roles in influencing student learning and how faculty and staff members connect with diverse students (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). “Communication is meaningful and because of the culture that frames it, and culture must be expressed to exist” (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 2). For many of the participants, the language—how they spoke and what they said—made a difference. They were open to how African-American faculty and staff members communicated with them. One of the participants, Monique, indicated that she could not fully explain why she was more
open and accepting of listening to an African-American faculty member, but she stated that “it’s the language.”

All the participants indicated that they are motivated by their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members; in turn, the participants were receptive to what was shared and listened to the African-American faculty and staff members. Moreover, they perceived that African-American faculty and staff members have a greater understanding of their challenges; thus, they are more receptive to their guidance and knowledge. This receptivity could have been influenced by the fact that the participants view African-American faculty and staff members as role models; thus, the participants respect their roles at the community college.

**The importance of role models and visualizing success.** Among the emergent themes, the one theme that was consistent for all the participants was the important role that race plays in their educational success. Interacting with people who “look like them” in authoritative roles was a prominent perception and experience for the participants. Did it provide them “visual validation” to witness an African-American teach a class, conveying to them that, one day, they could be in his or her shoes? Was it clearly a comfort for these participants because of the color of the person’s skin?

Even though many of the participants commented on embracing diversity, the importance of connecting and interacting with faculty and staff members of the same racial group was more central. This concept of African-American students’
interacting with faculty and staff members who “looked like them” indicates how important it is that they be exposed to African-American role models.

It is important for all students to be exposed to and interact with good role models in a college setting. Role models can encourage students and influence them to succeed as students and professionals. It is even more critical for African-American students, males in particular, to interact with positive role models (Warde, 2008). African-American students tend to have lower graduation rates compared to other racially diverse students (Warde, 2008). The study's participants were able to interact with African-American faculty and staff members, both males and females. In fact, all of the male participants interacted mostly with African-American males.

For community colleges, this notion of role models has some significance in understanding how African-Americans perceive the role of African-American staff members in contributing to their success. Interacting with faculty and staff members who “look like them” can only be achieved when the college staff is reflective of the student population. Diverse students are arriving at community colleges; thus, these institutions will need to embrace the changing faces of the student population (Wilson, 2004). Research has indicated that faculty/staff-student interactions influence college success for many students, helping them to matriculate in college (Parker, 1997; Coleman, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). In fact, Tinto (1987, 1993) asserted, “Those encounters which go beyond the mere formalities of academic work to broader intellectual and social issues and which are seen by students as warm and
rewarding appear to be strongly associated with continued persistence” (p. 57).

Moreover, Astin’s (1993) theory of student-faculty involvement was emphasized in the literature review. Astin’s involvement theory (1993) stresses that the more students interact and engage with faculty in a positive manner, the more likely they will be to commit to their academic goals; thus, creating those interaction opportunities for African-American students is crucial.

Establishing African-American mentor-protégé connections will be difficult when few African-American staff and faculty members are available to serve in that role (Warde, 2008). At many community colleges, the faculty and staff do not reflect the diversity of the student body.

**Interactions provide motivation.** All the participants claimed to have felt motivated and inspired in their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members. In fact, during difficult times, they seek support from African-American faculty and staff members to keep them focused and on track. Whether the interactions are in-depth discussions with African-American faculty and staff members behind closed doors or friendly, short conversations in passing, these participants are motivated by those interactions.

Mortimore and Wall (2009) contended that the study of student motivation is critical in exploring academic success for African-American students. Understanding the factors that influence their motivation is essential in supporting African-American students in achieving their academic and personal goals (Mortimore & Wall, 2009). The term “motivation” has been traditionally defined in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as
“[engaging] in a task or behavior for its own sake, whereas extrinsic motivation is motivation to engage in a task or behavior as a result of some outside factor” (Mortimore & Wall, 2009, p. 31). In other words, intrinsic motivation is defined as a person’s internal drive and spirit to facilitate success; it is important for African-American students to possess this drive to help them accomplish their academic and professional goals. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation involves external factors such as interactions with faculty and staff members. As Mortimore and Wall (2009) contended, “although motivation is an internal process, several outside and contextual factors influence an individual’s motivation” (p. 31). For the participants, connecting with African-American faculty and staff members contributed to their feeling motivated and inspired. These interactions have the potential to keep African-American students focused and uplifted; thus, in turn, they continued to thrive and persistence as community college students.

