

# **African-American College Students: A Qualitative Study of Selected Factors Affecting Dropout**

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by

Wendell B. O'Neal, Jr.

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|   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| _____   | <u>Quincy Martin, III, Ed.D.</u>        | _____ |
| Dissertation Committee Director                       |   | Date  |
| _____   | <u>Sunil Chand, Ph.D.</u>               | _____ |
| Dissertation Committee Chair                          |   | Date  |
| _____   | <u>Tamara Korenman, Ph.D.</u>           | _____ |
| Dissertation Committee Reader                         |   | Date  |
| _____   | <u>Sunil Chand, Ph.D.</u>               | _____ |
| Program Director, Faculty                             |   | Date  |
| _____   | <u>Eileen Kolich, Ph.D.</u>             | _____ |
| Faculty   |   | Date  |
| _____   | <u>Ethel Ragland, Ed.D., M.N., R.N.</u> | _____ |
| Acting Dean, College of Education and Health Services |   | Date  |



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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my guiding light, Almighty God. Philippians 4:13 states, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” The journey traveled to the completion of this dissertation could have only been endured with prayer and worship.

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored African-American students' perceptions of personal and institutional factors that contributed to their dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college in a major Midwest city. Nine former students of the community college participated in the study. Data was collected through individual, in-depth interviews with the participants to address three primary research questions that directed this study: 1) How do non-completer African-American students previously enrolled at a two-year community college perceive their experiences at the institution? 2) Are there common perceptions of these African-American students related to their personal and academic lives? 3) How did their experiences impact or influence their decision to withdraw from pursuit of their postsecondary education? Through analysis of the data, insight was provided into the various social and academic factors impacting the former community college students. Subsequently, three major themes emerged: (1) institutional environment, (2) institutional support, and (3) decision to withdraw. Findings from this study indicate that the majority of the participants were dissatisfied with their experience at the college. Furthermore, while some participants cited the institution's failures as their reason for leaving and not planning to return to the college, other participants indicated they left for personal reasons and would return to the college even though they were dissatisfied with their experience.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

The United States higher education system has seen an increase in enrollments over the past few decades. This increase includes an ever-growing demand for higher education for minorities. Zusman (2005) stated, “A much larger portion [of students] than in the past are older, part-time, and from ethnic minority groups. Over one-quarter of all college students were ethnic minorities, up from 16 percent in 1980” (p. 128). At the beginning of the twenty-first century emerged the necessity for institution administrators to increase their efforts to attract and retain African-American students (Ntiri, 2001; Rudenstine, 2001). Research indicates minority students withdraw at a much higher rate than White students, especially first-year students (Glenn, 2001; Green, 2007; Hu & St. John, 2001; Knapp, Kelly-Reid & Ginder, 2010; Lee, 1991; Opp, 2002; Pascarella & Terezini, 1980). Many institutions have taken creative approaches to their recruitment efforts and strategies in an attempt to boost minority student enrollment (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup and Kuh, 2008; Smith, 1999). However, traditional retention strategies that are employed to retain White students will not always yield the same results for African-American students (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

The gap in college graduation rates between African-American and White students remains very large, and minimal progress has been achieved in bridging the divide (“Black Student College,” 2007; Seidman, 2005). African-Americans’ low completion rates are particularly troublesome when compared to their proportionate representation in the community college sector compared to White students (Laden,

2004). Though many institutions have implemented retention programs and strategies, there still exists a need for significant improvements to minority student retention.

### **Background of the Study**

Prior to the American Civil War, few African-Americans were granted access to postsecondary institutions of higher education and in the South were forbidden by law from learning to read and write (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). A limited number of higher education institutions located in the Northern United States, such as Dartmouth College and Oberlin College, began to grant access to African-American students in 1824 and 1833, respectively (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010). Known today as Cheyney University, the Institute for Colored Youth, founded in 1837 by Richard Humphreys, a Quaker from Philadelphia, is the oldest historically Black college and university in the United States (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). The end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the abolishment of slavery by 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the United States Constitution brought about the emergence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

The creation of historically Black colleges and universities was necessitated by the prohibition of African-American students attending White institutions of higher education (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, and Bowman, 2010). The majority of historically Black colleges and universities were established following the passing of the Morrill Act of 1890, which supplied federal funding for land grant colleges (Avery, 2009). Following the passage of the Morrill Act of 1890, philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller contributed financially to historically Black colleges and universities. As student enrollment grew, financial

support from the federal government increased. However, the Great Depression and World War II ignited financial difficulties that directly impacted the survival of many historically Black colleges and universities. Federal funding had increased in prior years but most historically Black colleges and universities still suffered from severe underfunding in comparison to predominantly White institutions of higher education (Avery, 2009; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). Throughout the United States and its territories, 103 historically Black colleges and universities remain today (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2010).

During the three-decade time span between 1948 and 1978, enrollments in community colleges grew exponentially from 150,000 to over four million students (Beebe, 2007; Robinson-Neal, 2009). Community colleges have provided the primary gateway to higher education for minority student groups (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Enrollment projections indicate that minority students will continue to make community colleges the campuses of choice (Laden, 2004). This indicator may be attributed to community colleges' distinct mission of providing open-admission to students that are historically underserved (Bragg and Durham, 2012). In fall 2009, 14.2 percent of all students enrolled at two-year colleges were African-American (NCES, 2011). The graduation rates for African-American students and White students attending 2-year public institutions for the 2007 starting cohort were 11.9 percent and 23 percent, respectively (NCES, 2012). The increase in the percentage of African-Americans enrolling in postsecondary education over the past 150 years has not yielded a comparable increase in African-American student graduation rates. Almost 45% of African-Americans have attended college in comparison to 53% of Whites (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). However, recent statistics indicate that a mere

40% of Black students who enroll in college will graduate compared with greater than 61% of White students (Cross & Slater, 2004; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

Although early studies of African-American student retention issues documented pre-college characteristics and factors impacting student success (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983), often overlooked are students' own perceptions, beliefs, and reasoning behind their voluntary withdrawal from postsecondary education (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980). Theorists like Astin (1984), Bean (1985), and Tinto (1987) provide foundational research on factors that impact students' decisions to persist, but minimal research exists that conveys students' own thoughts on their rationale to persist or not. The ability to recognize those students most likely to withdraw from postsecondary studies does provide a foundation for uncovering solutions to the African-American student retention issue (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). In addition, Conley and Hamlin (2009) emphasized that higher education institutions continuously attempt to identify effective means for engaging and retaining minority students, particularly first-generation Black students from low-income backgrounds.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Though African-American student retention is a widely researched topic, there are a combination of contributing factors that may negatively impact students' motivation and ability to persist. According to various scholars, the following factors have been identified: lack of academic integration and social belonging, financial concerns, the absence of faculty and institutional support, deficiency in academic preparation, and a lack of student commitment (Barbatis, 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Braxton, 2004; Byrd & McDonald, 2005; Enstrom and Tinto, 2008; Hassel &

Lourey, 2005; Hurtado, Han, Saenz, Espinosa, Cabrera, & Cerna, 2007; Perna, 2000; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). These identified factors highlight the necessity for institution administrators to increase their efforts to not only attract African-American students but, more importantly, retain them as well (Ntiri, 2001; Rudenstine, 2001).

Astin (1984) believed social and academic integration was the essential component to students' retention and that the level of student involvement, academically and socially, was the determining factor in students' likelihood of persisting. Students identified early negative college experiences and the absence of institutional support as the two most important factors impacting their decision to exit college (Glowgowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007). The lack of positive interactions with an institution's faculty and staff usually results in students withdrawing from the institution (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011). Sparse consideration in existing research on student retention has been given to why students are impacted to such an extent when failing to socially integrate into a system with which only a short-term relationship exists. While research has identified the importance of social integration (Bean & Eaton, 2002), little has emerged in relation to understanding the influence of students' peers on their decision to persist.

However, increased attention has been given to tuition increases and financial aid and the direct impact on African-American student persistence. Research has spawned the development of theories that highlight the importance of finances in relation to determining these students' decision to persist (Bean & Metzner, 1985; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). Additionally, researchers contended that socioeconomic status has more of an impact on a students' opportunity to pursue a



postsecondary education than their ethnic background (Carter, 2006; Hanson, 1994; Hearn, 1984). Despite annual tuition costs to attend a community college being significantly lower than a university, substantial financial resources are necessary to attend college on a full-time basis (Mendoza, Mendez, & Malcolm, 2009). Studies indicate high attrition rates at community colleges have been partially attributed to financial burden encountered by students when having to pay for college (Dowd & Coury, 2006).

Many studies were conducted from a rational-choice perspective meaning the assumption has been made that students have performed a cost-benefit analysis, thereby impacting the students' decision to withdraw or persist (Mendoza, Mendez, & Malcolm, 2009). This perspective suggests that some low-income students become dissatisfied with their financial circumstances because of the negative impact associated with the burden of accepting government loans, which leads to withdrawal from an institution (Dowd & Coury, 2006). Minimal research has been conducted on the extent of students' understanding of financial aid and the student loan repayment. Many first-generation minority students without college-experienced parents encounter a complicated financial aid system that is difficult to maneuver through (Seidman, 2005). In addition, little has emerged in identifying if students' persistence is impacted more by the burden of loan repayment, or their ability to pay the costs of living and any remaining balances to an institution not covered by financial aid.

Although financial challenges can impact African-American student persistence, evidence also suggests that even with attempts to improve degree programs, colleges have failed to improve the learning experiences that garner the engagement of African-American students (Enstrom and Tinto, 2008). Wyatt (2011)

contends, “The challenge for institutional leaders is not only student engagement but how to engage the different student populations on campus” (p. 10). Data measuring students’ satisfaction with their college experience indicates low ratings were given to classroom instruction and academic advising, and this should be a main concern for institutions (Seidman, 2005).

Tinto (1993) asserts more than 75 percent of students withdraw due to the challenges related to a lack of fit between their skills and interests, and the structures, resources, and patterns of an educational institution. The current body of literature on student engagement is “highly segmented, even atomistic, and virtually atheoretical, focusing narrowly on individual programmatic interventions or overlooking the wide variety of influences shaping an outcome” (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, p. 1). While studies have highlighted the positive impact of student engagement on African-American student retention (Schuetz, 2008), limited literature exists that indicates what these students believe spawns and maintains their desire to engage.

