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## **Northeastern Illinois University: Identifying Characteristics Associated with Low African American Student Retention and Persistence**

Laural E. Johnson  
*DePaul University*, aynelil@yahoo.com

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DePaul University  
College of Education

**Northeastern Illinois University:  
Identifying Characteristics Associated with Low  
African American Student Retention and Persistence**

A Capstone in Education  
with a Concentration in  
Educational Leadership

**Laural E. Johnson**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
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We approve the capstone of Laural Johnson



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Andrea Kayne JD  
Associate Professor & Program Director  
Committee Chair

May 11, 2023

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**Certification of Authorship**

I certify that I am the sole author of this capstone. Any assistance received in the preparation of this capstone has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this capstone according program guidelines as directed.

Author Signature Laural Johnson Date 05/09/2023

## Executive Summary

The objective of this study is to explore some of the key issues/factors/questions about the retention and persistence of African American students in higher education raised in the broader research literature, a Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) Campus Climate Survey as well as research questions I raised in an earlier research proposal on African American Student retention and persistence. Although a recent study found that college student retention and persistence rates are on the rise, it concerns me that there continues to be significant differences between African American and White students at predominately white institutions (PWI) with the same being true at NEIU. Therefore, after an in-depth analysis of my data, I will tease out recommendations to present to the NEIU administration that might assist in their efforts to increase African American student retention and persistence.

NEIU is a commuter university that includes four campuses drawing students from various communities throughout the Chicagoland area. The main campus is located on the Northwest Side of Chicago. Other campuses include: the Jacob H. Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies (considered an African-centered institution) located on the South Side of Chicago, in the historic African American Bronzeville neighborhood; El Centro, located in the Avondale neighborhood which focusses on creating opportunities for the Latinx community; and the University Center of Lake County, which is open to students in Lake County to transfer in and complete work previously started toward degree completion. In addition, NEIU hosts the Center for College Access and Success which works to develop partnerships with communities to support students' success in higher education.

NEIU is a PWI commuter university in Chicago with a large percentage of first-generation Midwest. However, the retention and persistence rate for African American students is significantly lower than that for any other racial/ethnic group on campus. This fact alone signifies an urgent need for NEIU to make changes in their strategies to retain African American students to want to remain at NEIU to graduation. The following represent the research questions guiding this study:

1. What characteristics or factors are significant predictors of African American students at NEIU dropping out of the university?
2. What are the factors/experiences of African American students who have persisted (remained at NEIU until graduation)?
3. What institutional factors are associated with African American students' decision to either remain at NEIU or stop out (leave the university)?
4. What interventions does the research literature suggest that NEIU might use/implement to increase African American student retention and persistence?

In all of its diversity, the retention and persistence of African American students at NEIU continues to be a problem. While early research studies of retention focused on individual characteristics of those students who dropped out of college, later studies have moved away from this focus. Instead, the focus is on reasons why students remain in college and how colleges and universities can make changes or develop programs to increase the retention of their students. This study is important for current and future students at NEIU in terms of helping them make

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Better, more productive decisions about their education as well as helping NEIU administrators make the campus a more welcoming and productive place for all of its constituents. In addition, this study adds to the literature that offers insights into why African American students drop out of college before graduation and the role that universities play in this process as well as offers higher education administrators and other stake-holders insight into strategies, programs and procedures and best practices that work to break down the barriers to and cycle of denial of African American student success.

This mixed method case study explored the issue of the low retention rate for African American students at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU). This inquiry explored the issue through 1) an analysis of the responses of two African American female students to an in-depth interview designed to provide insights about the factors related to why African American students choose to either remain in the university or leave before graduation, and 2) an analysis of relevant survey data presented in a Campus Climate Survey conducted in Spring, 2020 at NEIU.

This study found that university resources and financial support, inclusion, comfortability with professors, a culturally relevant curricula and campus climate were major themes/factors that come into play in African American students' decision to remain in college. Other factors that emerged from the study include competent staff and professors and hiring more African American professors. Finally, the study found that the student participants, both of whom took undergraduate and graduate classes primarily at The Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies (CCICS) also known as the South Campus and/or the "Center," located in a historic African American community on the Southside of Chicago, both found the North or Main campus to be problematic for African American students. One interviewee described it as: "weird." In contrast, both students had extremely high praise for the South Campus, its faculty and staff and considered it a safe space for African American students. For example, one of the students said: "The Carruthers Center is a whole different culture from the Main Campus. The Center is a special place."

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*Smooches, Everybody!!!!*

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## BACKGROUND

### Introduction

Student retention and persistence has been a serious issue over the decades for many colleges and universities across the country. Research repeatedly shows that many colleges and universities struggle with low retention and persistence rates, particularly for students of color, especially African American students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020; Greenwell et al., 2018; O’Neal, 2012; Tinto, 2006).

Particularly since the latter part of the twentieth century, the U.S. higher education system has seen an increase in student enrollments, including a growing demand for higher education for African Americans. In fact, “the latter part of the 20th century was one of great progress for diversity in higher education, generally speaking, and for African Americans in particular.” (Duster, 2009, p. 99). According to O’Neal, Jr., 2012, at the beginning of the twenty-first century this growing demand for higher education by African Americans (and other students of color) necessitated college and university administrators to not only increase their efforts to attract African American students but also to retain them.

However, early on there has been a large gap in the retention and persistence rates between African American and White students, with minimal progress in the first decade of the twenty-first century to bridge the divide (“Black Student College,” 2007; Seidman, 2005). Although retention and persistence rates for college students generally have been low over the decades, a 2019 study from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019), found that college student retention and persistence rates were on the rise. However, with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, college student retention and persistence rates decreased in the 2020–2021 school year, a year that some researchers have dubbed the “Pandemic Year” (e.g., National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Although the pandemic impacted retention and persistence rates across race and ethnicity, significant disparities remain between African American and White students. For example, the overall persistence rate for White students who began in Fall 2021 at all higher education institutions was 79.5 percent. For African Americans the overall persistence rate was 65.5 percent. The retention rate for Whites was 68.8 percent, compared to a retention rate for African Americans of 55.2 percent. Thus, only slightly more than half of all African American students who entered college in the Fall of 2021 returned to the same institution in the Fall of 2022 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022, Figure 2a).

While many institutions have implemented retention and persistence programs and strategies, especially geared toward African American students, given the continuing low rate of retention and graduation rates for African American students, there still exists a need for significant attention and improvements. A case in point is Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), a predominantly white commuter university in Chicago with a large percentage of first-generation college students, that takes pride in being labeled as “one of the most diverse universities in the Midwest, preparing our graduates to thrive in a multicultural world” (NEIU Website: About, Facts and Distinctions, para 4). However, in all its diversity, the retention and persistence rate for African American students is significantly lower than that for any other racial/ethnic group on campus. For example, a report by a former NEIU student (Ross, 2019) put the dropout rate for

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NEIU African American students at 91 percent, meaning the university has a dismal 9 percent retention rate for African American students.