In addition to examining those faculty/staff-student interactions that affected the participants’ community college persistence, as expressed through the themes, the researcher explored the relevance of Tinto’s Institutional Student Departure Model (1987, 1993) to this study.

**Tinto’s Student Departure Model Revisited**

Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model represents the stages that facilitate student departure from college. This model provided the researcher with a theoretical framework to explore the research questions. Briefly, Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Model of Institutional Student Departure (1987, 1993) includes five stages.
1. Pre-entry attributes. Students enter college with academic, personal, and social characteristics, values, and beliefs (Tinto, 1987, 1993). These attributes are developed and shaped by prior educational and personal experiences (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

2. Goals and commitment. Students also enter college with their intentional goals as college students, as well as their internal and external commitments (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

3. Institutional experiences. This is the stage when students interact with the two college systems: academic (formal) systems and social (informal) systems (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The academic system can best be described as academic instruction and performance (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The informal system is described as co-curricular activities that students engage in, such as student activities (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

4. Academic and social integration. This stage is when students experience a sense of belonging as a member of the educational community, having experienced rewarding encounters in their interactions with the institution (Tinto, 1987, 1993). This stage also represents a critical point in which students may not have experienced rewarding and positive interactions with the institutions; thus, a student may leave the college (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

5. Revisiting goals and commitments. This is the stage in which students revisit their goals and commitments as college students and determine whether to remain in college (Tinto, 1987, 1993).
Tinto (1987, 1993) placed a lot of emphasis on the external community, since it can impact a student’s journey in college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Tinto (1987, 1993) postulated that students may have to disconnect themselves from the external community to fully integrate into the college community. There are three movements that facilitate integration: separation, transition, and integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Stage 1: Pre-entry attributes. Each of the participants entered college with pre-entry attributes. For example, Vincent viewed himself as a failure before enrolling in college. Another participant, Scott, indicated that he felt as though he was not prepared for college. Moreover, all the participants entered college with racialized beliefs—viewpoints—regarding their perceptions and experiences as African-American students. As members of a minority group, they have experienced discrimination, unfair treatment, and other negative stereotypes; thus, they have learned to navigate the college environment with the support of African-American faculty and staff. Although the participants expressed self-doubt and uncertainties as African-American students, particularly during their high school to college transition, they were able to “push through” those barriers and remain committed to reaching their goals.

Stage 2: Goals/commitments. Because the participants are actively involved in student support services and programs, developing and establishing academic goals are the norm. These participants have partnered with these departments to ensure that they continue to persist and meet their academic goals while remaining committed to their overall college intentions. Many of the
participants discussed their interactions with faculty and staff members to establish goals. For example, Monique shared how her interactions with the advisor of the Black Student Union (BSU), an organization that promotes African-American pride and community service, empowered her as an African-American student:

My greatest point when I truly felt empowered was when I was a part of BSU. Being a part of BSU, that gave—that just—made me appreciate my race. [The advisor] was our overseer at the time. She was over us, but she let us do all the work. She was just there to watch and guide us. She wasn’t our leader; we were the leaders.

Stage 3: Institutional experiences. The third stage is the phase in which African-American students feel either connected with or disconnected from the college community. All of the participants spoke highly about the campus community; hence, a common theme—a warm and inviting campus environment, “a place like home”—emerged. Furthermore, because of the participants’ positive institutional experiences (interactions) with the academic and social systems (Tinto, 1987, 1993), they expressed feeling motivated and empowered to continue on their path to success.

Two of the common themes that emerged in this study involved race and shared experiences and interpersonal communicative connection for the participants. Six of the seven participants are greatly impressed by the presence of African-American faculty and staff members, viewing them as role models and leaders. In fact, Michael, the only adult student interviewed for this study, expressed that, although a person’s race is important, it is not necessary for him to
establish a connection with that person; this may relate to his maturity and life experiences. Although Michael welcomed interactions with African-American faculty and staff, he was open to receiving support from any faculty or staff member who showed a genuine interest in his progress as a student.

Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model was used to begin exploring institutional support systems such as the offices of Student Affairs and Academic Affairs through which academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993) have been rewarding for African-American students. Although the academic system is vitally important for these participants in their pursuit of a degree, it was the informal systems outside the classroom that the participants mostly spoke about with respect to their persisting in college.

