Understanding the Meaning African-American Men Give to Their Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities in College

Karl A. Brooks

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Understanding the Meaning African-American Men Give to Their Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities in College

A Dissertation in Education with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

August 2012
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Abstract
The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of African-American (A-A) men who are persisting in college and who demonstrate participation in co-curricular activities defined as student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA). The study was designed to gain a better understanding of the meaning actively engaged A-A men make of their college experiences and how these experiences serve to guide their actions toward persistence in college. Ten A-A men from three different institutions participated in individual open-ended interviews. Results and findings indicate that regardless of students’ pre-college experiences, participation in SLIEA supported the integration of A-A men to the college environment. Upon arriving to campus, immediate participation in SLIEA supports the adjustment of A-A men to college by exposing students to successful peers, college resources, and support system that encourage academic success. Research participants were able to identify beneficial outcomes, practical competencies, and personal gains that were the result of experiences supported by SLIEA. These include networking, time management, access to available resources, enhanced interpersonal communication, public speaking skills, and challenging oneself to set goals. Although participants expressed a challenge with balancing their academic workload alongside their commitments to SLIEA, these types of involvements served to support student learning and educational focus in college. Students were able to translate the influence of SLIEA on their classroom experiences, which contributed to their personal motivation and expectations for pursuing and achieving academic success, often supporting college persistence choices and behaviors.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last 40 years, the educational experiences of African-American (A-A) students at post-secondary institutions have received significant attention. Considering the impact and social mobility that often result from degree attainment, the attention to access, matriculation, persistence, and successful outcomes of underrepresented students in the educational pipeline should be of interest to everyone invested in the ideals of an equitable and participatory democratic society. Thus, when specific populations of students are clearly not achieving successful academic outcomes, the educational experiences of these students and the academic environments designed to support their success becomes a public concern.

At Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), A-A college students generally represent a small rate of enrollment and are retained at even lower rates as compared to majority students. Embodied within the issues of enrollment and retention is the high attrition of A-A men in college. There is growing public concern regarding the educational development of these students, who often experience many challenges along their path to achieving the social and economic benefits of degree attainment (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2006a, 2006b, 2009b; Lee, 1991; Polite & Davis, 1999).

The history of higher education in the United States has clearly established that college and university environments are communities where enrolled students have the opportunity to develop intellectually and socially (Astin, 1993; Cohen, 1998; Goodchild & Wechsler, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). The type of experiences students gain inside and outside of class during college can serve to support their persistence to graduation. Successful student experiences while attending college impact
academic, social, and personal development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Keeling, 2004, 2006). Therefore, when students feel empowered by their educational experiences, they may be more likely to pursue academic interests and obtain skills that contribute to society. The practical knowledge and skills gained during the undergraduate experience also serve to prepare students to successfully participate in the professional workforce and afford them the opportunity to become confident life-long learners (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Therefore, when A-A men leave college without completing a degree, they miss out on the collective academic, social, and personal gains. An effort to address the high attrition rate of A-A men who matriculate should be among the priority for college educators.

Recent research on A-A men in college has supported that successful co-curricular student involvement opportunities, such as leadership development activities, can engage students’ personal and social interest, increase their sense of belonging on campus, and positively affect their identity development (Brown, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Frazier, 2009; Harper, 2003, 2006b, 2009b; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kimbrough, 1995; Sedlack, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008). Successful student involvement experiences are perceived to be meaningful campus opportunities that also benefit the holistic development of students. Some of the benefits to students may include increased personal knowledge, practical life skills, and the establishment of a valued social network (Harper, 2003, 2006b). These and other benefits gained by students are assumed to support a student’s overall academic commitment to college. Recent research has contended that student involvement experiences that serve to positively engage students outside of class can also play a critical role in promoting deeper learning that tends to
complement the academic experience for students inside the classroom (Harper & Quaye, 2007, 2009).

A desire to positively affect the rate of persistence and educational achievement of A-A men in higher education has resulted in many initiatives by colleges and universities to directly address the high level of disengagement. Student leadership development opportunities represent programs designed to increase the level of student involvement and engagement with their campus. These activities are also intended to support “educationally purposeful” opportunities identified by students (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). College involvement and engagement opportunities, such as student leadership development experiences, are generally intended to influence student success outcomes, such as academic motivation, college persistence, and ultimately degree completion.

Because of the relatively low retention and high attrition rates in PWIs, past research on A-A men has disproportionately focused on the students who have experience the greatest difficulty and challenges within the college context. However, recent research has focused some attention on students that are successfully engaged to better understand their perspective and the type of co-curricular student involvement experiences that have effectively influenced their development (Brown, 2006; Harper, 2003, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

The Problem

The retention of A-A men in college has become a significant issue for many higher education institutions. It has been well reported that many A-A men come to college campuses under a microscope of suspicion related to their academic preparation
and motivation. They also experience the added social pressure of being labeled “endangered species” in the general society, which some contend often extends to their lack of presence on many college and university campuses (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Gibbs, 1988; Smith, 1999). Research conducted on A-A men in college has indicated that those who matriculate to the university environment face many challenges (Cuyjet, 1997; Brown, 2006; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Harper 2006b, 2009). These challenges pertain to their academic and social integration, as well as their lack of campus involvements and general disengagement with what is often described as “educationally purposeful” co-curricular campus opportunities. These opportunities are often designed to complement their curricular commitment and overall college experience (Cuyjet, 1997; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008).

In addition, when A-A men matriculate to PWI, they often experience problems of cultural adjustment, feelings of isolation, and perceived racism on their campus (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999). However, in spite of any negative academic assumptions, social characterizations, and stereotypes that may burden A-A men, there are A-A men in college who feel invited and demonstrate a level of motivation to participate in educationally purposeful co-curricular opportunities such as student leadership involvement and engagement opportunities. Understanding what compels some A-A men to engage in these experiences and how these experiences benefit their academic and social adjustment to college could shed light on the influence these types of purposeful experiences have on supporting the successful persistence (and institutional retention) of students and their commitment to degree attainment.
Concerns related to the experiences of A-A men in college are magnified because of the widening gap in student retention rates and college completion rates between A-A men and A-A women. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2007), two-thirds of the baccalaureate degrees awarded to African-Americans have been achieved by women in the population. NCES further affirmed the alarming attrition, graduation, and degree attainment rates of A-A men in college by reporting 67.6% of all A-A men who start college do not graduate within six years, which represents the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education (Harper, 2006a; NCES).

These statistics represent the idea that higher education as a public good is not reaching its potential to benefit a greater number of A-A men in America (Harper, 2006b). Clearly, explaining the academic and social reasons for the difference in persistence and completion rates between A-A men and other populations requires greater inquiry. It is important to gain greater insight about the experiences of the A-A men who are successfully retained and understand the campus experiences that are effectively contributing to their persistence.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of successfully retained African-American men who are persisting in college and participate in co-curricular college activities that are identified under what is being defined as Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities (SLIEA). Using a phenomenological method along with an anti-deficit lens to better understand how actively engaged A-A men in college make meaning of their experiences, the study was
designed to explore the belief systems that guide the past and current choices and behaviors of those A-A men who persist in college. The study also explored an understanding of the personal gains these men perceive as a result of their experiences and how these gains contribute specifically to academic persistence in college, supporting a path to degree attainment.

This study was aimed at college educators, specifically at student development and student affairs professionals who are in positions to develop and intentionally design co-curricular programs that support the college persistence and degree attainment of students. It was assumed that co-curricular campus opportunities that intentionally consider the interest and needs of undergraduate A-A men can increase positive academic outcomes by effectively influencing achievement motivation, academic habits, student social integration to college, and overall personal development. Research that considers positive academic outcomes for A-A men should encourage developing a deeper learning and understanding for student development professionals to better influence institutional policies and resources that intentionally advance the persistence and degree completion of A-A men.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions served to guide the study. The research questions served as guidelines for the questions asked of the interview participants and were used to maintain a focus on the lived experiences of successfully retained African-American men who are persisting in college and participating in co-curricular college activities of Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities (SLIEA).
Grand Tour Question. What meaning do A-A men give to their co-curricular student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA)?

Research Sub-questions.

1. How do A-A men participating in student leadership involvement and engagement activities experience their campus environment?
2. What perceived influence do SLIEA have on the motivation, commitment, and skill development of A-A men that support their persistence toward degree attainment?
3. What beliefs serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA?

Significance of the Study

Because there is a crisis concerning retention and graduation rates of A-A men at PWIs, consideration must be given to how these students experience their environment, as well as to the outlook that they bring (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2003, 2006a, 2009; McGlynn, 2004; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). Understanding the outlook A-A men bring to higher education and develop while in school may indicate their confidence and desire to actively engage in co-curricular opportunities available within the learning environment, which can support their academic commitment. Student leadership involvement and engagement activities (and related programs) are believed to bridge the curricular and co-curricular “gaps” that may exist in the educational experience of students (Harper, 2003, 2006b, 2009b, 2012). As a result, increased attention is being paid to the student learning outcomes associated with these activities (Harper, 2009b; Cress et al., 2001; Kezer & Moriarty, 2000; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999).
Examining the effect co-curricular leadership opportunities have on successfully engaged students may support an increased understanding of the underlying mechanisms that influence persistence and social satisfaction in college. While some studies have examined the leadership experiences of students in general (Cress et al., 2001; Kezer & Moriarty, 2000; Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005; Posner, 2004; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999) and minority students (Arminio et al., 2000; Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001), very few studies have specifically examined the successful co-curricular leadership involvement experiences of A-A men and how their engagement in these activities directly benefit students’ academic integration and persistence (Arminio et al, 2000; Frazier 2009; Harper, 2003, 2006b; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004).

Co-curricular campus involvement experiences can also have an effect on the identity development of college students, which can influence persistence behaviors that encourage degree completion. Campus involvement activities that support leadership development and further positive identity formation can increase the self-efficacy of students, which can support their commitment to gaining the academic knowledge and complementary skills to be competitive in the labor force after they leave college (Brown, 2006; Cress et al., 2001; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kimbrough, 1995; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Therefore, exploring the particular experiences and assumptions of A-A men who are successfully involved with their campus was important because it shed further light on some of the personal and institutional processes that support these students’ successful academic integration, persistence attitudes, as well as their behaviors in college.
Studying retention is important because retaining A-A men and evaluating their campus involvement and engagement activities is of interest to higher education leaders and the larger community concerned about the academic achievements of the group as a whole (Anderson, 1989).

Previous research has indicated that the high attrition and poor college completion rates have a negative impact on the development of A-A men and avert them from achieving the benefits that are associated with obtaining success through the marketable product of earning a higher education degree (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Roach, 2001). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), the experience of college plays an important role in the academic, personal, and career development of students, as well as the communities in which they represent. Because research with regard to A-A men in college has demonstrated that success for these men is related to having an academic and social balance within college life, and being skilled at negotiating the educational pipeline (Brown, 2006; Harper, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Strayhorn, 2008), understanding how students are motivated and influenced within their college environment by exploring the experiences of those involved in SLIEA should provide a counter-narrative to the well documented research that often communicates the high level of failure, disengagement, and poor completion rates that exist among the population of A-A men.

Research that serves to understand the perspective, beliefs, and gains of students actively engaged in SLIEA should inform educators, particularly those trying to develop effective co-curricular programs, on how best to further address the unique interest and needs of those who may be most underserved within the context (Harper, 2003; Harper &
Quaye, 2007; Harris, 1996; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). This could be especially true for A-A men, given the variety of experiences (both positive and negative) they may engage in while in college, which is coupled with the social experiences and history that many of them bring to the college environment. Although economic and social benefits often result from degree completion, the poor persistence and completion rate of A-A men on college campuses indicate that they are not gaining the necessary academic and leadership training that will support and influence a “pipeline” of leadership beyond college, which has historically served to establish a foundation for the social and economic progress of African-Americans in the United States (Jackson, 2003).

Student development research has compelled educators to understand and consider strategic and intentional efforts to foster conditions for successful student transition and persistence in college (Astin, 1985, 1999; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1987). Further understanding students’ interest in campus involvement and engagement activities outside the classroom can help to communicate the intent and benefits of these activities that support student success outcomes. For undergraduate students, understanding how the experiences provided by SLIEA can complement their academic goals inside the classroom will help them consider the importance of specific types of campus involvement opportunities. Increased knowledge of the opportunities and benefits of campus involvement for A-A men may provide them a clearer pathway to pursue the full range of opportunities (both inside and outside of the classroom) a college campus has to offer.

and opinions is essential to understand their experiences and to counterbalance the deficit thinking that often plagues the collective population of A-A men on college campuses (Harper; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2008). In spite of their academic and social challenges, A-A men who demonstrate a certain level of campus involvement have been able to connect to their campus environment and exhibit interest and behaviors that support college persistence and future success (Harper, 2012).

Research that provides a counter-narrative to the failure assumption is necessary in order to provide greater understanding about their collective experiences. This serves current and future A-A men (and potentially their peers from other underrepresented populations) who are unaware of the positive outcomes that may be associated with these types of co-curricular college opportunities. College faculty and administrative leaders, especially those who design and deliver programs and activities that support student success outcomes, should also gain insight on the potential impact of these experiences on students. Overall, this research effort urges a deeper conversation and adds greater understanding to a population that currently remains underserved.

Concluding Statement

Today’s higher education environment values student leadership involvement and engagement activities. These opportunities are believed to intentionally support the successful engagement and personal development of students. The intent of these co-curricular programs and opportunities is to empower students’ learning potential and complement their overall academic experiences as they persist toward degree attainment. However, while many of these campus opportunities are intended to be available for all students, they seem to attract the interest of a small number of A-A students and even a
smaller number of A-A men at PWI (Armino et al., 2000; Frazier, 2009; Harper, 2006b; Sutton & Terrell, 1997).

There are systemic concerns about how A-A men view and engage their higher education experience. Their current level of disengagement may reflect their interest, desires, and outcomes of completing a degree. The student development literature in higher education has clearly indicated that co-curricular programs that have defined outcomes have a positive effect on student persistence in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Enriching educational experiences, such as co-curricular student leadership involvement and engagement activities on campus, help to mediate student feelings of academic ineptitude and support their critical appreciation of university life as being instrumental to socio-cultural development, as well as campus satisfaction (Brown, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Higher education research studies related to A-A men in college have concluded that the most successful of these men tend to have a balance between the academic and the social environment of college life, and are skillful at negotiating the educational pipeline (Brown; Harper 2003; Harper & Quaye; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Strayhorn, 2008). The issues concerning A-A men and their persistence in college are clearly complex; however, this research has advocated increased understanding about their campus experiences, and has provided a counter-narrative to how some students experience their campus environment through leadership involvement and engagement activities designed to increase their commitment to educational outcomes and successfully support their persistence to degree completion.
Definition of Terms

The definitions of terms specific to this study are given for purposes of clarity. The definitions provided are based on current understanding of the terminology from related literature.

Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities (SLIEA). For the purposes of this study, the term student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA) has been developed to aggregately define co-curricular campus opportunities designed to support the interest and active involvement of undergraduate students (Astin, 1999; Harper 2006b; Harper & Quaye, 2009). SLIEA provide students with knowledge, skills, and experiences that serve to complement their overall academic experience, facilitate student development, and career aspirations (Harper, 2006b). SLIEA are intended to result in meaningful campus experiences that also increase a sense of belonging and connection to the academic community and its various resources and learning opportunities. The intended outcome for students participating in SLIEA is college Student Leadership Development, which tends to support increased campus commitment and serve to support academic persistence (CAS, 2009). SLIEA are often represented by a student’s consistent participation in one or more of the following experiences: participating in a campus organization, serving in identified leadership roles on campus, or participating in identified leadership development opportunities designed to increase students’ capacity for reflective learning, personal development, and experiential action (i.e., college sponsored retreats, cohort leadership programs, training opportunities, etc.) (Cress et al., 2001; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999).

Student Leadership Development. Leadership development in college involves engaging with learning opportunities in one’s environment over time to build one’s capacity or efficacy to engage in leadership. This developmental approach entails moving from simple to more complex dimensions of intellectual and personal growth. The developmental components that influence students’ capacity to learn and engage in leadership includes the role of adults in their lives, the changing role of peers, opportunities for involvement, and time spent in reflective learning (Komives et al., 2005).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following contains a review of the literature concerning African-American men and their various issues related to navigating college in the American Higher Education System. More specifically, the review will explore (a) current theories that serve to provide a framework for discussing co-curricular student involvement, as well as the academic and social integration experiences of students in college; (b) the influence of racial identity development on choice and potential benefit of campus involvement; (c) current and emerging literature on the benefits of undergraduate student leadership development activities and programs in college; and (d) trends in co-curricular involvement for A-A students in college and what is known about the developmental benefit of student involvement for A-A men. Overall, the literature reviewed considers research associated with A-A men in college at Predominately White Institutions (PWI) and some of the campus experiences and activities relevant to their persistence.

Theoretical Framework

The experience of college plays an important role in the academic, personal, and career development of students and the communities in which they belong (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Therefore, the college environment students choose, along with the subsequent choices made within the academic culture while attending college, will impact their personal and academic development. Because attending college is as much a social experience as it is an academic one, examining the meaning students give to their involvement choices is critical to understanding how they experience the college environment (Astin, 1993). Further, how students transfer meaning from their various learning experiences, serving to support their academic commitment and persistence
toward degree completion, is an essential component to add to the collective narrative for
A-A men in college (Cuyjet, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Much has been examined with regard to the importance and nature of student
involvement in college. Most of this work has been primarily centered around Astin’s
(1984, 1999) theory on student involvement and Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory related to
student integration. Both theories support the critical role a student’s active engagement
with their college environment will play in supporting a quality educational experience,
and acknowledge the important interplay of students’ active interaction (in-class and out-
of-class) with the educational environment and resulting positive educational outcomes.

**Theory of student involvement.** According to Astin (1984), “Student
involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student
devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297). Five basic postulates exist related to his
theory of involvement: (a) involvement means the investment of psychological energy in
different “objects” that range in degree of their specificity; (b) involvement occurs along
a continuum, with different students investing different amounts of energy in various
objects at various times; (c) involvement includes quantitative and qualitative
components; (d) the amount of student learning and personal development is directly
related to the quality and quantity of involvement; (e) the effectiveness of any
educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase
involvement. Astin noted that the final two postulates are key because “they provide
clues for designing more effective educational programs for students” (p. 298).

Student involvement theory has spawned important research that has served to
guide much of the professional practices in higher education (Berger & Milem, 1999;
Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). This is because student involvement supports a direct relationship with learning and encourages institutional agents in higher education to increase educational effectiveness that link practice to identified outcomes (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). As stated by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), “Involvement also accounts for the time and energy that students spend but also acknowledges the contribution of the environment” (p. 411). Although the theory stresses the importance of both academic and co-curricular/extra-curricular involvement activities, it has influenced student development educational practice by supporting measuring and understanding the impact of students’ out-of-class activities (i.e., living on campus, working on campus, engaging with peers, being a member of clubs/organizations, etc.) on the educational outcomes of students (i.e., persistence, degree completion, college satisfaction, grade averages, etc.) (Astin, 1984, 1999).

According Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), the theory of student involvement has contributed to research and practice in higher education in the following manner:

- It emphasizes academic, out of class settings, and extracurricular activities.
- It focuses on the individual and the activities the individual does to become involved.
- Campuses have used the concept to develop programming and create offices to encourage student involvement to provide more opportunities for students to become involved in activities as part of a successful college experience.
• Involvement has been linked via research to almost every positive outcome in college. (p. 412)

Further, Wolf-Wendel et al., referencing a personal conversation with Alexander Astin, communicated that the advantage of the theory and its related Input-Environment-Output model is as:

Useful heuristic devices for thinking about what matters in the lives of students and what interventions we can create to make effective learning environments, and to specify what a student has to do to make the experience richer and more fulfilling. (p.412)

**Theory of student integration.** Tinto (1993) theory of academic and social integration also speaks to the positive educational outcome of students and how the critical role of involvement can impact this positive outcome. Primarily developed to help understand and explain voluntary student departure from undergraduate institutions, Tinto’s model has an emphasis on understanding the relationship between student involvement in learning and the impact this may have on student persistence. In summarizing a key understanding to his model, Tinto noted, “There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of students’ effort and in turn both learning and persistence” (p. 71). In providing further understanding to his model, Tinto explained that the ways in which students “experience” and “interact with” their campus environment is an important link to how learning will support a strong connection to student persistence. Tinto clearly indicated that students must be able to integrate themselves into the social system in order to make the necessary connections that support persistence toward
achieving their academic intention and experience positive academic outcomes. Referencing Tinto’s model, Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) stated, “In higher education, integration involves social (personal affiliations) and intellectual (sharing of values) connections” (p. 414).

In an effort to explain student departure from colleges and universities, Tinto’s model emphasized not only the student, but also served to increase accountability of institutions in the process. The model can be described as an interactionist theory that looks at both the person and the institution (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Therefore, as it relates to voluntary departure, the student’s perceived level of integration is what greatly influences the decision to persist or depart. The model supports examining student interactions and connection to peers, faculty, and staff, as well as involvement in co-curricular activities.

Although Tinto’s (1993) theory and the large amount of related research have contributed greatly to understanding the academic and social integration of college students, the theory has also been criticized. Among the criticism are theories that focus on traditional age populations, lack of attention to racial and ethnic differences, and its narrow focus on sociological issues, which does not attend to the individual psychology of students (Braxton, 2000). Tinto acknowledged that higher education institutions attract and are established to serve students from a variety of backgrounds and communities. Understanding this, it is critical for students to establish some kind of positive community attachment to a college campus.

The theory and concepts associated with academic and social integration have influenced the work related to understanding and supporting student success in higher
education. Some notable contributions of the theory indicated by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) include the following:

- Integration is a state of being; it is based on perceptions of student fit with their campus and, by extension, perceptions of interactions that reflect the values and norms of the institution and its culture.
- It is focused on specific outcomes. To put it simply, successful integration results in retention and unsuccessful integration contributes to departure.
- Integration calls for reciprocal commitment of the individual and the institution. That is, the student needs to be willing to become integrated into the college environment and the institution needs to create opportunities for the student to become integrated.
- Integration adopts a cultural view of the campus. Students are departing from past cultural involvement to become integrated into a new culture.
- Integration is about students forming relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and is about the sense of belonging that students develop. It is also a measure of student knowledge of campus cultural norms. (p. 416)

Because campus involvement, along with positive academic and social integration, is critical to the student experience, it is clear that understanding how students interact with their college environment serves to inform educators on how best to address the unique interest and needs of those who may be most underserved within the context. This could be especially true for A-A men, given the variety of experiences they may engage in within the academic environment that can promote or hinder their academic persistence and success. This is of particular importance as students make
choices related to their academic commitment and interest in campus involvement activities in college.

**The construct of student engagement.** Through empirical studies, the theories of student involvement and student integration have been well established as important constructs associated with college student success (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). As Astin (1984,1999) and Tinto’s (1987,1993) theories were further established by empirical research and validated by professional practice in higher education, an emerging element related to the foundations of both involvement and integration was adopted to encompass clarifying (or understanding) best practices with undergraduate students. This construct is **student engagement.** As a construct, the term student engagement has been developed to further establish empirical measures that can serve as indicators of “good educational practice” in undergraduate higher education (Kuh et al., 2005). Student engagement acknowledges and affirms the importance of activities on the part of individual students and an institution that are related to the desired outcomes of college.

According to Harper and Quaye (2009), student engagement is “characterized as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measureable outcomes” (p. 2). Therefore, engagement supports examining the critical and intentional interaction between a student and their institution. For students, engagement is represented in the amount of time and effort spent on academics and other educationally purposeful activities. For the institution, engagement represents how resources are deployed and the curriculum (including co-curricular
activities) are organized in conjunction with various support opportunities designed to influence students’ active participation that results in positive outcome experiences: student persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) asserted, “Engagement is about two elements: what the student does and what the institution does” (p. 413).

As a construct, student engagement supports increasing the empirical effort to define educational practices and conditions that are associated with high levels of successful outcomes. As indicated by Kuh et al. (2005), participating in educationally purposeful activities directly influences the quality of learning and development for students, which greatly impact students overall educational experiences. The importance of understanding and measuring the level of engagement for undergraduate students can be best reflected in the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is administered nationally to college students. NSSE (commonly referred to as nessie) is important to mention because it represents the significance of capturing and assessing the extent of student engagement in good educational practices, and also what they gain from their various college experiences. The goal for understanding student engagement behavior is to consider what behaviors are highly correlated with desirable learning and personal development outcomes in college (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). In referencing the unique contributions of the construct of student engagement, Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) noted, “The concept of student engagement is about encouraging institutional reflection and action on effective practices. Specifically, it includes consideration of the institution’s role in channeling students participating in effective educational practices” (p. 414).
As indicated, the established theories of student involvement and student integration support the notion that students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities are more likely, than their disengaged peers, to persist through graduation (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Although A-A men tend to have a variety of experiences (both inside and outside the classroom), recent literature has indicated their lack of meaningful engagement in purposeful educational activities and opportunities available within the college environment may play a detrimental role in their academic and social development while in college (Harper & Quaye; Strayhorn, 2008). Student engagement outcomes have been empirically supported and well documented, which indicates that effective engagement can significantly contribute to undergraduate student persistence (Astin, 1993; Bridges, Cambridge, Kuh, & Leewater, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reasons, 2009; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

Successful engagement requires students and the institution to identify and make choices about activities that are perceived to be “educationally purposeful” (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Therefore, it important to consider understanding the various activities students engage in and the rationale behind identifying their activities, as well as their motivation to engage in specific types of opportunities. The meaning students give to their choices prior to participating in an educationally purposeful activity, and the meaning made during and after their engagement in selected activities, is critical to understanding their perceived gains and the value of those activities. SLIEA are generally perceived to support positive outcomes that are congruent with the values of the educational environment. Reasons (2009), referencing Pascarella and Terenzini (1998), called on future research in higher education to increase the exploration of the conditional
effects of college, which involves exploring the impact and particular experiences and their “magnitude for different kinds of students” (p. 677).

**Racial Identity Development**

The racial and ethnic background of students can significantly impact their experiences in college (Parker & Flowers, 2003). More specifically, the perceptions of the college campus environment and the subsequent experiences for A-A students is often influenced by racial identity status, which represents students’ transformation experiences and processes resulting from various levels of interaction with the majority culture (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Helms & Cook, 1999; Spurgeon & Myers, 2010; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). According to Helms (1990), the quality or manner of a person’s identification with a respective racial group reflects their racial identity. As a result, considering and understanding the impact of racial identity and campus connectedness, belonging, and involvement for A-A students has been a priority for researchers as they work to make important contributions to the body of knowledge of A-A students attending PWI (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984).