Other research examining attrition has attempted to explain the languid completion rates of African-American students by pointing to weaknesses in their college preparation (Hu & St. John, 2001; Nettles, 1990; Zeidenberg, 2008). For example, elementary and secondary education systems have been faulted for the lack of preparation exhibited by many African-American students (Bettinger & Long, 2009). Many African-American students fail to effectively transition from high school into college (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). The transition issues present challenges for those institutions serving minority populations because minorities represent a growing segment of future enrollments (Raab & Adam, 2005). Underprepared students are a well-researched topic in higher education; however,

little is known about how the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions are impacted when these students are informed that they are underprepared for college-level coursework and that remedial coursework is necessary.

While students' lack of preparation for college-level coursework may not be the fault of the students, African-American students have a responsibility to dedicate themselves to self-engagement in the academic environment to improve their own learning experience (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). Students' initial level of commitment to an institution is impacted by the level of social integration and the perceived commitment of the university to its students. In addition, this initial level of commitment shapes the students' subsequent commitment to an institution (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, and Hartley, 2008). Tinto (1975) believed the greater a student's subsequent commitment, the higher the student's likelihood to persist. Research has not provided insight into why some students at a single institution perceive a greater level of institutional commitment than other students at that institution.

In an attempt to address ailing retention rates, community colleges have formulated solutions like improved classroom instruction, learning communities, and enhanced faculty and institutional support (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Nitecki, 2011). Institutional support services, such as intrusive student advising and student-focused workshops have made a positive impact on students at community colleges (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Calcagno et al., 2008). However, institutional remedies to improve support services, have not resolved all student retention issues. The failure of students to persist after intrusive advising and the completion of student-focused workshops are attributed to

students' personal characteristics and the personal challenges they encounter (Brint and Karabel, 1989).

Disproportionate African-American graduation rates critically impact the American higher education system and society, and will continue to do so in the absence of system-wide and institution-specific solutions (Carnevale and Fry, 2000). Kinzie et al (2008) believe the racial gap in graduation rates indicates that too many students are failing to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary in the twenty-first century. Not only would minorities benefit because college graduates also earn more money over a lifetime (Seidman, 2005), but an increase in minority graduates would better prepare the United States in addressing the economic and global challenges that threaten America's future (McGlynn, 2008). The emergence of personal characteristics and challenges that impact African-American student retention can be crucial in yielding solutions, but will require these students to be forthcoming with their personal perspectives and beliefs. Research indicates there are a variety of causes to the African-American retention problem, and currently no one model exists to resolve the issue (Siegel, 2011). The fact remains African-American students are still behind in the struggle to stay in school, although retention programs have been specifically designed for them (Opp, 2002). The issue of retention is the responsibility of everyone on campus and any retention approach must be comprehensive and utilize an array of philosophies and strategies (Siegel, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore African-American students' perceptions of personal and institutional factors that contributed to their

dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college in a major city in the Midwest.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to structure this study on the perceptions of African-American students who attended a two-year community college:

- How do non-completer African-Americans students previously enrolled at a two-year community college perceive their experiences at the institution?
- Are there common perceptions of these African-American students related to their personal and academic lives?
- How did their experiences impact or influence their decision to withdraw from pursuit of their postsecondary education?

### **Significance of the Study**

Little research has been conducted on the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of African-American students related to their persistence in the pursuit of a postsecondary education. Retention programs at colleges and universities have increased nationwide, but those programs lack the focus necessary to achieve the goal of significantly impacting African-American student retention (Tinto, 1987a). Retention programs have had minimal impact on the overall character of educational institutions and have done little to deter the prevailing attitude surrounding the student experience in postsecondary education, and as a result have not uncovered the true causes of African-American student attrition (Tinto, 2009). Additionally, insufficient data has been retrieved that encompasses African-American students' common perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs related to persistence. Thus, this study was

conducted in an effort to contribute to the existing body of literature on African-American student retention. This study has a dual significance to college administrators and African-American students. First, college administrators may already understand the demographics of their students, but this study could provide insight into the mindset possessed by their core students. Second, the study may enlighten African-American students with an understanding of the common characteristics and challenges shared by this demographic of students. The students' recognition of their own dynamic characteristics and challenges could aid in their academic preparation, and potentially influence the approach that would be otherwise taken by this group of students. As a result, this study will provide data on African-American students' experiences and perceptions and highlight how their academic decisions have been impacted.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are operationally defined to avoid the possibility of misinterpretation:

*Attrition:* Reduction in a school's student population as a result of transfers or dropouts (Education.com, 2012).

*Cohort:* The group of students entering in the fall term established for tracking purposes. For the Graduation Rates component, this includes all students who enter an institution as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking undergraduate students during the fall term of a given year (NCES, 2011).

*College:* A postsecondary institution of higher education granting students a minimum of an associate degree.

*Historically Black College and University (HBCU):* A postsecondary institution of higher education that existed before 1964 with a historic and contemporary mission of educating blacks while being open to all.

*Low-Income Students:* Students whose family income was below 125 percent of the federally established poverty level for their family size (Choy, 2000).

*Minority Student:* a student identified as an Alaska Native, American Indian, Asian-American, Black (African-American), Hispanic American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.

*Open Admissions:* Non-selective and non-competitive admissions process used by postsecondary education institutions in the United States.

*Persistence:* To continue college enrollment without interruption through graduation (NCES, 2011).

*Retention Barriers:* Barriers that directly or indirectly impact student persistence in postsecondary education.

*Retention Rate:* Percentage of first-time students who return to the same institution to continue their studies the following fall semester (NCES, 2011).

*Retention Strategies:* Strategies implemented by postsecondary educational institutions in an effort to positive influence student persistence.

### **Organization of Study**

The organization of this study is segmented into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides insight into the study with emphasis on the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and definitions highlighting the study's relevant terms. Chapter 2 reviews literature relevant to the study. The methodology of data collection and analysis are outlined in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 5 yields the study's conclusions and provides insight into opportunities for further research.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Research on college student attrition is extensive; however, the majority of the research has examined pre-college characteristics of students that identify the students' likelihood to persist in college (Astin, 1970, 1984; Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 1997). Research on minority students, particularly African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students, has primarily focused on students' persistence at predominantly-White institutions (PWIs) and has been quantitative in nature (Alford, 2000; Barbatis, 2010; Booker, 2007; Carter, 1999, 2006; Castle, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Han, Saenz, Espinosa, Cabrera, & Cerna, 2007; Perna, 2000). However, there is minimal phenomenological research solely on African-American student persistence.

Despite the data that indicates 44% of African-American undergraduate students are enrolled at community colleges, minimal research has been conducted related to African-American student persistence at community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). The existing studies on community college student retention examined pre-college characteristics, institutional characteristics, all minority students combined, minorities other than African-Americans, or a particular gender of African-American students (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Leinbach & Kienzl, 2008; Carter, 2006; Glenn, 2001; Green, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; McGlynn, 2009; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978; Thomason, & Thurber, 1999). Absent from these studies is research on all African-American students who attend community colleges. Hence, this study will focus on the beliefs,

attitudes, and perceptions that impact African-American student persistence at a community college.

In an attempt to gain a more in-depth understanding of the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that impact African-American students who attend a community college, literature on student retention was studied. Emphasis was placed on student retention literature specifically related to factors that impact minorities and African-American students. The beginning of this chapter provides a historical overview of community colleges and African-American student enrollment and attrition trends. The overview is followed by a review of the literature on student retention models, with special emphasis on the retention barriers that most impact minority student retention. In addition, a review of the literature on retention strategies is essential to understanding how institutions have combated student attrition challenges over the years. The conceptual framework that guides this study concludes this chapter.

### **Historical Overview of Community Colleges**

The American Association of Community Colleges (2012) suggests that in the early 20th century, leaders from the United States saw the necessity for a more skilled workforce due to increased global economic competition. During this time period, high schools were seeking innovative ways to serve their communities through teacher's institute, vocational education, and citizenship school (Robinson-Neal, 2009). These high school-based institutions were able to fill the gap in communities without larger, four-year institutions (Robinson-Neal, 2009). William Rainey Harper was credited with starting Joliet Junior College, the first public junior college. During the 1940s and 1950s, junior colleges gained wider acceptance through the creation of the associate's degree, increase in job training programs, and the passage of

legislation allowing college operating costs to be funded by state revenue (Robinson-Neal, 2009).

Though the original goal of junior colleges was to provide a broad general education to students in preparation for the rigors of a university education, by the 1960s the open-door community college was considered the embodiment of a socially conscious institution (Dassance, 2011). The two-year college's claim to being a genuine educational institution resided in its promise to prepare students for the first two years of a four-year education (Robinson-Neal, 2009). The community college's mission of preparing students for a four-year education was scrutinized because less than half of community college students transferred to a four-year institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In addition, increased scrutiny came as critics questioned how these institutions could claim their mission was to provide gateway access to higher education for those who were previously denied, while having a seemingly opposing mission of offering terminal degrees (Frye, 1993).

Further scrutiny came from scholars who believed that minorities were hindered by community colleges because of these institutions' push for vocational education rather than degree completion and transfer (Cohen, 1990). However, as two-year colleges became as eclectic as the communities in which they reside, these institutions' reputation as the college for the community increased (Robinson-Neal, 2009). Prior to 1965, due to segregation, minority students were not enrolled in many colleges and universities, particularly in the southern United States (Robinson-Neal, 2009). Carroll Miller's (1962) study concluded community colleges will need to involve all segments of the surrounding communities in order to improve their reputation of being institutions of the community.

Between the years of 1960 and 1970, the number of community colleges doubled from 412 to 909 institutions in the United States (Dassance, 2011). Student enrollment at community colleges increased from 26% to approximately 48% of all students accessing higher education over a nearly three decade span from 1965 to 1992 (Robinson-Neal, 2009). Nearly half of higher education's undergraduate minority student population is enrolled at community colleges (Laden, 2004). Minority student enrollments also substantially increased between the 1960s and the 1990s. This enrollment growth among minorities inspired Laden (2004) to classify these minority groups as the emerging majority. By 2001, there had been a dynamic shift in the ethnic and racial minorities attending community colleges in the United States (Lum, 2004). Evelyn (2003) reported approximately half of the African-American and Hispanic students enrolled in college in the United States were attending community colleges.