All participants discussed interactions with the staff of minority student support services departments, faculty advisors, and club advisors. Those interactions occurred in offices, behind closed doors, to facilitate open dialogue and privacy. Several of those interactions occurred in passing, with participants being greeted by an African-American faculty or staff member who inquired about their academic efforts. Because four of the seven participants have not enrolled in a course taught by an African-American faculty member, their classroom experiences were limited; however, each of the participants shared that informal interactions have served as a source of motivation.

These informal interactions also occurred as the participants participated in clubs and organizations. As indicated by Tinto (1987, 1993), the informal sector in colleges is significant for integration; thus, as students interacted with faculty, staff,
and peers as members of clubs and organization, they were contributing to this goal. In addition to their interactions and experiences with the academic and social system, the participants spoke about their support from their families.

**Stage 4: Integration.** According to Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model, the integration stage is also critical for students. This is the stage in which a student may decide to depart from college because he/she begins to explore—defined as the discovery phase during which a student is learning more about the college’s culture (Tinto, 1987, 1993)—and internalize how he/she “fits” within the campus community. At this stage, students will reject the environment, embrace it, or learn to negotiate it and continue their educational endeavors (Tinto, 1987, 1993); in turn, they will experience academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993). In fact, because the participants experienced early interactions with African-American faculty and staff members and minority student support services, the concept of “institutional fit” became a reality for them. Although some of the participants expressed that they wanted to “give up” because of challenges, mostly external, they continued to persevere.

**Stage 5: Revisiting goals/commitments.** Stage 5 is the phase in which students commit to their academic goals and continue on their educational journey. The participants are not struggling academically; furthermore, they were very clear and concise in their communication about their academic and professional goals. There was a strong sense of comfort and passion about transferring to four-year institutions and pursuing their dreams. Additionally, as African-American students, they value their race. Many of them spoke about appreciating diversity and
welcome opportunities to learn more about other diverse cultures, thereby embracing a bicultural and multicultural orientation (Cross, 1970, 1991). It is the researcher’s hope that as the participants progress in their educational journey, as well as life experiences, they will gain more knowledge about themselves as African-Americans and will embrace diversity and inclusion to its fullest.

**External community.** In examining the external community, defined by Tinto (1987, 1993) as family, friends, and social support systems, the researcher sought to explore Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory of the need for students to disconnect from the past to engage holistically in college life. This is the area that was most challenging to the researcher because all of the participants shared different stories regarding their external support systems. Three of the participants stated that it was important for them to disconnect from family and friends to continue their academic goals. Additionally, it was vital for them to surround themselves with people who are solid role models and support them academically. Conversely, the other participants remain connected with their external support systems, particularly those who are from single-parent households.

One participant indicated that she remains connected with African-American teachers at her former high school because she respects them as mentors and role models. On the other hand, a common theme for those who disconnected from the past was directly related to significant adversity that had impacted their lives. These participants were resilient, “conquered those challenges,” and connected with African-Americans who empowered them academically, personally, and professionally. In general, Tinto’s (1987, 1993) disconnection theory was
somewhat supported by a minority of the students. Several of the students expressed that remaining connected to their external support system was vitally important for them in their academic pursuit.

**Summary**

In examining Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model, the researcher was able to determine whether it has relevance to African-American students attending community colleges. This model has significance for African-American students attending community college for the following reasons.

1. The model stresses the importance of understanding African-American students’ pre-entry attributes in college (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

2. In this model, there is a strong emphasis on African-American students’ interacting with the academic (formal) and social (informal) systems to facilitate student success (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

3. This model also examines African-American students’ college academic and social goals while negotiating their commitment to the external support systems (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Although the researcher has criticized the model’s notion of separation from past communities, it was discovered that some of the participants engaged in the separation process to maintain their educational pursuits.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

This chapter begins with an overview of why this study is significant for community colleges. Implications for future research will be discussed. Since community colleges are exploring best practices to retain and successfully graduate African-American students, the study's implications for practice will also be discussed. The researcher will include the participants’ perspectives about the programs, services, and resources that influenced their persistence in college. Finally, the researcher shares her thoughts about the study while discussing national policy implications for graduating more community college students.

Why This Research Study Is Significant for Community Colleges

This study is significant for these reasons.

1. It contributes to the research literature regarding the experiences of African-American students at community colleges, an important goal because of the limited number of studies focused on this particular student population and institution type. The study's contributions include the following: (a) It explores African-American students’ experiences and perceptions in a community college context; (b) it considers how the role of African-American faculty and staff can impact African-American students’ academic and social success; and (c) it examines an attrition theoretical model and its relationship to African-
Americans students in their interactions with formal and informal systems (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

2. It contributes to the limited research that explores African-American faculty/staff-student interactions as an innovative approach to improving African-American students’ persistence. The study’s contributions in this regard include the following: (a) it highlights how African-American students view the role of African-American faculty and staff in influencing their college success; and (2) it introduces the importance of African-American students’ exposure to role models in their college careers.