Researchers such as Mitchell and Dell (1992), as well as Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995), have provided information related to the influence of racial identity development on the level of campus engagement of A-A students in general (Mitchell & Dell) and more specifically, A-A men (Howard-Hamilton, 1997; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton). Although the research conducted by Mitchell and Dell as well as Taylor and Howard-Hamilton has made important contributions to understanding A-A students on campus, Parker and Flowers (2003) affirmed that Cross’s (1971) Identity Development Model has served to support a comprehensive description of the transformation
experience of A-A students. The model is used to describe the way African Americans advance to understand themselves and their race with respect to understanding their racial identity in light of the majority culture. The model has identified five stages of Black psychological development as individuals engage the world around them: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization and Commitment.

Although Cross (1995) later revised the model to further reflect the salience individuals give to race in the stages of Pre-Encounter and the bi-cultural/multicultural outcomes in the stage of Internalization, the model still implies that how students see themselves, with respect to their self-concept and the majority culture, will impact their level of involvement, interaction, and connection to their campus environment. An understanding of identity development sheds some light on why some A-A students feel more comfortable and get involved in an unfamiliar cultural environment as compared to others who do not. This has implications for academic and social success leading to assessing attrition, retention, student persistence, and ultimately degree attainment (Parker & Flowers, 2003).

As we consider A-A men and the impact racial identity development has on their interest and behaviors related to campus involvement, research has not clearly evaluated or distinguished how the stages of racial identity directly impact the decision of A-A men to participate in the broad range of SLIEA. However, research does imply that racial classification for A-A men and their internalization of societal perception of them as a marginalized group may have an impact on their purposeful behavior related to campus involvement activities (Brown, 2006).
Bonner and Bailey (2006) affirmed, “The establishment of positive identity for African-American male student is significant in that it serves as the foundation upon which the student can develop some sense of agency and in turn determine where he fits within the academy” (p. 28). It has been established that the notion of fit and belonging is often experienced quite differently for undergraduate African-American men at PWIs, as compared to their other male and female counter-parts (Bonner & Bailey; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2006a, 2006b, 2009). This may be attributed to A-A men feeling high levels of isolation, alienation, and in many cases the absence of meaningful peer connection while attending college (Cuyjet, 1997). Exploring these and other related issues with students involved in SLIEA is critical to considering the perceived behavioral choices that tend to result in successful outcomes.

**Student Leadership Development in College**

New theoretical constructs have emerged to promote enhanced understanding of student perceptions of themselves, leadership, and personal and collective identity within the educational process and the broader world. Student leadership activities serve to assist student understanding of their potential and real impact on the community regardless of specified roles or cultural background (Wielkiewicz, 2000). Recognition of the responsibility for enabling student leadership development has promoted an increased commitment on the part of colleges and universities to support student leadership development (Dugan, Komives, & Associates, 2006; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006; Scott, 2004).

**Why explore leadership development.** Evidence suggests that colleges and universities have a renewed commitment to the leadership development of students they
serve (Dugan et al., 2006; Komives et al., 2006; Scott, 2004). The growing understanding of leadership in a changing world and the need to develop college students who are able to contribute to the process is believed to have resulted in a new paradigm related to educational programs on college campuses (Komives et al.; Roberts, 2007). As a result, two paradigms of leadership have been identified: The industrial (i.e., management-oriented, leader-centric models) and the post-industrial (i.e., relational, reciprocal, values-based models) (Rost, 1991).

The post-industrial paradigms of leadership have served to shift and challenge the hierarchical models of leadership that have generally promoted the development of a select group of individuals who are perceived to possess historically identified leadership qualities and traits (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). As a result of the post-industrial shift in viewing leadership, many new models are being endorsed by higher education institutions that support the development of leadership in students. These new models embrace social change (Astin & Astin, 1996; Bonous-Hammarth, 1996), demonstrate commitment to service (Greenleaf, 1998; Polleys, 2002), promote an understanding of diversity (Overstreet, Okiror, Weber, & McGary, 1998), and support a developmental approach to understanding leadership that embraces a relational model and promotes leadership as a process that supports self-efficacy among college students (Komives et al., 1998, 2006). These models are leading to new theoretical understanding related to how students perceive themselves, perceive leadership, and develop a sense of personal and collective agency within the educational process and the broader world. As a result, new experiences and self-knowledge related to involvement in leadership activities is serving to aid students in their understanding of the systemic impact they can have in
organizations, institutions, and the greater community, regardless of what prescribed organizational role or cultural background they may come from (Wielkiewicz, 2000).

Although higher education institutions may have some general differences in their mission, the majority embrace the importance of leadership development in students and recognize the responsibility for empowering students to develop as leaders. Therefore, those involved in student leadership development programs and related campus activities are challenged with providing empirical evidence for the unique and important ways these programs are contributing to student learning and development outcomes (Keeling, 2004). Previous research has provided support and evidence for the impact of leadership programs, activities, and opportunities on the development of students. These experiences often encourage students to act in ways that positively impact their educational experiences (Cress et al., 2001; Harper, 2006b).

Despite the fact that leadership is acknowledged as a complex phenomenon with many different definitions, colleges and universities across the United States have developed many intentional opportunities and programs that support the leadership development of students (Mangan, 2002; Freeman, Knott, & Schwartz, 1996; Komives et al., 2006; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Considering the post-industrial paradigm’s influence on the contemporary views of leadership, higher education leaders and policy makers have worked diligently over the last three decades to further examine and recognize an institution’s role in nurturing an environment in which students can learn and develop themselves as leaders. It is currently estimated that there are over 800 identified academic, co-curricular, and extra-curricular leadership programs established at colleges across the United States (Counsel for the Advancement of Standards [CAS],
2009; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). These programs influence activities and opportunities that support the engagement of students in attendance. More leadership programs and related opportunities are being added each year as colleges commit to sponsoring purposeful activities that benefit students and influence successful outcomes (Cress et al., 2001; CAS; Komives et al.).

**The birth of the focus on college student leadership development.** Leadership educators credit the work of James McGregor Burns (1978) and his vision for developing transformational leaders. Educators also attribute grants awarded to higher education institutions by the Kellogg Foundation during the 1990s for engineering a focus on the coordination and evaluation of leadership development programs and activities in college. Results of the Kellogg Foundation study confirmed important developmental outcomes for college students (Astin & Astin, 2000; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Some of these outcomes included supporting student development of communication skills, problem-solving, personal and social responsibility, sense of campus belonging, conflict resolution, interaction with faculty, and increased self-esteem (Astin & Astin; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt). According to Astin and Astin (2000):

Colleges and universities provide rich opportunities for recruiting and developing leaders through the curriculum and co-curriculum. Co-curricular experiences not only support and augment the students’ formal classroom and curricular experience, but can also create powerful learning opportunities for leadership development through collaborative group projects that serve the institution or the community. (p. 3)
According to Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998), efforts to coordinate these types of opportunities for students influence “self-development, with the goal of [students] becoming more effective leaders and participants” (p. 19). This is a primary goal for most colleges and universities. Mangan (2002) and Cress et al. (2001) indicated that identified campus leadership development opportunities should support student development and are intended to encourage and influence student involvement, personal development, and leadership self-efficacy.

In addition, leadership program activities often support experiential action, a sense of personal agency, and civic engagement, both on campus and in the larger community (Mangan, 2002; Cress et al., 2001). Although leadership activities and programs designed to influences these activities are acknowledged as important by many college campuses, understanding the essential impact of these activities on the academic performance of students has been a critique and limitation (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Therefore, understanding the academic commitment behaviors of students that result from involvement in SLIEA could shed light on how leadership activities serve to influences college persistence. In light of the low persistence rate of A-A men, evaluating the successful involvement of A-A men engaged in these activities has shed light on their campus experiences that support their academic commitment behaviors and uniquely influence their college persistence.

**Defining leadership development.** According to the Council for the Advance of Standards (CAS), which adopts and articulates guidelines and standards that support program development, improvement, and professional practice in higher education, leadership development activities support an environment that empowers students to
mature and develop toward greater “growth and increasing complexity” over a period of time. Activities that promote leadership development promote positive behavioral, cognitive, and effective outcomes (CAS, 2009, p. 369).

CAS (2009) indicated that larger student access to higher education has resulted in greater diversity within higher education. As a result, there has been a movement for colleges to intentionally identify and engage students in transformative experiences that support their academic aspirations and future outlook through positively influencing their social environment. Therefore, SLIEA have been directed toward the entire student body. CAS guidelines for effective program development stated,

Because [college] students experience leadership in many settings—in and out of the classroom, on and off campus—virtually every student engages in some type of activity that involves the practice of leadership. Regardless of academic discipline….students must be better prepared to serve as citizen-leaders in a global community. (p. 366)

Literature that supports leadership development and engagement opportunities for students in higher education challenge educators to help students understand their experiences, which can facilitate their learning in a way that validates them as knowers (Baxter-Magolda, 2001). The assumption is that validating students as knowers can support meaningful outcomes in the learning process that should better prepare students to become effective contributors in (and to) the various communities in which they belong (Roberts, 2007; Baxter-Magolda). This suggests the importance in identifying which activities students, in this case A-A men, give meaning too and why.
Sedlacek, (1999) acknowledged that successful involvement and experiences with student leadership activities has been defined as an important non-cognitive (or non-academic) variable, which is significant to the development and persistence of A-A students in college. According to Sedlack, “Successful Black students have had successful leadership experiences. They have shown the ability to organize and influence others, often within their cultural-racial context” (p. 543). Fleming (1993), who is highly regarded on the issues related to understanding the deeper experiences of Blacks in College (1984), spoke to what students may be missing if their needs are not being met or if they are not engaged in leadership related activities. Fleming (1993) stated:

In college students learn to participate in and run the world around them, just as they will be expected to run the world around them after leaving college. Students who go with the natural flow and become responsibly involved stand to have a happier adjustment. Leadership is the single most important negotiating skill that a student can bring to college or develop while in it. Leaders are in a position to maximize the critical relationship associated with academic and intellectual growth. Leaders develop working relationships with other students, and learn how to work with sometimes difficult people in order to get things done and still stay in school. (p. 18)

**Leadership identity development.** Student leadership programs and their related activities on college and university campuses are often funded to support all students in their development (CAS, 2009). This would imply that all college students entering higher education should identify themselves as future leaders as they actively pursue quality learning experiences within the college environment. The implication for A-A
men is that SLIEA should attract their interest, as well as positively support their academic commitment and persistence. However, little is still known about A-A men who take advantage of these activities and the impact these campus sponsored activities have on their academic commitment and motivation to persist in the environment. Komives et al. (1998) indicated that active engagement in college leadership activities can support students’ understanding of their strengths and weakness. According Komives et al.,

Being aware of how you prefer to think, to relate, to learn, and to find personal meaning is an important self-awareness skill. Being able to articulate what you believe and what you value helps you understand your own motivations and behaviors. (p. 108)

The attention and focus on leadership development activities and opportunities of college students led Komives et al. (2006) to propose a grounded theory that articulated how leadership identity is developed by students. Komives et al. contended, “Leadership development involves engaging with learning opportunities in one’s environment over time to build one’s capacity or efficacy to engage in leadership. This developmental approach entails moving from simple to more complex dimensions of growth” (p. 402). Komives et al. further asserted that the developmental components that influence students’ capacity to learn and engage leadership include the role of adults in their lives, the changing role of peers, their opportunities for involvement, and time spent in reflective learning. Komives and Wagner (2009), in explaining the Leadership Identity Development Model (LID) proposed by Komives et al., clarified that the developmental components contained in the model contribute to students’ development of leadership
self-efficacy as an element of their identity. This understanding suggests the need for
identification and clarification of these components among A-A men related to the
meaning they give to these experiences and their perceived gains.

Komives et al.’s (2005, 2006) model seems to indicate that students’
understanding of opportunities for engagement in the environment and the positive
outcomes that are understood (via reflective learning) could be critical to the process of
their commitment and ultimately their persistence. Meaningful opportunities for
leadership engagement experiences could therefore serve to address academic and social
challenges and increase personal expectations for oneself within the educational context.
This is a point that could be of critical importance for A-A men trying to navigate
through their college experiences while managing the negative social characterization and
stigma of being an endangered species in education (Hrabowski et al., 1998). In essence,
supporting a leadership identity for A-A men may serve to increase their personal
expectations, both external and internal, and how they should interact within their
development can be thought of as an integration strategy by helping people understand
how to relate to others, coordinate their efforts, build commitment, and develop extended
social networks by applying self-understanding to social and organizational imperatives”
(p. 414).

Harper and Quaye’s (2009) sentiment about the importance of campus
engagement would seem to support Komives et al.’s (2006) notion that a leadership
identity that promotes engagement is valuable to students. Harper and Quaye
acknowledge that a student’s marginal commitment to their institution can play a critical
role in attrition. The understanding is that “Institutional commitment is strengthened when undergraduates [college students] are actively engaged in educationally purposeful endeavors that connect them to the campus in which they feel some sense of enduring obligation and responsibility” (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 4). Hence, SLIEA represent activities and opportunities designed to support students’ connection to campus, which should ultimately have a positive effect on their academic and social integration, as well as their commitment to campus. A recent study by Avery and Daly (2010) also supports the importance of encouraging SLIEA activities to high risk college students, which would include A-A men. The research conducted by Avery and Daly implied that certain co-curricular activities may result “in social capital and therefore enhance student retention and increase likelihood of degree attainment” (p. 35).

**Student beliefs about leadership.** Examining the beliefs and perceptions of students who participate in leadership development activities has been identified as important in providing insight into student’s campus leadership behavior. Shertzer and Schuh (2004) conducted a study to better understand the motives and beliefs of student leaders. The study indicated that the belief system of students tends to influence their perception and interest in leadership, as well as the related opportunities identified to support a student’s development. Held beliefs by a student can serve to empower or constrain student motivation and interest in leadership involvement activities when they arrive on campus. Therefore, how college students come to understand and define leadership may play a significant role in their desire and the perceived benefit or academic gains associated with the time and energy they might commit to these identified
activities. Research supports that a student’s perception tends to support their level of engagement or disengagement in campus leadership roles (Shertzer & Schuh).

Shertzer and Schuh (2004) also reported findings and implications with regard to the role higher education can play in empowering students’ belief through intentional leadership development initiatives. The authors contended that an empowered belief system led students to seek and receive support from others, recognize and take advantage of opportunities presented to them, and call upon their background and previous experiences that raised their expectations to engage in SLIEA. On the other hand, a constrained belief system resulted in students feeling they lacked the capabilities and experiences to lead others, which limited their motivation to seek these opportunities (Shertzer & Schuh). A constrained belief system held by students also influenced a lack of confidence in their abilities and the perception that there was a lack of opportunities, which limited their ability to develop themselves as a leader.

Exploring the belief system of A-A men engaged in SLIEA students should provide practitioners with a greater understanding of how some students perceive their leadership development and its connection to their overall academic commitment, which could reflect and serve to influence their desired behavior in college. Research has not examined the belief system held by A-A men engaged in SLIEA. Exploring beliefs may add insight into the empowering or constraining perceptions that lead to behaviors associated with successful involvement in leadership development activities (Harper, 2006b; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). Unexamined beliefs and meaning associated with these activities can lead educators toward unsubstantiated (and often negative) assumptions about who students are, why they are in the educational
environment, and their motivation for engagement (or lack of engagement) in the curricular and co-curricular opportunities presented within the context of college.

Students who are actively involved in various SLIEA are often viewed as individuals who have successfully integrated themselves into the campus environment. This may be assumed because, in addition to the academic workload often associated with college, these students seem motivated to make additional commitments to identified co-curricular opportunities. These commitments are assumed to support their development and may serve to further demonstrate their dedication to the values inherent within the university environment. Although some students involved in SLIEA receive campus recognition for their involvement and/or campus service, it is the choice to be involved in these purposeful educational opportunities and the meaning attributed to these experiences that may best communicate the impact a campus environment is having on supporting their academic commitment behaviors and influencing their persistence.

**Conclusion for student leadership.** Although emerging research is contributing to the understanding of how A-A men experience (i.e., interact, navigate, and perceive) their campus environment through degree attainment, there is still much to learn about how successful students recognizes and overcome their challenges, develop a sense of belonging, direction, and purpose in order to persist toward degree completion (Harper, 2006b). A-A men who are successfully involved in leadership development activities generally represent a group of individuals who are successfully engaging their college environment. It is believed that they have a story to share that can help educators understand their motivations as well as the potential gains that their choice of
involvement in these activities provide to supporting their academic commitment, persistence, and ultimately degree attainment.

A-A Students and Leadership Involvement in College

A few studies have explored the leadership involvement and development of A-A students in college (Arminio et al., 2000; Kimbrough, 1995; Sutton & Kimbrough, 1991) and African-American men in particular (Brown, 2006; Frazier, 2009; Harper, 2003, 2006b, 2009b; Harper & Quaye 2007; Sutton & Terrell, 1997). The study by Arminio et al. (2000) explored the leadership perceptions and experiences of A-A students. The study acknowledged the importance of understanding how A-A students may perceive the nature of their leadership involvement differently than what is considered the traditional view that often supports a hierarchal (or the industrial paradigm) approach to leadership.

African American student involvement related to leadership and development activities often centered on group experiences and communal orientations rather than those of the individual (Arminio et al., 2000). Arminio et al. also indicated a difference in gender orientation related to student leadership. Gender may impact the types of involvement, the perceived risk of involvement, and the approach students take to leading in organizations.

In specifically understanding the involvement of A-A men on predominantly white campuses, Harper and Quaye (2007) acknowledged, beyond the risk perceived by the involved men, there was a purposeful nature to their involvement. These included affording the student an opportunity to develop cross-cultural communication skills and allowing A-A men to develop and express Black identities within the context of the
organizations they were involved with on campus. Reportedly, cross-cultural communication afforded A-A men the ability to “successfully learn how to work with people who were different in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, and religion” (Harper & Quaye, p. 137). A strong emphasis was placed on learning how to deal with White people, which many A-A men involved in leadership considered a gift that was not shared by many uninvolved A-A peers. Purposeful interactions with individuals outside of their same race peers were perceived to be essential for future success.

According to Harper and Quaye (2007), membership in student organizations represents a commitment to enacting change, which signifies an inner comfort with one’s blackness. Therefore,

Clubs and organization—predominantly Black and minority, as well as mainstream and majority White—offered platforms through which the African-American men in this study can champion Black causes; advocate for support and resources to meet the needs of racial/ethnic minority students; and offer a voice that was often missing when decisions were being made regarding campus policies, the allocation of resources, and the selection of speakers and entertainers that student organizations brought to campus. (p. 140)

Although the benefits of campus organizational involvement enriches the educational experiences of A-A men, questions still remain. How did their involvement support their academic commitment to persist in college? What kinds of persistence behavior resulted from this SLIEA that can be shared and effectively understood?
African-American Students and College Participation

Since the Brown versus the Board of Education decision of 1954 that outlawed racial segregation in public education in the United States, A-A students have had the legal access to attend PWIs (Fine, 2004). The NCES (2005) has indicated that more A-A students are attending post-secondary institutions of higher education today than have ever been recorded. In spite of increased enrollments, many A-A students at PWIs continue to have various challenges with their academic transition, often struggle with racial tension, and are commonly challenged to develop a sense of identity within the culture of the higher education academy (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Fries-Britt, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Pascarella, Smart, & Stoecker, 1989). In addition, A-A students are commonly challenged to find “educationally meaningful” social lives on campus that serve to positively influence their persistence and lower their feelings of isolation (Allen, 1986; Cuyjet, 2006; Fleming, 1984; Taylor, 1986). The various struggles for A-A students are most represented by the A-A men within the population, evidenced by the fact that two-thirds of the baccalaureate degrees awarded to African-Americans have been achieved by women in the population, and only 32.4% of the A-A men who start college graduate within six years (NCES, 2005; Harper 2006a).

Singer (2005) indicated, “Historically, American educational institutions have been some of the most visible perpetrators of racism against African-Americans” (p. 366). Further, Cureton (2003) asserted that many A-A students struggle because they are asked to navigate an unfamiliar context and culture in the higher education environment, which may be drastically different from their formative life experience prior to college attendance. Although the challenge of making the adjustment to college affects all
students, A-A students experience increased challenges due to the cultural assimilation that is often involved in their academic and social transitions at PWIs (Fleming, 1984; Harper, 2006c; Levy, Blanco, & Jones, 1998; Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010; Parker & Scott, 1985; Smedley et al., 1993).

Cureton (2003) conveyed the magnitude of the situation, which implies the challenge A-A students are faced with in the academy:

In the new situation Black students on predominantly White campuses are asked to assimilate into an unfamiliar environment composed of bureaucratic organizations and policies, entertainment organizations, sports programs, diverse populations with differences in cultural values, and judicial systems with legal agents working to maintain campus social order. (p. 296)

Although open access to attend PWIs has been afforded to A-A and other racially and ethnically diverse students over the last six decades, the evidence demonstrates that A-A students continue to be challenged in their efforts to persist and navigate the higher education pipeline (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Fleming, 1984; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Smedley et al., 1993).

In spite of the various struggles A-A students may face in higher education, many students have persisted and thrived within the culture at PWIs. Their choices and patterns of involvement within the academy have empowered a sense of commitment, understanding, and growth related to their purpose and aspiration for achieving success (Brown, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper 2006b). Critical understanding of students who are successfully navigating and negotiating the various challenges with the academic culture is warranted (Cuyjet, 2006; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Harper,
2003, 2007, 2009; Steward, Jackson & Jackson, 1990). Distinguishing their system of support and active participation, which encourage behaviors that represent a commitment to the values established within the academy, may indicate clearer and more meaningful pathways that serve to help students in their effort to become connected to the college environment (Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008; Smedley et al., 1993).

Davis (1991) revealed the importance of involvement and engagement activities for A-A students at PWIs by recognizing that those involved in student organizations and in leadership roles were more satisfied with their undergraduate experiences and less likely to consider dropping out of school. It may be assumed that there is something purposeful about the experience for students that made the decision to become involved. Experiences such as leadership opportunities may have also empowered a commitment to learning and personal development within the context of the college environment. Involvement in leadership activities may also encourage participatory behaviors that translate to both in-class and out-of-class commitments known to support college level achievement (Finn & Rock, 1997). Therefore, SLIEA may support students’ confidence about being in the learning environment of higher education.

Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) advocated, “Learning how to build confidence in Black students by creating personal and institutional system of support is crucial” (p. 326). These systems of support, through classroom activities or meaningful out-of-class engagement opportunities, aid students in their academic and social integration. For A-A students, this type of engagement serves to affirm a sense of belonging within the higher education environment. A sense of belonging for college students is important to their
sustained motives and desire to exhibit behavior that represents their commitment to persisting toward earning a college degree (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005).

**A-A men participating in higher education.** According to Davis (1999), “There is virtually no race or gender-neutral school context for Black males in higher education” (p. 134). As a result, educational research has taken greater interest in attempting to understand and document the educational progress of A-A men within the academy. The reality is that A-A men currently demonstrate the poorest educational outcomes compared to other major demographic groups in the United States, which often serves to perpetuate a perceived ethos of academic disengagement toward members of the population. According to Palmer et al. (2010), the educational disengagement for many A-A men can begin as early as elementary education and is connected to low academic performance, lack of positive role models, low-self-esteem, and low expectations from their schooling environment, their communities, and the larger society. However, as students move through secondary education and are essentially motivated to pursue higher education, their aspirations and their expectations should be met by an environment that acknowledges their challenges and intentionally meets their needs, but also recognizes their assets and affirms their potential for achieving success (Samuel, Harper, & Nichols, 2010).

In spite of recent research conducted on the experience of A-A men in college, little is still known about the meaningful activities that attract their interest and influence their active engagement and persistence within the modern higher education academy. More specifically, it is important to examine the co-curricular campus involvement and engagement activities that can make a difference in supporting their interest as students
who belong and can thrive within the environment. These activities should increase the
academic commitment and participation behaviors of students, which can serve to
influence successful persistence in school (Finn & Rock, 1997). It is often assumed that
students who are attending college have affirmed values that are congruent with the
culture of higher education. Although this may be a reasonable assumption, the apparent
lack of engagement and persistence by a majority of A-A men attending college may
more accurately portray how they perceive their educational environment and the
environment’s interest in their success (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006). However, certain activities,
such as leadership activities, may serve to set or support educational expectations for the
type of meaningful engagement students should be actively pursuing and participating in
as part of their presence in the university environment (Harper, 2003, 2006b; Harper &
Quaye, 2007).

Much speculation has been made about the needs of A-A men and the nature of
purposeful co-curricular activities in college. Cuyjet (1997) asserted that A-A men need
to be nurtured as they attempt to adjust and adapt to the college community. Part of this
need is to make the environment more welcoming and perceivably less hostile, as many
A-A men in the academy may be viewed negatively and portrayed as less capable than
their peers from different racial categories and females from their same race category.

To understand and address the needs of A-A men, Cuyjet (1997) stated, “A
worthwhile place to start this reeducation of the American public is among the faculty,
staff, and students of our campuses” (p. 7). Cuyjet further asserted,

An overt campaign must be initiated on predominantly white campuses to counter
the institutionalized, generally negative image of black men accepted by almost
every segment of the American population….One of the first things we may need to address in making the college experience less marginalizing for African American men is to recognize the broad acceptance and institutionalization of these negative perceptions of black men as threatening, unfriendly, and less intelligent than any other distinguishable segment of the American population. Ironically, one of the more critical populations requiring assistance in changing attitudes about the merits and abilities of African American men is that of African American men themselves. (p. 8)

Understanding the need to better orientate a college campus and the A-A men who encounter the campus experience, it would seem clear that identifying and encouraging participation in certain college activities by understanding the benefit gained by A-A men engaged in these activities may serve to provide an orientation for what should be expected as a part of the social and academic transition to college.