### **African-American Enrollment Trends**

Research shows that the principal entry point to higher education for minority students, particularly African-American students, continues to be through community colleges (Perrakis, 2008). Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh (2008) contend, over the past four decades significant growth has occurred in the enrollment of historically underrepresented student groups. The National Center for Education Statistics (2011b) reported that African-American student enrollment in higher education has grown over the years, reaching an all-time high. According to Seidman (2005), in 1990 there were over 13.5 million students enrolled in higher education in the United States, which of only 9% were African-American. In 2000, African-American students made up 13% of all college enrollments (Seidman, 2005). The American

Association of Community Colleges indicated that 14% of all community college students were African-American. In addition, 44% of all African-American undergraduate students were enrolled at a community college as of fall 2009 (AACC, 2012).

In comparison to their enrollment in the two-year college sector, African-American students were underrepresented in completion rates versus White students earning an associate degree. As the proportional representation of African-American students among traditional-age students continues to grow, the disparity in associate degree completion rates between racial ethnic groups will become increasingly important for two-year colleges (Opp, 2002). African-American student attrition presents a serious, long-term challenge for college administrators (Carter, 2006). The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) indicates of all 2-year institutions, 26.1% of African-American students in comparison to 31.5% of White students graduated from their cohort starting in the year 2000. The 2007 starting cohort saw a minimal, but negative shift with 25.3% of African-American students graduating compared to 29.5% of White Students.

In addition, individuals with an associate's degree earn over a quarter of a million dollars more than individuals with just a high school diploma. Day and Newburger (2002) indicate the average annual salary for full-time, year-round workers with an associate's degree is \$38k in comparison to \$30k for the same demographic of workers without a degree. Degree attainment can have a direct impact on the socioeconomic status of individuals, specifically African-Americans.

## **Theoretical Models of Student Retention**

Scholars like Astin, Tinto, Bean, and Pascarella have hypothesized about student persistence in the college environment. Various models have conceptualized these scholars' theories related to what motivates student commitment and persistence at the postsecondary level (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1993). Do students possess pre-college characteristics and skills that motivate them to remain enrolled until graduation or do students absorb and learn these values and behaviors once they are enrolled in a higher education institution? These theories combined provide insight for academic institutions to gain a better understanding of student retention. Feldman (1972) stated, "Each [approach] may be necessary to the study of student change and stability during college, but none of them is sufficient" (p. 21).

### **Astin's Theory of Involvement**

Astin (1970) proposed one of the earliest models related to students and their interaction in the college environment, the "input-process-output" model. He innovated a "theory of involvement" to elucidate the components of student development. According to Astin (1985), his theory can be conveyed simply by stating: "*students learn by becoming involved*" (p. 133). Astin believed student learning and development was directly influenced by the quality and quantity of student involvement (Astin, 1984). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identify the five "basic postulates" suggested by Astin (1984):

- involvement requires the investment of psychological and physical energy in "objects" (for example, tasks, people, activities);
- involvement is a continuous concept – different students will invest varying amounts of energy in different objects;

- involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features;
- the amount of learning or development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement; and,
- educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to induce student involvement .

Under Astin's model, students' interests and goals, in addition to their other commitments, will determine how much energy the students will invest in academic relationships and activities. The definitive goal of an academic institution is to achieve the utmost student involvement and learning. Astin (1984) contended that institutional policies and practices could be assessed by the extent to which they foster student involvement. Astin believed his theory of involvement was advantageous over other educational approaches because the focal point of his theory is student motivation and behavior. Some scholars questioned if Astin's ideals constituted a theory. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) contended, "Astin offers a general dynamic, a principle, rather than any detailed, systemic description of the behaviors or phenomena being predicted" (p. 51).

### **Tinto's Theory of Departure**

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) stated, "A more explicit model of institutional impact, yet one similar to Astin's in its dynamics, is a longitudinal model given by Tinto" (p. 51). Tinto's theory focuses on the premise that students possess various social, family, and academic attributes, including beliefs and intentions related to college attendance and performance (Tinto, 1975). Tinto theorized that students enter college with certain commitments related to finishing school. These commitments and intentions are impacted on a continuing basis by interactions with academic and

social systems contained within an institution (Tinto, 1975). Less than 25 percent of students withdraw due to academic performance, whereas more than 75 percent dropout because of the difficulties related to lack of fit between the skills and interests of the student and the organization of the educational institution (Tinto, 1975).

Positive interactions within an institution's academic and social systems will lead to better integration for students and ultimately to student retention. Negative encounters and experiences lead to a reduction in integration into the academic and social systems, which cause students to distance themselves, resulting in withdrawal from an institution (Tinto, 1997, 1998, 1999). If students' values coincide with an institution there is greater potential for academic integration. The development of positive relationships with peers and faculty leads will lead to social integration for students. The absence of academic and social integration for a student is likely to result in withdrawal from the college (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's (1993) later model does tread a similar path as his earlier ones; however, he offers a separate component to student departure. He theorized that even if students separated themselves from family members and friends, students would stay enrolled in college if they aligned themselves with the values and behaviors of faculty members and students. Analyzing student departure is critical to understanding and improving student retention (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

### **Bean's Explanatory Model of Student Retention**

Bean's (1980) model of student retention posits that student interactions with the institution of their choice are governed by the student's high school experiences, academic goals, and level of family support. This model was based on employee turnover within an organization. According to Bean (1980), once the student enters



college, the student will begin to intermingle within the institution setting. In addition, external factors like financial concerns will also impact the student's attitudes and behaviors. Bean (1980) theorized that interactions with an institution's academic and social systems will influence a student's attitudes toward himself or herself and the institution. Academic performance, social integration, and allegiance to the institution are all components that impact a student's decision to continue enrollment at an academic institution (Bean, 1980).

Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a student retention model focusing on nontraditional students. Nontraditional students possess characteristics that require less interaction with other students at the institution. The nontraditional classification of students is generally older, working, and commuting to college. This type of student typically engages less with other students, thereby reducing the social integration factors normally associated with students in college (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Research was also conducted by Bean and Metzner (1985) to determine how persistence and educational attainment are impacted by the frequency and quality of academic advising. However, the generated results were mixed.

Bean and Eaton (2002) constructed a psychological model of student retention under the belief "that the factors affecting retention are ultimately individual and that individual psychological processes form the foundation for retention decisions" (p. 73). Predicting retention using a psychological approach had minimal success in the past (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2002), and the psychological methodology has been avoided in preference of the sociology of retention (Bean & Eaton, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Through this study, Bean and Eaton theorized that diverse types of students withdraw for a variety of reason; however, this approach does not yield an elucidation

of the academic and social integration processes, and how it leads to student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2002).

### **Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change**

Pascarella (1985) proposed a general causal model that paid greater attention to structural and organizational features of an institution, in addition to its general environment, and its relationship to student retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identified the five main components of Pascarella's model:

- Students' background/Pre-college characteristics
- Structural and organizational features of an institution (size, selectivity, residential character)
- Institutional environment
- Frequency and content of students' interaction with agents of socialization (faculty members and students)
- Quality of student effort

Pascarella believed these five components have an indirect influence, rather than a direct influence, on students' development and decision to persist. Pascarella's model was originally intended to elucidate changes in students' learning and development, yet it is applicable in the study of alternative college-related outcomes.

### **Retention Barriers**

African-American students are still behind in their graduation rates in comparison to White students. Important factors influencing attrition include, the sense of belonging socially and academically, financial concerns, lack of institutional and faculty support, and underprepared students (Alford, 2000). These barriers to

retention present administrators with unique challenges that require practical and innovative solutions.

### **Social and Academic Sense of Belonging**

Many student retention theories have emerged as a result of Tinto's theoretical model of persistence. A student's decision to continue the pursuit of postsecondary education is directly impacted by the student's ability to assimilate into an institution, socially and academically (Tinto, 1975). The "sense of belonging" is applicable to many facets of life so the correlation to an academic environment is practical. In accordance with Hurtado and Carter (1997), students' sense of belonging is delineated as their psychological connection to an academic community. The sense of belonging for students correlates to their ability to better adjust socially and academically, though not directly to their academic performance (Hurtado, Han, Saenz, Espinosa, Cabrera, & Cerna, 2007). Interaction with peers and faculty, involvement in extracurricular activities, and classroom engagement, all contribute to students' sense of belonging. Students' social and academic involvement is critical to their persistence (Astin, 1984).

Students who perceived their social interactions to be positive during their first semester of enrollment were more likely to enroll in a second semester (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). The more involvement in an academic community, the greater sense of belonging for students, thus these students are more likely to continue pursuing their postsecondary education. Students who reported increased social involvement on campus also indicated more social integration equating to commitment to the institution and the intent to return to the institution (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). Astin's (1984) model highlights that student involvement promotes

learning and development resulting in increased persistence. Though the sense of belonging socially in an academic setting is important (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the sense of belonging academically is of equal importance (Deil-Amen, 2011).

The faculty-student relationship impacts students' persistence and, ultimately, academic success (Wood & Turner, 2011). Positive interactions between faculty members and students contribute to the overall learning experience. Student classroom involvement may be reduced in the absence of positive interactions with faculty members, thereby inhibiting a beneficial learning experience (Wood & Turner, 2011). Classroom interaction with peers is also essential to gaining the full benefits of the learning environment (Tinto, 1997). Collaborative peer support was of noted importance to motivating students (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008). Those who perform poorly academically may feel uncomfortable in a classroom setting with those students who perform well. On the other hand, students who excel academically can be hesitant to exhibit their knowledge in the classroom in trepidation of embarrassment from being viewed as an outsider (Ford, 1996). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) point out, "Students talked about their programs as safe places to learn, places where they were free to express themselves and learn from one another" (p. 47). While theorists have provided substantial insight into academic and social integration, theory does not provide administrators with a blueprint for what is necessary to achieve academic and social integration within their particular institutional setting (Tinto, 2006).