### ***Personal Context***

As a member of an informal group of African American former and current NEIU faculty and staff as well as friends of NEIU, all of whom were deeply concerned about the status of African Americans generally and African American students particularly on the NEIU campus, I became keenly aware of the seriousness of the African American student retention problem at NEIU. While the group was concerned with the overall status and condition of African Americans at NEIU across rank (e.g., faculty, staff, students), the primary focus of the group was NEIU's African American students. Thus, most often, group discussions and quests for solutions centered on NEIU's problem of retaining African American students. The group debated what many members of the group described as the abysmal retention rate of African American students at NEIU, the lack of attention to and meaningful interventions or strategies on the part of NEIU administrators to address the issue/retain African American students, and problem solving: talking through the problem and coming up with what the group considered to be meaningful strategies or remedies for the problem.

Based upon these group discussions, as a long-time public-school educator, I thought that perhaps a study looking at what current and/or former NEIU African American students themselves had to say might shed important light on their decisions to remain at NEIU or drop out, and it could possibly provide important insights for NEIU administrators and stakeholders as they struggled to increase the retention and persistence rates, especially for African American students.

### ***Significance***

This project addressed the problem of retention and persistence of African American students at an urban commuter university in Chicago, Illinois. There is an urgent need for targeted interventions to address the university's long-standing and ongoing problem of low retention and graduation rates for its African American students. This need is based on national and local information about African American student retention and persistence generally and on information about the retention and graduation rates of African American students at Northeastern Illinois University specifically. As presented above, nationally, African American students have the lowest retention and graduation rates as well as locally, as the case in point of NEIU shows. Research on retention and persistence in higher education, especially that which focuses on African American students, highlights the problem of retention and graduation for these students in American institutions of higher education.

Remaining in college until graduation is an important key to economic success in life because not only does it open up and expand career options, but also, it potentially unlocks a higher earning potential and the ability to be independent and self-supporting as well as take care of one's family if applicable. According to researchers, the lack of completing college/dropping out can, and often does, perpetuate an existing cycle of poverty or economic, cultural, and racial marginalization (Wilson, 2018). As shown in the review of literature that follows, retention researchers tend to agree that the best strategies for supporting the retention and persistence of students of color generally and African American students particularly, include providing them

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with safety nets, such as intentional programming, cultural spaces on campus, culturally relevant and inclusive curricula as well as hiring faculty and staff of color (Greenwell et al., 2018; LaVantet al,1997; O’Neal, Jr., 2012; ; Tinto, 2006; Quaye et al., 2015). Strategies such as these lead to feelings of belonging and contribute importantly in students of color decisions to remain in college through graduation (Quaye et al., 2015).

Thus, finding and implementing strategies and programs that focus on the needs of African American students and thus assist them in matriculating through the college years to graduation is a solution worth examining.

### ***Key Terms***

**Persistence** - “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution, including one different from the institution of initial enrollment, in the Fall terms of a student’s first and second year” (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022, p.1).

**Retention** - “continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the Fall terms of a student’s first and second year” (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022, p. 1).

**Campus Climate** “The real or perceived quality of interpersonal, academic and professional interactions on a campus and consists of the current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities and potential” (Rankin & Associates, Consulting, 2020, p. 1).

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

As indicated above, student retention and persistence are a decades old problem in American colleges and universities that continues to be a significant issue today. So much so, that a wide range of research has been produced on the subject, dating as far back as the 1800s. For example, researchers Berger et al. (2012) provide a useful chronology of student retention that traverse nine historical periods. In addition, Johnson (2022) recently compiled a a comprehensive review of retention literature.

### **Early Retention and Persistence Studies**

During the mid-1800s, with the enactment of the Morrill Act of 1862, American colleges and universities saw a significant increase in the number of students seeking to enroll in colleges or universities with a focus on obtaining a degree (James, 2017). It was during this time that interest in undergraduate student retention and graduation arose and began to grow (Berger, et al., 2012; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). However, the first systematic studies of undergraduate retention appeared during the 1930s. John McNeely’s study, published in 1938, was one of the earliest studies “to examine multiple issues related to the departure of students at multiple institutions” (Seidman, 2005, p. 18).

McNeely’s work came to be recognized as the antecedent model of a large group of comprehensive studies on undergraduate retention that emerged over the next three decades.

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During this time, undergraduate retention began to form into a well-researched subfield of higher education (Berger & Lyons, 2005; Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Summerskill, 1962). With the expansion of education during the 1950s and 1960s, the demographics in higher education began to change from the traditional view of undergraduate college students as 18–22 years-old White students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). For example, the increase in student enrollment resulted in greater access to higher education for middle and low-income students, diverse student bodies.

The Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty and the general student unrest on college campuses in response to war, politics and social revolutions led to important questions about who had access to college and who didn't, who was succeeding in college and who were the college graduates in American society (Berger & Lyons, 2005). Consequently, retention became a common concern for college and universities. During the latter part of the 1960s, for example, several studies appeared that specifically addressed the issue of student attrition (Bayer, 1968; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Marks, 1967; Marsh, 1966; Panos & Astin, 1968). Many of these studies focused on students' individual characteristics such as their personal attributes and shortcomings, rather than on their interactions with college environments. Perhaps of greatest import on thinking about student attrition during this period was the research study by student development theorist Alexander Astin and fellow researcher Alan Bayer, which encouraged a comprehensive and systematic examination of student attrition (Berger & Lyons, 2005). As a consequence of studies such as this, higher education institutions began to develop research and activities designed specifically to understand and support student retention (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

As the issue of retention gained increased importance for higher education officials and leaders many retention researchers focused on developing and building retention theories (Berger, et al., 2012). In addition, during the decade of the 1970s, a flurry of systematic studies and attempts to conceptualize retention were produced that developed the idea of the student-college relationship (e.g., Spady, 1970, 1971; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Tinto, 1975). William Spady's (1970) work, "Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis," (1970), in which he presented a theoretical model to explain the relationship between college students and the college they attend, was perhaps, the single most important work that sparked interest in and a focus on developing student retention models during this decade. Following Spady's theoretical model, Tinto (1975) developed a model of student integration (Seidman, 2012). Other important work during this time and in this tradition include D.H. Kamens' (1971) "The College Charter and Size: Effects on Occupational Choice and College Attrition," and A. W. Astin's (1977), "Four Critical Years."