Sutton and Terrell (1997) asserted that student development professionals must clearly articulate the importance and advantage of engaging campus organization and purposeful college activities. Some of these activities include experiences such as student government, serving as residential advisors, and as peer counselors. It is believed that these experiences provide avenues for empowering students and increasing interest and motivation for greater involvement and participation throughout campus, which could positively translate into successful classroom experiences (Sutton & Terrell, 1997). Sutton and Terrell speculated that the lack of involvement and engagement in such activities for A-A men stems from the perception that these types of leadership activities are not relevant to their personal collegiate experiences. Some of the perceived lack of
interest may also be the result of low participation in similar types of activities in high school.

**A-A men and co-curricular college involvement.** For college students in general, evidence has clearly indicated that involvement in co-curricular activities positively affects cognitive and intellectual skill development (Anaya, 1996; Kuh, 1995) and positive self-image (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995), and influences the rate at which students generally persist (Berger & Milem, 1999; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999; Reason, 2009). However, Harper (2006b) asserted that leadership involvement activities represent the type of opportunity that “is central to the success of the African-American male collegian as he is likely to reap a return on the investment he makes in his experience” (p. 69). The implication is that students who make meaningful choices about the investment of their time in college are more likely to engage in experiences that will support their development and to assert their commitment to persisting in college. However, the larger question that must be answered as we encourage and invite A-A men to engage in out of classroom experiences is how their involvement and engagement in activities out of class (co-curricular) benefits them in the classroom (curricular).

Despite the effort to understand the undergraduate SLIEA of African-American men, little is still known about out-of-class behaviors of A-A men that are positively impacting their purposeful engagement, academic commitment, and persistence while in college. For students, “evidence suggests that gains in cognitive complexity depend largely upon the extent to which students are able to connect their out-of class experiences with what they learn inside the classroom” (Harper, 2006b, p. 71). This
notion encourages the need to conduct more research that specifically examines the experiences of A-A men (and boys) as they attempt to navigate their education at all levels, but most importantly in higher education, where a personal choice has been made to pursue success through the attainment of a higher education degree (Palmer et al., 2010).

A few studies have examined co-curricular campus activities and their impact on the engagement behaviors and educational outcomes on A-A men. Harper (2006b), in an examination of out-of-class leadership activities on A-A men, reported that these types of engagement experiences were critical to the development of A-A men. Involvement in leadership activities resulted in practical competencies, or what is defined as “transferrable skills gained in college that should be easily recalled and applied to other settings (for example, internships, jobs, graduate school)” (p.76).

Although some of the leadership experiences available to students may present them with various challenges, Harper (2006b) indicated that for A-A men in the study, “involvement had brought out different strengths they had not previously know they possessed” (p. 76). Therefore, the active participation of A-A men in their co-curricular activities provided experiences and skills that increased students’ sense of confidence, which supported their sense of being prepared to engage and respond to new institutional settings and situations. The practical competencies most cited by students in the study by Harper included working with people from different backgrounds, prioritizing and effectively managing time, contributing to and negotiating in teamwork settings, communicating in small groups and large forums, identifying talents in and delegating responsibilities to others, and recognizing and successfully navigating highly political
environments. The study supported that the development gained by students essentially resulted from meaningful choices made by A-A men about how they would use their time out of class, which represents an interest and an investment in their educational development experiences (Harper).

The belief is that outcomes gained from out-of-class SLIEA may have an influential and lasting effect, serving to support students to graduation and beyond their undergraduate experiences (Harper, 2006b). Harper (2006b) contended,

The skills they [A-A men] gain and the benefit they accrued through involvement underscore the importance of finding ways to get more African American male collegians similarly engaged and exposed to the fruits of involvement and leadership in out-of-class activities. (p.85)

Although the study by Harper added to the literature on high achieving A-A men in college, the study was restricted to participants with a 3.0 or higher cumulative grade point average. The results do not clearly address how the practical knowledge gained by students supported their academic commitment, which may have influenced behaviors that encourage persistence in college.

Contrary to literature that overwhelmingly affirms the positive effects of out of class college activities on the development of students, Flowers (2004) critically asserted that the value of certain out of class activities for students must be closely examined. In an examination of national data obtained from the College Student Experience Questionnaire, Flowers found that participation and involvement in clubs and organizations for A-A students, “did not exert a considerable influence on academic and social developmental gain for African American students” (p. 648). However, given the
contention that different types of student involvement experiences may influence the learning and development experience of students differently, A-A students’ educational outcomes may be impacted by type, quantity, and quality of their involvement experience in college. Because some activities may negatively impact A-A students in their development, educators must explore the informal and formal nature of individual activities with a close eye on investigating the intended outcomes for students and the direct and indirect effect the activities may have on learning gained within the environment. This would be especially true for educational outcomes that supported or impacted students’ interaction with faculty, interaction with peers, and meaningful participation in campus organizations (Flowers).

Flowers (2004) suggested, “Certain types of student involvement experiences might exert only a small and trivial direct influence on African-American students’ development” (p. 651). However, the “appropriate type and amount of student involvement experiences may significantly enhance African American student educational outcomes in college” (p. 651). Therefore, research must continue to explore why, how or if certain student involvement experiences have significant influences on student development while others do not.

**Participation in Greek life.** Although the literature is limited with regard to the SLIEA of A-A men, one of the known activities that appeal to the interest of some A-A men in college is the active participation in Greek life. According to Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998), “Membership in a Greek-letter organization contributes positively to collegiate student involvement, be it in other student organizations or in the holding of formal leadership positions generally” (p. 103). Black Greek-letter organizations (BGOs)
tend to provide expectations for student involvement and present their members with
greater opportunities to practice leadership skills, which are believed to develop a higher
level of leadership abilities (Kimbrough & Hutcheson).

Some research has clearly contended that the involvement of A-A men in BGOs
is considered a critical venue for engaging A-A men (Harper & Harris, 2006; Kimbrough,
1995; McClure, 2006). This is a point Sutton and Terrell (1997) seemed to affirm when
considering A-A men at predominately white campuses: “The Black fraternity remains
the most popular avenue for black men to exercise leadership” (p. 57). McClure (2006)
asserted that part of the importance of BGOs for A-A men is that they increase the close
relationship of individual members, support a sense of connection to their campus, and
also link the men to the heritage and legacy represented in Black history. These
organizations support an important social network for A-A men on campus as well as
important alumni networks beyond campus (McClure). “These connections help create a
supportive environment for membership that is conducive to increasing success in college
and a sense of satisfaction with their campus experience, as well as increase possibilities
for success after college” (McClure, p. 1045).

Harper and Harris (2006) have also indicated there is strong evidence that A-A
men experience positive gains as a result of their fraternity membership, which include
racial identity development, leadership development, the development of practical
competence, and cognitive development. Further, the SLIEA experienced by A-A men
via BGOs are reported to help their connection with other student leaders, help students
access financial resources, encourage students to participate in collaborative
programming opportunities, and tend to support meaningful relationship with university
administrators. Although no link has been made to these organizations and their perceived influence on classroom behaviors of students, Harper and Harris (2006) indicated that one of the practical competencies gained by A-A men as a result of their fraternity affiliation is the ability to “balance multiple commitments simultaneously, such as study and preparing for class, attending chapter meetings, planning and executing programs, and remaining involved in other aspects of campus life” (p. 139).

Although it is important to recognize the importance of BGOs to A-A men on campus, involvement in these organizations and the contemporary experiences of A-A men and their choice to affiliate (and voluntarily associate) with these organizations have not been without criticism. The increased incidents of physical and psychological hazing, as well as recent criticism regarding the apparent decline in the academic performance of members have left many college students, faculty, and administrators raising questions about the declining roles of these prestigious organizations on college campuses, particularly at PWIs (Harper & Harris, 2006; Jones, 2004). Further, the selective nature and secret society culture of these organizations limit the ability of the non-Greek affiliated A-A men from taking advantage of the legacy of high achievement and campus participation involvement behaviors that membership in these organizations may offer students. Considering the various leadership development opportunities often offered by colleges and universities, which do not require membership in a BGOs, it is important to understand the meaning students are gaining from SLIEA and how these experiences transfer to college persistence.

A-A men negotiating college. While BGOs have been identified as one of the primary campus involvement opportunities that tends to attract A-A men attending
college, Brown (2006) asserted that identifying any positive co-curricular activities for A-A men that support leadership development and help students negotiate the system of higher education will essentially support their persistence to graduation. Research conducted by Brown indicated that other activities such as intramural sports programs, activities sponsored by the student union, and participation in student government, in addition to Greek fraternity activities, is believed to increase the persistence and eventual rate of graduation for A-A men in college. The notion is that many of these experiences serve to aid A-A men in their effort to negotiate the systems at PWIs, which essentially can strengthen their commitment and positively encourage their survival until graduation (Brown). This implies that colleges and universities play a pivotal role in identifying purposeful opportunities for A-A men to become involved in co-curricular activities that further influence their interest and desire to remain in the environment.

One indication is that meaningful interaction with peers of all backgrounds in both formal and informal settings establishes a social environment that increases expectations for college participation. Therefore, the opportunities that may be the most meaningful for A-A men might be the ones that nurture active college participation, both in class and out-of-class, which may possibly promote college persistence attitudes and participation behaviors (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). There is some implication that these experiences are also supporting gain in social and cultural capital for students, which can prove beneficial to their understanding of college and their motivation to establish networks that are beneficial in the process of pursuing and obtaining a college degree (Strayhorn, 2008, 2010). Overall, the current research suggests that A-A men who are attempting to navigate their college experiences do
perceive certain activities, facilities, programs, and relationships as critical to their social and educational survival on campus (Brown, 2006; Harper & Quaye; Strayhorn).

**Social stigma and pursuing campus involvement.** Research seems to indicate that there are social stigmas associated with campus participation for many A-A men. Brown (2006) indicated that A-A men may consider involvement in campus organizations, both as members and leaders, but that negative stereotypes and perceived social stigmas, such as “acting white” or being “less than cool,” may impede students’ interest and decision to actively pursue and engage in potentially meaningful activities.

In addition, the desire for involvement and participation may be diminished if programs and activities are not perceived to be immediately relevant to the current experiences of the student, or if A-A men perceive the experience to represent qualities that are feminine (Fischer, Overland, & Adams, 2010).

When considering the social stigma of involvement for A-A men in college, relationship development, particularly with regard to interpersonal relationships, is important to deliberate. Important insight may be gained into how A-A men involved in SLIEA relate to their environment through understanding how trust is developed and how fears, which tend to be manifest in gender stereotyping such as “hyper masculine” behavior response (Harris, 2008) or “Cool Posing” (Majors & Billson, 1992), are diminished. Understanding social stigmas in relation to the values placed on SLIEA is important because it recognizes the meaningful nature of how activities can serve to develop and support students’ aspirations to attain a college degree.

Fischer et al. (2010) also asserted that gender and ethnic identity can play a critical role in considering what it means to be engaged in activities intended to develop
students’ skills and abilities as leaders. Therefore, exploring the meaning students give to these activities can provide insight into how students are motivated by their involvement experiences in college and the influence this may play on their desire to actively persist. Harris (2009) contented that A-A men are among the marginalized males battling social stigma and psychological challenges that may serve to decrease their identification with the academic environment of college and “prevent the nation from tapping a potential pool of talent that it needs to compete in the global marketplace and improve our economy at home” (p.1).

**Concluding point.** There is a crisis concerning the meaningful engagement and academic persistence of A-A men in college. Some of the crisis stems from the social stereotypes and the various challenges A-A men encounter during their primary and secondary schooling experiences, which often carry over to the academic environment of higher education (Hrabowski et al., 1998; Lewis et al., 2010; Majors & Billson, 1992, Palmer et al., 2010; Wilson, 2000). According to Brown (2006), “It is imperative for higher education to address this crisis, as resolving it is essential to the social, political, and economic stability of the African-American and larger community” (p. 47). Although most of the dialogue with regard to A-A men in the educational pipeline has centered on their apparent disengagement with the current educational process, interest in what is considered to be “meaningful educational activities” that can serve to support their development, enhance their sense of belonging, interest, and commitment to persisting toward degree attainment is a priority. Recent research has stressed the importance of narrating a different story, one that can better support the meaning given to
certain activities and the lens that can impact this understanding (Brown, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006b, 2006c; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Examining and understanding the college experiences of A-A men involved in SLIEA will support increased knowledge about the meaning students take from these types of purposeful opportunities that are intended to support college student development and influence persistence to degree completion. This understanding may help to better inform and empower students, as well as members within the campus environment. As previously stated, when attempting to examine the experiences of A-A men on college campuses, many educators working within higher education have expressed the importance of reframing the inquiry of research, which can result in greater student-centered insight, as well as provide a counter-narrative to the culture of failure that seems to plague many A-A men in the educational pipeline.

The likelihood of success for A-A men is increased if they are prepared to take full advantage of what the higher education environment has to offer and if the environment is equipped to understand the various and complex needs that exist among the population of students. Therefore, redirecting the focus of educational achievements from those that are often perceived as negative, referencing deficit skills and behaviors, to those that are positive, supporting descriptive behaviors associated with successful outcomes, should be a goal. New language that critically recognizes and serves to understand the assets of successful A-A men participating in the university environment should encourage colleges and universities to assess, identify, and construct programs that effectively address the needs and interests of the broader population (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper 2003, 2006b; Harris, 1996; McGlynn, 2004).
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of African-American (A-A) men who are persisting in college and who demonstrate participation in student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA). The study was designed to gain a better understanding of how actively engaged A-A men in college develop meaning of their experiences and how these experiences serve to guide their actions toward persistence in college. The study maintained a focus on A-A men students and how co-curricular campus activities such as SLIEA can increase positive academic outcomes by influencing achievement motivation, academic habits, student social integration, and overall personal development. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the research design used for this study. The chapter outlines the research questions, the research approach and design, as well as population and sampling for the study. The chapter also outlines informed consent and confidentiality, the data collection and analysis process, and the quality and trustworthiness of the study. The chapter is summarized with a brief conclusion.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as a guide for the data collection. Open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) were developed for the purposes of the study, maintaining the focus on the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of A-A men in college with regard to their SLIEA participation and academic persistence toward degree attainment.
**Grand tour question.** What meaning do A-A men give to their co-curricular student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA)?

**Research sub-questions.**

1. How do A-A men participating in student leadership involvement and engagement activities experience their campus environment?
2. What perceived influence do SLIEA have on the motivation, commitment, and skill development of A-A men that support their persistence toward degree attainment?
3. What beliefs serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA?

**Research Approach and Design**

This study was designed to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of participants who have demonstrated persistence in college and are participating or have participated in SLIEA as part of their college experience. A qualitative phenomenological design will be used to accomplish this goal. The following sections include a discussion of the research approach, research design, and the appropriateness of the design for the study.

**Research approach.** According to Creswell (2005), qualitative research “is best suited for a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 45). The goal of the present study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of participants. LeCompte and Preissele (1993) indicate, “Qualitative studies are framed by descriptions of, explanation for, or meaning given to phenomena by both the researcher and the study participants” (pp. 31–32). In this case, engaging A-A men in conversation about their co-curricular SLIEA involvement and understanding their
personal experiences and beliefs related to their decisions to participate in SLIEA may be best understood by this form of inquiry. Manning (1992) supports the use of a qualitative approach when doing research involving college students because this mode of inquiry and the use of method (e.g., interviews) allows participants the opportunity to reflect on aspects of their experience related to campus life that are difficult to capture. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was selected for this study.

Qualitative studies focus on the importance of the participant’s perspective and how it informs the personal meaning held by the participant (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The qualitative approach also provides flexibility in exploring an isolated subject (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Qualitative exploration allows for an in-depth study, which may lead to the potential development of a new observation, providing an opportunity for further exploration of a study’s prevalence, predictors, and sequence in other studies (Yoshikawa et al., 2008). The methodology of a qualitative study is inquiry-based, exploring an occurrence through questions, narrative descriptions, and analysis of emerging themes (Creswell). As such, the qualitative approach provides a representation of the specific focus of the study, based on the interpretation of lived experiences of participants (Creswell; Neuman, 2003).

A qualitative research approach is valuable when the researcher seeks to understand the meanings individuals make of their experiences (Morrow, 2007). “A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). Qualitative research is useful when the possible variables have not yet been defined or inadequate research exists on the specific population.
Qualitative research is also appropriate when one needs to present a detailed and in-depth view of a phenomenon. Whereas quantitative methods can enable the researcher to get a broad understanding of a phenomenon, qualitative approaches are able to delve into complex processes and illustrate the multifaceted nature of human phenomenon. (Morrow, p. 211)

In contrast, a quantitative method does not meet the characteristics and goals of the present study, as quantitative studies are focused on “a description of trends or an explanation of the relationship among variables,” expressed statistically (Creswell, 2005, p. 45). Quantitative methods have a fundamental characteristic of attempting to provide precise measurement (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). The primary goal of a quantitative method is to collect a sample based on theories of mathematical probabilities or random sampling, which require a large sample size (Cooper & Schindler). Quantitative methods often use research instruments that search for the answers related to how much, how many, when, and who; whereas qualitative methods explore phenomenon using detailed data to promote interaction between participants and events that may uncover phenomenon (Cooper & Schindler).

**Research design.** Phenomenological inquiry guided this study. The goal of phenomenology is to capture the lived experiences or how individuals perceive and experience a central phenomenon or a certain set of conditions (Creswell, 2005, 2007; Patton, 2002). Phenomenology study seeks a deeper understanding of everyday lived experiences through an exploration of the nature and meaning of these experiences, describing what has been experienced, how it was experienced, and the perceived effects resulting from the experience (Creswell; Moustakas, 1994).
A phenomenological inquiry assumes that meaning is derived from the commonality of shared experience (Patton, 2002). The phenomenological design was used as a means for attempting to reveal the uniqueness of the phenomenon of being a male A-A student participating in SLIEA in an institution of higher education. The phenomenological design involves investigating the experiences of individuals in order to obtain “comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

For research that seeks to assess the impact of programs or activities, qualitative phenomenological analysis can be used to explore participants’ perceptions of outcomes related to program- or activity-specific influences, and how these influences affected actions, performance, and behaviors (Harper, 2007; Patton, 2002). Harper (2007) noted, Individual insights, though not generalizable to the entire population of students on a campus or across institutions, can still be helpful in assessment and program enhancement. Statistical significance and generalizability are not the only indicators of educational impact and replication worth. (p. 57)

Phenomenological research identifies themes that demonstrate the essences of the experience based on the statements, words, phrases, and expressions used by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In the present study, participants were asked to respond to open-ended interview questions, which served to capture the common themes in the experiences of the participants. The data obtained through the responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed for themes and served as the basis for the phenomenon, representing the essence of the lived experience of the participants (Moustakas).
Specifically, the study used Moustakas’ (1994) modified van Kaam method of phenomenological induction.

Other possible qualitative designs, such as case study (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 1993) and ethnography (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), were considered for use in the study, but found to be generally less appropriate for accomplishing the goals of this study. The case study approach is typically used to provide an in-depth look at a particular case, encompassing various data collection methods and data sources, such as interviews, surveys, and historical data collection, to provide different perspectives and understanding of a single or few case circumstances. The present study collected a single source of data (interview data). In addition, the study did not involve the investigation of a single location or specific case, but rather, an in-depth look at the experiences and perceptions of a sample of A-A men from a variety of locations (either a four-year college or university or a two-year community college). Therefore, the case study approach was deemed less appropriate. Ethnography is used to describe the behavioral patterns, conditions, or beliefs of cultural groups typically through observational and interview data collected in a natural setting and over a prolonged period of time (Creswell; Neuman, 2003). However, because the study was not conducted over an extended period of time, nor did it account for the possible variants of cultural differences among the A-A population, such as geographic cultural distinctions, ethnography was also deemed slightly less appropriate for the research. Neither the ethnographic nor case study designs were chosen to accomplish the goal of the present study.
Population and Sampling

The present study maintained a focus on the perceptions of A-A men in college who participate or have participated in SLIEA and have demonstrated persistence in their college education. The students chosen for this study had either junior or senior undergraduate standing and were actively enrolled at a four year institution of higher education or have completed a minimum of four successive semesters at a community college. The inclusion of A-A men attending community college is important. While four semesters at a community college might result in a student’s graduation, students’ persisting beyond four semesters is common. Course availability and requirements to transfer, along with the flexibility and variability of students persisting full-time or part-time, is customary within the community college context.

Students were selected from institutions located in and around a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. In addition, the student participants were in good academic standing with their institution, as defined by the institution. Participants in the study have been or are presently involved in SLIEA.

The study utilized a purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling method for which the researcher selects the particular research locations and participants to increase the probability that they will be able to provide the information necessary to answer the research question of the study (Creswell, 2005). Selecting samples for qualitative research requires a focus on participants who provide specific narratives to clarify and deepen the exploration of the study and provide the depth of information needed for descriptive research (Morrow, 2007; Neuman, 2003). Participants were purposively recruited and selected via a recruitment letter and flyer sent
to administrative leaders and student leadership development staff at participating institutions to help identify A-A men who met the criteria. The letter and flyer provided detailed information about the study and how to participate. Staff receiving this information were asked to forward it to students, and interested students voluntarily made contact with the researcher if they were interested in participation.

In addition, snowball sampling was required in order to obtain an adequate sample size for the study (Creswell, 2009). According to McMillan and Schumacher (1997), snowball sampling can be used as a method to support identifying other participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a technique by which the researcher asks chosen participants to provide information about other potential participants that are likely to fulfill the criteria for participation (Creswell).

Qualitative research normally involves small sample sizes of participants, as opposed to quantitative research, which normally relies on larger sample sizes (Creswell, 2005). Research suggests a sample size between 1 and 25 participants for qualitative investigations (Creswell, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005). However, the size of the qualitative sample remains largely up to the researcher with no specific rules for qualitative sample size (Patton, 2002). Patton stated, “Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244).

Using purposeful sampling of participants, the sample included 10 participants. Arminio et al. (2000) notes the importance of the researcher identifying six to eight “information rich” participants to interview when exploring the lived experiences of students. The research conducted in this study explored the perceptions and lived
experiences of the participants; as such, the size of 10 participants was based upon the overall need to provide an in-depth analysis and the expected availability of appropriate participants. The data obtained from the open-ended interview questions were able to provide rich descriptive information about the phenomenon being studied.

The selected participants voluntarily participated in the study. The population and sampling of the student participants from various institutions of higher education presented a greater chance of obtaining qualified participants to represent A-A men who are persisting in college and who participate in co-curricular SLIEA. Nominated, interested, and referred participants were extended an opportunity to participate via an email letter from the researcher (Appendix B).

**Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

Prior to conducting interviews, participants in the study received an introductory letter or email solicitation (Appendix B) and a form outlining informed consent (Appendix C), which they were asked to read and review prior to the scheduled interview. The informed consent form included the purpose of the study, a description of the open-ended interview process, identification of whom would view the data collected, identification of any risks associated with the study, identification of the time commitment needed for study involvement, a discussion of the confidentiality, and the option to withdraw from participation at any time. At the time of the scheduled interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the participant and asked that the participant sign it. By reading and signing the informed consent, the participants demonstrated awareness of their rights and involvement in the study (Neuman, 2003). Each participant was required to sign the informed consent form at the time of the
Interview if the intent was to continue with participation in the study. Once the consent form was signed in front of the researcher, the researcher conducted the interview with the participant.

Confidentiality, the process of holding personal information of participants in confidence without disclosure to the public, is a highly important responsibility of the researcher when conducting a research study (Neuman, 2003). Participation in this study was voluntary; there was no payment given to respondents for their participation, and there were no foreseeable risks to participants during the study beyond what would be ordinarily encountered in everyday life. Special precautions were established to protect the confidentiality of the responses. Interview data was transcribed and electronically archived by the researcher on a computer disc in a password protected document. Interview data will be kept in a secure, locked file cabinet for three years, after which all electronic documents and data would be destroyed. Confidentiality was further supported through assignment of pseudonyms to each of the participants; although demographic data was collected through verbal communication at the time of the interview, the researcher did not collect personal identifiable information such the address of the participants.

**Data Collection**

After IRB approval was successfully obtained, the researcher identified college administrators, student development staff professionals, and leadership educators at three identified institutions. An invitation e-mail letter (Appendix B) along with a recruitment flyer (Appendix D) was forwarded to each identified administrator and staff. In the e-mail, a request was made to post or forward the flyers and recruitment materials to all
students that may meet the criteria outlined for participation in the study. The researcher’s contact information e-mail and cell phone was contained in the introduction letter and flyer. Once potential study participants had been identified through recruitment activities, the researcher emailed the initial communication and letter of informed consent (Appendix C). The consent form clearly informed students of the purpose of the study, how they would be engaged, and any risk associated with participation. Particular emphasis was made related to the voluntary nature of the study.

Ten participants made contact with the research and expressed interest in participation. Each was provided with follow up communication (phone call or e-mail) from the researcher. Within written email communication or during the phone conversation, the details of the study were discussed and initial confirmation of the desire for participation or non-participation took place. Once willingness to participate was established, an interview time and place was arranged. For students who agreed to participate, a consent form was provided to them prior to the start of the study (Appendix C).

Semi-structured and open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) were utilized to conduct the interviews after the participants signed a consent form. The researcher served as the primary instrument in conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants in a natural setting. Interview protocol consisted of asking questions and recording answers to include handwritten and audio taping devices (Creswell, 2007).

In addition to the open-ended interview questions, participants verbally shared information about themselves that supported developing individual profiles (i.e., age, enrollment status, academic major, academic standing, family background, type of school
attended, and estimated time commitment to co-curricular activities). This provided the researcher a baseline of information related to each participant’s background and nature of experiences that support their participation in the study.

Interviews were conducted at a designated location that was private and comfortable for the participant and located within the confines of the institution in which the participant was enrolled, such as a campus library meeting room. At the time of the scheduled interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the participant and asked that the participant sign the informed consent form (Appendix C). Each participant was required to sign the informed consent form prior to commencement of the interview if the intent was to continue with participation in the study. Once the consent form was signed in front of the researcher, the researcher conducted the interview with the participant.

In attempting to understand the experiences of A-A men involved in co-curricular SLIEA within a college setting and the associated effects of participation in these activities, data were collected by conducting individual interviews. Interviews were semi-structured around the three research sub-questions (Appendix A). A semi-structured interview method is consistent with phenomenological inquiry, as the researcher explores and identifies the “essence” of the human experience being described by participants (Creswell, 2003). According to Ross (1998), semi-structured interviews leave room for emergent questions that are relevant to “understanding the background or inner feelings of the students” (p. 30). Questions that emerge can be referred to as Key Questions. Although initial questions are prepared for the purpose of beginning the interview process, the goal of the interview method is to allow for open conversation to
take place, which should allow participants to reflect on the most meaningful part of their experience with the campus community.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes per interview. This was consistent with a similar type of study by Shertzer and Shuh (2004). The duration of 60-90 minutes provided a reasonable length of time for the researcher to engage participants in ways that encouraged relationship building and disclosure.