### **Financial Concerns**

Most postsecondary institutions have an increase in their tuition on an annual basis, including those that attempt to maintain lower tuition and fees to serve a greater

number of low-income students (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). College affordability is a concern for all students, especially those that are classified as low-income. Educational theorists have comprehensively researched the postsecondary education system to identify the causes of low-income students and African-American students falling behind in their college ambitions (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009) and enrollment, and their persistence in college among those who do enroll (Braxton, 2000; Perna, 2000). The increased attention to how tuition increases and financial aid have impacted persistence has spawned the development of theories that allocate the importance of finances in relation to determining students' decision to persist (Bean & Metzner, 1985; St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). Researchers contend that socioeconomic status has more of an impact on students' opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education than their ethnic background (Hearn, 1984; Carter, 2006; Hanson, 1994). Raab and Adam (2005) contend, "Financial aid concerns, particularly with these first-generation college students, surfaced as a bottleneck that often eclipsed academic needs as a serious initial obstacle to freshman success and retention" (p. 95).

Minority students attending minority-serving institutions are more likely to come from low-income families and depend on financial aid to pursue postsecondary studies than White students (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2002) estimated millions of college-qualified students will not enroll because they are low-income and face financial constraints. Minority students were less inclined to begin or continue pursuing a college education if financial aid was inadequate (Kaltenbaugh, St. John & Starkey, 1999). Students' decisions to attend college and choice of college are governed by their socioeconomic

circumstances (Carter, 1999). The financial nexus model points to a direct correlation between students' financial background and academic persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Paulsen and St. John, 2002; Shireman, 2009).

### **Institutional Commitment and Support**

Institutional effectiveness and accountability has become the focus in higher education (Schmidtlien & Berdahl, 2005), and community colleges encounter the unique challenge of providing access to minority and low-income students, while improving on the academic success of their students (Bailey & Morest, 2006). The United States Department of Education tasks the Higher Education Programs (HEP) with the goal of increasing access to higher education for low-income and minority students, strengthening the ability of colleges and universities to effectively serve a high percentage of low-income and minority students, providing development resources for teachers and students, and increasing proficiency in foreign languages and other areas of international studies. However, evidence suggests that even with program restructuring attempts, colleges have failed to improve the quality of education they provide to students (Enstrom and Tinto, 2008). While benchmarking is a necessary analytical tool for an institution, an institution's assessment of the particular attributes and characteristics of its own students will aid in targeting of retention strategies that are effective and applicable to that institution (Tinto, 1987). The process of student retention varies from institution to institution and the type of institution has a direct impact on the process (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994; Tinto, 2006).

Tinto (1993) acknowledged that institutional commitment is an integral component of an institution's ability to retain students. Tinto (2002) affirmed,

“Simply put, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student retention seem to find a way to achieve that end” (p.2). Institutions have the opportunity to convey commitment to their students by consistently communicating the high level of concern that exists for its students’ development and well-being (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008). A student’s ability to adapt to college will greatly depend on the student’s perceptions regarding an institutions level of commitment to the welfare of its students (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). However, the problem as Conley and Hamlin (2009) stated:

When a student of color is from a low-income, first-generation background, the obstacles to completing a college degree are compounded, for most college campuses expect minority students to adapt successfully on their own to this new, often bewildering, and generally more alienating cultural environment. (p.48)

Institutions will need to reinvent themselves and aggressively commit to engaging African-American students in the college experience (Wyatt, 2011).

### **Underprepared Students**

Research examining attrition has attempted to explain the languid completion rates of African-American students by pointing to weaknesses in their college preparation (Hu & St. John, 2001; Nettles, 1990; Zeidenberg, 2008). The Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 increased minority access to postsecondary education institutions. This resulted in an increase in the number of underprepared students entering into higher education institutions. In 1892, the National Education Association commissioned the Committee of Ten to investigate the amount of underprepared students entering college. The committee examined the issues associated with college entrance requirements. In addition, the committee explored potential issues related to curricular articulation between secondary institutions and

postsecondary institutions. In more recent years, the elementary and secondary education system has been scrutinized as potential contributors to underprepared college students (Bettinger & Long, 2009).

Though enrollment rates are trending positively, only approximately half of high school graduates are prepared to be academically successful in postsecondary studies (ACT, 2004). Nearly one-third of students entering into postsecondary institutions, nationwide, need to take remedial coursework to improve their academic performance to a level that will allow them to be successful in college (Barbatis, 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Byrd & McDonald, 2005). The number of students requiring remedial coursework increases to approximately 41 percent when segmented to those entering community college (Parsad & Lewis, 2003). African-American students exhibit a disproportionate necessity for remedial courses. Adelman (2004) estimates, approximately 62% of African-American students require remediation in comparison to 36% of White students. According to Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008), “Large numbers of students do not complete the academically challenging coursework in high school necessary to do well in college, which contributes to low retention and graduation rates” (p.21). Academically and psychologically, many minority students are inadequately prepared to successfully complete coursework at the college level (Wyatt, 2011). The cost of providing remedial resources for underprepared students has risen exponentially, and the anticipated improvements to minority student retention rates have not come to fruition at a rate commensurate to the resources, time, and effort expended (Raab & Adam, 2005).



## **Retention Strategies**

Institutions have formulated a number of solutions to address low retention rates (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2005; Nitecki, 2011). No one blanket strategy or combination of strategies can be applied to every academic institution. McGlynn (2009) stated, successful colleges “monitor year-to-year change, study the impact of different interventions on student outcomes, break down the numbers among different student populations, and continuously ask themselves how they could improve” (p. 42). Just as there are a multiple barriers to student retention, there exist a range of institutional initiatives aimed at improving student retention. Research conducted by Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008) and Pascarella, Seifert, and Whitt (2008) indicate a positive correlation between effective instruction and minority student persistence. In addition, Engstrom and Tinto’s (2008) study highlighted the encouraging impact of learning teams on underprepared, low-income students. Lastly, Raab and Adam’s (2005) research provides insight into minority student retention improvement through highly intrusive advising strategies. The three retention strategies outlined in this review of literature on minority student retention “draw strength from and have a direct impact on the student learning experience” (Siegel, 2011, p. 8).

## **Learning Communities**

The research on student persistence at non-residential institutions has provided insight into not only the impact of external factors on student persistence but also how student involvement in the classroom is imperative to student retention (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994). Engstrom (2008) indicated, “The classroom is one key arena, if not the only one available, for unprepared students to

participate in powerful, meaningful learning opportunities” (p. 7). Engstrom (2008) also noted, “Learning communities, in their most basic form, intentionally cluster two or more courses taken by a cohort of students, typically around an interdisciplinary theme” (p. 7). While previous research had been conducted on the topic of learning communities and effective practice (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), Tinto (1997) was the first to noticeably link the innovative activities that shape classroom practice to increased student engagement, and ultimately to student persistence. Identifying that link has provided the platform for the widely accepted notion that the engagement of faculty with students, especially in the classroom, is crucial to the institutional campaigns to reduce student attrition (Pascarella, Seifert & Whitt, 2008).

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that students participating in learning community programs were more likely to persist to the second academic year than their peers who did not participate in learning community programs. The average difference in persistence between students in learning communities and those not in learning communities was slightly higher than 5% at most two-year colleges, and as high as 15% on some two-year campuses (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) provided students’ reflections on their participation in learning communities. These reflections highlighted how the students’ fears and anxieties were eliminated, their sense of belonging was developed, their self-esteem was enhanced, their belief emerged that they were headed in the right direction and their confidence of their abilities increased. The development of learning communities on campus is an effective strategy in accomplishing the necessary levels of student involvement that will impact student success and retention (Tinto, 1997).

## **Intrusive Advising**

The success of minority students, and the evolution of higher education, is going to be contingent upon institutions' capacity to engage these students (Spanier, 2001). The desired level of student engagement will rest in the higher education institutions' ability to fully immerse students in the college experience, which includes ongoing academic support and required participation in orientation programs (Wyatt, 2011). The identification of "high-risk" students at the beginning of their academic career is imperative to the students' success (Siegel, 2011). Raab and Adam (2005) outlined the following necessary factors for high-risk students to be successful:

- Improving academic skills
- Completing required paperwork (especially financial aid)
- Developing college-level social and study skills
- Achieving a new level of maturity
- Decision-making that will help them make the transition into upper division life

Students' first impressions of an academic institution as a whole are generated by the availability and knowledge of resources, guidance, and perceived attitudes of advisors in student services departments (Spellman, 2007). Drake (2011) asserts that academic advising is more than mere administrative recordkeeping; it is the art of relationship-building with students and assisting them in aligning "their personal strengths and interests with their academic and life goals" (p. 8).

The manner in which institutions create and implement strategies that connect students to the collegiate environment and integrative learning experiences is equally

as important as the time and effort students expend on being successful (Kuh, 2005). Academic advising is essential to the success of postsecondary education because it is directly related to what is at the core of all institutional goals and decision making, student success (Drake, 2011). In addition, developmental and intrusive advising techniques require the advising staff to be properly trained and have access to the necessary resources (Siegel, 2011). Raab and Adam (2005) confirmed:

Prairie View A&M University developed a multifaceted, highly intrusive, “tough love” approach to this dilemma that simultaneously addresses a number of first-year problems and offers a proven model that has been successfully disseminated to other start-up programs throughout the United States. (p. 88).

This type of advising is more intense and personal in nature, and alleviates some of the pressures associated with the financial aid process and other components of the first-year college experience (Raab & Adam, 2005).

### **Effective Instruction**

The use of active learning practices by faculty members, directly and indirectly, impacts a student’s decision to persist in college (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008). Classroom discussions positively influence academic integration, student commitment, and ultimately enrollment in the subsequent fall semester (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). Faculty members teaching first-year courses have an unparalleled opportunity to mold students’ behaviors early in their academic careers (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). First-year students who experience integrative learning in their early courses perceive themselves as attaining knowledge and understanding, and subsequently their coursework as rewarding (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000).

A number of scholars hypothesized that the quality of active classroom learning not only is learning outcomes, but could directly play a role in students' decisions persist or depart from an institution (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Guided by Tinto's model (1975, 1993), Braxton, Bray and Berger (2000) hypothesized that students exposed to frequent instructional organization and clarity by faculty members generally are more confident about their academic achievement. Though the body of literature related to African-American student persistence continues to grow, a single model cannot adequately explain the process impacting students' decision to withdraw or persist until graduation (Siegel, 2011).