During the latter years of the 1970s, colleges and universities experienced a decline in student enrollments, leading campus officials and leaders to focus their attention on finding better ways to not only attract students but also to retain them (Berger, et al., 2012). Thus, retention research during this period had a variety of foci. For instance, utilizing concepts adapted from organizational studies of worker turnover, Bean (1980, 1982, 1983) focused on explaining student departure by examining how organizational attributes and reward structures affect student satisfaction and, in turn, their persistence. In general, key ideas and theories during this time focused on student intentions, motivation, experiences, and external institutional factors on student attrition and persistence (Bean, 1980, 1982, 1983) academic and non-academic factors,

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including pre-college variables and student social integration in college, (Tinto, 1982) and the right fit between student and institution in which they are enrolled (Pascarella, 1980).

During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of published and unpublished studies on student retention led retention to become a full-fledged area of study and to become permanently established as an educational priority throughout American higher education (Berger et al., 2012). Importantly, it was during this time that student retention literature began to focus on student diversity, which included students of color, underrepresented populations, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Researchers now began to turn their attention to higher education institutions themselves and suggest or recommend why and how they could promote and embrace diversity and multiculturalism within the campus culture as a means of addressing and encouraging student retention (Swail, 2004).

As the world was moving toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century, well-recognized retention scholars published, refined and upgraded their research on retention to fit the changing times. For example, Tinto (1993) revised his student integration model in which he identified different student groups which he said needed group-specific interventions and policies. In this context, many researchers began to examine how colleges and universities could provide students with quality support services in order to deal with student retention. These studies stressed cross-departmental institutional responsibility for retention in terms of a wide range of institutional programming (Kadar, 2001; Keels, 2004; Lehr, 2004; Salintri, 2005; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2000; Walters, 2004; White, 2005). Other researchers stressed various factors that they believed influenced a student's intention to remain at the college or university. These factors included student interactions with peers and university members (faculty, staff and administrators), and effective student services such as counseling and advising programs, which some researchers stressed as imperative to student retention (Anderson, 1997; Wyckoff, 1998).

As American colleges and universities continue to be diversified, current and future trends in retention research must rely on a wholistic approach to improve student retention and persistence. According to Siedman (2012), "These trends impact the study of retention and recognizing the need for taking a closer look at group differences and at the interactive influence between organizational contexts and the individual and collective characteristics of students" (p. 29).

### **Early Twenty-First Century: Current and Future Trends**

The arrival of the twenty-first century brought with it a firm acknowledgement of the issue of retention in higher education and the important role it plays in determining an institution's effectiveness. The extensive number of studies on the subject (only a small amount of which is reviewed here) is an indication of how serious the issue has become, so much so that the academic journal, *The Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, was specifically established to embrace this subject. Trends firmly established over many decades continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to "...impact the study of retention and persistence by recognizing the need for taking a closer look at group differences and at the interactive influence between organizational contexts and the individual and collective characteristics of students" (Siedman, 2012, p. 29).

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Building on these trends, many researchers today are directing their studies to specifically examine underrepresented student populations (Manyanga et al., 2017; Seidman, 2005), especially African Americans and other students of color. As a result of the change in higher education, largely created by the increase in diversity among racial and ethnic students, attrition and persistence have become much more complex issues, forcing a change in how and why student retention research is conducted today. For instance, it has led researchers to continue to investigate or review methods or models for effective student retention, and in some cases, reconsider the applicability of mainstream retention models for underrepresented groups (Crosling, 2016; Crosling et al., 2008; Harper, 2012; Maher and Macallister, 2013; Rendon et al., 2004). Consequently, implications for future research suggest that researchers should examine the interaction of traditional variables with the new changing variables that come with the inclusion of new student groups and that by studying the interaction of these variables it should allow stakeholders to fully understand the differential experiences of various students (Reason, 2003).

### **Retention and Persistence Studies of African American Students**

Black student retention and persistence in institutions of higher education is an important 21st-century issue. Due to the diversity across a variety of characteristics, many campus administrators and various stakeholders have struggled to retain not only the traditional college student, but also those considered to be “at-risk” such as African American and other students of color and each individual group included in this category, first generation college students, and students from low-income families to name a few.

According to O’Neal (2012), at the beginning of the twenty-first century the growing demand for higher education by African Americans (and other students of color) necessitated college and university administrators to not only increase their efforts to attract African American students but also to retain them (Kuh, et al., 2008; Ntiri, 2001; O’Neal, 2012; Rudenstine, 2001; Smith, 1999; Zusman, 2005). Broadly speaking, students of color are at a higher risk of attrition than their white counterparts (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Berkner et al., 2002; Carter, 2006; Castle, 1993; Kuh, et al., 2008; Quaye et al., 2015). However, like most experiences in American society, the higher education experience of students of color, particularly African American students, is not race neutral. For example, as previously stated, according to much of the research on retention and persistence, from early on and continuing today, minimal progress has been made to close the gap of disparities in the retention and persistence rates between African American students and their counterparts (Seidman, 2005). For instance, African American students continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education and they graduate at a significantly lower rate than Whites and Asian Americans (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). In response to this reality, a large and diverse literature has grown up around African American student retention and persistence that range from theories and models from across academic disciplines to studies dedicated to identifying and explaining a range of both institutional factors and/or barriers that contribute to the early departure of African American students to factors that have a positive impact on their decision to remain in college (Credle & Dean, 1991; Duster, 2009; Flowers, 2002; O’Neal, 2012;).

In general, these studies provide data and narratives that show that there are several key factors that are either barriers or positive contributors to the retention of students of color within

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colleges and universities. For example, many of these studies focus on pre-college characteristics and/or background traits of African American students. These include factors such as high school grades and scholastic measures as predictors of academic achievement and college persistence (Allen et al., 2008; Astin, 1971, 1973, 1997; Hoffman & Lowitz, 2005; Schwartz & Washington, 2002).

Other studies examine economic background factors and their relationship to student retention. For example, some of these researchers assert that disparities by race/ethnicity and family income, specifically for African American, Latinx, and low-income students has an important impact on persistence (Cabrera et al., 1988; Cabrera et al., 1992; Corbett, et al., 2008; Ishitani & Desjardins, 2002; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Stage & Rushin 1993; Tinto, 1993; Voorhees, 1985;). Other researchers contend that economic factors not only influence where students decide to go to college but also how long they remain in college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Along these lines, Cabrera et al. (1992) reported that a student's ability to pay for college expenses can moderate the effects of other variables on persistence. Relatedly, in their study of college retention, Stage and Rushin (1993) reported that parental income was the third-most useful factor for predicting persistence after student high school GPA and parental educational level.

While much of the research that focuses on retention and persistence of African American students relates to both females and males, a significant amount of it is gender specific, examining African American males specifically (Hall, 2017; Simmons, 2013; Cadet, 2008). For example, some of this research is focused on initiatives and strategies for retaining and graduating African American male students generally and at specific higher education institutions specifically (e.g., The University System of Georgia's African American Male Initiative, 2020; African American Initiative, UC Davis, 2018). In general, these studies provide data and narratives that show that there are several key factors that are either barriers or positive contributors to the retention of students of color within colleges and universities (Johnson, 2020).