Follow up interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes were conducted as additional key questions were identified. The purpose was to explore the additional questions, which added to the richness of the data collection. Follow up interviews took the form of face to face interviews or phone interviews. This was determined by the availability and convenience of participants.

A tape recorder was used to document students’ responses in individual interviews conducted. This allowed the researcher to collect information with detailed accuracy, which supported a rich description when reporting information. Data from the recorded interviews and researcher notes taken during the interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word by a professional transcription service. Transcriptions were imported into the NVivo9 qualitative analysis software.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data must be organized and categorized in preparation for data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenologist searches for common patterns shared by particular instances (Polit & Beck, 2006). Once the collection and transcription of the interview data was complete, the data were analyzed using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis, as described by Moustakas (1994).
Moustakas (1994) asserted that the primary source of knowledge is the individual’s perceptions. Phenomenological analysis provides a method of capturing the perceptions of participants and exploring the phenomenon to generate a vivid depiction of the experiences of the individual as well as the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological analysis model, as presented by Moustakas, focuses on four elements: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and intuitive integration that support synthesis of meanings and essences.

The concept of epoche requires the researcher to refrain from judgment and view the phenomenon under investigation in the absence of bias and preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish this, the researcher must set aside previous experiences, perceptions, preferences, and feelings in order to receive the phenomenon without bias and in a pure form (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas). Similarly, phenomenological reduction requires the researcher to bracket out presuppositions and assumptions, providing for the discovery of the data in its purest form (Patton, 2002), which is referred to as bracketing. As such, the phenomenon is taken solely within the context of the individual’s experiences (Denzin, 1998) and not analyzed in relation to current literature or existing meanings (Patton).

Because the researcher examined detail rich data of A-A men who are involved in SLIEA, care was taken when bracketing responses in order to capture the essence of what was communicated, which supported data analysis. Quality measure played a central role in evaluating the data. Denzin (1998) referenced that bracketing requires the following steps: (a) locating within the story key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question; (b) interpreting the meaning of these phrases as an informed
reader; (c) obtaining the subject’s interpretation of these phrases, if possible; (d) inspecting these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied; and (e) offering a tentative statement or definition of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step d.

The next step in phenomenological reduction is horizontalizing, which involves treating the data with equal value (Moustakas, 1994). All participant responses are initially reviewed and examined as potentially relevant. Data found to be irrelevant to the research topic and questions are then removed, leaving the textual meanings and unchanging elements of the phenomenon (Moustakas). “Phenomenological reduction is not only a way of seeing but a way of listening with a conscious and deliberate intention of opening ourselves to phenomena as phenomena, in their own right, with their own textures and meanings” (Moustakas, p. 92).

From the reduction phase, in which the invariant constituents (relevant data in the form of statements, words, phrases, or ideas) extracted from the different interview sources are analyzed, imaginative variation allows for the enhancement and expansion of the data and subsequent categorization into themes to provide a more vivid picture of the experience and perceptions of participants, however not quite achieving an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Using the textual descriptions, structural descriptions of the phenomenon are then derived (Moustakas, 1994; Patton). Through the steps of imaginative variation, the underlying and precipitating factors are discovered, allowing the researcher to answer how the experience came to be (Moustakas). The final step in phenomenological analysis is termed intuitive integration, which involves the integration of the individual textual and structural descriptions.
developed in the previous steps into a single manifestation of the essence of the experience of the group with regard to the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas).

The modified van Kaam data analysis method (Moustakas, 1994) and the NVivo9 software were used to synthesize the data gathered from the reduction and imaginative variation steps. NVivo9 qualitative analysis software (QSR International) allowed the researcher to explore, analyze, and gather information from unstructured data such as the open-ended questions and interview transcripts. The software provided a sophisticated workspace for working through data to discover patterns, and identify themes that provide the findings of the study. NVivo9 was used to assign codes to every word, phrase, and expression (termed node or invariant constituent) deemed relevant to answering the research questions of the study.

NVivo9 software was used to synthesize the data and allow for a comprehensive phenomenological exploration adhering to the previously described elements (epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and intuitive integration) and their related processes. Accordingly, the data analysis followed these detailed steps supporting the process outlined by van Kaam and modified by Moustakas (1994) as follows:

1. **Listing and Preliminary Grouping:** List every expression relevant to the experience (Horizontalization).

2. **Reduction and Elimination:** To determine the Invariant Constituents: Test each expression for two requirements:
   a. Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
b. Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.

3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents: Cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label. The clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience.

4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation: Check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant. (a) Are they [themes] expressed explicitly in the complete transcription? (b) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed? (c) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the co-researcher’s [participant’s] experience and should be deleted.

5. Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher [participant] an Individual Textural Description of the experience. Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview [or other qualitative data].

6. Construct for each co-researcher [participant] an Individual Structural Description of the experience based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation.
7. Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. From the Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121)

The process allowed the researcher within a set of clearly defined steps, to reveal the essences and lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). As noted, NVivo® qualitative software assisted in the processes of storage, coding, and comparing data; however, the researcher performed the actual analysis utilizing these seven steps of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas) as a framework for an effective and valid analysis.

**Quality and Trustworthiness**

Quality and trustworthiness of the study are based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account, as well as that the approach is consistent across different researchers and projects (Creswell, 2005, 2007). Issues of credibility and rigor are points of evaluative concern in naturalistic inquiry. The notion of trustworthiness is important to consider because it speaks to the quality and accuracy of the information being gathered.

Four strategies common to qualitative research were used to support trustworthiness of the data collected: thick description, peer debriefing, member checking, and audit trail. Creswell (2003) provided a brief description of three of these approaches:
Thick description is used to support and convey the findings. A thick description [via written text] transports the reader to the setting and gives the discussion an element of shared experiences; Peer debriefing, as a process, enhances the accuracy of the [described] account and involves locating a person (a peer debriefer) who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher; Member checking is used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific description or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate. (p. 196).

Using an audit trail as a strategy supported the researcher’s effort to be accountable for examining and tracking decisions made during the research process. This included a thorough examination of how data were transformed into categories on themes that emerge (Law et al., 1998).

Identifying these strategies supported the researcher’s goal of seeking credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “replaces the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 24). With regard to thick description, as data were gathered, the researcher took detailed notes on how A-A men share their experiences and see their lives and choices related to SLIEA and academic persistence. Capturing the meaning and essence they give to their experience helped to understand and convey data to others.

Two colleagues were identified as “peer debriefers” to assist with review of the data collected. Peer debriefers were trained researchers given raw transcripts to review as well as individual textual descriptions written about participants. The peer debriefers
were engaged in a series of individual discussions regarding the meaning the researcher was making regarding A-A men who are participating in SLIEA. This assisted the researcher in examining the accuracy and clarity of described themes that are developed.

In the process of member checking, participants in the study were given the opportunity to review transcription and notes from the interview in order to provide feedback on the researcher interpretation of the data that were collected. The researcher made clear to participants the importance of going beyond just confirming what had been transcribed in the interview. This purpose was to encourage careful review and analysis by participants in the study. The feedback provided by participants was incorporated in order to enrich the credibility and dependability of the data gathered.

As referenced earlier, the audit trail process was employed throughout the process to encourage detailed reflection and analysis by the researcher. An audit trail increased awareness of decisions taking place with participants, as well as how data were being gathered and the methods being used. This made the researcher critically conscious of the “emergent design” taking place.

Yin (1989) suggested reporting a detailed protocol for data collection so that the procedure of a qualitative study might be replicated in another setting. Therefore, in order to ensure quality of the study, the collection and analysis of data followed the procedure as described in the previous data collection and analysis sections of this chapter. Quality of qualitative research is also improved by the use of qualitative analysis software to aid in the coding and categorization of the data.

In addition, the interview protocol incorporated the collection of demographic data in terms of date of birth/age, major, academic standing, and type of school attending
These data were used to triangulate the data obtained from the interview process. As such, the demographic data were used comparatively to determine if the data obtained (themes uncovered in the analysis) were consistent across these demographic variables, or if the data demonstrated differences across the variables.

**Conclusion**

Chapter 3 discussed the qualitative research methodology that was employed in the study. The current study employed a phenomenological research design. In order to understand the approach, the chapter includes a description of the study of phenomenology and the appropriateness of the design for the study. In addition, Chapter 3 includes a description of the process of selecting the participants, the data collection and analysis processes, as well as an exploration of ethical considerations of confidentiality and consent.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of African-American (A-A) men who are persisting in college and who demonstrate participation in SLIEA. Through this investigation, the goal was to gain a better understanding of how actively engaged A-A collegiate men develop meaning of their experiences and how these experiences serve to guide their actions toward persistence in college. This study was conducted through use of semi-structured interviewing (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The data were obtained through interviews with 10 African American men who are actively persisting in college and involved in student leadership activities at one of three colleges in a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. Chapter 3 documents the phenomenological method, data collection process, and describes the analysis of transcribed interview data using the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994).

Primarily, chapter 4 provides individual descriptions of participants, as well as a presentation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories revealed during the data analysis, relevant to the research topic. The structural composite descriptions serve to describe the perceptions of participants as a group in terms of the themes revealed in analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Data Collection Process

The data collection for the study was conducted according to the description in chapter 3. Ten African American, male students who currently attend one of three colleges near a major metropolitan area in the Midwest and who participate in student leadership activities within their respective colleges were contacted and recruited for
participation in this study via email, telephone, and face-to-face interactions. The sample size of 10 participants is consistent with recommendations of Creswell (2005), Patton (2002), and Polkinghorne (2005) for qualitative inquiry of this type.

Pseudonyms were used to replace participants’ names to support participant confidentiality. To ensure accuracy in the data collection, all interview responses were transcribed into Microsoft® Word format and then reviewed, comparing the transcriptions to the recorded interviews. The process of member checking (Moustakas, 1994), in which each participant received a copy of the interview transcript to review and verify, was used to ensure that the participants felt the transcription was an accurate account of the interview and as such, their thoughts and perceptions related to SLIEA. Member checking served to increase the validity of the study by allowing participants the opportunity to verify that the information in the transcription (data for the study) was realistic and complete (Creswell, 2005). Following completion of the data analysis, the data were placed in a secured and locked filing cabinet and will be retained for a period of three years after which time all data will be destroyed.

**Research Questions**

This phenomenological research study focuses on the insights and lived experiences of 10 African American men who are successfully persisting in college and participating in college co-curricular Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities (SLIEA) at one of three colleges located in or near a major city in the Midwest. To accomplish the goal of this study, the following research questions were used to guide the exploration:
**Grand tour question.** What meaning do A-A men give to their co-curricular student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA)?

**Research sub-questions.**

1. How do A-A men participating in student leadership involvement and engagement activities experience their campus environment?

2. What perceived influence do SLIEA have on the motivation, commitment, and skill development of A-A men that support their persistence toward degree attainment?

3. What beliefs serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA?

**Description of the Sample**

As part of the interview questions, participants answered several demographic questions. The data provided is self-reported by the 10 study participants. All study participants were between the ages of 20 - 24, with varying college majors. The GPAs of the participants ranged from 2.5 - 3.6, which demonstrated adequate academic achievement for persistence in college. Over half of the participants were first generation college goers and more than half were also from a single parent home. The sample, taken from three different schools, represents students from a two year community college, as well as four year public, and private universities. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample.
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<td></td>
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Individual Participant Profiles

Ten A-A men who are actively enrolled and persisting at their respective institutions participated in this study. Participants were selected based on the criteria established for the study:

1. Participants identify themselves as African American or Black.
2. Attend a predominantly White four-year or two-year college or university.
3. Are active participants in Student Leadership Activities as defined by the study and are in good academic standing with their institution.
4. Have persisted at their institution for a minimum of four semesters or six quarters (excluding summers), and if attending a four-year institution, hold a minimum of a junior standing.

Below is a brief profile of each participant. In order to protect the identity of each participant, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Participant 1 – Martin. Martin is a confident young man with a strong professional demeanor, which represented a mature presence. He is a fifth-year senior attending a private religiously affiliated four-year university, where he is a pursing a degree in public policy with an emphasis in urban affairs. Martin has lived on campus in the residence halls for most of his college career, but at age 22 he has made the decision to commute an hour to campus from a neighboring suburb.

Martin attended a large, predominately Black, public high school located in the suburbs south of a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. He considered himself an academically strong high school student, a standout among most of his peers. His major involvement in high school was the marching band. Growing up in a middle class home,
attending college was an expectation that was primarily set forth by his parents; however, he did not hold many preconceived expectations for college, as both of his parents were not college graduates.

Martin decided to participate in a variety of student leadership activities while in college and felt invited by his college to seek out these activities when he first attended. He also felt he was motivated to pursue opportunities to connect to his campus. He has been a member of his residence hall council and the Black Student Union. His most notable and sustainable leadership activities have centered on the student government association and a Historically Black Greek fraternity, which he became a member of in the spring of 2008. He has held various leadership roles in student government over the years, most recently serving as senator, and has also served as president of his fraternity for the last two years. Although Martin is in his fifth year at his university, he still maintains a high commitment to engaging in his co-curricular activities, spending approximately 15 hours a week on leadership activities and related events.

Although Martin generally considers himself a good student, he communicated that he feels he should be a stronger academic student. He currently holds a 2.6 GPA. Regardless of his current grades, Martin aspires to pursue graduate school or law school in the future. With his college preparation, along with the skills, resources, and opportunities he has had as a result of his leadership involvements, he feels confident that he will continue to succeed.

**Participant 2- Walter.** As we began to engage in the research interview, Walter demonstrated a laidback, gentle demeanor. Walter is a first semester junior attending a private religiously affiliated four-year university, where he is a pursing a degree in
political science. Currently maintaining a 2.6 GPA, Walter hopes to attend graduate school in the future, but currently does not seem overly committed or aggressive in his expression of his future education beyond his current schooling experience.

Raised in a single parent and lower income household, Walter expressed that his high school experience was a challenge primarily due to a family move from his home in a major Midwest city to a southeastern state, where he attended his first years of high school. During this time, his high school was affected by the overwhelming number of students who were relocated to his state of residence as a result of a major hurricane. After a year in the southeast, his family returned to the Midwest, where he completed the last three years of high school. Walter indicated his last two years of high school were academically challenging because he had to “catch up,” which resulted in minimal involvement in his high school co-curricular activities. He played basketball his first year in high school, but could not sustain his interest through the challenges associated with the multiple moves. As a result, he experienced various family challenges related to the frequent relocation of his family, such as having to reside with friends and extended family, which at times left his family homeless.

Walter is 21 years old and has lived on campus throughout his college career. He currently spends approximately 12 hours a week engaging in his co-curricular activities. Walter’s leadership activities include being a mentor in a university program entitled the Men of Color Initiative which is designed to develop, mentor, and support the persistence of minority men enrolled at the university. He also feels privileged to have been selected as an orientation leader, as part of the college’s orientation program that is delivered to new students during the summer before their first quarter of enrollment. As a first
generation college student, he feels his knowledge about his university and his own successful transition to college helps to support the success of other students. From Walter’s account, he has been a successful student, who realizes the opportunities his college education will afford him in the future.

**Participant 3 – Wayne.** Wayne is a 22 year old junior attending a public, four-year university located approximately one hour west of a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. He is pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering. Wayne lived on campus his first two years of college, but now resides in off-campus housing close to campus.

Wayne attended a large, predominately Black, public high school designed to support college preparation; however, Wayne felt his high school fell short on both his preparation and raising expectations for him to attend college. Although he considered himself an above average academic performer in high school, Wayne felt his high school environment did not encourage him to apply himself academically, and as a result, he never identified a bigger picture for a future career. Raised in a single parent household by his father, Wayne felt working to gain extra income was a priority for him during high school, which resulted in his lack of involvement (or sustained involvement) in any co-curricular activities prior to college. He held very few expectations for college, which was reflected in his late application to the university he currently attends. However, he realized that his parents, who did not attend college, had high expectations for his attendance.

Wayne feels his orientation to collegiate co-curricular involvement was influenced by the university’s Black Male Initiative (BMI) program, designed to support academic persistence and engagement with the campus. Through BMI, he has
participated in community service activities, led and assisted with orientation activities, and served as a peer mentor. His other activities include serving on student government for a year and actively being a part of the executive board for the National Society of Black Engineers. Despite defining himself as middle class, Wayne feels that his many financial worries about paying for school have distracted him from greater academic success. He currently holds a 2.5 GPA. Committing approximately seven hours a week to his current co-curricular leadership activities, he prides himself on being able to persist at his university and having positive academic experiences that will support his future aspirations.

**Participant 4 – Simon.** Exhibiting a very strong professional persona at the time of our interview, Simon was dressed professionally, indicating that he had just returned from a broadcasting studio tour. Simon is a junior, attending a public, four-year university located approximately one hour west of a major city in the Midwest. He grew up in a two-parent household and identified that his mother earned her college degree. Currently 21 years old, Simon is persisting towards a degree in business at the university.

He attended a predominately Black public high school located in the south suburbs of the same Midwest city. During high school, Simon expressed that he struggled to fit in socially. His major activities included the marching band and music, which he excelled at during competitions. He was also a member of the National Honor Society. Feeling that he needed to work during high school, Simon spent a lot of time working as a caddy at a golf club. Although attending college was an expectation expressed by both his parents, he set a goal to earn a scholarship for college because he knew, growing up in a lower income household, it would be difficult for his parents to
provide financial support to attend college. Simon earned a scholarship to college through the support of the golf club where he worked.

He currently lives near his college campus within a residential house designated for students that are associated with the named academic scholarship award he receives. He credits the scholarship house he resides in for supporting his academic transition, but references the Black Male Initiative program (BMI) at his college for engaging his leadership development. BMI has supported his active involvement in community service and various college sponsored activities. Simon also actively serves on the executive board of National Association of Black Journalists, and is actively involved with the financial management association and the regional INROADS program, which also supports his educational persistence with a small financial scholarship. Maintaining a 3.2 GPA, he is a member of a national honor society for A-A students. Spending approximately 20 hours a week on co-curricular leadership activities, Simon feels that he has worked hard to find his sense of place at his university. He feels his college is a good academic and social fit, preparing him to achieve in the future.

**Participant 5 – Peter.** Peter’s face appears young in comparison to other college students his age. At the time of our interview, he was well dressed (wearing a sweater vest and a tie) and initially appeared business-like in his demeanor. He had a welcoming smile and a soft tone in his voice as he responded to questions. As Peter shared his story, he did so in a careful manner. He is a junior attending a public, four-year university located approximately one hour west of a major Midwest metropolitan city, where he is pursuing a degree in business.
Indicating that he is from a middle income household, Peter attended a public inner city high school located on the north side of the major city he grew up in. High school was full of activities for Peter. He participated in a variety of sports, served on his senior planning council, participated in the honors program, and helped to coordinate a number of activities for his school community. He also participated in a well-known community activist organization located on the south side of the city that has a strong history of supporting youth development. Although his high school activities were primarily to support him not getting involved with the “wrong crowd,” he did not feel well prepared for college, and was not sure he wanted to go because of the perceived cost and debt that he felt would be required of him. Growing up in a two parent household, he is the youngest of six kids in the family. All of his siblings attended college, but only one graduated. As a first generation college student, he felt great parental pressure to attend college, but indicated that he thought he would initially attend a community college in the city with some of his peers.

At 21 years old, Peter currently lives on the campus of his university and is actively involved with the Black Male Initiative Program (BMI), serving as the treasurer. He also serves as the vice president for marketing for the National Association of Black Journalists, treasurer for the TRIO program he participates in, and is also a participating member of an honor society. Peter communicated that he has performed better than he expected in college, maintaining a 2.8 GPA. Although Peter currently spends less time (approximately four hours a week) on his co-curricular leadership activities as compared to his first two years in college, he gives a lot of credit for his current persistence and success to his leadership involvement activities, particularly BMI:
I wouldn’t have been the same person if I wouldn’t have gotten involved. If my peer group wouldn’t have changed, if those people wouldn’t have inspired me and touched my life in some sort of way. I wouldn’t have been here; I would have left. I would have definitely not have done good my freshman year, because that involvement my freshman year really set the foundation, you know, for me now.

**Participant 6 – Fred.** Fred’s demeanor was casual, relaxed, and laidback. He attends a two-year public community college located 20 minutes southwest of a major metropolitan city, located in the Midwest. He is currently a 20 year old student pursuing his associate’s degree with aspirations to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree in political science and possibly pursue a career in law.

Growing up in an upper middle income household, Fred attended a well-known predominately White, private, religiously affiliated high school located in the major metropolitan city in which he grew up. He considered himself an academically poor performing high school student, with his primary high school activity being football. He also participated in the drama club. Fred identifies himself as a third generation college student, and also indicated that both of his parents have college degrees. He feels his family places a high emphasis on higher education. However, despite having strong support for college attendance, Fred’s first college experience fell short of his family’s expectations. His first attempt at college was at a small selective four-year private university, where Fred admits his only motivation to attend was to play football. He spent three semesters at the first college he attended, and he disclosed that he had no co-curricular involvements outside of football and was suspended because of his poor academic performance. Due to strong encouragement from his mother, who is a single
parent, Fred decided to return to college, choosing to attend a community college. He currently commutes every day to campus.

With no sports to consider, Fred decided and was encouraged by college staff members and peers to get involved in co-curricular activities to help support his overall school experience. His current involvements include being a student life leader, a role that allows him a voice in planning campus activities. He also serves as the student intramural program coordinator, a judicial board member, and has become an active member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society, which he was invited to participate in because of his current academic achievements. He currently maintains a 3.6 GPA.

He credits his academic turnaround to his mother, who continued to encourage his college pursuit even when he was ready to give up. He also credits the mentors and the staff at his institution for showing him resources and encouraging his active engagement with leadership opportunities. Fred currently spends approximately 18 hours a week engaging in his various leadership roles and activities. He expressed that exposure to other students, as well as establishing networks outside of his normal circle, increased his academic motivation to excel in school, which has resulted in his academic success. He believes his current experiences will result in the completion of his associates degree and eventual transfer to a four-year university to earn his bachelor’s degree.

**Participant 7 – Malcolm.** During our interview, Malcolm was well spoken and confident. Malcolm is a 21 year old fourth year senior pursuing his degree in business marketing and attends a public, four-year university located approximately one hour west of a major metropolitan city located in the Midwest. At the time of our interview, he expressed great excitement about his plans to graduate after the next spring semester.
With a current 2.7 GPA, he hopes to continue improving his grades as he persists towards graduating soon.

He attended a large predominately Black, inner-city high school located on the south side of the major Midwest metropolitan city in which he was raised. Malcolm’s major activity in high school revolved around playing sports, mainly basketball, and hanging out with other students who played sports. In high school, he was also a student ambassador, a role that afforded him the opportunity to help research college scholarships for his peers and organize information related to the process of selecting and applying to colleges.

He admits he was not a very focused student in high school and expressed that his academic experience prior to college did not prepare him or his peers to be successful in college or set any strong expectations for him to attend college. Raised in a middle class, single parent home, Malcolm credits his mother, who is a college graduate, for pushing him to see college as the next step in his future. Because he felt he was ambitious and wanted to make money, he decided to apply to the institution his mom attended.

Upon arriving to college, with mom’s strong influence and support, Malcolm became involved with a variety of organizations. He indicated that the Black Male Initiative (BMI) Program served to provide a strong foundation and motivation for his campus involvements. He also became actively involved in the campus activities board (planning student programs/events), a modeling organization, and a campus mentoring program. Malcolm’s eventual feeling of over-involvement led him to limit some of his activities after his freshmen year. Currently, he is a member of a historically Black, Greek fraternal organization (BGO). He is also involved in a variety of community
service activities, and was recently selected as homecoming king, which he admits is a big deal, as an A-A male, at his university.

Malcolm currently commits approximately 16 hours a week to engaging in his co-curricular activities. He feels his involvement has taught him a great deal, especially about setting expectations for an “identity” for success to lead others:

Giving my time and my opportunity I can make somebody else’s time an opportunity well worth living for. [The BMI administrative professional] actually helped me as far as one to be involved. Because I didn’t necessarily want to be involved when I first came in but I felt like it was something that I could do that would be an investment. I invested in it and I felt like it kind of made me a better person through the experiences. You know I get to know a lot of positive people and got to touch a lot of people, to the point where they would want to touch others. So I feel like the aspect of community service also made me a leader on campus as well.

Participant 8 – Thomas. Thomas exhibits a laid back demeanor and is soft spoken in his tone of voice. He is a 24 year old fifth year senior pursuing his degree in biology and attending a public, four-year university located approximately one hour west of a major metropolitan city located in the Midwest. He is also a first generation college student.

Thomas attended a large, predominately Black, high school located in the south suburbs of the major metropolitan city in which he grew up. Outside of the honors courses he was qualified to take in high school, being a member of his high school basketball team was his major out of class activity. Because he stood out as an academic
achiever and was also recognized for his involvement with sports, Thomas felt at times he was challenged to fit in socially during high school. He expressed that he overcompensated for his feeling of social awkwardness by becoming known as a “joker” in high school. Raised in what he describes as a middle class single parent household with his mother, Thomas shared that both of his parents expressed high expectations for him to attend college, although neither were college graduates.

During Thomas’ senior year of high school, he became a teen father. For him, he believes this unexpected life change increased his focus to attend college, with a clear goal of becoming successful. With extended family support providing for the care of his child, Thomas has been able to live on campus or in nearby campus housing throughout his college career.