### **African-American Student Retention Literature**

Over two decades ago, Stewart (1988) declared that the successful enrollment and retention of African-American and other minority students is one of the most vital needs in higher education. Stewart's reflection remains true nearly three decades later (Carter, 2006). Although African-American students are entering college at higher rates than in earlier years, they continue to exit at a higher rate than White students (Seidman, 2005). Continued growth of African-American student participation in higher education, combined with their moderately low graduation rates and the increased pressure for institutional accountability, have augmented the necessity for a better understanding of the factors that directly impact the success of African-American students and the creation of approaches that improve teaching effectiveness and student learning (Bok, 2006; Hussar and Bailey, 2006; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). In addition, understanding that student background characteristics and precollege experiences cannot be modified by institution staff or faculty, the ability to identify specific barriers will be essential in creating innovative

strategies and solutions to combat African-American student attrition (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Carter (2006) contends that the cultivation of best practices for all students may not be effectively serving all students.

### **Sense of Belonging for African-American Students**

One factor linked with the persistence of African-American students is the retention construct of a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Research indicated that African-American students perceive their college environment to be less supportive than White students, and are thus less likely to persist to graduation (Carey, 2004; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986). In the same manner that achieving an adequate sense of belonging can produce positive results for African-American students, failure to achieve a sense of belonging can have important negative consequences (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). The difficulty in African-American students achieving a sense of belonging can encourage the emergence of identities opposed to the dominant culture of an institution, thereby increasing the likelihood of feelings of alienation and subsequently oppositional behaviors (Ellis, 2002; Perrakis, 2008). This process dramatically reduces the likelihood a student will persist. Research found that students who reported more involvement behaviors in their first-year of college also reported higher levels of academic and social integration, as well as increased institutional commitment (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). In recognizing the importance of African-American students' sense of belonging, research seeking to understand why some African-Americans students feel a sense of belonging and others do not is minimal.

## **Financial Concerns of African-American Students**

African-American students face a number of hurdles to their academic success; however, one major concern for these students is limited resources to pay for college (Schwartz & Washington, 1999; Seidman, 2005). Limited financial resources have a negatively affect the college enrollment and retention rates for African-American students (Seidman, 2005). The ability of African-American students to fund their education and remain enrolled in college is highly correlated with the low income economic status of many of these students (Seidman, 2005). An American Council on Education (ACE) study of the public's knowledge and attitudes about financing higher education highlighted people's lack of understanding related to the grants and loans received by students to pay college (Carter, 2006). Eighty-three percent of the African-American respondents surveyed believed college is not affordable. Research also indicates that African-American students' likelihood of persistence was reduced if financial aid levels were not adequate (Kaltenbaugh, St. John, and Starkey, 1999). These findings highlight the influential role that financial aid can play in the recruitment and retention of African-American students. However, most research on the correlation between financial aid and minority student persistence utilizes limited samples of African-American students, producing inconclusive results for this population (Mendoza, Mendez, & Malcolm, 2009; Chen, 2008).

## **Faculty and Institutional Support of African-American Students**

Bensimon (2007) suggested institutional staff and faculty behaviors are key variables in African-American students' ability to succeed in college. Research has shown that academic support services are crucial to the success of African-American

students (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Deil-Amen (2011) contends that institutional agents, rather than student characteristics, play an instrumental role in creating social capital and an environment conducive to African-American student persistence. There exists a necessity for focus to be placed on “institutionally-located people” that can impact the success of this demographic of students (Bensimon, 2007; Deil-Amen, 2011b). Certain aspects of the teacher-student interaction have been shown to influence students’ decision to remain enrolled or withdraw from college (Myers, 2004; Wheelless, Witt, Maresh, Bryand, & Schrod, 2011). However, scholars have yet to identify specific instructional behaviors that directly impact African-American students’ attitudes related to attrition and persistence (Wheelless, Witt, Maresh, Bryand, & Schrod, 2011). Research has revealed the stronger the student’s perception of his or her institution’s commitment, the higher the level of student’s commitment to the institution (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008).

### **Academic Preparation of African-American Students**

Many African-American students fail to master the coursework at their secondary institutions necessary to be successful in college, which contributes to low retention rates (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Research shows that African-American students exhibit a disproportionate need for remedial coursework. Adelman (2004) asserts that 62% of African-American students enroll in remedial coursework in comparison to just 36% of White students. A variety of reasons may be attributed to African-American students’ lack of preparation, such as inadequate secondary school experiences or unfamiliarity with the college process (Engstrom, 2008). African-American students do not benefit equally from remedial coursework when



compared to White students, as they do not advance at comparable rates into courses at college-level proficiency (Bahr, 2010). Students who tend to underperform in math, specifically African-Americans, also have high rates of unsuccessful remediation (Bahr, 2010). A good portion of institutions are ill-prepared to handle the developmental needs of African-American students (Engstrom, 2008). While institutions have dedicated substantial resources to basic skills courses for African-American students, these courses have been presented in a traditional, non-engaging manner (Engstrom, 2008). The remaining challenge is creating remedial courses that engage students while providing them with the necessary foundations to be successful at the college level.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of the conceptual framework is to identify the key factors or variables being studied and the presumed relationship among them (Roberts, 2010). This framework narrows the focus of the study and provides boundaries for the research topic of African-American student retention. African-American students' withdrawal from pursuit of a postsecondary education is a phenomenon that requires more in-depth knowledge on what contributes to these students' decision to withdraw. Thus, the conceptual framework utilized for this study incorporated the underpinnings from Bean's (1990) student attrition model containing concepts of academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment. The model incorporates Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) concepts on the correlation between individual's beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and intentions.

The infrastructure of the conceptual framework for this study was established on the premise that African-American students have beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions

that may impact their decision to persist; however, their capability to academically and socially integrate in conjunction with institutional commitment will determine their ability to overcome the barriers to retention. The African-American student persistence model (see Figure 1) illustrates the student's originating commitment and how his or her negative or positive experiences and interventions can impact the student's persistence and continued commitment to graduation though the encountered retention barriers .

Figure 1. *The African-American Student Persistence Model*



Seidman (2005) argues that positive experiences and interventions will strengthen a student's intentions and commitments, while negative experiences will diminish those intentions and commitments. The student's level of integration into the social and academic systems of the college will impact the student's commitment, thereby affecting the decision to persist (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986).

### **Summary**

African-American students still graduate at a rate drastically lower than White students and there are a variety of contributing factors. Institutional administrators are presented with unique challenges that require practical and innovative solutions to

improve African-American student persistence. Theorists like Tinto (1975) and Bean (1985) believe students' decision to continue the pursuit of their postsecondary education is directly impacted by their ability to socially and academically assimilate into an institution. Students' ability to adapt to college will greatly depend on the their perceptions regarding an institutions level of commitment to the welfare of its students. Though social and academic integration and institutional commitment are contributing factors, researchers like Mendoza, Mendez, and Malcolm (2009) believe that socioeconomic status has greater impact on students' opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education than their ethnic background. However, African-American students' inadequate preparation, academically and psychologically, also presents a challenge to successful completion of college-level coursework. Though colleges have a responsibility to provide students with a quality educational experience, students have a responsibility to commit themselves to self-engagement in the academic environment to improve their learning experience. Previous research has analyzed factors that increase the probability students will withdraw. This study intends to gain insight to students' decision to withdraw based on their first-hand experiences and perceptions.

Academic institutions have innovated and implemented a number of strategies to address low African-American student retention rates. Student involvement in the classroom is critical to student retention, and students' participation in learning community programs were a successful strategy that influenced the likelihood of students to persist to the second academic year. The impact of remedial coursework on student persistence is intricate and mixed; however, one-third of students entering into postsecondary institutions need to take remedial coursework. The desired level of

student engagement is based on higher education institutions' ability to fully immerse students in the college experience, which includes ongoing academic support.

Academic advising is essential to the success of students in postsecondary education.

In addition to advising, the use of active learning practices by faculty members, directly and indirectly, impacts a student's decision to persist in college.

Many scholars have researched student persistence in higher education, and the various internal and external influences that impact students' decision to persist. Astin (1970) theorized students learn by becoming involved. Spady (1971) purported individuals dropped out if they believed they did not possess the same values as others in an institution and if they lacked the support of friends and family. Tinto's (1975) theory explains that students enter college with certain commitments related to finishing school and these commitments and intentions are impacted on a continuing basis by interactions with academic and social systems contained within an institution. Bean (1980) theorized that interactions with an institution's academic and social systems will influence a student's attitudes toward himself or herself and the institution. Finally, Pascarella (1985) believed greater attention should be paid to structural and organizational features of an institution. Though research has yielded positive contributions to student retention literature, further research is needed to thoroughly and effectively address the African-American student retention challenge.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the study focuses on how non-completer African-American students perceive their experience at an institution of higher education. Thus, the following primary research question was investigated: How do non-completer African-American students previously at a two-year community college perceive their experiences at the institution? Second, this study explored the common beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of these African-American students related to their personal and academic lives. Lastly, the inquiry examined how their experiences impacted or influenced their decision to withdraw from pursuit of their postsecondary education. The methodology in this study discusses the research design, rationale for the selected methodology, researcher biases, ethical issues, and data collection and analysis.

### **Research Design**

The selection of a topic and a paradigm are the beginning components of designing a study (Creswell, 1994), and research design should be based on the nature and purpose of a study (Roberts, 2010). Creswell (1994) contends “Paradigms in the human and social sciences help us understand phenomena” (p. 1). He further states a qualitative study “is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994, p. 1). In qualitative research, participants provide a framework for the researcher to critically analyze, synthesize, and organize the gathered data.

The qualitative paradigm based on the ontological assumption questions the nature of reality. From a qualitative perspective, this means reality is subjective and

multiple realities can exist based on participants in the study. In qualitative research, reality is solely constructed by the individuals within the research conditions (Creswell, 1994). The qualitative approach has also been considered the naturalistic inquiry because no attempts are made to manipulate the environment. Qualitative research focuses on the meanings people correlate with activities and events occurring in their world (Roberts, 2010).