## **Best Practices**

In conjunction with the plethora of studies on this topic is a body of literature on best practices (e.g., educational opportunities and programs designed to improve retention and graduation rates, especially for marginalized and at-risk groups) that examines the barriers to retention and persistence, and graduation for students of color generally and African American students specifically at institutions of higher education (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Grier-Reed et al., 2008) and which highlight factors that have successfully contributed to retaining students of color on a variety of community colleges and universities (Greenwell et al., 2018; O'Neal, Jr., 2012; Tinto, 2006).

Across much of this literature, researchers tend to agree that best practices in supporting the retention and persistence of students of color generally and African American students particularly, include providing these students with a number of safety nets, such as providing intentional programming and cultural spaces as well as hiring faculty and staff of color. A culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum is also a key factor. For example, Quaye et al. (2015) reported that coursework that is culturally inclusive and well developed increases the likelihood of engaging students of color in the classroom. Most agree that such engagement leads

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to a feeling of belonging and thus contributes to students of color deciding to remain at the university.

Although many campus programs and initiatives aimed at student retention are general and inclusive of gender/sex, because some researchers have found that some of the issues affecting the achievement and retention of African American males are different from those affecting African American women, many institutions have developed programs and initiatives specifically for African American males. For example, institutional initiatives such as African American Male mentoring programs and initiatives, Bridge Programs, Black Male Think Tanks and Brotherhoods have been developed and implemented on many campuses as strategies to address the low retention and persistence rates for these students (e.g., Quaye et al., 2015; LaVant et al., 1997).

### **Campus Climate**

Within a context of a long-standing history of the intentional or unintentional exclusion of individuals or groups (e.g., women, racial-ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, sexual minorities, individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds, and certain religious groups) from access to a higher education, colleges and universities struggle to increase the diversity of students, faculty, staff, and administrators in their efforts to establish inclusion, fairness, and equality on their campuses (Worthington, 2008).

In this regard, given today's cultural, social and racial environment and calls for racial social justice and inclusiveness, on and off higher education campuses, interestingly, an important factor that figures into efforts to retain students, especially African American and other students of color, is expressed in the concept of the campus climate. This term has become pretty commonplace among higher education administrators and thus, a host of higher education institutions have either conducted campus climate surveys themselves or they have contracted to outside agencies to conduct campus climate surveys on their campuses with the goal in each case of finding ways to best deal with campus issues such as diversity and student retention and persistence.

The increasing focus on campus climate notwithstanding, as Hart and Fellabaum (2008) have aptly pointed out, there is not much consensus on how to best define and measure the term, no standardization of survey design or instrumentation in studies of campus climate, nor is there a set of best practices for assessing campus climate. Nevertheless, researchers have explored various aspects of a campus and its student body, inside and outside of the classroom, the working environment for faculty and staff as well as how campuses can improve their environment for diversity.

Generally speaking, these studies purport that the climate on a campus is a crucial factor in the ability of higher education institutions to recruit, enroll, and graduate a diverse student body as well as hire and promote a diverse professoriate and administrative body that reflects the nation's demographics (Hurtado et al., 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Shenkle et al., 1998).

Research studies on the campus climate tend to focus either on the academic or the racial climate of a college or university, specifically exploring students' observations about or perceptions of

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their experiences on a campus in terms of factors such as treatment by instructors, being perceived as serious students by peers, and receiving academic mentoring (Naylor et al., 1980; Reichers & Schneider, 1990; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gisi, 2000; Vaccaro, 2012; Campus Climate Survey Task Force, 2022).

Studies of the academic climate generally argue that the academic climate is the best predictor of students' overall satisfaction with their institution and thus an important factor in their decision to remain at the university. In terms of racial identity, most of this research suggests that racial minority students are more likely to report a negative academic climate than white students (Allen, 1985; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nettles et al., 1986).

On the other hand, climate studies that focus on specific student populations by race is also an important part of the campus climate research landscape (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Reddick, 2011; Saenz et al., 2007). The general conclusion of these studies is that groups that are underrepresented and/or marginalized have a more negative view of the climate. This is especially so for African American students who, researchers report, face more negative experiences and perceive their campus experiences more negatively than any other minority group (Ancis et al., 2000). Conversely, groups with power and privilege on campus, such as some white students, generally view the climate as positive (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Racial tensions and hostilities on college and university campuses in the U.S. is not a thing of the past. This tension was very visible in the 1960s when stereotyping of African American students by their white peers and by faculty as well as their provisional inclusion in campus life was common fare (Cabrera et al, 1999; Davis et al, 2004; Farley, 2002; Holmes et al, 2001; Lewis, 2002). Nevertheless, racial tension continues today even if sometimes covertly.

Contemporary racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), DeFund Police, #MeToo, LGBTQ+ rights and a slew of other social justice movements and the continuing inequities at PWIs (Lewis et al, 2000) are factors in the hostilities and tensions on many of today's PWIs. In this context, students as well as faculty and staff, especially those from underrepresented groups, face what some researchers have described as a chilly campus climate—an unwelcoming or sometimes covertly and other times overtly hostile campus climate.

The exclusion from mainstream activities, access to academic networks, financial support, and isolation are several themes that researchers have found to be problematic for African American students. In general, studies in this regard have found that African American students lack access to campus resources and networks that are available to white students, and they are seldom included in class activities, study groups or various campus or social networks. Consequently, they report feeling isolated, as not part of the campus culture (Ancis et al., 2000; Love, 2009). Not surprisingly, stereotypical views and an unwelcoming campus climate can, and often does create problems for African American students and are the reasons that many African American students report as a reason for leaving the university. From their perspective, the racial climate at PWIs was never good (Lewis et al., 2000). For example, according to Mow and Nettles (1990), ninety percent of African American students in their study claimed that feelings of alienation and loneliness were among their reasons for dropping out.

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While a number of researchers have examined the issue of African American student retention at PWIs generally (Allen et al., 1991; Davis, 1994; Davis & Lasane, 1994; Holmes et al., 2001; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Nettles, 1990; Pascerella & Terenzini, 1991; Turner, 1994) several others, such as Fleming (1984), have examined the different experiences and retention rates of African American students specifically at HBCUs compared to those at predominantly White institutions. Fleming found, for example, that African American students on White campuses felt the campus environments were hostile and unsupportive of their social and cultural needs. According to Lewis et al. (2000), unwelcoming campus climates create problems for African American students at PWIs. For example, Mow and Nettles (1990), found that ninety percent of African American students at PWIs claimed that feelings of alienation and loneliness promoted reasons for dropping out.

Ancis et al. (2000) confirmed such findings that African American students face more negative experiences than any other minority group. The exclusion from mainstream activities, access to academic networks, financial support, and isolation were among key themes that are problematic for African American students and their retention on college/university campuses. According to this research, linking African American student retention and the campus climate is of primary importance in retaining African American students as is faculty who are an essential component of student satisfaction, academic achievement, and retention (Guiffrida, 2005; Love, 2009). In addition, a welcoming, supportive institutional climate is found to be crucial to help students succeed (Hanover Research, n.d.).