When first attending college, he was immediately exposed and became connected with the Black Male Initiative (BMI) program at his university. He considers BMI his primary leadership development activity throughout his persistence in college, which he feels has supported his development and sense of personal growth/responsibility, and has also provided mentors to encourage his success. As a senior in his fifth year at his university, he currently spends five hours a week engaging in his co-curricular leadership related activities, which is considerably less than previous years. However, during his junior year in college, Thomas shared how he became actively involved with the minority science association, which supported his career goals and degree aspirations. Although Thomas maintains a 2.6 GPA in what he considers a challenging academic discipline (biology), he believes what he is learning, both inside and outside of class, will help him
become successful in a future career. Providing an example of how his activities have influenced his approach and commitment to school, Thomas said:

I know I have to focus and pay more attention to my classes. Because MSA [Minority Science Association] actually requires studying. Because we research grad school to see what the minimum GPA or you know the PCAT [Pharmacy College Admission Test] score that you have to have to get in. So now that I know how competitive it is to get into professional school. I have a different aspect on my classes because I’m not sitting back and just getting C [grades]; I’m trying to get an A and raise my GPA to launch myself into the next step. In BMI, everybody in BMI wants to graduate so you know it’s kind of competitive. We got like a 3.0 club thing where guys compete to see who gets the highest GPA and things like that.

**Participant 9 – Vince.** Although Vince was dressed casually during the time of our interview, his demeanor seemed to reflect a business-like manner. He indicated that he was born in the United States, but his parents emigrated to the United States. Currently 21 years old, Vince is a fourth year senior pursuing his degree in business with a concentration in accounting and attending a private, religiously affiliated four-year university located within a major metropolitan city in the Midwest.

Raised in a middle class household by his mother, Vince attended a large, predominately White high school located in the suburbs north-west of the major city where he attends college. High school presented various challenges for Vince with regard to his academic and social development, but he felt well prepared for college based on the academic culture of his high school, which expected students to attend
college. Soccer dominated Vince’s out-of-class activities, which he felt left very little time for him to pursue other high school organizational and leadership activities. Vince’s parents set high expectations for him to attend college, and his mother, who has earned her college degree, continually stresses the importance of being a high academic performer. According to Vince, his transition to college did not present many challenges.

Vince lives on campus in the residence halls and believes his decision to live on campus supported his successful transition, along with the high expectations from his campus that supported his active involvement at the university. He indicated that he is one of only a few A-A students invited to be a part of the college’s honors program in accounting. He currently maintains a 3.5 GPA. Vince chose to get involved in activities and organizations that supported his academic aspirations in business and accounting. He is a member of a business fraternity and also a member of the National Association of Black Accountants, for which he currently serves as campus vice president and previously served as chair of community services.

Vince is also an admission ambassador, which is a paid position. However, he communicates that his ambassador role affords him the ability to lead and plan activities as well as other initiatives that invite students to consider attending his university. Vince also referenced that the various intercultural programs at the university have been important to his development. His active participation in college sponsored leadership retreats and other activities offered by the intercultural programs has increased his sense of identity and connectedness with other cultural groups and has afforded him the opportunity to foster his sense of identity with other African-Americans on campus.
As a senior, Vince continues to spend approximately 15 hours a week engaging in his activities. He feels building confidence is a major outcome of his activities that support and contribute to his academic development/performance. In responding to how his leadership activities have supported his academic development he stated:

I would say I am more interested in not just getting a grade but actually understanding information and if I really don’t understand it actually seeking help. Instead of just saying ok this is just one question on an exam whatever. I am more receptive to actually going in and getting help from a professor to actually understand what is going on and not just memorizing. Putting in the proper amount of time to actually make sure I understand something.

**Participant 10 – Paul.** Paul’s smile is bright and welcoming and his eagerness to share his story is evident. Paul has persisted through his fourth semester at the two-year public community college located 20 minutes south of a major Midwest metropolitan city. Currently 22 years old, he is pursuing an associate of arts degree with the intent of transferring to a four-year college to earn his degree in political science. Paul shared that he has aspirations of becoming a community organizer.

Although Paul communicated that he grew up in a middle class household, his journey to college did not take a traditional route. His high school education was split. He spent his first two years of high school in the Southwest region of the United States and his last two years were spent in a major city in the Midwest. He described his Southwest region high school as a large integrated school with over 5,000 students. While in the South, he played sports, participated in student government, and also was on the forensics team. He described his Midwest high school as slightly smaller, which is
located on the south-west side of a major metropolitan city. Sports continued to represent
his primary activities throughout high school. Paul also indicated that he spent some time
doing community service as a part of a youth group, which was associated with his
church.

After high school, he intentionally decided to enlist in the military with the goal
of gaining some life experiences that would support his future aspirations. Having served
three years of active duty in the military and continuing in the reserves, Paul decided he
was ready to pursue college and all the opportunities he anticipated that it would offer.
As a first generation college student, who felt responsible for financing his degree, Paul
believes that a community college would be a good fit and the most cost effective point
of educational access. He chose to enroll as a full-time student at his college and
commutes to campus daily.

Paul spends approximately 15 hours a week engaging in his co-curricular
leadership activities. His college activities include serving as an orientation leader,
serving as the current president of the Alliance of A-A students, serving as an
orientation/student life leader, and serving as an active member of the student
government association. Paul prides himself on being a successful academic student,
both in high school and in college. He currently has a 3.3 college GPA. He believes that
life is about engaging opportunities and experiences that shape perspective. Insight to
Paul’s character is evident in his explanation of why he decided to join the armed forces:

My decision to go into the military was not only to, you know, bolster my resume,
but it’s to get a different experience than just academic. I think a lot of people;
they think that just building on academics you can be successful. But, I think that
through life experiences and some experiences through the military, that I got, there’s no replica of it in academics.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

Using a phenomenological approach, data were analyzed from the transcribed interviews with 10 participants. The goal of the study was to identify the perceived meaning A-A men give to their SLIEA and the perceived relevance to collegiate success in terms of supporting persistence toward earning a degree. Specifically, the seven step modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) was used to identify the experiences and essences of these experiences for the African American college men who participated in the study.

The first four steps of the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) were used to reveal the invariant constituents and thematic categories in the data. During these steps of the process, the researcher used the NVivo9 qualitative software program to assign codes to the various elements of the transcribed text of the interviews, to note the location and frequency of each invariant constituent within the text, and to group these invariant constituents into categories. Resulting from this analysis process, the key invariant constituents were revealed and separated into the following thematic categories under two headings: categories related to high school experiences and categories related to college experiences (see Table 2).
Table 2. Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituent Distribution for Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Categories</th>
<th># Key Invariant Constituents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School Experiences leading to College and SLIEA</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school academic experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school extracurricular involvement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of involvement in high school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school peer groups and influences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why chose college</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Experiences and SLIEA</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations for college</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General college experiences and SLIEA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific activities</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of involvement: what learned or gained</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact or influences of SLIEA</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific skills gained</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived significance from involvement</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-perception compared to other students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What matters most about SLIEA</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

This section presents the responses (invariant constituents) of participants during the interviews that are relevant to the phenomenon. These responses reveal participants’ perceptions and experiences related to their high school and college experiences and the meaning given to SLIEA within this context. Experiences of participants prior to attending college are initially presented to provide background knowledge and a deeper understanding of participant responses. Responses about the experiences of participants prior to college serve as a starting point that indicates transference of knowledge, skills,
and conveyed behaviors that support academic success. Also, expressed high school experiences can provide insight into participants’ foundational belief and understanding about the importance of involvement activities and their expectations (or approach) about engaging in certain types of co-curricular activities in college. Following the high school experiences, the findings are presented by thematic category and according to the research questions of the study.

The organization, distribution, and frequency of the data collected are important to note. Although the frequency of participants responses relevant to the themes are clearly identified in the tables, the importance and meaning assigned to the interpretation of data, as well as the essence conveys, is not limited by the frequency of the distribution of data (i.e. relevant responses) provided in the tables.

**High school experiences: prelude to college experiences.** In the interviews, participants described their life and scholastic experiences prior to attending college. These experiences served to shape their personal identities as well as their actions, resulting in their personal decisions with regard to attending college. Tables 2-6 illustrate these elements that affected the participants and their personal path toward higher education. These elements serve as information from which to frame the results pertaining to the persistence of A-A men in college and the perceived influence of SLIEA.

As such, in describing the sample, while half were self-described “good students,” others were affected by their adverse surroundings or circumstances or were distracted from their academics due to a priority on sports involvement (Table 3). Therefore, high school involvement had both negative and positive influences on academic achievement,
depending on the type of activity (Tables 4 and 5) and the individual. A major part of the influence of high school activities seemed to stem from the peer associations (Table 6). Peer associations with smart or nerdy types were perceived by participants to confer a desire to attend college and therefore, attain academic success to achieve that goal. Peer associations with more athletically oriented students were felt to sometimes have a negative effect on academic performance. Finally, half the participants specifically noted choosing their college because of its proximity to home (Table 7).
Table 3. *High School Academic Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good student</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affected by surroundings/ adverse circumstances</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not do well or as well as should have; did not apply self</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on sports rather than academics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Invariant constituents receiving just a single mention included: wanted to do well to change own financial situation, attended a college preparatory school, became a better student after started to get involved.

Table 4. *High School Extracurricular Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student leadership programs (e.g., student council, student government, etc.)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors society</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic teams</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Single mention elements included: church group and community service, stage crew, not much until went to college due to lack of opportunities, not very involved in HS, not very spirited in HS because did not feel invited.
### Table 5. *High School Peer Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic types of peers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart, ambitious, nerd types</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/small group of friends</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-rounded, well-liked, average, successful peers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t quite fit in</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Single mentions included: negative influence (focused on football), class clown, hung around with primarily White kids because the school was predominantly White.*

### Table 6. *Impact of High School Involvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supported academics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer influences of smart crowd pushed to go to college/</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenge each other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact of sports on academics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Impacted understanding of leadership and continuance in college*

### Table 7. *Why Chose Particular College*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise in a field</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship availability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Single mentions include networking/alumni connections, girlfriend was going, football, mother made apply, close to businesses, thought could handle community college because was out of school for two years while in military.*
Research Subquestion 1: How do A-A men participating in student leadership involvement and engagement activities experience their campus environment? The thematic categories related to the first research question shed light on the experiences of A-A men in terms of the expectations and realities of their on-campus experiences. The relevant constituents garnered from the interview data were clustered and aligned thematically according to the modified van Kaam process (Moustakas, 1994), resulting in four thematic categories related to the first research question. These categories include (a) expectations for college, (b) general college experiences and SLIEA specific activities involved in, (c) perceived benefits in terms of what was learned or gained from their SLIEA, and (d) the challenges experienced as a result of their involvement. Each of these thematic categories is discussed individually.

*Expectations for college.* The first thematic category, related to the first research subquestion was labeled expectations of college and provided insight into the students’ pre-conceived notions, if any, of what the college experience would be like. The key invariant constituents to this thematic category included (a) did not know what to expect (either few or no relatives had gone to college before them), (b) expectations of others for them to go to college, (c) expected to be successful and earn degree, (d) expected an increased workload and greater challenge, and (e) expected it to be fun. The various common invariant constituents among participants relate to expectations of college and their associated frequencies are provided in Table 8. Invariant constituents only mentioned by a single participant are given in the table notes.
Table 8. Expectations for College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t know what to expect</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others expected me to go (e.g., parents expectations)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected to be successful/earn a degree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected increased work load, faster pace, more challenging</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected it to be fun</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought of as next step</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Invariant constituents receiving only a single mention included: expected more maturity/sophistication, expected it to be a way to launch into a stable career, negative perceptions related to the cost of colleges.

Interestingly, five participants of the 10 reported not knowing what to expect from college, primarily because they were either a first generation college student in the family, or few people in their family/peer social network had gone to college. For example,

I had none [expectations for college] really. I didn’t know what to expect because, you know, you don’t hear many stories like when you’re around the kitchen table about college, because no one was going to college. My sister was away, so I just had no idea. So, I was just going sort of feet first, not really knowing what to expect, because it’s just what you’re supposed to do and the other 5% of the people at [high school] that are going to college and they don’t really know what to expect either. (Martin)

In addition to not knowing what to expect, some participants expressed that they were expected by others, both family and peers, to attend college. Wayne noted both these elements:
Because I didn’t have too many people to talk to about this, not too many people in my family, I mean, one of my uncles, he graduated and maybe one of my cousins that I meet after she got out of college. Like nobody really talked about it. It was expected. I didn’t know it [but] my mother, my father, my uncles, my aunties expected this of me. They expected me to go to the next level and I didn’t find that out until it was time for me to go to the next level. (Wayne)

Finally, Fred described expectations of partying and having fun, but met with the realization that it was not going to be like that. “When you think about college, like, you look at TV, and you kind of see like mad parties, so you want to be a part of that scene. But, then like senior year kind of hits around and you start realizing that it’s not like that easy” (Fred).

Thus, participants experienced the pressures of others’ expectations on them, while remaining uncertain as to what to expect from college. The pressure to apply to college frequently came from their “smart group” peers and their parents/family. At the same time, they acknowledged understanding that college would most likely be more difficult than high school.

**General college experiences and SLIEA.** The second thematic category related specifically to the first research subquestion was the general college experiences of participants and SLIEA. This thematic category served to reveal the participants’ initial experiences as well as the various SLIEA activities they became involved with during their years at the school. Key constituents in this thematic category included (a) getting involved right away, (b) participation in African American specific groups, and (c) resources and support resulting from involvement. Some participants noted academic
difficulties initially when they first arrived at the school, which were turned around, frequently as a result of experiences and support received through the Black Male Initiative (BMI) Program or similar co-curricular engagement opportunities targeted at A-A students (or men) specific to encouraging SLIEA. Tables 9 and 10 provide the common invariant constituents and frequencies related to this theme.

Table 9. General College Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Got involved right away and allowed to be connected/engaged in school</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources and support resulting from involvement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic struggles early on</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social segregation and/or racial tension</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Single mention invariant constituents included: strong bond between students/feel connected to the school, touched different aspects and areas of school and different people, connected with roommates and dorm mates initially, not as involved as should have been in the first semester, not relating to others in a predominantly white school, financial struggles.*

Table 10. SLIEA Specific Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General African American Specific Groups (e.g., BMI, Black Student Union, Alliance of African American Students)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association of Black Journalism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Government</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors Society</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Invariant constituents mentioned by a single participant included: attendance at leadership conference, financial management associations, internships for minorities, judicial board, community service activities.*
As a means of becoming connected with the school, 6 of the 10 participants noted becoming involved immediately upon arrival at the school. For example, according to Martin:

[In] September, I was already running for senator for [the] college of sciences for student government. Maybe a week before that I was running for president of [residence] Hall. I won both of those elections, so that just kind of catapulted me into leadership and stuff there. Probably a few weeks after that, I started meeting up with the brothers in [Black Greek Fraternity Organization]...By the end of the freshman year I was already involved in residence hall council, student government and a fraternity. (Martin)

In addition, the majority of the participants (7 out of 10) reported that their initial involvement was in joining an A-A leadership group, which served to promote immediate engagement on the campus and offered resources and support to promote student success.

As soon as I came in as a freshman, I kind of just hit the ground running with the right people. [A BMI member] actually approached me during orientation and invited me to the Black Male Initiative meeting. I went to the BMI meeting it was so upon me. I saw all these guys come in with suits and shirts and ties on. They were ready to talk about old business and new business and how to move forward as far as campus involvement, academics, and leadership, and image was a thing as well. I adapted to BMI and it helped me build upon the man I am today.

(Malcolm)

To clarify what the BMI is, Wayne, a student at the same campus, offered the following explanation:
BMI is an organization to provide resources to make sure that all the [A-A] males that come in [to the school] graduate. Because we have 100% graduation rate for all active members. So it provides resources as far as financial aid [and others]. Like bringing speakers from each department to you directly so you can’t say you didn’t know about it and then besides that, advising, because [BMI member] is a great advisor also because you’re assigned an advisor while you are here. Well, he also will give you more inside [information and tips, such as,] ok are you ready for this class are you sure you want to take all these classes together? So I feel like it’s more personal and more of like a mentor type of thing to insure your success. So it’s designed to make sure you come in and you graduate. (Wayne)

**Benefits of involvement/what was learned or gained.** The third thematic category related to the first research subquestion describes participant responses to the perceived benefits of involvement and specifically, what participants learned or gained from these experiences. Critical to this theme were the perceived benefits of (a) networking; (b) time management; (c) resources and support; (d) improved interpersonal communication skills; (e) enhanced public speaking skills and comfort; (f) the ability to set goals, challenge oneself, and persevere; and (f) experiencing diversity and the advantages of experiencing and understanding different perspectives. Table 11 illustrates the variety of common responses among participants and the associated frequencies of occurrence.
Table 11. SLIEA: Benefits of Involvement/What Learned and Gained to Support

Personal Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources/support</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication/interpersonal communications</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge self, persevere, goal-setting</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different perspectives/diversity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about others without judging</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Invariant constituents with two mentions included introspective learning, understanding the big picture, good work habits, social interactions, community service opportunities. Single mentions included learning how to develop business relationships, personal development, professional etiquette, teamwork, social and academic balance, responsibility, interview skills.

Most of the participants reported several perceived benefits and/or lessons learned or skills gained through their involvement with SLIEA. The most common responses related to networking, time management, and resources and support. Other common elements included communication and public speaking skills. Martin and Fred noted several of these items while focusing on the elements of networking, skills gained, and resources.

I would say any benefits like public speaking, relationship building if that goes with building relationships with the professor, the director of student and life, or the student life at that time. So things like that, so I like the idea of public speaking that is something that I feel I am good at. So I have worked to polish
those skills in that two part student existence [experiences in the classroom and outside of class]. I guess again deadlines this is pretty important. Not knowing to meet deadlines for the most part that is probably not a good thing either. I mean just working with people I think that has been the theme of my time here at [the university] has been relationship building. That is probably the most tangible benefit that I have had at least. (Martin)

I’d say they’re contributing to my college experiences, but not only to my college experiences, but to my future experiences too. How? I’d say…with the hard work, we’ve learned hard work. We’ve done some great networking, like, before I would never talk to any of these people. (Laughter) but now that I’m inside of it, I’m trying to bring more people into this group. This is a great place to be and…people need to get involved and really, you know, just really involved. But yeah, I’ve learned great networking through this school. (Fred)

Paul shed light on the many different ways he was helped by being involved, with a focus on time management and planning:

So as far as being academically, like it teaches you a lot of times, like, things take a lot more thought than just waking up in the morning and doing it. Sometimes, you have to plan out. Like I have a project due this Tuesday that we had a week to do, a six page paper on a candidate, and um, the republican party, so even though it was a week, a six page paper is not that hard as far as my thinking wise, but planning, that’s the hard part of it. I learned that through the club, you know, I had six different events that I need to get done in a month, I still have to plan in my club. So I applied that to being successful in school because you still have to
plan no matter what you do and um, the third thing I got was just making sure that communication is key to like everything and so the third thing I got out of that would be, was basically communicating with my professors, communicating with people that I work in my group with, and you know, just helping, the group that the clubs have helped me to be able to become a better communicator, you know, just basically helping people where I can in the appropriate situations. So, it helped me with that. (Paul)

**Challenges of involvement.** The final thematic category related to the first research question, how A-A men participating in SLIEA experience their campus environment, indicates the challenges perceived by these participants that resulted from their co-curricular leadership involvements. Two common invariant constituents were revealed through the analysis of the data. These included (a) achieving a balance to ensure that the SLIEA and resulting lack of time do not have a negative impact on academic performance, and (b) being held to a higher standard/being more accountable because of SLIEA. Table 12 provides the frequencies of these common responses.

Table 12. Challenges of Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieving balance: so that involvement and lack of time do not have negative impact on grades</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are held to a higher standard/ are more accountable</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Invariant constituents receiving only a single mention included: risk not having as much fun, overcoming adversity, academic problems and probation.

The need to strike a balance between the time given to activities and the time given to studies was evident in some of the participant responses. This coincided with an
increased accountability in terms of academic achievement among these students, who were notably more visible and recognizable within the campus community because of their SLIEA experiences. For example, Malcolm described such a balance, realized through trial and error:

So I started thinking, like man, what if I got more involved...Well, I hit a rude awakening after my second semester because I joined a modeling organization and the campus activity board. So now I was involved in four organizations, being the campus activity board, modeling organization, BMI, and explanatory mentoring program. I ended my second semester with a 2.0 GPA. So that brought my GPA down immensely. I wasn’t proud of that, so of course my sophomore year, I started taking on more responsibilities as far as making decisions on what I had to do to make sure my GPA would go back on the rise and stay at an increasing pace. (Malcolm)

In addition, participants maintained the perception that they were under scrutiny due to their positions of leadership, and that they were more accountable for their actions/behaviors and their academic performance, as a result. Paul explained:

I do believe that being involved, that it, like I said, I am a popular student, so my professors know me before, some of the professors know me before I get in the classroom because they’ve seen me on the website, they’ve seen me at events and stuff. So like when I do register for classes and I go to those classrooms, they already have the expectation of me being a, you know, a good student, you know, obviously, because you are involved and in order to keep being involved you have to make sure you keep your academics up and that really makes you, like,
sometimes you don’t want to do an assignment, like, you know, oh man I’m going to blow this off, but in the back of your head, you know, I’m representing not only myself, but every AA student. That’s what aligns back to AA students. Every student in the campus, I am representing. So if I am doing this, how does it look upon other students. That’s like, just the responsibility factor, like you approach class totally different, I do anyway, than you would as far as if you were just a regular student because a regular student really doesn’t have that responsibility of, hey you know I don’t really have anybody else but me and if I fail this class, I fail this class.

**Research subquestion 2: What perceived influence do SLIEA have on the motivation, commitment, and skill development of A-A men that support their persistence toward degree attainment?** Two thematic categories related specifically to the second research subquestion. These thematic categories and associated invariant constituents reveal the perceived influences or impact of SLIEA on their motivation and commitment to their academic success and on the development of skills needed to actually achieve such academic success. The thematic categories relating to the second research question include (a) success-related motivation and commitment, and (b) specific skills gained through involvement. Each thematic category is discussed individually.

**Success-related to motivation and commitment.** The first thematic category related to the second research subquestion describes the perceived influences of SLIEA on the participants’ motivation and commitment in the areas of personal development, academic development, classroom experiences, academic persistence and degree
attainment, personal life and curricular expectations, and overall educational experiences. In addition, participants related specific skills that were perceived to have been gained or developed through their involvement in these leadership activities. Key invariant common constituents within each sub-category of influence include (a) serving to instill motivation and prioritization and goal-setting, (b) enhancing interpersonal relationship skills and conflict resolution, (c) making them accountable to live up to high expectations, (d) witnessing the success of others promotes self-motivation and high expectations for oneself, (e) helping to define career and life objectives/dreams, and (f) contributing to a sense of belonging/engagement at the school. Table 13 provides the invariant constituents and frequencies of occurrence according to sub-headings of the impact on academic development, personal development, classroom experiences, persistence, life and personal development, and overall educational experiences.
Table 13. *Success-Related Motivation and Commitment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence on academic development</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation, prioritization, goal-setting</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits work back and forth between academic and leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence on life and personal development</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible/more mature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive/ goal-setting</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped decide career direction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps to be better person</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept and importance of community/ team work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in front of others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School and learning is more than just grades</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivates to be a leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding personal role and that of African American men</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to represent African American men</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowered by the understanding of the resources behind you</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence on peer group</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer group defines you /your future</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep you challenging yourself/ positive social influence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspire to become involved/ active</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence on classroom experience</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makes you accountable to live up to high expectations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better communication and interpersonal skills</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take initiative, focused</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A positive example, leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking with teachers and students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence on persistence in school</td>
<td># of participants who mentioned this element</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing others success motivates your own; high expectations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps you engaged and rooted in school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes school more enjoyable</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More from parental expectations than from involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support gets you through the doubt and hard times</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence on overall educational experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributes to feeling of belonging/ sense of engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivates to succeed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Single mention constituents for academic impact included meeting academic requirements and work load, taught study tips to make up for lack of time, instilling good habits, importance of time management, focus on concepts rather than grade. Single mention constituents for personal development included becoming a better person by helping others, and embracing diversity.

The impact of SLIEA was perceived to be multi-dimensional by participants. Frequent responses centered on the motivational aspects, interpersonal communication and conflict resolution, influence of peers, accountability, and being witness to others’ success serving as inspiration. Martin discussed the influence in terms of staying focused on academic success: “So that part really made me focus on what I really needed to do, which was to maintain my grade point average and maintain good grades. Because at the end of the day, it’s still a college. So that was one of those significant points.” Similarly, Vince spoke of the motivation to succeed in the classroom:

So surrounding myself by those types of individuals definitely helped me to strive to do better. Also, just being able to, like I said, do the networking events, being able to see what they look for and all firms have a certain GPA requirement that they want you to have. So just knowing that and being aware of that when you
have an exam coming up and you have an option to go hang out with friends or you have to study for say a final coming up. Knowing that I need to get a certain GPA to do this or to go to be accessible to other companies or to a company that I really want to be a part of, that is something that you have in the back of your mind; if I want to accomplish this goal, I have to do this, this, and that to do it. Therefore, I will skip out on going to a bar tonight to finish reading chapter 21 for test. So that, as far as applying to my classroom, so I mean, I guess that gives me my motivation or one aspect of my motivation to do well in class and taking steps to do well in class. (Vince)

Although Paul also noted the motivation and focus on one’s studies, he also described the accountability in terms of being the club president and the personal responsibility attached to your success.

It does help you realize that you do have a bigger goal in life and you don’t blow off assignments because, you know, the professor already expects you to do it and the club is looking for you to make sure that you’re in the club meetings and stuff and if you fall behind in your academics, there’s no way you can be a president of a club. So, there’s no way people would take you seriously if you are a president of a club and you fell behind in your classes. So, like that type of stuff like that, personal responsibility and like taking things seriously, even if there’s an economics class you know that a lot of people don’t think they need economics in life, so you wouldn’t, you take classes like. For me, it’s humanities, I never saw the point in humanities, but I have to do it, it’s part of my degree and part of me getting out of school and um, the club just helped me experience that open
mindedly as well. You learn about different type of stuff, you talk to different type of people. I wasn’t a big fan of humanities and music, but I’m listening to a lot more different types of music and it helped me academically to just make sure that I enjoy these classes and get more out of the classes too. (Paul)

Several participants cited the 100% graduation rate among members of BMI and the importance of these types of organizations to the collegiate success of African American males. In addition, participants indicated the importance of witnessing the success of others A-A men (and leadership peers) as a contributing factor to their own aspirations for success.