### **Rationale for Methodology**

As opposed to a quantitative study, a qualitative approach allows greater exploratory research but requires a tolerance for ambiguity. A qualitative inquiry will provide the researcher with the opportunity to gain insight into the first-hand viewpoint of African-American students at a higher education institution, thereby creating a portrait of their experiences. Creswell (1994) contends quantitative researchers should be distant and independent of that which is being researched, while qualitative researchers must interact with those being studied to gain an understanding of how people make sense of their lives and experiences. The qualitative approach, according to Roberts (2010), is grounded in the philosophical orientation called phenomenology, which is focused on an individual's experiences from his or her personal perspective.

### **A Phenomenological Study**

McMillan (2008) states, "The purpose of conducting a phenomenological study is to describe and interpret the experiences of participants in order to understand the essence of the experience as perceived by the participants" (p. 291). Phenomenology studies are, according to Creswell (1994), "human experiences being examined through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied" (p. 12).

Though the basis of phenomenology is that there are multiple ways of interpreting the same experience, this research seeks to uncover if participants have comparable or dissimilar attitudes towards the college experience. This qualitative study of a single institution utilized a phenomenological approach in examining the attitudes of students whom have withdrawn from a degree-granting program at their institution.

### **Biases**

The researcher is an African-American student who earned his associate degree from a community college; however, his completion of his studies at a community college marks him distinct from the studies' participants. The researcher experienced certain obstacles firsthand during his time enrolled at a two-year institution and decided his research should focus on non-completer African-American students who attended a community college. Having attended a community college, the researcher has personal experiences and perceptions of a community college.

Biases, whether actual or perceived, were acknowledged by the researcher; however, steps to minimize these biases are identified. The first potential bias emerges from the researcher's previous experiences at the institution being studied. It is possible that the researcher's negative experiences could skew the interpretation of the findings. Another potential bias is the researcher's training, knowledge, and experiences as both a student at the institution being studied and faculty member at another academic institution could influence those involved as participants in the study. In an effort to control these biases, the researcher will utilize a peer debriefer to review and validate the findings. TheNguyin (2008) states peer debriefing, "also called analytic triangulation, is the process whereby a researcher calls upon a

disinterested peer—a peer who is not involved in the research project—to aid in probing the researcher's thinking around all or parts of the research process” (p. 605).

### **Ethical Issues**

Qualitative research is interpretive in nature. Based on this interpretive nature, the researcher's biases, values, and judgment are explicitly stated in the research product (Creswell, 1994). Ethical issues do not arise out of honest errors by the researcher or differences in interpretation; rather, it is related to the intent to deceive others or misrepresent one's work (Roberts, 2010). Examples of such include, but are not limited to, attempts by the researcher to enhance the significance of his or her research or intentionally interpreting results that support the researcher's opinions or biases (Roberts, 2010). Benedictine University's IRB requires doctoral students completing their dissertations to complete certification in the National Institute of Health (NIH) Human Subjects Training. The researcher completed the certification and the certificate will be filed with the IRB chair and NIH certificates are valid for five years.

Once the researcher successfully completed the NIH certification, the researcher completed the IRB application with all appropriate signatures. Attachment of any auxiliary materials such as the questionnaire, letters of permission from data collection sites, and the certification of NIH training is required. The IRB application was submitted to the researcher's Dissertation Director for review and approval prior to submission to the IRB. Once approval was given by the researcher's committee, the Director sent one electronic copy and delivered one hard copy of the application to the IRB Chairperson.



### **Site Selection**

The institution is a 2-year commuter campus located in an urban Midwest metropolis. The institution's primary goal is to prepare students for transfer to bachelor's degree programs or to move directly into the workforce through the earning of an associate degree, certificate or the completion of short-term training programs. During fiscal year 2011, the headcount enrollment trend was 8,706 and the full-time equivalent enrollment trend was 3,744 students. African-Americans comprised 82% of the student population, 15% were Hispanic and the remaining 3% were White, Asian, or Native American.

This institution is the focus of the study and presented an ideal location for interviews to be conducted because it provided access to the students who possessed applicable demographics that were the focus of this study. In addition, the researcher attended the college and has extensive knowledge of the institution. A formal letter (Appendix A) was sent by certified mail to the president of the college to request permission to conduct the study at the institution's campus. The letter outlined the focus of the study and the process to be utilized in soliciting participants.

### **Participant Selection**

The study utilized a purposive sample. Patton (2002) contends, "Purposive sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 230). All participants were required to provide transcripts as proof of their enrollment at the institution. The goal is to have an appropriate representation of male and female participants.

Approximately 9 – 12 participants were chosen for this study. The validity of the sample size was based on the emergence of themes. If similar themes emerged

with fewer participants, there was no need for an increase in the sample size; however, if there were a variety of themes with fewer participants, the sample size was increased. Participants must meet the following criteria:

- African-American
- Undergraduate
- Previously enrolled full-time
- Minimum enrollment of one semester
- Students who have withdrawn cannot be currently enrolled at another postsecondary institution

Participants were selected through various advertisement and outreach initiatives (i.e. flyers, e-mails, message boards, social media, etc.). Snowball sampling was also utilized to strengthen the pool of participants if needed. The snowball sampling technique is used for developing a research sample where existing study participants recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances.

### **Data Collection**

The study required each participant to give informed consent to the researcher. As individuals volunteered to participate in the study, an email to prospective study participants (Appendix A) was sent. The researcher then mailed each participant a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix B) authorizing the researcher to record the interview and the participation and demographic data form (Appendix C) to be completed and signed by each participant. A confirmation letter to prospective participants (Appendix D) identifying the scheduled date, time, and location of the interview was also included. A day prior to the scheduled interview, using a prepared script (Appendix E), the researcher made a follow up telephone call and sent a

reminder email (Appendix F) to prospective study participants. A request was made to each participant that they bring the completed and signed documents to the interview. In the event a participant failed to bring any of the documents to the interview, additional copies were provided.

To facilitate data collection, an Interview Protocol (Appendix G) was utilized. The researcher utilized an open-ended format with a set of standard questions to be asked. The standardized, open-ended set of questions was used to ensure participants were asked the same questions. Each open-ended interview question was cautiously designed to solicit relevant responses and information related to the research questions. The intent of asking standardized, open-ended questions was to improve the credibility of the study. In addition to recording the interview, notes were taken by the researcher of items thought to be of additional relevance during the interview (Appendix H).

### **Interviews**

Although there are various qualitative techniques available, the researcher utilized in-depth interviews for this study. Creswell (1994) states interviews allow the researcher to have control over the line of questioning and the ability to capture historical information from the participants. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format that allowed the researcher to govern the focus of the interview while allowing participants the freedom to expand on information critical to their perceptions. The conversational tone to be used by the researcher was conducive to engaging the participants and enabling crucial information to be gathered. As a result of this approach, the researcher was able to convey the perceived meaning of the participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2008b).

In addition, the researcher asked probing questions to extract responses essential to the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Individual interview sessions were conducted on scheduled dates. The interviews were held in an atmosphere that is convenient and comfortable for participants. All documentation and procedures were fully explained to each participant and a verbal agreement to continue with the interview was made prior to the acceptance of any consent forms. The researcher discussed the purpose of the study, intent of the interview, confidentiality, and federal regulations governing the research of human subjects. In addition, the consent form and participant and demographic information form was discussed with participants. Prior to conducting the interview, recorded verbal authorization to record the entire interview was given by each participant. Interviews were recorded with a digital recording device. Upon completion of the interview each participant was given a \$25 Visa gift card. All transcripts and recordings from this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of 7 years.

### **Data Analysis**

McMillan & Wergin (2010) contend, “Findings are considered plausible if the specific descriptive themes are supported by textual evidence. They are considered illuminating if they provide the reader with a new and revealing understanding of the phenomenon as lived/described by participants” (p. 97). The achievement of both plausibility and illumination has the implication that an interested reader will be able to read the results, make the connection between the text and the researcher’s interpretations, and then have an expanded concept of the phenomenon.

Recorded audio from the interviews was transcribed verbatim. Each interview transcript was carefully analyzed and categorized into overall patterns by the researcher. The researcher identified segments of the participants' responses that seem to convey significant meaning from the perspective of the participants. The emergence of themes determined the necessity for additional participants in the study, meaning if no themes emerge additional participants were required. A joint criterion was used by the researcher for evaluation in terms of plausibility and illumination once the overall thematic analysis was completed.

Utilizing the process outlined by Creswell (1994), the data was collected by the researcher through the interview process, sorted into categories, formatted into a narrative, and written as a qualitative text. Once tentative interpretations were made from coding and categorization, the researcher formulated statements into developing themes. Subsequent to data collection, analysis, coding, and categorization, findings were presented by the researcher in written format.

### **Trustworthiness**

Though the notions of validity and reliability have been declined by some qualitative researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researcher of this study attempted to ensure the studied phenomenon and subsequent results were presented accurately. Joppe (2000) asserted that reliability is based on results that are an accurate depiction of the total population. Validity in research is grounded in the premise that the research truly measures what is intended to be measured by the study (Joppe, 2000). Reliability and validity are evidenced through trustworthiness, which is crucial in qualitative research. Golafshani (2003) contends it is essential for a researcher to achieve validity and reliability in order to "eliminate bias and increase the

researcher's truthfulness of a proposition about some social phenomenon" (p. 604) using triangulation. Triangulation is defined as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

One limitation of this study is it solely examines the perceptions of African-American students that volunteered to participate in the study. The resulting findings were restricted to the perceptions of African-American students who elected to participate in the study and are not representative of all the students who currently attend or formerly attended the college.

This study did not take into account the degree-seeking programs participants were enrolled, retention programs, or any other on-campus services that may have been detrimental or beneficial to their academic success. Though the participants' perceptions of those programs and services were important to this study, those services and programs were not controlled by the researcher.

The study is delimited to examination of participants from the African-American ethnic group. In addition, all participants were formerly enrolled at the college. The findings generated from this study were generalized to African-American students at the college.