3. It reveals that African-American faculty/staff-student perceptions and positive interactions are critical to African-American students’ success; thus, it uncovers the importance of enhancing institutional resources and programs that promote informal and formal interaction.

4. It highlights some of the student support services in which interactions have been successful for African-Americans at the community college.

Implications for Future Research

Because little research has been conducted that focuses on African-American faculty/staff-student interactions as a success strategy for college persistence, this study contributes to the research literature. As stated in Chapter 1, from 1990 through 2005, only 11 articles were published about community colleges and the experiences of African-American students (Lewis & Middleton, 2003); thus, more research is needed to explore how to improve the success of African-American students at community colleges. This research is significant because it explores
faculty/staff-student interactions as a factor in promoting student success instead of
the traditional factors such as a student's academic preparation. The following
implications are important for further research.

**Other student subgroups' experiences at community colleges.** As
indicated earlier, although the study focuses on traditional-age college students, the
researcher was interested in also exploring the experiences and perceptions of the
adult population. As noted in Chapter 4, Michael, an adult participant, commented,
“I believe that it is important for any student to interact with any teachers here. . . . It
doesn’t matter if [that person is] white, black, green, blue, or whatever.” Michael’s
perspective was very different from the other six participants, since they believed
that interactions with African-American faculty and staff are critically important.
Future research might explore factors that contribute to the success of African-
American adult students in the community college setting. Instead of focusing on
African-American faculty/staff-student interactions, studies might explore what
types of interactions influence the success for this student subgroup.

It was important to study African-American students because they have the
lowest degree attainment over a six-year period (26%; see Table 4) compared to
their counterparts. However, Latino students are ahead only slightly at 29%—a low
percentage rate as well. Instead of exploring one subpopulation, the researcher
could capture the experiences of two minority groups attending community colleges
and conduct a comparative study.

**Student racial identity development.** Several of the participants shared
that race and shared experiences matter for them. They perceive that African-
American faculty and staff members share a common bond as persons of color. Future studies might explore racial identity development in depth and its connection to their experiences as African-American students. Cross’ (1970, 1991) five stages of Black identity development could serve as the theoretical framework for this study. African-American students would share how African-American faculty and staff have shaped or influenced their racial identity development through their encounters with them and the campus community.

Because the idea that race and shared experiences matter was a significant theme for the participants, future research could also explore how to “blend” Tinto’s (1987, 1993) Student Departure Model and Cross’ (1970, 1991) Racial Identity Development Model to examine college success for African-American students, thereby developing and exploring an attrition-identity-institution model in which the researcher could study two models/theories to determine whether the models have relevance to African-American students attending community colleges.

**Faculty interactions in the classroom.** Three of the seven participants have enrolled in a course taught by an African-American faculty member. Consequently, most of the participants’ interactions occurred with staff members outside the classroom environment. Future studies could critically examine the experiences and perceptions of African-American students who have all enrolled in a course taught by an African-American faculty member. Would their perceptions and experiences regarding the role of African-American faculty and staff members be more strongly influenced because of their interactions in the classroom?
African-American students’ experiences at predominantly African-American community colleges. Because the researcher selected only one research site for the study, the stories shared by the participants are reflective of their experiences at that particular community college. This could be viewed as a limitation of the study. Other African-American students’ perceptions and experiences regarding the role of African-American faculty and staff members may vary depending on the research site. Future research could explore how African-American students would respond to a similar research study at a predominantly African-American institution. Although the participants viewed the campus community as welcoming and inviting because of the presence of African-American faculty and staff members, it is safe to assume that they would have similar perceptions; however, since every institution is different, their responses would be diverse. A community college where the students, faculty, and staff are mostly minority members would be an ideal research site for such an exploration.
Implications for Practice

Recruit, hire, and retain more African-American faculty and staff members. In the literature review, the researcher posed this question: How can community colleges help African-American students feel comfortable and connected to the campus when the faculty and staff do not reflect the student population? One answer is to recruit, hire, and retain more African-American faculty and staff members at community colleges: not just any faculty or staff members, but African-American faculty and staff members who are prepared and passionate about teaching and staff members who are committed to promoting student success:

We must focus on hiring and developing faculty members who enjoy working with students even more than they enjoy their discipline, who are convinced that students are capable of learning, and who have the skills to engage students actively in the learning process. In so doing, we will increase the odds that our faculty and staff are well prepared to “make magic” in community college classrooms. (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010, p. 2)

The more diverse learners are attending community colleges, the more imperative it becomes for the faculty and staff to reflect this change. Research has indicated that faculty/staff-student interactions contribute to student success, particularly for African-American students (Parker, 1997; Coleman, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). However, African-American students will have fewer opportunities to connect with African-American faculty and staff members if community colleges are unsuccessful in hiring and retaining
them. In fact, “differences in student and faculty demographics often are a concern for colleges in that they may restrict opportunities to interact with role models or mentors from similar backgrounds” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010, p. 5).

As many of the participants indicated, these interactions have enhanced their college experiences. The participants feel more motivated to achieve success due to their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members. Not only did they feel inspired, but the participants also perceived the college environment as more inviting, thus validating the research regarding how the presence of African-American faculty and staff members can influence African-American students’ perceptions about the college environment (Green, 1989). Instead of the participants feeling like “a guest in someone’s house” as expressed by Turner (1994) (as cited in Chhuon & Hudley, 2008, p. 17), they felt at home.

**Educate faculty and staff members on the importance of student engagement.** Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) pointed out that “community colleges are major players in the national system of postsecondary education” (p. 153). In turn, as community colleges educate students, it is even more important to provide faculty and staff success strategies to enhance learning for students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). Because higher education institutions are experiencing an increase of diversity on their campuses, it is vitally important for colleges to prepare faculty and staff to meet the demands of diverse learners, coupled with creating a learning climate where students are academically engaged (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010).
Recruiting, hiring, and retaining African-American staff and faculty members is only one approach to increase African-American awareness; to meet the needs and demands of students, specifically African-American students, community colleges must continue to provide ongoing classroom instruction and management as well as training and seminars on student engagement (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010).

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2010) asserted that “students learn and retain more information—and persist and succeed at higher education levels—when they are actively involved in learning rather than passively receiving information” (p. 10). The training topics should range from diverse teaching methods that build faculty-student rapport inside and outside of the classroom such as learning strategies and methods for (1) learning how to engage in discussions to encourage students; and (2) orienting students about support services on campus (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). When faculty and staff members are knowledgeable about the services and resources offered on campus, such as advising, counseling services, and other student support services, they are able to provide guidance to African-American students when they are faced with an academic or personal crisis.

These classroom instruction and workshop opportunities should be offered to all faculty and staff members through a formalized process. For instance, many community colleges are establishing learning centers so that faculty and staff members can receive in-house professional development. Community colleges pride themselves on stressing the importance of life-long learning; thus, this life-long
learner concept must transcend to the faculty and staff as they educate and mentor African-American students.

**Formalized and intentional programs to promote faculty/staff-student interactions.** Research has shown that African-American faculty and staff members serve as role models for African-American students, which could lead to the development of mentor-mentee relationships (Green, 1989; LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997; Warde, 2008; Jones, 2001). Few of the participants have an assigned mentor, with the exception of those who are active with Project Success; however, the faculty/staff-student relationships had developed through informal interactions, mostly outside of the classroom environment. The participants spoke about connecting with African-American faculty and staff members during difficult times to seek advice and support. In fact, these individuals served as excellent resources in referring students to appropriate departments for help and support, which contributes to enhancing students’ college navigation skills. These findings suggest that, because these African-American faculty and staff members play an instrumental role in students’ education careers, community colleges should be proactive and intentional in creating opportunities to increase African-American faculty/staff-student interactions. Colleges should employ a formal and intentional program such as mentorship, which could also include peer-to-peer mentors.

Student leaders can serve as role models for African-American students as well. Many of the participants stated that they mentor young students at church and within the community. The adult student, Michael, said that he participates in a panel discussion at the college to discuss his life lessons to motivate other African-
American students. Giving African-American students opportunities to mentor first-year African-American students can also help them to develop leadership skills that may translate to greater success at four-year institutions and in the workplace.