## **RATIONALE**

Overall, the findings from a wide variety of studies of retention and persistence in institutions of higher education, particularly for African American students, confirm the ongoing dismal record of many of these institutions to retain and graduate African American students. An important body of retention research yields a significant set of findings that link student retention to campus climate and validates further study as to how to better accommodate and retain African American students in higher education. According to Miller (2014), “given that many campus climate studies focus only on one or two identities at a time (most commonly race or gender), there is also a need to conduct intersectional climate studies that will acknowledge the multiple identities all students, faculty, and staff experience” (p. 3).

It is a fact that African Americans have always recognized the value of education at every level and its power for transforming their lives and that of their communities. Recognizing that our society benefits tremendously from an educated citizenry, there must be a development and utilization of consistent and workable strategies that empower African American students on college campuses and that facilitate their retention and road to graduation.

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## PROCESS

### Project Design/Methods

This study is framed as a Single Case Study of a single institution (Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) and a single issue (Retention of NEIU African American students) using a simple mixed-methods approach. That is, the methodology for this study utilized a single case study analysis through the application of a combination of primary and secondary data. The primary data consisted of in-depth comprehensive interviews with two African American, NEIU female students, and the secondary data consisted of a comprehensive survey report to the NEIU administration of the NEIU Campus Climate. These two data sets lent themselves to a content analysis which I conducted and presented as my findings in this paper. In general, the content analysis method allowed me to describe and analyze the attitudinal and behavioral responses of NEIU students relative to retention and the NEIU campus climate and it allowed me to uncover similarities and differences between the individuals in each set of data.

In general, a case study is a methodology used to explore a particular instance or contemporary phenomenon in depth/in detail and to generate an in-depth multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011). According to Robert Stake (2008), as a form of research, the case study “is defined by interest in an individual case, not by the methods of inquiry used,” and “the object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system” (as cited in Willis, 2014, p. 1). Further, case studies can, like all forms of social science research, be exploratory, descriptive, and/or explanatory in nature. The present study is both an exploratory and descriptive case study. A major benefit of the single case study method is that through the application of multiple research methods, a single case study can provide a nuanced, empirically-rich, holistic account of specific phenomena.

A major limitation of this method is that of generalizability. It cannot be reliably applied beyond the case under review. While this is a fair critique, when using this methodology, most researchers, including myself, are aware of this issue of generalizability and do not purport to generalize beyond this case.

### Statement of the Problem

As indicated repeatedly throughout this paper, student retention is a problem faced by individual colleges and universities and has a long history that dates back some 70 years. It is no surprise that, like most universities, student retention and persistence at NEIU is problematic. Regarding of the continuing consistently low rate of retention and persistence of African American students specifically in many U.S. colleges and universities, researchers have found that traditional retention and persistence strategies that are employed to retain White students will not always yield the same results for African American students (O’Neal, Jr., 2019). Given the dismal record of African American student retention and persistence at NEIU, “the most ethnically diverse university in the Midwest,” (NEIU Website: About, Facts and Distinctions, para 4). this study will focus specifically on African American students at NEIU. The goal of this study is to:

- identify characteristics that predict low African American student retention and those that will predict which African American students will persist (remain at NEIU).
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- identify characteristics or factors that predict African American students' departure from the University and at what point (e.g., after one semester, one year, etc.).
- identify and explain African American students' experiences at NEIU, both inside and outside the classroom, that contribute to their decision to either remain at NEIU or drop out.
- help NEIU administrators, faculty and staff develop positive productive policies, strategies and programs to increase African American student retention and persistence.

## **Motivation for Research**

Retention, persistence and graduation are important issues in today's global society. There is a huge body of research that address these issues, including a large body of research devoted to best practices, retention, persistence and graduation, especially for African Americans students. While early research studies of retention focused on individual characteristics of those students who dropped out of college, later studies have moved away from this focus and instead the focus is more on the reasons why students remain in college and how colleges and universities can make changes or develop programs to increase the retention of their students (Nutt, 2003). This study is important for current and future students at NEIU in terms of helping them make better more productive decisions about their education as well as helping NEIU administrators make the campus a more welcoming and productive place for all of its constituents.

In addition, this study adds to the literature that offers insights into why African American students drop out of college before graduation and the role that universities play in this process as well as offers higher education administrators and other stakeholders insight into strategies, programs and procedures as well as best practices that work to break down the barriers to end the cycle of denial of African American student success. When all is said and done, "The success of the university and the success of the student are intertwined" (Miller et al., 2018, p. 309). The asset approach used in exploring the problem of retention at NEIU allowed me to view the issues surrounding the problem of retention in a broader sense to bring out recommendations to present to the NEIU administration that will assist in their efforts to increase African American student retention and graduation rates.

## **Why This Project**

As an African American female college graduate and as an educator, I have a deep interest in matters pertaining to the educational experiences, successes and failures, of African Americans. Therefore, it was not by accident that I became a part of a group of educators whose goal was to mitigate some of the barriers faced by African American students generally but specifically those enrolled or potentially enrolled at NEIU. After a considerable time of discussion, debates and suggestions about what we could do, I decided that one place to start was with talking directly to African American students who were either current or past enrollees. As I have said elsewhere in this paper, retention and college graduation are important factors in the economic, social and mental health of many people. Thus, it was important for me to participate in efforts to solve the problem at NEIU. This research study is one such effort.

In order to fully grasp and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of African American student retention I did a careful in-depth search of the literature only to find an abundance of research theories/frameworks that mainly applied to White, traditional-age students in traditional

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4-year colleges and universities. For this study I was guided by a trio of theories and perspectives: Phenomenology, a Cultural Perspective, and a Model of Non-traditional Student Attrition. The phenomenological approach worked well with the qualitative design of this study as it allowed the participants to recall and retell their lived experiences both within and outside of NEIU. The cultural perspective provided an appropriate theoretical framework for this study because it not only provided an understanding of the cultural factors that influenced the decisions of African American students, but also, it suggested solutions that might help increase the retention and persistence rates for the university. Given that NEIU is a commuter university that commonly attracts non-traditional and first-generation students, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of non-traditional student attrition provided a relevant frame of reference from which to study the participants in this study.