### **Summary**

At the core of phenomenology, "researchers seek a holistic picture-a comprehensive and complete understanding of the phenomena they are studying" (Roberts, 2010, p. 143) and openness to whatever emerges. This chapter outlined the

methodological approach to be utilized by the researcher. The research design, rationale for the selected methodology, researcher biases, ethical issues, and data collection and analysis were also discussed. These components aided in gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to African-American students' dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from the college.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore African-American students' perceptions of personal and institutional factors that contributed to their dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college in a major city in the Midwest. The primary research questions that directed this study were: 1) How do non-completer African-American students previously enrolled at a two-year community college perceive their experiences at the institution? 2) Are there common perceptions of these African-American students related to their personal and academic lives? 3) How did their experiences impact or influence their decision to withdraw from pursuit of their postsecondary education? In an attempt to answer these questions, the researcher conducted nine interviews with former students of a two-year community college.

Through analysis of the data, insight was provided into the various social and academic factors impacting these former community college students. Subsequently, three major themes emerged: (1) institutional environment, (2) institutional support, and (3) decision to withdraw.

This chapter provides a brief overview and profile of the former community college students and outlines participants' perceptions of their experiences during their enrollment at the college. The emergence of themes through data analysis and factors contributing to the college students' eventual withdrawal are discussed.

### **African-American Non-Completers**

Following careful review of the interview transcripts of each former student in this study, the researcher identified common experiences and perceptions of the



participants while they were enrolled at the two-year community college. Some of the participants stated they appreciated the incentive but were motivated to participate because they wanted their experiences to be known. The majority of the participants enrolled in college because they believed it would position them to begin a career that would lead to financial stability. In addition, most of the participants wanted to earn a degree, and many wanted to transfer to a 4-year college or university. Seven of the nine participants attended a public high school within the same school system. Interestingly enough, the majority of the participants did not plan on attending this particular two-year community college.

### **Participant Profiles**

The demographics (see Table 1) of participants in the study provided insight into their profiles (i.e., age, gender, area of study, parent's highest level of education, and family's combined annual income range). These demographic categories were of importance because it provided the researcher the opportunity to determine if any correlation existed between a specific demographic category and participant perceptions. The participants' age provides insight to age diversity of the participants in addition to how their age may or may not influence the participants' perceptions. The number of male and female participants is virtually even and their perceptions are similar in both gender categories. The area of study noted by participants varied widely with a total of six different areas of study indicated. The individual participant's mother and father's highest level of education ranged from a high school diploma or GED to an earned bachelor's degree. Based on the annual combined family income indicated by each participant, the researcher has determined that all

participants are classified as low-income. All but one participant checked her annual combined family income as less than \$40k.

## Participants

This section provides an overview of the demographics of participants in this study. Specifically, age, gender, area of study, parent's highest level of education, and the family's combined annual income range of this study are presented in Table 1.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Therefore, it is necessary to provide a brief profile of the participants of this study.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Area of Study</b> | <b>Mother's Highest Level of Education</b> | <b>Father's Highest Level of Education</b> | <b>Family's Combined Annual Income Range</b> |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|----------------------|--|--|--|
| Adam               | 25         | Male          | Business             | Not Sure                                   | Not Sure                                   | Less Than \$20,000                           |
| Kelly              | 40         | Female        | Social Services      | Some College                               | Bachelor Degree                            | Less Than \$20,000                           |
| Monica             | 35         | Female        | General Education    | Bachelor Degree                            | Not Sure                                   | \$40,000 - \$59,000                          |
| Doug               | 23         | Male          | General Education    | Not Sure                                   | HS/GED                                     | Less Than \$20,000                           |
| Sharon             | 37         | Female        | Science              | Some College                               | Some College                               | \$20,000 - \$39,999                          |
| Tausha             | 21         | Female        | Child Development    | Some College                               | HS/GED                                     | \$20,000 - \$39,999                          |

|        |    |      |                   |        |          |                     |
|--------|----|------|-------------------|--------|----------|---------------------|
| Brett  | 27 | Male | Criminal Justice  | HS/GED | HS/GED   | \$20,000 - \$39,999 |
| Mark   | 25 | Male | Child Development | HS/GED | Not Sure | \$20,000 - \$39,999 |
| Darryl | 22 | Male | General Education | HS/GED | HS/GED   | Less Than \$20,000  |

Adam is a 25-year old male whose area of study at the community college was business management and he earned 27 semester credit hours while enrolled. He is unsure about either of his parents' highest level of education attained. Adam's family has a combined annual income range of less than \$20k. He enrolled with hopes of eventually becoming an entrepreneur. Adam affirmed:

I thought about attending the college about three years ago and I chose this college because it was convenient for me. I enrolled to obtain my business degree. I went there trying to get a background in what it would take to sustain a business, the financial part, the people-person part, just the whole aspects of it in general.

Kelly is a female who is 40 years of age. Her area of study was social services and she earned 47 semester credit hours while enrolled at the college. Kelly indicated both of her parents had earned a bachelor's degree or higher in college. She has an annual combined family income of less than \$20k. Kelly was driven to enroll in college when the company she was working for began laying off employees. She purported:

I first began to think about pursuing my degree in college when I was working for a corporation, B.P. North American Gas and Oil, and the company started downsizing and I lost my job which forced me to go to school to further get a degree to further pursue a new career. What made me choose the college was the convenience as far as the traveling and as far as me knowing the community, but if it was another option at the time; I don't believe I would have attended that college.

The location of the institution played a major role in Kelly determining which college she was going to attend because she was taking public transportation when she enrolled.

Monica is a 35-year old female whose area of study at the community college was general education and she earned 36 semester credit hours while enrolled. She indicated her mother had earned a bachelor's degree or higher but she was unsure of the highest level of education attained by her father. Monica's family has a combined annual income range of \$40k - \$59,999. She enrolled once she had completed the requirements for her high school equivalency. Monica stated, "I went to college right away after, well, I started college right away after completing my GED in 1996." When asked if she had always planned on attending that college she attributed her decision to life circumstances: "No, I didn't but because I had a child and I couldn't go away to college. It was the next logical choice."

Doug is a male who is 23-years old. His area of study was general education and he earned 24 semester credit hours while enrolled at the college. Doug indicated both of his parents had earned a high school diploma or GED. He has an annual combined family income of less than \$20k. Doug was motivated to enroll in college

because his sibling was attending college. He confirmed he began thinking of going to college while enrolled in high school:

I first thought about college when I became a sophomore because of the simple fact my sister was going. I thought it was kind of interesting, so I wanted to see what it was about. I did not always plan on attending that college. The only reason I attended was cause of the simple fact it was in the area, you know. It was close and I have to take so many bus rides to go so far so I just stuck with what was close in the area.

Sharon is a 37-year old female. She earned 48 semester credit hours and her area of study was science. Sharon indicated that both her parents had some college experience. She disclosed her family has a combined annual income range of \$20k - \$39,999. Sharon had a substantial amount of time between her graduation and her attendance at the community college. Sharon indicated:

Well, I graduated in '93 and then life happened and I ended up going to a community college. I attended that college because I needed a flexible schedule. I didn't want to go through all of the admission requirements and all that stuff and I just thought it was more, because, that college just accepts pretty much open enrollment. So you can just enroll and pretty much be sure you can attend the classes.

Sharon believed this was the easiest route to take to earn her degree and expeditiously move into a career position.

Tausha is a 21-year old female whose area of study at the college was child development and she earned 36 semester credit hours while she was enrolled. She indicated her mother had some college experience and the highest level of education

attained by her father was a high school diploma or a GED. Tausha's family has a combined annual income range of \$20k - \$39,999. Tausha explained, "I began thinking about college my junior year of high school." When asked if she had always planned on attending that college, she attributed her decision to the program of study she chose: "No, well my thoughts before I enrolled was I planned on going to a four-year university but I chose this school because of child development."

Brett is a male who is 27-years old. His area of study was criminal justice and he earned 18 semester credit hours while enrolled at the college. Brett disclosed that both of his parents had earned a high school diploma or GED. Brett has an annual combined family income of \$20k - \$39,999. Brett was motivated to enroll in college by his lack of employment. He confirmed he was not considering college while enrolled in high school:

It was probably about two years ago, so probably 2011 and it was all because I couldn't find a job. I didn't plan on going to that college; it was a last resort. I just didn't want to be out on the street with nothing to do so I went to school.

Mark is a male who is 25-years old. His area of study was child development and he earned 30 semester credit hours. Mark indicated his mother's highest level of education was a high school diploma and he was unsure of his father's highest level of education. He disclosed that his family has an annual combined income of \$20k - \$39,999. He considered going to college a couple of years after he graduated from high school. In addition, he noted he did not consider any other institutions and conveyed, "I planned on going to that college."

Darryl is a 22-year old male. He was undecided about his area of study so he focused on general education and earned 30 semester credit hours. Darryl indicated

that both of his parents earned a high school diploma or GED. He has an annual combined family income of less than \$20k. Upon completion of his high school equivalency requirements, he considered pursuing his college education. Darryl purported:

Well, I started thinking about going to college when I first received my GED in February 2009. No, I did not always plan on attending that college. I thought about trying to obtain, possibly, a scholarship or something to maybe go to a university or something bigger. I didn't want to start small... I wanted to go to a bigger college. You know, maybe gain some different experiences... being around different people and cultures....

### **The African-American Student Experience**

Regardless of the participants' individual backgrounds, each carried some concept of the importance of college and some possessed an outlook on what college life would entail. Participants also highlighted their perceptions and experiences by discussing their motivation for enrolling, the impact of their institutional surroundings, and their expectations of college life.

#### **Motivation for Enrollment**

At one time or another, each participant believed there was a benefit to pursuing a postsecondary education. Each participant discussed various motivations that influenced their decision. Participants' motivations emerged into four categories: (1) family-related motivations, (2) financial and career-related motivations, (3) athletic-related motivations, and (4) criminal past-related motivations.

### ***Family-Related Motivations.***

Family members can be an influential motivation for individuals to enroll in college. Kelly, Tausha, and Doug were all motivated by members of their respective families. Kelly and Tausha were both motivated by setting an example for family members, while Doug was motivated by his sister's enrollment in college.