I have learned that a lot of the men in BMI that are a part of that statistic of 100% graduation rate. I watched them be here and leave from here successfully and I seen that is something that I needed to do. I get insight from them and I get advice. When I keep seeing them come back and contribute and give back, it just shows me, like I know that I am on the right track so I need to continue to lead and then I am going to be right where they are in no time. (Malcolm)

Outside of the BMI or similar groups, other SLIEAs also were felt to contribute positively toward degree attainment and academic success. For example, honors society and judicial board programs were felt by Fred to support these goals:

With honors society, you want to earn your degree. Not only earn it, but you know, fly by with, what’s the term? Pass with flying colors, you know? So you want the best grades you can have. But with the Judicial Board, like, I’m trying to go into a- I want to have a future in law. (Fred)
Specific skills gained through involvement. The second thematic category associated with the second research subquestion relates to the perceived skills gained or further developed through the participants’ involvement in SLIEA. High frequency constituents (i.e., mentioned by many participants) reveal commonality among the participants. Such key invariant constituents within this thematic category include skills of multi-tasking and time management, interpersonal skills/communication skills, public speaking skills, leadership skills that could not have been learned from a classroom setting, and organizational/planning skills. Table 14 provides the variety of commonly noted skills that were perceived to have been gained through participants’ involvement in SLIEA. Single mentions are noted at the bottom of the table. The types of skills noted would prove helpful to both academic performance as well as in their careers.

Table 14. Specific Skills Gained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-tasking and time management</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal/ communication skills</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills that could not have learned in the classroom</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational/ planning skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and innovative thinking</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work/work ethic/ focus</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Single mention invariant constituents included writing skills, excel skills, study skills, teamwork, able to inspire others.

Interview participants offered their thoughts on specific skills they have gained as a result of participating in SLIEA. The most frequently cited skills gained were the ability to multi-task and manage their time, interpersonal communication skills, and
public speaking skills, all of which will serve these men both in school and in their future careers. Simon and Peter gave excellent examples of many of these perceived benefits:

How to communicate what I am thinking about how to gain relationships with who I am working with. How to be about my ideas. That really helps out especially with the business world. I know with the internship you know you really got to know how to work an interview. Just me hanging around that many people with those types of skills just fell over to me. So it’s all about people willing to be willing to have that teamwork with you and if you’re not a person to at least be cool and be able to hang around you they really don’t want to work with you. It’s just gaining a relationship experience. Another thing that I learned is as far as multitasking as far as getting things done. I learned that in college because in high school the work was pretty easy to me I believe. In college you got different experience and different activities. So you got to really know how to do homework then the next minute do another homework then go to an organization [meeting] then go back to homework. It’s all about time management and working things out. So I think I gained those kinds of skills in college particularly. (Simon)

There is so much that I learned from being involved that I don’t think I would have ever learned in the classroom. Things such as being organized, organizational skills is one of the biggest things for me. Coming from high school, you know all students in high school, they don’t study much. You know, they don’t do much organizing. So having to juggle different things, with the organizations and then with school and different things like college in general, it
really helped me become more organized and more efficient, you know, as a student as a person in general. Leadership, leadership, leadership, one of the biggest things on my mind. You know how to make a difference with in people’s lives and within your organization and in the world and in your community. The third thing that I learned is basically, that awareness that I can do it. One of the biggest things was that I didn’t know too much when I got here from high school. I didn’t really have people to take me from the collar and say hey you can make this happen. Just really I have gained some self-confidence from all this I would say. (Peter)

**Research subquestion 3: What beliefs serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA?** With regard to the third research subquestion, three thematic categories served to shed light on the beliefs of participants that serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA. These thematic categories and associated invariant constituents reveal (a) the significance given to their involvement; (b) the perceptions of self as compared to other students, particularly A-A male students, including why other A-A male students do not participate in SLIEA; and (c) what they perceive to “matter most” about SLIEA. Each thematic category is discussed individually.

**Perceived significance from involvement.** The first thematic category relates to the third research subquestion highlights the significance individual participants give to their involvement. Half of the participants noted their role and its effect on other black male students. The other common constituents among participants included changing the perceptions about Black men, providing the opportunity to succeed through support and networking, and the betterment of oneself that coincides with helping others and making
a better and stronger community. The constituents mentioned by participants demonstrate a perception of a higher purpose than simply helping to promote their academic success, rather, an emphasis on the larger A-A community.

Table 15. *Perceived Significance from Involvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Significance</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My role and effect on other Black men</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change perceptions about Black men</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to succeed through support, networking, and doing more than just going to school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-way street: bettering self as better community and help others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Single mention invariant constituents included character building, passing on the message that college is what you make of it.

The comments of participants provide a more general and overarching significance to campus involvement opportunities, as perceived by the participants, particularly in terms of their perceived personal roles in contributing to changing the image of A-A men, serving to support their own successes as well as those of others through their leadership involvement. The following examples represent various invariant constituents:

Well, the meaning, I guess I take away from that, that you can, it’s almost a must that you get involved in some kind of activity in school, not just in school, but in life. What I got out of being involved in clubs is that I serve people that don’t even go to my club, that they don’t come to my club, but I still serve them the fact of image or the fact of having these resources available just for our particular group. And that’s what I get out of that, like you know, I serve a greater meaning. (Paul)
As a black male, I want to change a lot of the things that have been said about us. What they try to say is wrong with us. I want to prove a lot of those things wrong. My participation as a student leader is the beginning steps of me doing that. (Walter)

The world’s generalization towards African Americans in this day and age is that they expect you to not get the job done. In my opinion and when you get the job done it’s kind of like breaking that barrier. It’s important to understand that we are a unique race. We are the race that are like the underdogs. I feel as though being an underdog you have something to prove and we do have something to prove. We have to prove that we are the future. We have to prove that we have the maximum potential...You can learn from anyone. Everybody can learn from everybody in that if we just continue to learn from each other we can be where we are right now, times a hundred, times a thousand, times a million. That’s why there is a new day; everyday there’s more opportunities and more time for us to excel forward with every field of endeavor that we uncover. (Malcolm)

**Self-perception compared to other students.** The second thematic category related to the third research subquestion reveals how the participants’ perceptions of themselves compare to other students, and particularly compared with other A-A male students in general. In addition, participants were asked their thoughts on why other A-A males students do not get involved, essentially failing to take advantage of the benefits of SLIEA. Central to this theme is the reference to themselves as positive role models and leaders (4 of 10 participants). In regard to the perceived causes of the low numbers of A-A students participating in these activities, study participants attributed it to participation
going against the popular image of the A-A male, and that the involvement opportunities are not presented to some. Tables 16 and 17 illustrate the various common responses and the associated frequencies of these constituents. Given the relevant benefits and skills perceived to be gained from participation in SLIEA, these participants felt additional promotion of the availability of these opportunities is needed to reach more A-A male students striving to succeed.

Table 16. *Self-Perception Compared to other Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive role model and leader</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average/equal to other students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible for helping; view self as a resource for others</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Single mention invariant constituents included fitting in among A-A students who work hard and are goal oriented, not fitting in, not feeling connected with other A-A students, representing other A-A students

Some of the participants in this study described themselves as positive role models and leaders within their respective communities and take on a responsibility for helping other students like themselves, serving as a resource to others. For example, Paul stated, “I kind of feel that my position in relationship to my A-A peers or just I’m a leader; that’s the bottom line, I’m the leader of the vision for A-A students for this semester at least.” Rather than view themselves as better than anyone else because of their leadership roles, two participants focus on their equality or “sameness” with their peers and in doing so, hope to be an example and a resource for the other A-A students on campus. The following examples provide a detailed picture of these perceptions:

In honesty, I view myself as an equal. I never knew until recently that people could look at you on such a high pedestal and you not even know it. Being able
to show them like hey I’m just like you. You know we sleep the same way, we brush our teeth the same way, we put our clothes on the same way and we have the ability to think the same way. It kind of helps them relate more to me, to the point where maybe they don’t have any reason to throw me on this high pedestal. Just as long as you respect the fact that I am striving to be the best that I can be. I would just hope that’s showing you that you can do the same thing. (Malcolm)

I view myself as someone that is responsible for helping them out. That is just the fact that I am in a position to affect other people’s lives and I could do that in a positive way. Some people that’s in my position and the big head and say I am over you. That I am better than you and you know that you’re below me. You know I was in their shoes at one time or another or can be or will be. So I really don’t put myself over other people but I really try to put myself where I can help them out. I really think other people view me as a resource. I hope other people view me as a resource and that is what I try to be to other people. I really don’t want to be a snob or that seems like he is out of reach. I really try to be there for people. (Simon)

As part of how participants perceived themselves compared to other A-A male students, participants offered their ideas as to why other A-A male students fail to get involved in SLIEA, as they do. These perceptions that reveal perceived differences between these A-A students who participate in SLIEA and those who do not is important in providing a focus to reach more students. Table 17 illustrates these perceptions and the associated frequencies.
Table 17. *Perceptions of Why Other African American Men Fail to Get Involved*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Reason</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goes against popular image; not cool</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not advertised; opportunity not presented</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail to see the benefits; not seen as worth the time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Single mention invariant constituents included some people do not wish to or cannot handle the responsibility, not comfortable dealing with or intimidated by how they will be accepted by others, lack of commitment, A-A men not told they have the power and responsibility and the ability.

The opinions of participants in this study demonstrate the existence of a powerful popular image in which “doing well” academically is not necessarily “cool.” Paul described this image among A-A males and the predominance of images of musicians (rappers) and sports stars as successful A-A men. Some students fail to see the “big picture” in terms of the benefits of involvement and their own potential.

That’s like the biggest drawback to trying to recruit individuals to get involved is that they don’t see the bigger picture... [For example] I asked [an A-A male student] him before, if he wanted to come upstairs to our meeting, you know, we usually have a topic that we talk about, like, yesterday was just, I read this article in the newspaper, it was the gap between Black and White students and I asked the same question, “Why do you think this happens,” trying to get any feedback. So I get downstairs and he had told me he wasn’t going to be making it to the meeting, so I’m like, I thought you had to go, and he’s like, no I just didn’t want to go upstairs...it kind of hit me, he probably didn’t want to go upstairs because he doesn’t see the benefit of interacting with other A-A students. I think every type of A-A success story is either one of a long shot or you know, like a rapper, or a
basketball player, or you know, like that type of thing. They have to be entertainment or have to be funny (laughter), you know, that’s the only way you can like [be successful]. (Paul)

I have run into guys that have decided not to be involved. I guess it’s the image, like I was saying earlier, how some people are considered nerds when they strive towards goals or study or hit the books or things like that. So, I guess it’s the image; maybe they came from a background where it wasn’t cool to do that. I changed though; I came from it wasn’t cool to be a nerd at my school so that’s why I did things that I did, but I realized like now you worry about yourself now and not worry about what other people think about you. (Thomas)

Of interest is the perception of these participants that the reason for low involvement among A-A students is that the students are not necessarily presented with the opportunities. These sentiments were described well by Walter and Malcolm as follows:

It’s not advertised. I feel like at times it just doesn’t link up. It might be a good chunk of males of color looking for opportunities but the opportunity wasn’t there when they were looking for it or when the opportunity was there they weren’t looking for it they had their focus somewhere else. (Walter)

I feel that the word doesn’t get out enough to African American males that they have the power, that we are the power. We are responsibility. We are effort. We are triumph over adversity, but they don’t hear it enough...[In] public schools, it seems as though they [A-A students] are not being told of the maximum potential that they have. They are not being told that they have that potential. If somebody
is taught that they are the future...[that] you guys are the future [and] you, single
handily, can be the reason that the world changes. Maybe if they heard that, they
would want to do better. To do better you must know better in my opinion... They
don’t have the information. They are not being told of the resources they have
and they’re not being told of the potential that they could make happen with
themselves. (Malcolm)

Paul noted that by being in front of other students, presenting the organization and
getting out there to recruit, the students may see what they have in common with you, and
begin to see the potential benefits of joining. Paul described this type of belief:

I saw the need that a lot of students do lack that structure, do lack the opportunity
to join clubs and stuff like that. So, to have that put forth in front of you by me or
any other peer that looks like you. It can help other students that normally
wouldn’t or couldn’t get involved. (Paul)

What matters most about SLIEA. The third thematic category related to the third
research subquestion describes the perceptions of participants concerning the most
significant aspect of SLIEA, that is, “what matters most.” Half of the respondents
answered this question in terms of the effect they (as leaders) or the organizations have
on the lives of others and that being a leader within these organizations is therefore about
helping other people. Another response was that their involvement, which motivates
them to personally set a better example and strive for success, will possibly serve to
change stereotypes for A-A males. Finally, the last common invariant constituent
suggested that what matters most is the message that A-A men can be successful and can
be anything they want to be. Table 18 presents the frequencies of these responses among
the sample.

Table 18. *Thoughts on What Matters Most about Involvement Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought</th>
<th># of participants who mentioned this element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect on others’ lives; being a leader is about helping others</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being involved, pushing to do better, maybe will change stereotypes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message that can be successful; can be anything you want to be</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Single mention invariant constituents included a leader must have interpersonal
skills and be a leader from within, a leader takes on responsibility and accountability,
professional mapping to understand how you can achieve your goals.

Therefore, the invariant themes revealed in the analysis described common
responses centered on helping others, being a leader, an overall message that they can be
successful, and that these experiences and successes can change existing stereotypes that
serve to hold A-A men in particular back from achieving their best. These participants
demonstrated a belief that through helping others to achieve success, they will be able to
change themselves and the future for others to come. The following examples of
interview text from participants reveal the strength of conviction and dedication of the
participants.

It has to matter that you get to see other students and other individual’s success.

You have to see that. And that’s what I think I got the most out of just being
[involved], showing students there’s another way besides doing the rap thing or
doing the acting thing, or whatever entertainment purposes are popular way of
black individuals being successful. Showing them that people actually care about
what you do in life and people actually want to see you succeed. And that’s the
number one thing I think, if you can get that out of any group or organization on

campus, especially for our group of A-A students, because you don’t get that

outside of this campus. When you leave this campus, you are leaving into the

world, and by having this campus and the organization, especially for A-A

students, our club, showing you a different way and having those resources

available for you, it shows you that you can be successful. (Paul)

This is our opportunity to really push and turn around the thoughts that people

thought of us and think what we think of ourselves, and that could kind of...it all

starts to sound like if you could just make the push, you could do whatever you

want. I feel like us getting involved, if we just make the push to do better, maybe

other people will see that and those stereotypes go out the window. (Fred)

It matters most, like I said, what you do for other people and what you can gain

from it also. It just matters how you deal with certain circumstances. It matters

how you affect other people lives. That is the main thing for me is how you affect

other people. Because at the end of the day when all else is said it is how other

people perceive you. Do they perceive you as a resource, a friend, a reliable

person or do they just see your liability? So I really think being the leader is all

about helping people out. Giving of yourself for other people. (Simon)

The growing experience, [to tell] the next person, to tell them, “You can do it.” If

you want to go to college and graduate, you can do it. If you want to be president,
you can be president...I am helping the next person. The goals matter a lot; you

got to have set goals, something that you’re working towards to be doing what

you got to do to get out of it. That is big too. (Thomas)
Finally, Peter provides a description of what it means to be a leader in light of these beliefs. He stated:

I think a leader should be three things. The biggest part of being a leader is just being the best you that you can be. A lot of that is that those interpersonal skills that form are from within. I feel like a great leader is a leader from within. Then it comes to our interpersonal skills, [which] is the number one [thing] for a leader. Secondly, it’s just being aware that you are being watched, your actions and stuff like that. Taking that responsibility for, you know, what you do and what you say. Just thinking about your words and being a man and just living that out. That’s a big part of it. Third, it’s just making sure that you’re making an effort to make other peoples’ lives better. Whether that be taking a few hours out your day or a few seconds out your day to help someone out with a class, or helping be a mentor to somebody you know. Influencing people is a big thing that a leaders should do. You should take time out to purposely do those things to help guide people along. When I am in these leadership positions, I always think, who is going to come after me. How can I train this person to do what I am doing now? How can I set them up just like the last person set me up to do what I was supposed to do. (Peter)

**Structural Composite Descriptions**

The structural composite descriptions are developed from a synthesis of the individual structural descriptions along with the thematic categories and high frequency commonalities derived from the analysis of the interview data (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the resulting overarching themes, representing the composite structural
description, describe how the participants perceived the essence of their experiences as A-A college men involved in SLIEA. The themes provide the overall conclusions of the analysis, serving to answer the research questions of the study.

**Theme 1: Limited knowledge of what to expect of college.** Although others expected college attendance from these A-A men, they tended to not know what to expect from college due to being the first or one of a few to attend college in their social network of family and friends. Half of the participants described the expectation on them to attend college after high school, which was generally coming from parents and/or peers. The peer groups, particularly among the self-defined “smart” students, were described as having a strong impact on the decision to attend college.

However, despite these expectations placed on the participants, half of the participants had no idea of what to expect from college, particularly since the majority were first generation college students or from families in which only a few had gone to college. In these situations, there was no “table talk” about college or college experiences for these young men to generate certain expectations. Although some participants (3 out of 10) noted the expectation of an increased workload associated with college. Interestingly, despite this expectation, participants also expressed high aspirations toward being academically successful in college, expecting to attain a degree in the end.

**Theme 2: Early participation in SLIEA supports adjustment and influences expectations.** Students got involved right away, primarily with A-A specific groups, which exposed them to the availability of resources and support systems to encourage their academic success. Participants specifically noted getting involved right away when
they arrived on campus (6 out of 10). This was often due to an opportunity to experience or get to know someone from one of the A-A male specific groups, such as the BMI. This immediate affiliation was noted to provide resources and support to the students to promote their academic success. These peers were seen as role models for the participants, who then became the same role models for other A-A men, coming full circle.

**Theme 3: Students perceived beneficial outcomes as a result of SLIEA.** Specific perceived benefits of involvement in terms of what was learned or gained through SLIEA experiences highlighted networking, time management, access to availability of resources/support, enhanced interpersonal communication and public speaking skills, challenging oneself. Participants described many benefits gained through participation in SLIEA as well as lessons learned and support received to promote their personal success. Of those mentioned, the most frequently cited by participants included social networking (8 participants), which included professors, peers, and professionals in the field; time management skills (7 participants); resources and support provided (7 participants); interpersonal communications (6 participants); public speaking (6 participants); and learning to challenge oneself, setting goals and persevering to achieve those goals (5 participants). Finally, participants noted the perceived importance of being exposed to diversity and many different perspectives (4 participants).

**Theme 4: SLIEA encourage expectations toward pursuing academic success.** Students were able to explain the influence of SLIEA on their classroom experiences, increasing motivation and expectations for pursuing and achieving academic success, which includes setting goals, increasing accountability for high expectations,
multitasking and managing their time, interpersonal communication, and supporting critical and innovative thinking. As noted in the previous theme, SLIEA activities for all participants encouraged development of specific personal skills that may be vital to academic success such as time management skills (7 participants); learning to challenge oneself, setting goals and persevering to achieve those goals (5 participants).

Theme 5: The challenge to balance involvement and academic success are stressors. A few challenges were noted for A-A students involved in SLIEA. The perceived challenges revolved around balancing the academic workload with the time commitment needed for the SLIEA. In addition to needing to balance their time and academic workload, participants felt they were held to a higher standard than their peers within the college context due to increased visibility and association with the various organizations. Also, the fact that they served as role models (and informed peers) for others, especially the A-A student population, increased standards and expectations felt by participants. Overall, their sense of accountability for academic success at times was stressful as they held themselves to a higher standard.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the qualitative, phenomenological analysis of interview data gathered from a sample of ten African American men attending one of three colleges in or near a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. The study explored the experiences and perceptions of the participants with regard to SLIEA. Chapter 4 first provided a review of the research questions, the data collection and analysis processes, and description of the individual participants. This was followed by presentation of data gathered relating to the pre-college (primarily high school) experiences of the participants.
leading up to their attendance in college. Thematic categories, resulting from the clustering and thematic categorization of the relevant responses (invariant constituents) of participants, were presented, highlighting the common experiences and perceptions of the participants. The composite description, developed from a synthesis of the thematic categories and individual textural-structural descriptions, served to provide the meaning and essence of the experiences and perceptions of the participants as a whole. The following chapter, Chapter 5, provides a discussion of the research questions related to the findings of the analysis of the data, implications of the study, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the phenomenon of African-American (A-A) men who are persisting in college and who demonstrate participation in SLIEA. Using a phenomenological design, 10 A-A college men, who are actively persisting in college and involved in student leadership activities at one of three area colleges/universities, were interviewed. The results of the study provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of these men, providing insight into the meaning assigned to this involvement and how these experiences serve to guide their actions toward academic persistence. The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994).

The study was designed to answer the grand tour research question: What meaning do A-A men give to their co-curricular student leadership involvement and engagement activities (SLIEA)? As such several sub-questions were formulated to answer this question, which included the following questions:

1. How do A-A men participating in student leadership involvement and engagement activities experience their campus environment?
2. What perceived influence do SLIEA have on the motivation, commitment, and skill development of A-A men that support their persistence toward degree attainment?
3. What beliefs serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA?

The analysis process produced key invariant constituents, which were separated into thematic categories. These thematic categories represented the perceptions of the participants with regard to their lived experiences related to the phenomenon of SLIEA
participation and persistence in college among African-American (A-A) men. Structural Composite Descriptions, which represent overarching emergent themes identified by the researcher, based on how participants perceived the essence of their experiences as A-A college men involved in SLIEA, provided empirically examined conclusions in the form of themes that serve to answer the research questions.

This chapter begins with a review of the conclusions (structural composite descriptions) that were derived from the individual descriptions and high frequency commonalities conveyed by research participants within revealed thematic categories (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher discusses the research questions and the structural composite themes with consideration of what can be learned about the experience of A-A men who are successfully persisting in college and participating in SLIEA, and what role these lived experiences play in supporting the motivation, commitment, and skill development, along with the beliefs of A-A men in their effort to persist toward the attainment of a college degree. Following the discussion of the analysis of findings and the research questions, study limitations are identified, and implications of the study are addressed related to future practice and recommendations for future reach are conveyed.

**Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

Findings from the phenomenological analysis conducted in this study reveal five significant themes, which are related to the lived experience of participants. They include participants’ limited knowledge of what to expect from college; the impact of early interest and participation in SLIEA; the perceived benefits gained from SLIEA; the encouragement of SLIEA on students’ expectations toward pursuing academic success;
and the challenge of balancing SLIEA while successfully meeting the academic
requirements of college.

**Theme 1: Limited knowledge of what to expect of college.** Although parents
and peers assumed college attendance from research participants, they did not know what
to expect from college due to being the first or one of a few to attend college in their
social network of family supporters and friends. Participants’ lack of knowledge about
college did not limit their attention and interest in pursuing campus opportunities and
taking actions to get involved in SLIEA. The choice and behaviors of participants were
supported by the high expectation from parents and family support systems, but were also
influenced by informed peers in college who were successfully navigating their progress
toward earning their college degree.

**Balancing expectations.** The majority of participants were first generation college
students. Although some had academic and social challenges in high school, more than
half the students described themselves as good students prior to attending college.
Information provided by participants indicated that balancing the expectations of college
attendance communicated by parents and family supporters with their own feelings of not
knowing what to expect from college was burdensome, even as they actively pursued
college attendance after high school. Despite the involvement activities of students in
high school and the academic preparation students were receiving, only a small number
of participants expressed confidence about expecting to earn their degree prior to
attending college.

Many first generation and underrepresented college students, like these A-A men,
often matriculate to college with little knowledge of what to expect and how to prepare
for what is ahead academically and socially. This suggests that the college processes that welcomes students and set expectations as they matriculate are important. SLIEA and the opportunities they present seem to play an important role in helping A-A men feel confident in their transition. Balancing expectations was often aided by informed peers, who served as important resources and support, as students arrived on campus. Peers exposed participants to activities and organizations that represented SLIEA. As Day (2001, as cited by Komives et al., 2006) suggests, “Leadership development can be thought of as an integration strategy by helping people understand how to relate to others, coordinate their efforts, build commitment, and develop extended social networks by applying self-understanding to social and organizational imperatives” (p. 414). Therefore, the opportunities associated with SLIEA can assist with informing students of the involvement habits important to the broader educational experiences that can influence success in college.

The influence of parents on expectations. Participants acknowledged that parent expectations supported their motives and actions to pursuing college enrollment and continue their persistence. The fact that most parents of participants were not college graduates did not reduce their interest in pursuing college. The expectations of parents also supported their actions toward pursuing campus SLIEA opportunities provided in college. Despite their limited knowledge of college, the value and emotional connection to parents expressed by A-A men in the study motivated their attitude and behaviors to seek out and utilize available campus resources and networks to support their persistence in school. The effort to avoid failure and meet the expectations of parents and their
supporters was a motivating factor that encouraged choices, campus commitments, and the behaviors of participants.

This study affirms previous research findings and educational reports that parental expectation is critical to the successful persistence of A-A men in college (Cuyjet, 2006; Harris, 2009; Harper 2003, Hrabowski et al., 1998). Bonner (2010) also affirms that family is a critical source of support for A-A students. Bonner indicates that families are important to meeting the safety, emotional security, and affective needs of students and also provide general guidance for students that help them to negotiate life and school circumstances simultaneously with growth and development issues.

**Peer influence on college expectations.** Critical to the process of meeting the interests of A-A men and raising their expectations for personal success in college was the information students indicated they received about the importance of getting involved once they arrived on their campus. Their choice to give attention, interest, and pursuit to campus SLIEA was influenced by the types of opportunities students were able to identify, which ranged from A-A identified organizations to mainstream and predominantly white organizations. The resources and network informed peers provided through SLIEA for new students in transition served to invite students to get involved and engage in experiences that support their knowledge and transition to college.

Informed peers were recognized as important resources and support for participants. As a result, participants valued them as mentors and role models in the environment of college, which often encouraged their meaningful engagement and desire to persist. Peers who are successfully persisting in college were able to promote a social connection for A-A men and help them increase their understanding and expectations of
what is expected in college. Having access to successful peers via SLIEA influenced participants’ desire to persist because seeing others succeed (i.e. progressing towards obtaining their degree) motivated their own success and high expectations (table 13).

**Peers as campus informants.** The expressed role of informed peers in the process of supporting the successful transition of A-A men to their campus is important. Because of their critical role, informed peers who are successfully persisting could be described as important “campus informants”. Campus informants can serves as knowledgeable resources to aid matriculated A-A men identify the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that are often important to the process of persisting toward degree attainment.