### **Data Collection**

The interviewees were recruited using recruitment emails, class presentations, phone calls and word of mouth—formerly called the snowball effect—based on a specific set of criteria. For this study I interviewed two female African American students who attended and graduated from NEIU. Because of their age, they are both considered non-traditional students. The interviews took place via a face-to-face Zoom meeting. The interviewees were asked a series of questions designed to generate responses related to their lived experiences inside and outside of NEIU that would provide insight into reasons underlying the decisions they made to persist to graduation. After each interview an audio version of the interview was generated by Zoom and sent to me via email. The audio version of each interview was then sent to a transcription company and transcribed and presented to me as a script that I used to code and analyze the data. First, I went through each interview, question-by-question, and based on the interviewee's response I assigned a 1–5-word code description to each response. The codes were then alphabetized and then grouped according to the particular alphabet in order to identify points that stood out as integral sources for answering the research questions posed by this study. After further analysis of these codes, I was able to identify and combine and condense the most salient points into four major categories.

### **Ethical Concerns or Conflict of Interests**

- The research subjects were advised that they could skip any question during the interview if they felt uncomfortable answering or wished not to answer or to stop the interview process altogether.
  - Each interview was video recorded with the consent of the subject. Each interview was coded with an ID number and the interview session recordings were used for transcription into plain text and then destroyed.
  - The interviewees' identifying information was stored with their data, and in any future public reporting of my findings I will present data only in the aggregate and I will not identify any individual.
  - Research data will be kept for 3 years after the research has been closed with the IRB and in accordance with IRB regulations.
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- IRB documents and forms are stored in the PI's Box account.

## APPLICATION

### Findings

This mixed-method approach, using both interviews and a campus climate survey to study the issue of retention at NEIU, yielded important results that stand as a beginning but preliminary set of information that can be used as a base for NEIU's ongoing efforts to develop and implement strategies and programs that can work to meet its efforts to retain African American students.

For ease of presentation, the findings/participant responses from this study are presented under each of four (4) main questions that guided this research. The actual names of participants in this study are replaced and they are simply referred to as Interviewee #1 and Interviewee #2 in order to protect their privacy and any ability to identify them through their responses.

Following are four key questions that this study explored and a presentation of what I found from the two interviews and the Climate Study. Under each question/theme, I present only the most exemplary response(s).

*1. What characteristics are significant predictors of African American students at NEIU dropping out of the University?*

Several themes emerged in student responses to this question. The most significant and consistent thematic responses were: 1) The participant seriously considered leaving/dropping out of NEIU, 2) Economic Factors: financial hardship; 3) The Campus Climate.

**Theme #1: Seriously Considered Leaving NEIU:** Any number of factors come into play when African American students make decisions about whether or not to remain in college. Often this kind of decision is impacted by how students view the university and the people in it who they thought were there to assist in their educational journey. This is exemplified in the response of Interviewee # 2 who talked about the lack of support she received and what she perceived to be incompetence:

If I was 17, I wouldn't have lasted long at NEIU because NEIU is a culture where everybody is an insider and they communicate as if everyone knows that. When it came to the system, they didn't explain things clearly. Didn't expect this. They were very incompetent. But when you get to the instructors in the classroom—stellar. (Interviewee #2)

Likewise, Interviewee #1 reported the same or similar experiences and issues but she was determined to not let it deter her. For example, she said "I expected more from professors at NEIU; expected professors to be more receptive, more so than Harper College since it is in the inner city. I was disappointed but did not drop out. I was determined to continue" (Interviewee #1).

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**Theme #2: Finances.** From my extensive review of the literature, there is little disagreement that economic or financial factors have an important impact on retention and graduation as finances not only influence where students decide to go to college but also how long they remain in college. In addition, parental income is an important factor for predicting persistence. Furthermore, the institution's provision of financial aid to students who need such assistance is also key to students' decisions to remain or leave the university. Interestingly, in this regard, Interviewee #1 said:

I did not receive anything from NEIU. I made every effort to access everything available there. I got loans and grants. I received scholarship but it didn't help because NEIU didn't accept it. Loans, grants, and my salary from my job paid for college/covered expenses plus gave me a little money on the side. (Interviewee #1)

This student went on to say that because of her school responsibilities, she had to drop from a full-time worker to part-time. In terms of support from family or others, she said that she "accepted little help from her family [because she] didn't want to burden them." However, on the other hand, she indicated that her "family gave emotional, financial and educational support all around."

Interviewee #2 similarly rejected seeking financial assistance from her family. For example, when responding to a question about how she paid for college, she said, "The best thing family could do for me that helped me through college was to leave me alone" (Interviewee #2).

She went on to say: "I feel like financial aid and scholarships were enough" (Interviewee #2).

Students responding in the Climate Study about finances and paying for college typically said that they had difficulty affording tuition, difficulty purchasing books and/or course materials, difficulty affording health care, difficulty affording technology (e.g., laptops, wireless cellphones, Wi-Fi,) and difficulty affording housing.

**Theme #3: Validation/Campus Climate:** By far, some of the most significant, extensive and compelling responses from the participants came in response to questions both in the interviews and the CCS, about how students would describe the campus climate at NEIU.

Typically, the two students expressed reservations or discomfort with being on the North Campus and the exact opposite experience on the South Campus—at the Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies (CCICS). (Students variously refer to the South Campus as CCICS or the Center). Interviewee #2 had a lot to say on this subject. In general, she indicated mixed feelings about what she referred to as the "Big" Campus. By "Big" campus she was referring to the North or Main Campus of the university. She went on to describe the North/Main campus as problematic compared to the South Campus/Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies (CCICS). For example, she said,

To be honest, when I'm responding to this question, I have to remind you that I was at the Carruthers Center, okay, and so that was pretty much all Black people. The times that I have gone to the Main campus, I have had some kind of weirdness. Nope, I do not feel

uncomfortable on campus because most of my classes are at the Carruthers Center.... Most of my classes, we were all the same race.

I felt welcome at the Carruthers Center. I am the kind of person that does not require a lot of welcoming; I felt that we are all in the same boat. We are all adults; we are all here [at CCICS] in the evening because that's the best place for our lives.

The Carruthers Center is a whole different culture from the Main Campus. The Center is a special place. The faculty and staff are very supportive.... It was just a sense of comradery and shared experience with being an adult student.

This praise for and sense of comfort at CCICS and discomfort on the Main Campus continues in Interviewee #1's responses. For instance, she said that she was a bit uncomfortable at first because of her age, but her interactions with her professors were "fine and warm" (Interviewee #1). She described the climate on the North campus as "lukewarm." She continued, [I] experienced some coldness in certain classes. [I] did not experience this at CCICS; Inner City Studies Campus [was] warm and beautiful" (Interviewee #1).

Interviewee#1 went on to talk about her graduate experience on the campus in this way:

... [In] the Master's Program, yes everyone in the Master's program was wonderful because my Masters was in Inner City Studies, so when you come over there, it's more of a Black orientated thing and they're really teaching you about Black history, and not just about Black history, but... well, Black history is everything, I'm sorry, it's everything. It entails everything, all types of avenues. So yes, all of my instructors in the Master's Degree Program were fine.

The two students' responses about CCICS are significant, and I will come back to this theme later in this section.