**Early outreach and intervention with student support services.**

According to a recent report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2010), a survey of the 2010 student cohort at community colleges across the nation found that:

- Nineteen percent were unaware that their college had an orientation program, and 26 percent didn’t know about financial-aid advising, according to the report. Seventy percent were familiar with writing, math, or other skill labs, and 72 percent knew about academic advising, but 65 percent and 47 percent, respectively, never used those services. (p. 15)

Early outreach and intervention are defined as community colleges’ reaching out and connecting with African-American students early in the enrollment process as well as intervening during their college years. All the student participants have been and continue to be involved in minority support services programs that provide early outreach and intervention. Although programs such as TRIO, Project Achieve, and the office of Multicultural Student Affairs provide different programs and services, they offer a “safety net” for students in monitoring and supporting them as they progress in college.

For example, Project Success, implemented by the Counseling Department at the research site, provides outreach to high school students within the district to encourage students of color to enroll in college, thus creating a seamless process as
they enroll and continue their educational journey at the college. These students are also assigned a faculty or staff mentor to support them throughout their stay at the college. Other programs such as TRIO Project Achieve, a U.S. Department of Education grant to support first-generation, low-income, disabled, and disadvantaged students, serve as supplemental academic programs to assist in graduating students. All these programs provide early outreach (financial aid instructions, admissions enrollment support, mentorship, tutoring) and early intervention (one-on-one meetings, mandatory academic advising, academic progress report documentation and follow-up, and other intervention strategies). All of the participants are receiving many of these services.

Because all the participants have and continue to utilize these resources and services, the additional support has helped them in college. Although these programs are aimed at a specific population, the research site also offers initiatives such as an orientation course, academic advising, and counseling; therefore, other students can benefit from early outreach and interventions. What is unique about these programs is that they help keep African-American students engaged in the educational process by coordinating meetings to discuss their academic progress and inviting them to take advantage of tutoring and cultural and leadership opportunities. This engagement occurs in both the academic and social systems at the colleges, contributing to college integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Therefore, the researcher recommends that community colleges continue to invest in these types of programs to promote student success.
Encouraging African-American students to share success stories. This study captures the experiences of seven African-American community college students in their academic journey. They shared with the researcher how African-American faculty and staff members have influenced, supported, and inspired them to persist in college. What the researcher learned after conducting the interviews is that African-American students should have a venue to share these success stories not just with other students, but also with faculty and staff. These stories are “hidden gems” that should be shared with the greater college community. By hearing these stories, faculty and staff members may feel more encouraged to participate in structured mentorship programs or other intentional programs to support African-American students. Community colleges take pride in sharing the successes of their students, but they should also take pride in sharing how faculty and staff members are impacting the lives of students by creating recognition programs that recognize celebrate faculty and staff members for their commitment to student success.

These five recommendations capture the strategies to influence faculty/staff-student interactions and to promote the academic and social integration of African-American students at community colleges. They are:

1. recruiting, hiring, and retaining more African-American faculty and staff members to contribute to the learning environment so more African-Americans are present to serve as role models;
2. creating intentional and formal opportunities to promote African-American faculty/staff-student interactions inside and outside the classroom;

3. educating faculty and staff members about teaching and communication methods to foster student learning;

4. developing and implementing programs to provide safety nets for African-American students through early outreach and intervention; and

5. encouraging African-American students to share success stories to increase awareness and promote faculty/staff-student interactions.

These recommendations can serve as best practices for community colleges in supporting African-American students.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore African-American students’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54) in the community college setting. Capturing the stories of African-American students regarding their educational experiences and perceptions is a distinctive approach in understanding how community colleges can proactively address African-American students’ persistence.

This study’s participants reported that their interactions with African-American faculty and staff members made a difference in their perceptions and experience at the community college. For some of these participants, this “place like home” has provided a second chance to receive an education and, ultimately, to achieve their goals. There is a reason that the word “community” is part of the names of most community colleges in the nation. These institutions continue to
provide educational opportunities for African-American students and others in their own neighborhood.

Community colleges are receiving a lot of attention locally and nationally (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). Under President Barack Obama’s American Graduation Initiative, community colleges are being called upon to increase the number of community college graduates, thus contributing to the goal of five million Americans earning degrees by 2020 (National Education Association, 2009). The ultimate goal of this initiative is to improve college attainment in the United States. President Obama made this statement about capitalizing on reforming community colleges to help achieve these goals:

Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy. It’s time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future. (as cited in Brandon, 2009)

Community colleges play a significant role in supporting this initiative, contributing to achieving the following goals.