Peers who served as campus informants were important to the process of guiding the expectations of A-A men. Research participants expressed receiving affirmation from campus informants as they were invited to pursue campus opportunities. The affirmation they received acknowledged their presence as motivated college students that were in transition and often recognized students’ racial and gender identity as A-A men. Campus informants engendered a level of trust and encouragement that was important to students’ pursuit of SLIEA. As a resource for A-A men, peer informants shared experiences and demonstrated behaviors that often served to “model the way” for participants. This supported the campus orientation and practical knowledge for participants to help them make important connections to their college or university community, which was sustained as participants persisted within the environment. For participants, knowledge and a sense of connectedness within their college environment was often reciprocated. Almost all of the A-A men in the research study chose to become informants as they persisted to become upper class students, serving to benefit under class peers in their
various organizational and campus leadership roles, which essentially identified them as role models and mentors.

Overall, the choice to participate in SLIEA affirmed the aspirations of participants as college students. This was facilitated by campus informants, which led A-A men to feel connected to their college environment. These findings are congruent with Tinto’s (1993) premise that student integration and connection with peers (and other institutional agents) is important to supporting a student’s transition to college and their persistence toward their degree. Furthermore, it involves a reciprocal commitment from both the student and the institution, which means students need to be willing to become integrated. This represents an active choice on the part of students as they evaluate institutional opportunities to affirm and build confidence in their decision to pursue and obtain a degree.

Previous research on A-A men has contended that if a sense of belonging is affirmed early in their matriculation process, the knowledge they can obtain about how to navigate and establish habits that support student success outcomes will serve to support their perceived fit within the college environment (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Brown, 2006). Therefore, regardless of their prior educational experiences and lack of knowledge about what to expect, attention to the immediate and continual orientation students receive from the college will influence their cultural understanding of what to expect within the context of college. According to Tinto (1975, 1993), the concept of “institutional fit” is a critical point to the student integration process that supports students’ desire to persist. Brown (2006) clearly affirmed that if the institutional fit can be established early for A-A men, which is often facilitated by the support of peers and
meaningful educational experience that may be offered or supported by SLIEA, then students’ transition to college expectations and the potential positive outcomes can be established.

The experience of research participants indicates that a minimum knowledge of what to expect from college was not a limiting factor in their successful persistence. As these A-A men matriculated, they sought opportunities to support their integration into their college environment. This led to actively pursuing organizations and campus co-curricular programs that increased students’ interaction with peers who were socially and academically engaged in the campus experiences, such as participating in meetings, attending sponsored events, conducting meetings, and attending community service activities. For participants, these experiences helped to facilitate an orientation toward co-curricular opportunities that can serve to interest and motivate students, which support expectations for engagement and learning in college. The student involvement and engagement opportunities offered and facilitated by the invitation from informed peers served to support student choices, which led to positive experiences and beneficial gains. The gains served to establish clearer social and academic expectations that increased the knowledge of participants and encouraged their commitment toward persisting within their learning environment.

Theme 2: Early participation supports adjustment and expectations for college success. Students got involved right away. For many, this involvement was initiated primarily with A-A specific groups (e.g., BMI, MOC, and NABA). These groups provided exposure for the students in terms of the availability of resources and support systems to encourage their academic success.
**Facilitation of campus connection.** Participant actions to get involved right away represented their interest and motivation to connect with their college environment. When participants first arrived to campus as new students, connecting with their college environment often meant seeking out co-curricular experiences that supported a sense that they belonged in the environment. Previous research has indicated that the sense of belonging and experiences that support the level of integration and fit with the institution is important to establish early for A-A men (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Brown, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2009b; Harris, 2009; McClure, 2006; Swartz & Washington, 2002; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010). Participants indicated their sense of connection is often facilitated by their relationship with peers. Peers are an important part of the campus network that participants often develop, which exposes them to the social and academic realities, as well as college expectations that are often unknown to students as they matriculate to their new learning environment. The desire of participants to pursue SLIEA may also represent their attraction to the potential experiences perceived to be beneficial to their interest within the learning environment (Kuh et al., 2005).

**Participatory behavior.** The desire of participants for early involvement could be perceived as representing “participatory behaviors” established prior to college. Because almost all were involved in some meaningful co-curricular activity in high school, an established habit of being involved in school related activities was considered personally meaningful to participants. It can be reasonably assumed that their activities (i.e. athletic team, student government, school band, honor societies, etc.) helped A-A men to develop a value for co-curricular participation, which nurtures a habit of participatory behaviors.
This habit is often supported by parent expectations that serve to influence students’ actions as they enter into a new learning environment.

Congruent with Finn and Rock’s (1997) assertions with regard to students’ active participation in school, the outcomes from this research study indicate that an engaged interest in college SLIEA may stem from a habit of participatory behaviors established prior to college, which increases the motives of students to seek experiences that support their connection and desire to affirm they belong. The behavior of participants and the learning outcomes that result from early participation in SLIEA, supporting a participatory habit, often encourage a greater understanding for what is expected in the learning environment. This was most evident for A-A men who were active participants of organizations and leadership experiences that affirmed the social identity and academic needs of A-A men in college, such as college sponsored Black male retention programs or related activities.

**Impact of racially-identified cultural organizations.** Although some A-A men sought SLIEA with both A-A identified organizations and mainstream/predominantly White organizations and groups, almost all the participants became involved in SLIEA with A-A specific groups early in their college experience as a means to support their academic interest and connection to their college or university environment. It was apparent that participants’ racial identity status played a role in choosing and sustaining their leadership and engagement activities. Whether by name of the organization (i.e., Black Male Initiative, Men of Color Initiative, etc.) or what the association implies in terms of interest and outcomes by students (National Association of Black Journalists, National Association of Black Accountants, Minority Science Association, etc.), the A-A
men were most attracted to these opportunities because they seemed to represent their interest in racial belonging.

The presence of these organizations could also be viewed as representing the interest of the college and the desires of the learning community to support what is important to the “student experience” as well as valued by A-A students. The findings of this study are congruent with previous research that has indicated that A-A specific organizations are important and beneficial to the orientation of first-year minority students on campus (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kenny & Stryker, 1996). Further, for A-A men, sustaining their involvement in these organizations represents their desire to utilize these types of organizations as an interest and an expression of their identity (Harper & Quaye). For the majority of participants, these SLIEA were where students felt most comfortable relating to peers, sharing life and college experiences with students from similar backgrounds, as well as common social and relatable academic challenges.

**Theme 3: Students perceived beneficial outcomes as a result of SLIEA.**

Students were able to identify specific benefits of their participation in SLIEA in terms of what was learned or gained (tables 11 and 13). Their experiences indicated that the opportunities provided by SLIEA supported educationally meaningful active learning experiences, provided participants with practical competencies, and supported students in their establishment of positive campus networks.

**Educationally meaningful active learning experiences.** Participants found their experience to be educationally meaningful. The knowledge they perceived to be gaining and the support they were feeling as a result of their SLIEA represented their deeper
connection to their college experiences. The skills participants gained supported their personal development and learning experiences. The processes the participants experienced through involvement and the relationships fostered with peers and staff also supported active learning. Active learning experiences add to students’ sense of purpose as to why they are in college and what various social or co-curricular learning experiences had to offer (Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Evans et al., 2010; Harper, 2006b; Komives et al., 2006; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Active learning that resulted in the personal development of practical skills reinforced the desires of students to be connected to their campus learning community. Spending their time pursuing SLIEA met their needs for social connection, which helped to foster a social orientation and a social identity for these A-A men that further affirmed a sense of who they were as college students (i.e., engaged and aspiring learners) and who they wanted to be as they persisted toward earning their degree. Participants indicated their pursuit of SLIEA was a productive use of their time that provided experiences to counter some of the social stereotypes and assumptions that A-A men may experience in the higher education environment, which include being underprepared, uninvolved, unmotivated, or academically distracted (Bonner & Baily, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2009b; Polite & Davis, 1999; Roach, 2001).

**Learning gains represent practical competencies.** For A-A men involved in SLIEA, the personal gains and benefits of active learning experiences resulted in what Harper (2006b) identified as practical competencies, which added to the skill set of students. Practical competencies, such as planning and learning how to effectively manage time, enhancing interpersonal skills, and recognizing resources and how to
effectively utilize them, increases the ability of students to navigate and negotiate their learning environment, which can decrease and help to protect them from future failures (Harper, 2006b). The knowledge outcomes and experiences for A-A men were congruent with broader research on college student outcomes that result from participation in leadership activities and related programs, such as the development of communication skills, increased sense of personal and social responsibility, ability to resolve conflict, and increased self-confidence and self-esteem in the learning process (Astin & Astin, 2000; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). In essence, students’ practical competencies supported a sense of agency and efficacy that was complementary to their academic learning experiences.

Establishment of a network. Participants expressed that networking was an important personal benefit that resulted from their intentional choice to be involved in SLIEA. The establishment of positive networks developed through SLIEA allowed A-A men to observe and learn from other successful students. SLIEA afforded participants in the study an opportunity to participate in both formal and informal discussions with motivated peers, which fostered relationships that benefited their college student experience. The interpersonal relationships and communication skills participants developed helped them to better understand and reflect on their choices and expectations as college students committed to the success of obtaining their degree—being motivated to learn and engaging in various opportunities and experiences sponsored by the college that support students’ learning and development. Networks established by the A-A men afforded them access to resources and allowed them to remain informed with knowledge
that supported their persistence, such as who to talk to about financial aid, class registration, and course requirements.

The development of a positive network helped to support the students’ development of interpersonal skills, which had a positive social influence on students’ sense of personal growth and motivation. SLIEA helped students establish a sense of responsibility. Subsequently, students’ sense of responsibility, facilitated by their increased commitment to planning and working with peers, increased their openness to new learning opportunities. With social support from peers and the knowledge gained from their various SLIEA, participants indicated a commitment to engaging and maintaining their connection to the learning environment of college. This, in turn, created more opportunities and openness for transformative experiences both in class and outside of class (Table 13).

Participants affirmed a sense of responsibility for their learning and were able to recognize they were gaining important skills. These skills further motivated them to prioritize educational activities and establish goals that support their academic and personal development within the college context and the knowledge they were able to identify through their experiences with SLIEA. Baxter-Magolda (2001) supported affirming students as knowledge bearers in their experiences prior to and during their various college experiences, which should validate students as “knowers” in their learning processes. In essence, students are believed to be able to create knowledge as a result of engaging in meaningful co-curricular learning opportunities (or unstructured learning environments). Participants were clearly able to reflect on their choice to pursue
SLIEA and interpret the gains and benefit to their college experiences, which influenced their desire to persist.

**Theme 4: SLIEA encourage expectations toward pursuing academic success.** Students were able to translate the influence of SLIEA to their classroom experiences, increasing motivation and expectations for pursuing and achieving academic success. Whether students engaged in leadership activities that were academically focused in their association (i.e., National Association of Black Journalists, National Association of Black Accountants, Minority Science Association, Honor societies, etc.), provided social and academic support to A-A students or A-A men specifically (i.e. Black Student Union, Black Male Initiative, Men of Color Initiative, etc.), or considered a majority mainstream organization/activity (Student Government Association, Student Ambassador, Student Orientation Leader, Student Life Leader, etc.), these experiences proved meaningful to the A-A men in this study. Being around motivated peers who also sought academic success as a priority increased their attention to behaviors that demonstrated their focus on making choices about how they would productively use their time. For example, attending to their homework rather than going out with friends and being responsible in their effort to meet course demands and expectations that were identified as a priority. In addition, participants felt their identified leadership role in their organizations raised expectations for how they would represent themselves in class and the effort they would make toward being successful students.

**Skill development promotes engaged learning.** Participants in the study also indicated that as their interpersonal skills developed, it became easier to relate to other students in class and share learning activities that required public expression in class and
during teamwork activities. Thus, the general experiences gained through SLIEA for participants did not have any negative impact on their academic self-concept, but rather, served to support their sense of self-efficacy toward academic behaviors and commitment to succeeding in their classroom environment. Their increased focus and attention to classroom experiences reflected a desire to remain in the learning environment. With a commitment to participating in SLIEA, these A-A men recognized the importance of managing their time effectively, utilizing their social networks positively, and accessing campus resources successfully. SLIEA and the associated opportunities that resulted from participation left these A-A participants with very little time to disengage from their campus community.

Congruent with previous studies on A-A men, participants gained practical skills and competencies that were perceived to be transferrable to other educational experiences (Brown, 2006; Harper, 2006b). Knowledge and experiences gained by participants strengthened their belief that they could navigate and negotiate their classroom experiences with greater confidence. The network connections and resources empowered participants and raised expectations for their interaction with classroom peers and faculty. Networking and utilization of resources motivated students to establish academic priorities and set goals that exhibited the academic commitment for students to live up to high expectations.

The responsibility and confidence expressed by participants reflect Flowers’ (2006) notion that giving attention to the academic behaviors associated with the integration of A-A men into the context of college is critical to understand. In particular, how the activities and resources available on campuses help students commit to their
academic endeavor and serve to establish or increase habits that are critical to learning and development, resulting in a more satisfying college experience. Research by Flowers (2006) also challenged college educators to further understand and observe the related attitudes and behaviors that stem from practical competencies gained by A-A students in their various college learning experiences.

**Theme 5: The challenges of balancing involvement and academic success are stressors.** Challenges for participants revolved around balancing the academic work load with the time commitment needed for the SLIEA. Participants felt they were held to a higher standard due to their association with the various organizations and the fact that they served as role models for others, especially the A-A student population. Their sense of accountability for academic success at times was stressful as they believed they held themselves to a higher standard compared to other students. The belief that A-A men who are successfully progressing toward their degree and benefitting from SLIEA activities have found a formula for success is one of caution for PWI supporting their development. Each semester in college, students have a variety of experiences that must be engaged and supported—new classes with various degrees of difficulty, changing relationship with peers, and social and family related stressors outside of college.

**Students feel pressure.** The pressure of being an A-A man in a predominantly White college environment means managing the stress of success with the threat of avoiding failure. For A-A men actively pursuing SLIEA, the visibility and often public recognition for these students means not wanting to disappoint peers who look up to them as role models in the environment. This also means not wanting to disappoint faculty and professional staff who often see these students as examples for others to emulate in their
academic journey. At times, the A-A men felt challenged to live up to high (and sometime unrealistic) expectations of themselves, even as they are confidently persisting toward their degree and actively sustaining their SLIEA.

Often, the stress and pressure is brought about by their effort to counter social stereotypes that exist in reference to A-A men in college. At times, this may limit the types of involvement experiences A-A men choose, leading some to avoid certain levels of leadership involvement and recognition. Therefore, the choices students make are important as they relate to the time and effort they commit. The desire of participants to be a positive role model and have an effect on the lives of others means that their leadership involvement activities can at times be in conflict with their time spent on academic priorities critical to classroom success.

Previous research by Smedley, Myer, and Harrell (1993) indicated that the careful examination of academic balance and mix between co-curricular activities and individual course expectation must be considered by students as they adjust to college. Therefore, the pressure to perform in academic course work while being active in SLIEA may leave students with the challenge to choose. As a result, for students who are trying to focus on establishing or improving successful academic course outcomes, their lack of involvement in activities might be misunderstood as lack of engagement (Smedley et al., 1993).

Discussion of the Research Questions

How do A-A men participating in student leadership involvement and engagement activities experience their campus environment? A-A men successfully persisting and involved in SLIEA overwhelmingly viewed their campus environments as
welcoming places to learn; they also developed a sense that they belonged within that environment. Participants felt the various SLIEA they chose to get involved with supported their learning experiences. This would indicate that students felt their activities supported their desire to connect with their collective learning experience. Tinto (1993) indicated that the way students both experience and interact with their campus environment is an important link to how learning opportunities, both in class and out of class, will support a strong connection and desire to persist. The social relationships with peers, who also associate with SLIEA, helped students make the necessary connections. These connections served to support the educational goals of participants, which encouraged attitudes and behavior consistent with persistence.

Positive attachment and racial awareness. As the men shared their stories, there was a “positive community attachment” that was conveyed, often supported by their SLIEA. The experiences of persisting A-A men indicated that the college environment is not only where they wanted to be, but also a place that they would be successful in. The resulting level of perceived integration increased their desire to maintain college curricular and co-curricular learning activities that motivated them to stay within the environment, which, according to Tinto (1993), is critical to the retention and persistence puzzle. Their activities and resulting experiences acknowledged their presence as A-A men and exposed them to existing college resources, which included peer resources. These resources supported and helped to encourage expectations for academic success and college persistence within the learning environment.

The participants acknowledged some racial identity challenges related to social stereotype as A-A men within their campus environment. Because most of the men
chose to pursue African-American specific organizations, it would appear that their “racial identity status” had an influence on how they saw themselves within the environment and the perceived influence these culturally specific groups could have on their experiences as they looked to affirm a fit within the educational context of college. This is critically important because many of the men indicated they did not know what to expect prior to attending college or prior to making the decision to get involved in SLIEA, lacking a clear understanding of the benefit, skills, or gains that would potentially occur because of their decision.

The participants’ affirmation of racial identity and campus involvement supports previous research findings that choice of involvement and the manner in which students identify with cultural and racial specific groups may serve to influence critical learning experiences that are the result of meaningful interaction with same race peers, multicultural others, and the majority culture (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Michelle & Dell, 1992; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995; Torres et al., 2009). Further, choices made by students to be involved in A-A specific activities, according to Harper and Quaye (2007), represent students’ desire to use their involvement as a means for identity expression to support or enhance their conditions for learning in the environment. The choices of participants characterized some of their motives for leadership and active engagement.

**Racial identity development.** With regard to racial identity development, the A-A men in this study appeared to exhibit the stage of internalization described by Cross (1995). The level of student interaction expressed by participants, their choice of SLIEA, and their purposeful desires to influence and project a positive image of A-A
men at their PWI represented their personal recognition of themselves as a marginalized group on campus that generally has an inner comfort with their “blackness.” However, their status as A-A men did not appear to limit their relationships with White associates and people from other ethnic groups. The assertion is that in the stage of internalization, students can selectively subscribe to elements of both the Black and White cultures without forfeiting one for the other (Cross, 1995; Evans et al., 2010). Research findings appear to be congruent with Parker and Flowers (2003), who concluded that A-A students at a PWI at the stage of internalization are more likely to perceive a greater sense of connection with their campus, which support their interest and active involvement with learning opportunities.

Positive connection to peers. A strong social connection to peer group networks facilitated by SLIEA supported a positive experience for the A-A men successfully persisting. Peer groups were perceived to represent a “positive social network,” which led to increasing the orientation of A-A men to campus by interacting with successful students or equally aspiring peers that are new to the environment. Whether peers were the same race, or represented by a multicultural or majority group, the perception of the participants was that peer group connections led to increased knowledge and meaningful organizational activities/experiences and provided access to important campus resources (i.e. mentor-mentee relationships, support services, college personnel, and other important campus offices). These resources can be utilized to support practical knowledge and competency development, which can serve the needs of students.

Practical knowledge gained by students support a type of social competence that was leveraged within the educational context for persisting students. As participants
increased and advanced their knowledge concerning social and academic behaviors that led them toward earning their degree from their college or university, they were committed to passing their competence and skills onto aspiring peers. Harper (2006) indicated that student recognition of the practical knowledge gained from their SLIEA, such as effective use and management of time, learning to solve problems, and interpersonal communication skills, are transferrable and provide benefit that can be applied to other parts of their academic and personal lives. Harper also noted that this knowledge further prepares high achieving and aspiring A-A men for future opportunities to demonstrate their skills and abilities.

**A strong campus experience.** A-A men successfully persisting seemed to have a robust campus experience. The choice to be involved supported exposure to meaningful educational opportunities, such as participating in community service projects, planning campus events, serving in important roles such as orientation leaders, student ambassadors, peer mentors, and other related experiences. Previous research affirms that the purposeful behaviors of A-A men to be involved in specific campus activities, particularly organizations intentionally focused on their orientation into the campus culture, indicates that SLIEA can support a positive identity, encourage a sense of agency, and affirm a notion of fit and belonging that is important to lowering any social isolation, perceived alienation, or feeling of disengagement that might be felt (Brown, 2006; Bonner & Baily, 2006; Harper, 2009b; Harper & Quaye, 2007). The choice to pursue SLIEA by participants in the study seemed to counteract the feeling of “onlyness,” which can serve to create stress and pressure on many A-A men when they fail to see a support group or a critical mass of A-A students as a part of their campus environment.
(Harper, 2012). As Cuyjet (1997, 2006) indicated, for A-A men, the “meaningful peer connections” while attending college can serve to inspire and motivate higher expectations and positive behavioral choices that encourage persistence toward graduation in spite of any social and academic challenges that might be encountered.

**What perceived influence do SLIEA have on the motivation, commitment, and skill development of A-A men that support their persistence toward degree attainment?** The participation of A-A men in SLIEA has many positive effects on their commitment and motivation to persist toward degree attainment. Most of the A-A men involved in the study got involved early in their academic career in college and sustained their involvement. Participants’ involvement resulted in access to a positive social network of peers, which facilitated understanding resources that could benefit and serve to complement the campus and academic experiences of A-A men. Participation led to engagement and leadership experiences that resulted in skills that could not be learned in the classroom, but were important to master, such as planning and managing their time. The influence, benefit, and skill gained from SLIEA kept students rooted in school related activities that supported their desire to persist in college, encouraging participants to consider how they would spend their time on campus and the constructive activities that would help to sustain their interest in being successful college students.

**Open to receiving help.** Participants expressed that interpersonal relationships with peers and the skills associated with developing these relationships (i.e. effective communication and resolving conflicts) was supported by their SLIEA. These relationships were critical to their personal development and served as important resources. The interpersonal relationships supported their ability to be open to receiving
and seeking help for what they did not know or understand within the context of college. Beyond participating in and eventually leading organizational planned activities, participants were able to share their successes, struggles, and challenges with other students who are within the same educational context. This is an important acknowledgement by A-A men, who are often reported to have difficulty asking for help (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006). Many of the men felt that the experience of being involved and sustaining their involvements helped them to feel more responsible for their education and more mature about the choices they could make as members and leaders actively involved in their organizations and committed to their college. These feelings of responsibility that led to positive choices for students support Astin’s (1993) notion that commitment of time and energy towards activities increase positive educational outcomes that can be understood. Tinto (1993) indicated that experiences that support the motivation of students to commit to their educational aspirations in a meaningful way will facilitate the development of educational goals and lead them toward increased academic performance. Students’ feelings of responsibility affirm Harper and Quaye’s (2009) notion that enriching campus activities that serve to connect A-A men to their campus will result in sense of appreciation and commitment behaviors from these men, ultimately increasing the likelihood of successful experiences for them within the environment.

**Efficacy in learning.** Students’ efficacy in their learning experience was expressed by the influence of SLIEA on their prioritization and goal setting, which increased their focus on academic development and success. If there were any perceived gaps in A-A men’s learning and understanding about college, the skills gained from
participating in SLIEA, such as interpersonal communication, learning how to work with peers to accomplish goals, being more accountable for personal actions, and challenging themselves to set high expectations, served to support filling those gaps. Beyond personal esteem-building, self-efficacy was supported by the learning outcomes and the dynamic that resulted from student experiences. A sense of efficacy in the learning experiences of A-A men supported their increased focus, commitment, and responsibility for their social and academic integration. Self-efficacy for these A-A men also supported an academic self-confidence important for successful navigation within the context of a college or university environment. This would imply that when these persisting A-A men experienced course difficulty, that they did not attribute their lack of success to a personal inability to be academically successful, but rather believed they could utilize available resources (professors, peers, support services) to make decisions, solve challenges, and exhibit behavior that would support corrective actions.

**Active learning promoted.** For persisting A-A men, SLIEA supported student active learning as opposed to passive learning. The learning gain from their activities empowered students to develop greater maturity and growth. Learning gains promoted positive behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes. These gains represent a hallmark of effective leadership development experiences that support persistence (CAS, 2009). The influence of SLIEA on the ability of students to manage their time, set goals, increase their confidence in their organizational and planning skills, and learn leadership skills that could not be learned in the classroom, influenced the co-curricular experiences that support active learning within the context of college, which can also be transferred to other context of their lives. The ability of participants to reflect and understand this
affirms the actions and responsibility that they must initiate in order to achieve positive outcomes from their college experiences.

Active learning was fostered by a strong social network of peers, who were sharing in experiences that promoted constructive activities and conveyed knowledge that encouraged students toward behaviors that tend to nurture persistence. Connecting to an academically influential social network of peers resulted in tangible benefit to influence participants’ desire to be successful in college. Peer networks, particularly those represented in A-A specific groups (i.e. BMI, MOC, NABA, NABJ), served to increase students’ belief that college is a place they belonged and could be successful. Harper (2012) asserted that A-A men engaged in leadership activities are often introduced to a network of other achievers, both within and outside of their racial group, who are able to share strategies and resources for success both within and beyond the bounds of the classroom, which essentially reflect active learning experiences that result in practical competencies understood by students.

**What beliefs serve to support A-A men who pursue SLIEA?** The A-A men in this study believed that SLIEA helped them sustain a focus on their learning and development. The sustained involvement of participants stems from their belief that SLIEA afforded them the opportunity to have meaningful experiences and learn important skills, giving them a greater chance to develop themselves outside of attending academic courses (Tables 13 and 15). Students were able to learn from their interaction with peers and from the time commitment they made to campus organizations and their related activities. Their choices and commitment served to build their belief about their interest in college and their desire to be successful in the environment. Student
development research has always contended that, because students spend the majority of their campus time outside of classes, learning from co-curricular experiences is critical to the personal maturation and the developmental processes that can serve to sustain behaviors important to academic engagement and student persistence (Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Participants also believed that their SLIEA would represent them as positive role models within the campus environment (Table 16). As role models, they expressed a belief that their presence would serve to change the perceptions of black males on campus. In essence, bettering themselves through their SLIEA would also serve to better the campus community. The majority of men believed that their leadership involvement activities would have an effect on other people’s lives, particularly other A-A students on campus (Table 15). Sutton and Terrell (1997) indicated that if A-A men are given meaningful leadership opportunities that are recognized by the college, they will develop important skills that support their personal development and enhance their experience while on campus and beyond their graduation.