In comparison, the responses of African American students in the CCS relative to this question, these students generally reported similar experiences at NEIU. For example, their responses included: a lack of a sense of belonging, lack of social life, financial challenges, lack of respect for cultural background, racial stereotyping, exclusion, intimidation, a hostile learning environment and offensive and/or hostile experiences overall. For example, a quarter of these students who experienced such conduct indicated that the conduct was based on their racial identity (CCS, p. 97). In this regard, one African American student reported the following:

I was the only Black woman on my floor. I was the newest and least experienced member of the lab where I received little to no help from my student peers. After telling my PI about it nothing really happened, it was very stressful being in a lab with different chemicals such as HCl and machines that I've never been around before. (p. 112)

Other African American respondents to the CCS also felt that their instructors were not helpful. In the section describing the theme of Faculty Misconduct,

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Respondents reported experiencing faculty conduct themselves in a way that interfered with their ability to learn, live, and work at Northeastern Illinois University. One respondent shared, “I felt like this faculty member was making reference to me being a Black individual. Like he was making a remark on a consistent basis about why Blacks are this or Blacks are that. It was so embarrassing because I felt like I was being put on the spot for being Black. (p. 112)

Unchecked behaviors such as those reported by African Americans generally and African American students at NEIU can have negative consequences for learning, retention and graduation.

***2. What are the factors/experiences of African American students who have persisted (remained at NEIU)?***

**Theme #4: Persistence.** Common practices such as an inclusive curriculum can make a great deal of difference in African American students’ retention and persistence. Interviewee #2 talks about how culturally inclusive curricula aids in her learning and we know that motivation to learn is related to whether or not a student remains in college or drops out.

According to Interviewee #2 only about 2 percent of NEIU faculty intentionally integrate culturally diverse materials into the curriculum but when they do, she is joyous. She explained, “It’s almost like removing a language barrier.... It’s like having a language barrier removed. It makes communicating a few degrees easier. A little less explaining kind of thing.... It’s like being bilingual” (Interviewee #2).

Although neither Interviewee #1 nor the CCS addressed this question directly, Interviewee #1 spoke about her experiences in the classroom being related to her race. She said:

My educational experiences are based upon my race. Basically, everything in society right now is.... With that being said, some instructors, some faculty aren’t caught up on it.... Even in certain classes, certain groups are expected on a low scale and some are not. (Interviewee #1)

Finally, Question 3 gets to the issue of retention and persistence of African American students through the two interviewees’ perceptions of what more the university could do to assist African American students in remaining in college until completion.

***3. What Institutional factors are associated with African American students’ decisions to either remain at NEIU or stop out (leave the university)?***

To get their response to this question, I asked them the following two questions: 1) Thinking hypothetically, if you were the president of NEIU, what would be your first priority as the College President to address the concerns of Black students? And 2) Since you are not the president, what would you say to the real NEIU president that she needs to do to assist and support Black students in order for them to remain in college at NEIU and graduate? Both students gave quite lengthy responses which were grounded in paying attention to Black students and their needs. Interviewee #1 said that if she were president:

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The first thing I would have a meeting in the auditorium with all the African Americans ... invite them, have an open invitation ... to hear about their experiences and what's happening with them and in the meantime, try to look at ... their grades and where they're at, and what they're doing because if you have a high number of dropouts, you're doing something wrong. So, my first thing was to probably get to understand what their concerns are ... an Open Mic session where you can voice your concerns. And with these concerns you can find out what is really truly needed. (Interviewee #1)

However, since she is not the president, she would tell the president to do her homework:

Do your research, do your homework, that would be my first priority as a president to help my African American students because they are spending the same amount of money as your other counterparts ...see what they need ... you know, look into the problems and the situation of what's happening with the African American students, why is it a high number of dropouts? Why is it a high number of successes, then build up on that.... I would tell her to please hire more competent professors... and really do research about the students and try to give them more resources. (Interviewee #1)

With a similar level of concern and passion, Interviewee #2 seemed concerned that university administrators had a need to poll people to determine how to serve Black people:

You know, they do a lot of polling and they hire a lot of consultants and they have a lot of focus groups and all of that. I know I've been to two or three of them myself about how to better accommodate Black students.... Do it. You know, they keep so-and-so consulting firm and they get these students in the room and they ask them about classes and white teachers and stuff like this. You've had enough of that. Do some of it before you bring another woman back.... I think [it's] really blatant that we have a school that the federal government has designated a Hispanic serving university where we [have to] study and practice how to serve Black people and so still work (Interviewee #2)

In terms of what she would actually tell the president to do, she said she would tell her, "Be prepared to accommodate those non-traditional graduates" (Interviewee #2).

**A Final Word and Observation:** As I indicated earlier in this presentation of my findings, both of the students that were interviewed had high praises for the Carruthers Center for Inner City studies, for both the faculty and staff there as well as the campus climate at CCICS. Their feelings and experiences at the CCICS are in high contrast to their reported feelings and experiences on the North Campus. When asked about safe spaces for Black students at NEIU, both students said the entire "Center" was a safe space for African American students, and they talked about how much they loved and appreciated it and its faculty.

The interviewees' responses and shared feelings about CCICS are reminiscent of how both students and former students of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) speak of their college experiences. Various descriptions and discussions of HBCUs coincide with how the

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two interviewees in this study describe CCICS and their relationship to it. Most descriptions in the literature and on websites about the benefits of HBCUs describe them thusly:

- Most institutions are not made with Black people in mind, while HBCUs are one of the only types of learning institutions where Black people are the majority, and their culture is prioritized (Get Schooled).
- HBCUs provide students something they can't get anywhere else — a diverse & inclusive community of scholarship that celebrates the richness of the entire American experience (HBCU First).
- HBCUs provide a better experience for Black students — academically and socially" (HBCU First).
- Many students attend HBCUs to make a stronger connection with their heritage as they're surrounded by people with similar cultural experiences. Students who attend HBCUs experience a unique community of support and understanding with faculty and fellow students, versus the likelihood of being more isolated in predominantly white institutions (Get Schooled).
- HBCUs are smaller higher-ed institutions with close knit communities. Their small class sizes make it easy to get to know your classmates and form meaningful relationships with your professors. Fewer students mean faculty will know your name and are better able to help you achieve success! (Get Schooled).
- Most HBCUs aren't located in large cities so students are more likely to spend time together outside of class rather than being swept away by the big city lights. This time together - whether it's by joining a student org or just hanging out after class - helps create strong bonds that last a lifetime. When you mix this family feel with the school pride, you get school pride, you get a college community that has your back, long after you graduate (Get Schooled).
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) consistently outperform non-HBCUs in student experience, affordability, and after college preparedness for Black students (HBCU First).