1. By 2020, community colleges are charged with graduating five million community college students (Brandon, 2009).

2. New competitive grants will be offered to assist community colleges to enroll and graduate five million students by 2020. These competitive grants will help to strengthen support for students (Brandon, 2009).
3. The College Access and Completion Fund will help to provide funding for programs and resources to improve graduation rates and “close achievement gaps” (Brandon, 2009, p. 1). This fund will support innovative and best practices such as learning communities and adult student programs.

4. Updating community colleges’ facilities is also a goal under this initiative. Funds will be allocated to community colleges to enhance the facilities’ infrastructure to meet the needs of the students and the workforce, particularly in fields that require technical and hands-on training (Brandon, 2009).

From a policy implications viewpoint, with the pending support from the American Graduation Initiative, community colleges are on the radar of the administration, providing an opportunity for these institutions to reevaluate the support mechanisms (services and resources) that are in place for African-American students (Brandon, 2009). With this attention comes more accountability.

Community colleges will be held responsible for supporting students, particularly those who are not persisting and graduating, such as African-American students. Given the fact that African-American students’ graduation rates are the lowest compared to those of their counterparts (ICCB, 2008), it becomes even more critical for community colleges to identify, develop, and implement strategies for improvements. Thus, it is fundamentally important for community colleges to continue to look for ways not only to enroll African-American students, but also, and most importantly, to retain and graduate them.
Community colleges have a responsibility to contribute to the greater society. Providing an opportunity for all to receive an education has been the mission for community colleges since the beginning. For African-American students, a population that has been disenfranchised, community colleges offer promise and hope for graduating. Community college faculty and staff members can contribute to retaining and graduating African-American students by encouraging them academically and personally. Education institutions, particularly community colleges, cannot afford to fail another student—not today, not tomorrow, not in the future. By encouraging African-American faculty/staff-student interactions, community colleges may “save” an African-American student from departing, but, most importantly, those interactions may help African-American students to graduate.
Appendix A

PARTICIPANT LETTER

January 2009

Dear Student:

I am currently a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at DePaul University in Chicago. As partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor in Education, I am conducting a research study. This research is being supervised by my faculty advisor, Dr. Layla Suleiman-Gonzalez.

As a community college administrator currently at Moraine Valley Community College, it is my hope to identify factors that influence the success of African-American students at community colleges. More specifically, it is my goal to listen to “student voices” regarding their experiences in the community college setting. The study’s findings may have significant implications for community colleges in understanding how to support African-American students academically and professionally.

I am seeking students who meet the following criteria to participate in the study: (1) African-American full-time students who are enrolled and have attended the research site ( ) for the last two consecutive semesters, (2) are at least 18-24 years old, (3) must have accessed minority student support services during the last seven months and/or enrolled in or completed a course taught by an African-American instructor.

This study will take about three hours of your time; this estimate includes a 2-hour in-depth interview with me and a follow-up review of a transcription that may involve 1 hour or less. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to an interview and to complete a demographic form. The interview will include questions about your experiences and perceptions of the role of African-American faculty and staff in the community college setting. The demographic form will provide me more insight of who you are as a student such as your year in college, major and long-term goals. Each participant will be guaranteed that all information will remain confidential. No real names will be used.

Participation in this study is considered voluntary; therefore, participants can voluntarily withdraw from the study at anytime. There will be no negative consequences if you decide to not participate or change your mind later.

As an incentive for your participation in this study, your name will be entered into a drawing for a $15 iTunes card upon completing the interview and the follow-up phone discussion.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at (630) 669-1621 or via e-mail at yolisaacs@yahoo.com. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Version January 21, 2010
Appendix B

Demographic Profile Form

Date: ________________________________

Participant's Name: ____________________________________________________________

Mailing Address: Address ___________________________ City __________________________ State ________ ZIP Code ________

Preference for Contact:

Home Phone: Area Code ____________ Cellular: Area Code ____________

E-mail Address: ____________________________________________

Best time to contact you for follow-up:

□ Mon. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________
□ Tues. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________
□ Wed. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________
□ Thurs. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________
□ Fri. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________
□ Sat. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________
□ Sun. □ AM □ Noon □ PM Specific time: _____________

Gender: □ Male □ Female Age: __________

Semester in College: ____________________________________________

Major: ____________________________________________
Ethnicity/Family Origin:

_________________________________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________________________

Extracurricular activity membership:

_________________________________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________________________

4-year institution transfer intent (What institution do you plan to attend? When?):

_________________________________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________________________
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT-FACTORY/STAFF INTERACTIONS IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SETTING

What is the purpose of this research?