**Empowered to persist.** The persisting A-A men in this study involved in SLIEA conveyed an empowered system—seeing themselves as positive role models, but equal to their peers. Their beliefs fueled and sustained their interest and motivation to engage in leadership involvement activities. Held beliefs were associated with the time and energy participants committed to their activities, which in turn, impacted the level of engagement and the potential gains that can serve their academic commitment and behaviors toward persistence within the academic environment. For example, a participant who was engaged with the Minority Science Association interacted with peers and learned to
increase positive student habits, became more goal oriented in his pursuit of higher grades, and was able to consider various career opportunities in science due to planned activities, exposure, knowledge and awareness of campus resources, which served to empower his belief about his interest, ability, and commitment to pursuing the field.

Shertzer and Shuh (2004) indicated that beliefs held by students influence their perception, choice, and interest in the opportunities identified that can support their development. As Shertzer and Shuh (2004) contended, an empowered belief system (as compared to a constrained belief system) leads students to seek and receive support from others, recognize and take advantage of opportunities presented to them, and call upon their background and previous experiences, which raises expectations to engage in SLIEA. These A-A men successfully persisting and involved in SLIEA would affirm this notion. Some of the empowering perceptions that were identified by the behaviors shared by A-A men within the study included: students getting involved right away, accessing and engaging in resources and support presented through their involvement activities, and seeing themselves as positive roles models on their campus that can have an effect on their community and the lives of other students, particularly other A-A students. The most empowered belief exhibited by these persisting A-A men was simply that they felt they belonged in college, which was facilitated by their SLIEA and the influence and benefit these experiences presented (Table 13). Overall, students held an empowered perception of their campus as a place to learn and grow, which served as a foundation to support their active and sustained involvement on campus.

**Belief about leadership.** Leadership is about helping others or having an effect on other people’s lives. Despite their successful persistence and recognition in their
learning environment, students did not believe they were better or more important than their peers. As students persisted, this belief served to increase their motivation and commitment to serving in roles that they can be credible informants of the experiences, resources, and process that would support the success of other peers. Their perception of leadership roles represented a community/social responsibility orientation. Many higher education institutions have adopted social responsibility as a co-curricular learning orientation to support leadership development initiatives and activities on their campus (CAS, 2009; Komives & Wagner, 2009; Komives et al., 2006)

**Student's belief about leadership identity.** Although this study could not explore the depth or extent of participants’ leadership identity, it appears that the opportunities SLIEA provides supported their identity formation as leaders. Students believed themselves to be positive role models to their campus and also wanted to help others, having an effect on the lives of others. It seems clear that some of the developmental components conveyed by Komives et al. (2006) are evident: the role of adults, the changing role of peers, and the opportunities for involvement in leadership activities along with time to engage in reflective learning. However, Komives et al.’s (2006) model of leadership identity development fails to consider if students from underrepresented groups, particularly A-A men, who are attracted to organizations that support racial identity expression, experience leadership identity differently. More consideration needs to be given to students from outside the racial majority and how the PWI environments affect the “developmental component that influences students’ capacity to learn and engage leadership,” which impact their efficacy in the learning process (Komives et al., 2006, p. 402). With regard to A-A men, there is also a need to
focus on the opportunities for involvement in certain activities like male identified academic support/retention programs, considering the role that peers who serve as “campus informants” play on the identity expression and development of students.

Komives et al. (2006) may indeed be correct that peers are playing a significant role, but to what extent in particular campus experiences would be important to consider.

**Limitations of the Study**

**Selection of students.** Students received a recruitment flyer and information from a college administrator, which may have encouraged their participation. This may have led to bias in terms of who participated in the study or the oversampling of students that had a relationship with student development administrators or leadership educators on their campus. Although students voluntarily contacted the researcher on their own to express interest in their participation, participants’ pre-existing relationships with staff professionals may have left some students feeling obligated to follow up with the researcher and participate in the study.

**Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive.** As noted by Creswell (2009), qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive; therefore, analyzing the rich information provided by participants and drawing conclusions, filtered through the personal lens of the researcher, who is primarily a practitioner, must be recognized. Because students are self-reporting, they may be subject to blind spots in their own understanding of their experiences. As a result, the qualitative data from students in this study relies on their ability to self-reflect on deeper learning and knowledge acquisition.
Implications for Practice

Student development staff and leadership development educators must examine the involvement patterns of A-A men on their college and university campuses. Greater attention must be given to the institutional context and its support for the successful integration of all A-A men who should be expected to be successful.

While Harper (2006c, 2009a, 2009b), Strayhorn (2008, 2010), and others caution institutions of higher education to not treat A-A men as a monolithic group, attention to the individual and collective needs of students and patterns on a campus must be a priority if their persistence is to be supported. The “conditional effects” of the environment on the academic and social experience of men involved, as well as those who do not perceive opportunities for meaningful involvement, will serve to indicate the campus’ ability to provide an enriching educational experience that supports the unique social of academic needs of students in attendance.

Seek narratives about the educational interest, motivations, and assets of A-A men entering college. When educators embrace a counter-narrative message to the perceived disengagement of A-A men, it will force campus leaders to increase expectations on how to best serve students and examine the opportunities that specifically target A-A men early and often. This will require educational leaders to evaluate indicators of success for student who are persisting on their campus. Rather than trying to “fix” A-A men or holding stereotypical views of the population, a counter-narrative message represents understanding the experience of A-A men from an anti-deficit point of view, which requires a lens that “rejects deficit-minded treatments of Black male students, while simultaneously recognizing the continued need to better understand the
factors that stifle achievement” (Harper, 2009b, p. 148). This supports learning from A-A men who are achieving the results or gaining experiences we desire as an outcome within the context of higher education. This would include evaluating standard administrative processes, such as orientation, new student cohort, and social and academic organizational opportunities. Student development practitioners must keep in mind the effects of the social orientation that may support, and often times may precede, the academic orientation and students’ feelings of comfort within the college or university environment.

Although educators within higher education institutions feel that targeting the population may only serve to reinforce a message of negative stereotyping about the ability of students to be successful, empirical outcomes identified by Cuyjet (2006) and Harper (2012) and associated best practice outcomes clearly indicate campus programs that recognize the value of providing meaningful experiences targeted at A-A men, who are often underserved at PWIs, support students’ interest, motivations, and persistence toward the goal of degree attainment. Student success outcomes are congruent with the academic learning, growth and development, as well as degree attainment that higher education institutions aspire to achieve with students enrolled.

**Create opportunities that target A-A men and share the benefit of SLIEA.**

When possible, the orientation process should target parents of students (and other family supporters), because many are unfamiliar with college and how best to support students. Even for parents who have some familiarity with the college environment, the uniqueness of navigating the academic and social opportunities provided by a specific campus culture is important to consider. Given the value students placed on parental
expectations, targeting parents may increase the attention and expectations of students to take advantage of the opportunities and experiences that are associated with success outcomes and college persistence.

Student development staff and leadership educators should share the identified empirical outcomes that support the benefit and gains of students who take advantage of SLIEA, giving emphasis to how these experiences may influence the persistence attitudes and behaviors of college students. This will encourage students to understand the social connection and learning experiences that could be missed if they do not become actively involved with meaningful and enriching educational activities on their campus (Cress et al., 2001; Harper, 2006b, 2012; Komives et al., 2006; Overstreet et al., 1998; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999).

**Invite A-A men to experience SLIEA and campus programs that serve to connect them to their purpose of schooling.** This would include providing engaging opportunities for them to dialogue about their experiences, which encourage meaningful connection to peers, their schooling experiences, and their sense of purpose for being in the environment. This should help the process of connection, a sense that they belong, and increase trust toward the belief that the institution wants them to be successful in the environment. Engendering trust with racial peers and multicultural others should increase student comfort with sharing their needs and seeking timely resources that may influence their persistence attitudes and behaviors. In essence, this serves to normalize the idea that college can be a difficult place to navigate (both socially and academically) for every student, but that active choices with their time and connection to a positive social network of peers equally motivated to achieve success should nurture a sense of
efficacy and academic self-confidence for students. Encouraging participatory behavior that encourages meaningful engagement for A-A men helps to promote positive student experiences. Ultimately, this will serve to increase their sense of belonging, to confirm their academic “fit” with their campus, and to connect them to positive academic outcomes.

**Promote dialogue about SLIEA with A-A men and consider the value to A-A men.** Because some organizations and activities that nurture SLIEA may be foreign to students, there is a need to promote student dialogue about what can be gained by these experiences and why these experiences are of educational value. There is also a need to help A-A men consider programs and activities that support and empower active learning, which intentionally recognize the interest and educational journey of A-A men. Promoting activities that support active learning and reflection will foster increased knowledge and personal development in the schooling process. Increased dialogue should promote a focus on the learning experiences of A-A men, which can support “educational enriching” experiences.

**Identify, recognize, and support the A-A men who are successfully persisting.** Whether seemingly engaged or not, these students need acknowledgement that their persistence in the environment is valued and that resources are available for support if they need to call on them. This research study affirmed that A-A men benefit from seeing and being exposed to other A-A men successfully persisting in college, which supports empowering beliefs and motivation that actively encourages students toward their own success. When students are motivated to set high expectations with
supportive peers and mentors, they are likely to access campus resources to meet their expectations.

**Work to establish trust with A-A men.** Despite the fact that many of the A-A men in this study did not know what to expect from college, many were confident that the environment would serve their interest and support their successful outcomes. They trusted the ethos of college and the representative agents within the environment for providing guidance. However, trust was most developed in organization that emphasized the success of A-A students (BMI, MOC, Black Journalists, Black Accountants, etc.) or that had demonstrated interest in A-A student involvement and success. Some educators underestimate the level of trust that must be established by A-A students in order for them to feel welcome and comfortable within the environment. Trust was most established by peers and staff who informed students of the experiences and choices that would best support their desire to persist. For participants in this study, establishing a level of trust was important, especially as they were invited to participate in certain organizations and experienced activities that impacted their orientation to college and confirmed their expectation that they belonged and would successfully persist toward earning their degree.

**Recognize the challenges that exist to commit to SLIEA by helping students balance their time.** In order to avoid talent deferred or talent lost, it is important not to accept the underperformance of A-A men within a college environment. Raising expectations for student involvement of A-A men and supporting the process of developing trust that invites students to engage in SLIEA is essential. The desire to make meaningful contributions to their campus and to the lives of other students may result in
distractions that may lead students off the pathway of success. Helping students maintain perspective on their SLIEA and how they manage their time effectively to support positive academic outcomes, the measure by which they will persist, is important. Therefore, campus support systems need to anticipate, understand, and effectively help student manage their leadership roles on campus.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

**Explore the decision making process of A-A men.** A-A men in the study were making critical decisions that represented their desire to be successful in college. Their sustained involvement seemed to represent personal assessment of benefit/reward compared to perceived risk/detriment of SLIEA. With the various demands of college and the limited time students have to balance course work, social demands, and other life demands, the opportunities and known benefits of co-curricular involvement experiences may elude A-A men who may most benefit. How do students weigh their understanding and the perceived personal and social benefit of SLIEA with life demands? What are real and perceived conflicts that limit A-A men from exploring campus leadership involvement opportunities?

**Examine specific organizations that target A-A men/minority males.** Some evidence (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2012) has indicated that these organizations are having an effect on the college experience and successful outcomes of A-A men. However, more specific understanding of the dynamic of these organizations in practice must be understood. Because six out of the 10 men interviewed for this research study were actively involved in organizations that exclusively targeted A-A men/minority males, the experiences gained seemed to shape their orientation and perspective about the
institution’s interest in their successful persistence and experiences toward earning a degree. Considering that these organizations provide an open invitation to minority males, the speculation is that these organizations are providing similar benefits identified in the past by historically Black Greek fraternal organizations (Kimbrough, 1995).

Because some researchers believe that historically Black Greek Organizations (BGOs) have been declining in prominence on college campuses, are limited to selective membership, and are not present in many environments where A-A men can benefit, such as at community colleges, the need to consider the benefit, dynamics, and structure of specific SLIEA that target A-A men and their influence on persistence is important to examine. Who is leading these experiences on college campuses? What kinds of resources are necessary to sustain these types of organizations? How are these experiences helping A-A men to access necessary resources, increase their self-efficacy and academic self-confidence, and negotiate their college experience towards successful outcomes and degree attainment?

Examine more closely the leadership identity development of A-A men in college. A-A men in this study had various leadership roles in campus organizations and were engaged in various SLIEA that supported their sense of personal understanding of leadership and meaning given to their SLIEA. Being “leader identified” was not something students exclusively claimed during research interviews. While many students expressed that their interest in leadership activities was to affect the lives of others and help others, the interest of A-A men did not support a hierarchical or industrial paradigm of leadership, but rather one that was relational in view and post-industrial in its paradigm (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006; Komives, et al., 2006; Rost, 1991). This
is consistent with what many colleges and universities are supporting in the development of students. Therefore, examining developmental milestones for leadership identity development of A-A men that was inspired by certain types of SLIEA would add to the grounded theory proposed by Komives et al. (2006). The indication, supported by the meaning A-A men give to SLIEA, is that students of color may experience the stages of the leadership identity development differently than their majority peers.

Further explore peer relationships within SLIEA. It was clear in this study that the role of peers had a significant impact on the invitation and support of A-A men in SLIEA. Reference to peer support was often expressed and integrated into the important “campus resources” conveyed by participants. Campus peers supported productive networks for students, provided and inspired mentored relationships and the development of interpersonal skills, offered role modeling that encouraged participants to increase expectations and set goals for their academic success. In essence, peers were pivotal to inspiring and supporting participants’ motivation and commitment toward behaviors that supported persistence toward degree attainment. However, learning about how the interactions between peers are effectively fostered within SLIEA for A-A men would increase understanding for student development educators on how to best support positive educational outcomes for students.

Examine the effectiveness of new student orientation programs on the integration and engagement experiences of A-A men. Early participation was critical to the successful integration of A-A men and their sense of connection with their college environment. Therefore, exploring orientation programs and their messages on the knowledge and understanding of A-A men (as well as their parents and family
supporters) could provide insight into understanding the effectiveness of these initiatives. The administration of new student orientation programs and related activities on college and university campuses represent best practice standards, which are expected to address the individual and collective needs of participants (CAS, 2009).

**Concluding Points**

The contribution of this research is to remember the counter-narrative story that allows educators to challenge their assumption of who is coming to their campus and how the level of engagement by A-A men may be more of a poor reflection on how the environment engages them, rather than students’ desire or commitment to engage in meaningful educational activities. Students come to a new environment with aspirations for success, which may or may not be affirmed and supported in the environment.

The study makes a firm case for the investigation of the SLIEA experienced by A-A men. Some of these leadership development activities take place in the form of organizations and program initiatives targeted at A-A men, which college campuses are attempting to offer or evaluating the value of offering to students. However, many of these types of opportunities are offered without an understanding of the empirical impact on students—not just high achieving students, such as those identified by Harper (2003, 2006b, 2012)—but all students that may have the basic skills and motivation to be successful, but who have not yet reached their capacity to understand their ability, and to make choices that lead to experiences that spur deeper growth, development, and understanding of their personal gifts involved in the process of pursuing and obtaining their degree.
Student development professionals and student leadership educators are aware of the positive influence of these types of opportunities for all students, but need to further acknowledge the unique needs of high risk students, who are often reported in the national educational statistics as marginalized in the college environment despite their ability to be successful. These students are often unfamiliar with the context of college other than they need to be successful in the classroom. The student integration challenges presented by Tinto (1993) are far more complex and require educators to consider the personal development needs along with the ability of the environment to understand and provide meaningful opportunities, experiences, and resources that intentionally support participatory and engaged learning to meet the needs of students.

The student development assumption is that all students should want to be engaged effectively; however, the misassumption is that if students are not, it is their fault, placing blame on the student and not on the institution that may not be providing meaningful activities to better support the effective engagement of students. This researcher agrees with Harper and Quaye (2009) that our environment must make a call for action and change, particularly as the demographic make-up of college attendance has changed. As a result, there is a need to better understand what is “effective educational practice” for those most underserved, or what is deemed as “meaningful educational activities” for each individual student and the population they represent.

SLIEA provide students with activities and experience that help them connect to their peers, influence their ability to contribute to the campus community, and learn valuable skills. In essence, these experiences help A-A men understand what it means to be a college student. These activities enriched the educational experiences of the A-A
men in this study who are persisting in the environment because the skills perceived to be gained and behavior identified by the men were congruent with their desires to be academically successful and persist toward obtaining their degree. The co-curricular opportunities presented by SLIEA served to attract personal and social interest of A-A men to support their successful persistence in the college and university learning environment.
References


Black Issues in Higher Education, 13(16), 92.


Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Open-Ended Interview Questions

I am asking you to be in a research study because I would like to learn more about African-American men involved in Student Leadership Activities in college. More specifically, I am trying to explore the meaning men engaged in these various activities give to these activities, as well as what they take away from these experiences that influence their academic commitment to persist within the college environment.

These questions were created to capture your experiences and perceptions of college and your engagement in co-curricular leadership activities and their influence on your actions to persist in the environment. In an effort to make sure you are clear about this research study:

(1) From your perspective, what is your understanding of this study?

(2) How would you describe this study?

(3) How would you describe your role as a participant in this study?

In support of collecting accurate information from our conversation, this conversation is being recorded for research purposes. Please let me know now if you do not agree to being recorded.

The recording will start now and you may request that the recording stop at any time.

Experiences prior to coming to college

- Tell me about some of your experiences prior to attending college
  - Tell me about your high school academic experience (What kinds of academic experience did you have in high school?)
  - What were some of you social experience and activities that you were involved in during high school?
- Tell me about your peer group, what kinds of activities were your friends involved with? (Academic clubs, sport, student clubs/organizations, etc.)
- What did you learn from or appreciate about the activities you were involved with in H.S?  
  - Did your high school (out of class) activities support (or influence) your academic experience? If so, in what ways do you recall?

College Transition

- Tell me about your decision to go to college
Prior to your actual attendance, what did you expect from college? How did you come to establish these expectations?

Do you think your high school activities and experiences (academic, co-curricular, or social) impacted your decision to attend? If so, how?

In what ways, if any, did your activities/involvements prior to college create expectations that led to decisions you made after you got to college?

**General College Experience**
- Tell me about your experience at (Blank Institution).
  - In what ways are you feeling connected to your college?
  - What are you appreciating most about your college experiences?
  - Please share your academic and social experiences so far? (If you had any struggles, how have you overcome these struggles, what resources or support system have you sought out to address your struggles/challenges, how did you know or gain access to those resources?)

**SLIEA**
- What kind of activities (formal or informal) have you been involved in on campus? Why did you choose to be involved in these particular activities? (What influenced your decision to seek out these activities?)
- What influence do you feel your peer group has had on your decision to get involved?
- What do you believe, if anything, that you are learning or gaining from these (college activities) experiences?
- Do you think the activities that you are involved in are benefiting your college experiences? (or contributed to you college experiences?) if so, how?
- Do you think you’ve developed skills because of your involvement? If so, what skills? How did you identify them and how are you utilizing them?
- Do you think your activities are influencing your approach to school in general, your approach to classes (or classroom experiences)

**SLIEA, Academic Persistence, and Commitment**
- Are these activities contributing to your personal development? Academic development? Leadership development? If so, how and in what ways?
- Tell me how you think your involvements in these activities are helping you to be a successful student at (blank college)? (Do you think your activities are supporting your academic goal of earning a degree? In what ways? Can you provide an example?)
- Do you think that you are learning anything from your leadership activities (SLIEA) that is benefiting you in your classroom experience? If so, how? Can you share an example?
• Do you think your activities are contributing to your desire to stay in college (or earn your degree)? If so, how (or in what ways)? Be specific if you can.
• Do you believe you can attribute any academic skills or habits to your involvement in leadership activities? If so, what? How have they impacted your approach to your school (or learning)?

Additional possibilities (or questions restated a little differently from above):

• Tell me about the most significant experiences you’ve had because of your decision to assume a leadership role or your decision to be involved in leadership activities on your campus.
• Have you experienced any challenges to your development because of your involvement in your SLIEA? Things you feel (or felt) you needed to overcome?
• What kind of effect do you feel your leadership involvement activities have had on your overall educational experience? What effect has it had on your academic experience? Life experience?
• How do you view yourself in relationship to other students on campus? Other A-A students? A-A male students?
• What do you believe you are gaining from your leadership involvement experiences? What skills have you developed? How (if at all) do these skills contribute to your success in college?
• Before coming to college, who or what influenced your understanding of leadership and the importance of these activities?
• Do you feel this campus supports your involvement as a leader? (Yes or No? How? Why or Why not?)
• What kind of effect do you feel your leadership involvement activities have had on your overall educational experience? What effect has it had on your academic experience? Life experience?
• How do you view yourself in relationship to other students on campus? Other A-A students? A-A male students?
• What do you believe you are gaining from your leadership involvement experiences? What skills have you developed? How (if at all) do these skills contribute to your success in college?
• Before coming to college, who or what influenced your understanding of leadership and the importance of these activities?
• Do you feel this campus supports your involvement as a leader? (Yes or No? How? Why or Why not?)
Appendix B: Introductory Letter/Email

My name is Karl Brooks and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program at DePaul University located in Chicago, IL. As partial fulfillment of my Doctorate in Education, I am conducting a research study about African-American men who attend predominantly white institutions and are actively involved in Student Leadership Activities. These activities are often represented by a student’s consistent participation in one or more of the following experiences: participating in a campus organization (or campus service organization), serving in identified leadership roles on campus, or participating in identified leadership development opportunities such as college sponsored conferences/retreats, a formal leadership program, or designed training opportunities.

At this point in my research, I am seeking individuals who are willing to participate in two one-on-one interviews. The first interview will be face-to-face and the second interview will be a follow up conversation conducted by phone or in person.

Specifically, I need participants who meet the following criteria:

1) Identify themselves as African American or Black.

2) Attend a predominantly White 4 year or 2 year college or university.

3) Are active participants in Student Leadership Activities as defined above and are in good academic standing with their institution.

4) Have persisted at their institution for a minimum of 4 semesters or 6 quarters (excluding summers), and if attending a four-year institution, hold a minimum of a junior standing.

Please note, participation in this study is considered voluntary; therefore, participants identified for this study can voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequence to them, their academic progress, or academic standing.

If you know of any African American men who may fit these research requirements and may be willing to participate in this research project, please forward the attached recruitment flyer, which includes my contact information: email address kbrooks@jjc.edu and cell phone number 630-750-0191. If you or potential/interested participants have any questions about my study or need more details, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for passing this information on and sharing it with others who can also post and/or pass this information on related to my study.

With my highest regards,

Karl Brooks
Doctoral Candidate
DePaul University
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix C: Informed Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Understanding the Meaning African-American Men Give to Their Student Leadership Involvement and Engagement Activities in College

What is the purpose of this research?

I am asking you to be in a research study because I would like to learn more about African-American men Predominantly White Institutions who are involved in Student Leadership Activities in college. More specifically, I am trying to explore the meaning men give to these activities, as well as what they take away from these experiences that influence their academic commitment to persist within the college environment. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an African-American student actively involved in leadership activities, who has successfully persisted at your current institution for at least 4 semesters (community college students) or to the level of junior status (4-year university students).

This study is being conducted by Karl Brooks, a doctoral candidate at DePaul University as a requirement to complete his doctorate degree in Education. This research study is supervised by Dr. Ronald Chennault, DePaul University faculty in the College of Education.

How much time will this take?

This study will take approximately two to two and a half hours of your time: Initially a 90 minute one-on-one in-depth interview with me and a follow-up interview to discuss additional questions and transcription.

Follow up interview: A follow up interview may be conducted as additional key questions are identified. The purpose would be to explore the additional questions, which will add to the richness of the data collection. Follow up interviews may take the form of face-to-face interviews or phone interviews. This will be determined by the availability and convenience of participants.

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 90 minute in-depth interview. Interview questions will explore your perception of college, the experiences and activities you chose to get involved in during college, and how your leadership activities influence your academic, social, and personal development, which may serve your desire to persist toward degree completion.

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. In addition, you may be asked to participate in a follow up interview, either in person or over the phone, to
be no longer than 60 minutes. Follow up interviews, whether conducted by phone or in person, will also be audiotaped.

**What are the risks or discomforts involved in participating in this study?**

The expected risk is not greater than that encountered in everyday life. You may become upset or uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You can stop the interview at any time and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

As a participant of this study, you will maintain full discretion as to what and how much you share. You may take as much time as you need in responding to questions. In addition, you are free to ask questions to gain the fullest possible clarification, comfort, and understanding of the questions asked.

**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 educators and students alike

1) Foster a better understanding of participants’ college experiences;

2) Address prior research deficiencies concerning the influence of student leadership activities on the academic commitment and persistence behaviors of African-American men.

3) Consider the conditional effect a college community can have on inviting and engaging student in attendance that supports their desire to persist.

4) Provide additional considerations for creating intentional leadership development activities that recognize the identity development needs of A-A men and supports student persistence and degree attainment outcomes.

**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 your 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 pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be erased once accurate notes have been made. Research records will be kept for three years after the completion of the study.

The researcher will provide DePaul University (and upon request participating colleges) 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 Karl Brooks at (630) 750-0191 or kbrooks@jjc.edu. 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 summary:**

By signing this consent form, you agree that you understand the procedures, risks, or discomforts, and benefits involved in this research project. You are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw your consent to participate in this research at any time without penalty or prejudice; your participation is entirely voluntary. Your privacy will be protected because you will not be identified by name as a participant of this research project. Information will be securely stored and destroyed within one year of collection.

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: Share Your Experiences! Recruitment Flyer

Looking for African-American Men Engaged in College Leadership Activities!

ARE YOU….

- An African-American/Black Male Collegiate Student
- Involved in Co-curricular Leadership Activities at Your College or University
- A Junior or Senior at Your University Enrolled for at Least Four Successive Semesters (or Six Quarters); Or A Community College Student Actively Enrolled for at Least Four Successive Semesters.
- Interested in Sharing Your Collegiate Experiences Related to Your Academic and Social Engagement with Your Campus

If you’ve answered yes to these questions, you are invited to participate in a voluntary research study that is designed to gain a better understanding of your college experiences.

Interested in learning more, or signing up for participation?

Participation in this study is voluntary and will be conducted at a convenient time at your campus. If you’re interested in sharing your experiences, please contact Karl Brooks, doctoral candidate at DePaul University, who will head this research study.

Karl Brooks can be reached by e-mail at kbrooks@jjc.edu or by phone at 630-750-0191.