Sources:

Get Schooled. nd. <https://getschooled.com/article/5732-top-5-reasons-to-attend-an-hbcu/>

HBCU First. nd. <https://hbcufirst.com/resources/why-choose-an-hbcu>

I close this discussion with the following excerpt from Interviewee #1's interview that makes the point:

Yeah, I feel connected to the Campus. My main connection is to Inner City Studies. I don't even go, I graduated, but I still go into Inner City Studies just to say,

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“Heeeeeeyyyy, how you doing? ... I do go from time-to-time to the South Side Campus and just holler and just talk and see who’s there, and who’s working and say hello and you know, that’s it. Just to go by because the experience as wonderful, so I think I am probably always going to go there and stop in from time-to-time. (Interviewee #1)

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEIU ADMINISTRATION**

The findings of this study suggests that NEIU administrators and various stakeholders have much work to do to address its long-standing problem of low African American student retention and graduation rates.

As has been pointed out repeatedly in this paper and throughout the literature, the issue of student retention and persistence has been of serious concern for colleges and universities across the country for decades. In exploring the issue of African American student retention at NEIU, a number of factors both pointed out in the conclusions of this study as well as in the literature reviewed in this paper, merits the attention of NEIU administrators and various stake holders.

Perhaps a suggested beginning might be for the university administration to establish a renewed and visible university-wide commitment to the retention of African American students as well as a university-wide awareness of the importance of retaining these students while at the same time developing and implementing a variety of strategies and programs to help these students accomplish their educational goals. In this regard, a number of strategies come to surface both from the literature and from this study and are presented in the form of the following bullet points:

- Develop a comprehensive and relevant retention process that begins the first week students are on campus. According to researchers, this is when they get a feel for the spirit of an institution. Moreover, the personnel responsible for conducting enrollment and orientation activities should not only be competent, sensitive and fair but also, they should be friendly, communicative and enthusiastic;
  - Make Retention Count at NEIU: by developing policies and practices, strategies and programs that enhance African American student success. Rather than paying lip-service to the issue of diversity, inclusion and retention of African American student, what the administration does to support these initiatives on a behavioral level is of greater significance and portends to be of greater success in raising the retention and graduation rates of its African American students;
  - Broaden the base of the university’s stakeholders to include faculty and students of color in order to ensure that the university’s commitment to the retention of African American student is reflected throughout the university’s services, procedures, policies as well as personnel matters,
  - Reflect on and reestablish NEIU’s priorities and its stated values so that retention focused values are reflected throughout all university services and programs,
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- Provide a welcoming campus climate on the North Campus of the University that is consistent with that which African American students say they experience on the South Campus and which include competent and respectful faculty, staff and administrators and that encourages a positive teaching and learning experience for African American students. This includes paying particular attention to the campus racial climate as well as to the needs and concerns of African American students for a positive and productive campus experience; Clearly, a welcoming, inclusive and inviting campus environment can not only attract African American students who will be motivated to continue their program at NEIU through to graduation;
- Examine the characteristics and factors that make CCICS a welcoming, productive, rewarding campus and “special place” for the African American student experience and attempt to replicate it on the North Campus (throughout the university) where appropriate and feasible;
- Hire more African American Faculty. Faculty are the most important part of a student’s academic experience and, therefore, have a tremendous impact on retention and college success. Their effectiveness involves recognizing and understanding different student learning styles and being helpful to students in dealing with their failures. They must be sensitive to this and open to presenting information in ways that accommodate different learning styles;
- Develop and implement a relevant and inclusive learning environment with qualified, competent and sensitive faculty and staff, that offers the best chance for all students but especially its African American students to progress;
- Provide Cultural Inclusive Curricula that is not available exclusively at the South Campus but rather, interwoven into departments and programs throughout the university;
- Develop and implement counseling, advising and tutorial services designed specifically to assist African American students to meet their academic goals;
- Assign a research team and/or engage professionals and/or other interested individuals to conduct a larger, more comprehensive study specifically of African American retention at NEIU.

## CONCLUSIONS

Higher education institutions in the United States are more diverse than they have been in the past, enrolling students from various racial, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds. To accommodate this diversity, many predominately White institutions have developed diversity and other initiatives to accommodate the university experience of many of these previously excluded populations in order to retain and graduate them. However, despite these efforts, many colleges and universities have had a problem retaining and graduating students of color, especially African American students. Thus, higher education administrators and other stakeholders struggle to retain and graduate not only the traditional college student, but also those students considered to be “at-risk,” such as African Americans.

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Like many predominantly White Institutions, Northeastern Illinois University, consistently designated as the most diverse university in America's Midwest, has an abysmal record of retaining African American students. Recognizing this fact, I ventured to address this serious issue by conducting this small-scale mixed method case study of NEIU in order to uncover and identify some of the issues/factors, both institutional and personal, that contribute to the early departure of NEIU African American students as well as factors that have a positive impact on these students' decision to remain at NEIU.

As the extensive review of the retention and persistence literature presented in this paper shows, student retention and persistence are one of the most studied areas in higher education. Attention to issues of attrition, retention and persistence has produced a wide variety of studies that point out best practices for retaining students, especially students of color.

In general terms, the findings of this study are consistent with those of many of the studies presented in the literature review that focus on factors/barriers to retaining African American students. The findings in this study indicate that NEIU students feel unwelcomed at the university, specifically on the university's Main Campus; lack financial, academic, advising and other important support; encounter what they describe as rude and/or incompetent faculty and staff; and in general experience a "chilly" campus climate for African Americans. Although some students succeed despite these barriers, these important factors figure into African American students' decisions to either remain at NEIU to graduation or to drop out before completing their education. Further, according to student responses from the interviews, there is a significant lack of support services such as scholarships, financial aid and other important services. This area of concern, among others, shows up right away as weak for NEIU, giving African American students the feeling that the university does not care about them.

Perhaps the most significant and compelling findings of this study have to do with academic instruction and the overwhelmingly positive emphasis and description of all aspects of the university's South Campus (the Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies) for African American students' experiences, compared to their reported less-than-positive to negative view and experiences of and on the university's Main campus. The students in this study's enthusiasm, praise and respect for CCICS and its faculty and staff were somewhat contagious during the interview process, but most importantly, it is indicated in their many qualitative descriptors of CCICS as: "a safe place for African American students," "a special place," and "a whole different culture from the Main Campus." They reported that CCICS faculty and staff are very supportive and encouraging and that their experience on the CCICS campus represents "a sense of comradery and shared experience with being an adult student." These students' reported experiences and comfortability at CCICS is similar to the campus climate and experiences of African American students at Historical Black Colleges and Universities. This praise for and sense of comfort at CCICS and discomfort on the Main Campus is an important issue that must be addressed by the university administration.

Although the findings of this study are limited by the data and methodology as a case study and thus not generalizable, they provide important insights that can serve as a guide for NEIU administrators as they continue their best efforts to address the issue of African American

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retention, persistence and graduation as well as a guide for future scholars and others interested in the retention and graduation of African American students generally at NEIU specifically.

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