I am asking you to be in a research study because I would like to explore the role of African-American faculty and staff in the persistence of African-American students enrolled at an Illinois community college. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a full-time, traditional-aged (18-24) African-American student who has been enrolled and has attended the research site ( ) for the last two consecutive semesters has accessed minority student support services during the last seven months, and/or enrolled in or completed a course taught by an African-American instructor. Furthermore, you have expressed intent to transfer to a four-year institution as your long-term educational goal. This study is being conducted by Yolanda Isaacs, a graduate student at DePaul University as a requirement to obtain her doctoral degree in Education.

How much time will this take?

This study will take about 3 hours of your time; therefore, estimate a 2-hour in-depth interview with me and a follow-up review of a transcription that may involve 1 hour or less.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 2-hour in-depth interview. I will record your interview on audio tape and transcribe it later to obtain an accurate record of what you said. I will then ask you to review the transcription for accuracy as well.

What are the risks involved in participating in this study?

Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what you would encounter in daily life. However, you may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about answering certain questions. Since the questions capture your experiences and perceptions, you may feel uneasy about sharing experiences that were unpleasant.

What are the benefits of my participation in this study?

You will not personally benefit from being in this study. However, it is hoped that what I learn will help community colleges understand the educational experiences of African-American students and enhance resources, services, and support for this student population.

Will I receive any kind of payment for being in this study?

Version 2-8-2010
As an incentive for your participation in this study, your name will be entered into a drawing for a $15 iTunes card upon completing the interview and the follow-up phone discussion.

**Can I decide not to participate? If so, are there other options?**

Yes; you can choose not to participate. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later and leave the study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later.

**How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any report I might publish, I will not include any information that will identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researchers will have access to the records that identify you by name. Some people might review our records in order to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board may review your information. If they look at our records, they will keep your information confidential. Since the interviews will be transcribed, the transcriber will have access to the recordings; however, the researcher will have the transcriber sign a confidentiality form for added protection. Also, the transcriber will not have access to your real name. He/she will only receive your assigned name. Data and field notes will remain in a home safe for one year following the interview and will be destroyed. ActiveERASE, which is a software package for data destruction, will be used to destroy all data collected during the study.

The researcher will provide the College a copy of the research findings; however, no names or identifiers will be released to the College.

**Whom can I contact for more information?**

If you have questions about this study, please contact Yolanda Isaacs at (815) 609-3721 or yolisaacs@yahoo.com. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Protections, at (312) 362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu.

**You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one:)

☐ I consent to be in this study. ☐ I **DO NOT** consent to be in this study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Printed name: ___________________________
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

As a community college administrator, it is my hope to identify factors that influence the success of African-American students at community colleges. More specifically, it is my goal to listen to “student voices” regarding their experiences in the community college setting. The study’s findings may have significant implications for community colleges in understanding how to support African-American students academically and professionally. These questions were created to capture your experiences and perceptions as community college students.

- From your perspective, what is your understanding of this study? How would you describe this study? How would you describe your role as a participant in this study?

- Do you have any additional questions before we begin the interview?

1. How would you describe your educational experiences before attending this community college? Did you encounter/experience any challenges? Please explain.

2. Why did you choose to attend a community college to pursue your educational goals? Who or what was the driving force for you to attend college?

3. What are your academic goals?

4. What are your professional goals?

5. How would you describe the role of faculty in supporting your academic endeavors?

6. How would you describe the role of staff in supporting your academic endeavors?

7. Describe your interactions with African-American faculty members at the college.

8. Where did those interactions occur on campus?

9. Describe your interactions with African-American staff members at the college.
10. Describe an experience when those interactions have fostered your academic goals.

11. Where did those interactions occur on campus?

12. Describe an experience when those interactions fostered your personal goals.

13. Describe an experience when those interactions hindered your academic goals.

14. Describe an experience when those interactions hindered your personal goals.

15. Can you share with me any other experiences of a similar incident/occurrence when you felt a sense of belonging at the college as a result of your interactions with African-American faculty and staff members?

16. What were the elements of those interactions that contributed to your feeling connected as a student?

17. What implications does interacting with African-American faculty and staff members have for you as an African-American student and a learner?

18. Who or what has been the driving force in your life for you to complete your education?

19. From your perspective, do you think it’s important for African-American students to interact with African-American faculty and staff members? Why or why not?”
Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

References


community college (pp. 29-32). Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.