Kelly is one of two participants that indicated one of her parents earned a college degree. Though it is unknown if the majority of the remaining seven participants were first-generation college students, Tausha did indicate she was motivated by the potential of being a first-generation college graduate. Tausha simply noted, "My motivation for going to college was to be the first one to graduate from college in my family." Kelly acknowledged her child was her motivation for attaining a college degree. She affirmed:

The benefit was to show my son. I could tell my son no matter what age you are or whatever you're going through in life, get your degree and make something more of yourself if you are not happy where you are at in your life.

Lastly, Doug elaborated on his motivations for pursuing his degree. He commented:

My motivation, like I said, I had a sister that went to college and I saw the stuff she was doing. Just seeing other people's lives and hearing other people's stories about college always motivated me to go. They just went for it and they got it and now today, they are doing good, taking care of their family



### ***Career & Financial-Related Motivations.***

In addition to studies that indicate college graduates have higher lifetime wage earnings than non-college graduates, many individuals enroll in college because they believe a college degree will have a positive impact on their career or future income. Four of the study participants were motivated by the future career and financial benefits of earning a college degree. Sharon, Brett, Mark, and Monica felt a college degree would allow them to secure a better job and better compensation upon completion. Sharon maintained:

The benefit is to further your lifestyle, to advance in life; for me to enter back into the workforce. I was an executive assistant for 16 years and then the stock market crashed. Remember all that stuff happened in 2007? They started laying people off. And then when it passed, I went back to work and I felt like I got 16 years [of experience]. Well now, you need a degree.

Brett asserted, “The benefit would probably be to make more money once you got into the workforce.” Mark proclaimed, “I would be able to get a job in the future. I know for a fact that if you do not have an education it is hard.” Likewise, Monica revealed her goal:

I wanted to get a job, to obtain a career so I would not have to struggle in life. I feel that was my whole reason for enrolling. I felt like earning a degree would keep me from ending up in a dead-end job like McDonalds or something. I would be able to have a career and not just a job.

### ***Athletic-Related Motivations.***

Some college students believe college athletics will allow them to showcase their athletic talents and provide them a gateway to a prominent four-year university,

and ultimately a professional athletic career. While a college education may not be an athlete's main motivation, a degree can be a positive byproduct of pursuing collegiate athletic aspirations. Doug and Darryl offered similar commentary related to the motivation for enrolling in college. Both participants wanted to pursue basketball careers. In addition to being motivated by his sister's enrollment in college, Doug confirmed:

It was a lot that motivated me to go to college. Like I said, I really wanted to succeed in life. I really wanted to play basketball, too. So I wanted to take my basketball career further along and things like that.

Similarly, Darryl noted:

I like sports a lot and I was aiming to play on the basketball team and, possibly, get a scholarship to go to a two-year [college], and transfer to a four-year university and do another two years at a school.

### ***Criminal Past-Related Motivations.***

Though Adam's situation may not be unique amongst the participants, his motivation for enrolling was distinct. Adam was more in-depth with his explanation and emphasized college was "very important because I'm a felon." He maintained:

I need everything behind me saying, that was then, and this is what I am doing now. I need something to fill in the gaps on my resume to say this is what I was doing. I think me having a doctorate or something behind my name besides just saying I got this wrong and that wrong would show that I am moving further towards growth instead of being just stuck in a rut. I am not looking for a pity party.

## **Collegiate Expectations**

Although the various motivations mentioned were not enough to keep the participants enrolled at the college, something internal or external to the institution, transpired that impacted the participants' motivation and subsequent pursuit of a degree. While some students have no idea what to expect when they enroll in college, others have preconceived notions of what the college experience will entail. One participant, Mark, conveyed he did not have any expectations when he enrolled at the institution. The remaining participants' expectations were grouped into four categories: (1) college environment, (2) academics, (3) institutional support, and (4) financial.

### ***College Environment.***

While college does afford students certain freedoms and flexibility, students expect college to also have a certain level of structure that they did not experience in high school. Some participants expressed their expectations of a more serious collegiate environment. Monica stated succinctly, "I went into it thinking it was more of a stuffy, serious environment and it wasn't. I stopped taking it seriously." She also noted, "I thought it would be more structured but it was too laid back in many of my classes." Brett expressed his previous feelings about school and what he expected when he got to college. He proclaimed:

I hated school when I was growing up. I hated school. I looked forward to the freedom of college but when I got there it was too much freedom. It's just when I got that freedom; if you want to go [to class], you go, if you don't, you don't.

### ***Academics.***

New college students expect the coursework to be challenging and require a higher level of input on their part to be successful. A couple of the study participants expressed their beliefs that the assignments were simple and did not challenge them academically. Tausha and Adam expressed similar thoughts as they conveyed their belief that the coursework would be tougher. Tausha asserted, “I thought the assignments would be harder. I felt like the professors should be more aggressive on the work. The work seemed kind of simple. I expected more of a challenge.” Adam offered a similar assessment of the coursework he encountered while enrolled at the institution. Adam confirmed, “I actually thought it was going to be harder than it was academic-wise, the strenuous reports.”

### ***Institutional Support.***

One participant expressed an eagerness to earn a college degree but explained how her experience at the institution tainted that enthusiasm. Kelly conveyed:

My thoughts about college, I was very eager... excited to learn and get my degree. My thoughts have changed as far as me getting my degree; it feels like the process I thought it was going to be... not exciting anymore.

Kelly also discussed her expectations of faculty members: “You also look for that motivation from your professors to give you a challenge and to push you.”

Sharon offered a distinct perspective. She contrasted her expectations against what she believes it would be like at other institutions. She noted, “I think that major universities... when you go there it’s almost a seamless thing. You register, you go in, you get your financial aid. It happens one, two, three, four, five, six. Like that.”

Darryl explained the type of institutional support he expected to receive from the

institution's staff. He expected to receive motivation from individuals within the institution. Darryl affirmed, "I expected to find people who could motivate me, you know, push me, help me push myself further to that point to really want to go further."

### ***Financial.***

The financial aspect of earning a college degree can be a daunting concept for college students. Many students are discouraged by the cost of paying for a college education. Being a low-income student can add additional pressures related to paying for college and surviving financially outside of school. Kelly and Sharon discussed financial survival while enrolled in college and the challenge of paying for college, respectively, while Doug discussed the expected cost of earning a college degree.

Kelly asserted:

To be honest, it's hard to survive if you're a full-time student and you're a single parent and you're trying to work as well. Financial aid, it helps, but at the same time you need a little bit more to help you.

Sharon offered similar sentiment when she noted, "Right now I don't work, so financial aid was the only way that I was able to go school."

Doug highlighted his financial expectations prior to his enrollment at the institution. He asserted:

I mean before I got into college, I knew it was going to be a lot of money for what I wanted to do, especially for what I wanted to do. I wanted to go to school to be a pediatrician. So I knew me staying in school was going to take another eight years and getting a degree in what I wanted to do. It was going to take a lot of money. But, me, I wasn't going to let that discourage me.

## **Institutional Surroundings**

The ability of students to blend academically and socially into their institutional surroundings plays an integral role in students' decision to continue pursuing a college education. The institutional surroundings are inclusive of the classroom, common areas, and outside on the institution's campus. In the same manner institutional surroundings can provide an environment conducive to learning, it can also hinder students' ability to be successful. Participants provided their perceptions of their ability to integrate into their institutional surroundings.

### ***Distractions.***

During the interviews, the word "distraction" was mentioned or implied by several of the participants when discussing their perceptions of their experiences. A few of the participants outlined how their friends were a distraction during their enrollment. Darryl generalized how the environment could be disruptive when he asserted, "It's too many distractions there." Doug offered a similar statement about being distracted by his friends when he confirmed, "I could be doing one thing and then somebody would be like 'let me tell you this' or 'look, let me show you this' and I get distracted." Brett conveyed his ability to avoid distraction was dictated by his classmates. This was implied by his statement, "It depends on who you sit next to because most of the people did not come [to class] to work." Monica did not elaborate on what distracted her. She discussed what occurred as a result of the distraction by affirming, "I do not think I was prepared for college life." She added, "I was not going to class like I was supposed to. I had the party thing in mind."

### ***Student Cliques.***

In any environment where a large group exists, there can be the emergence of smaller groups within the larger group. Most of the students at the institution come from the surrounding community and many of the students know one another. This environment can contribute to the emergence of cliques. Two participants provided insight into the student cliques. Brett and Darryl discussed the cliques that can exist in the community college environment. Brett acknowledged, “It was a lot of guys up there that I knew, but it was basically like cliques from their neighborhoods. They only really hang with dudes from their neighborhood.” Darryl also explained why knowing many of one’s classmates can be a hindrance. He confirmed,

Like I said, it is too many distractions there. I am not the one to try and be popular and get along with the crowd... Chicago is big but it’s small at the same time so coming up in the Black community... the majority of everybody knew everybody.

### **Emergence of Themes**

Employing the process outlined by Creswell (2008b) for sorting the data into categories, the researcher read each interview and the transcripts were carefully analyzed to identify common themes across the data. Subsequently, the researcher coded and categorized the interview transcripts into three themes: (1) institutional environment, (2) institutional support, and (3) decision to withdraw.

#### **Theme One: Institutional Environment**

Community colleges not only have a mission to provide a gateway to higher education for those who may not be able to pursue a college degree, but also provide access to individuals living in the surrounding community. The opportunity for

students to attend the same college with people they have grown up with may improve social integration; however, it may also create a milieu that is not conducive to learning. All but one of the participants resided in the community directly surrounding the college. The majority of participants believed it was the most convenient institution for them to attend. Several participants mentioned knowing many of the students at college from high school or living in the same neighborhood.

Participants were asked to describe their experiences at the college and provide thorough insight into what they observed and how it impacted their experiences at the institution. Some of the participants' personal and academic lives were somewhat intertwined, creating an environment of chaos rather than learning. Participant responses centered on three major elements: (1) inside of the classroom, (2) reminders of high school, and (3) campus security.

### ***Inside of the Classroom.***

The classroom is the most basic and traditional platform for student learning. However, if class time is not structured and faculty members fail to maintain control of the students in their classrooms, learning may be inhibited. Participants discussed the classroom environment, the behavior of classmates, and their interactions with faculty members.

### ***Negative Experiences.***

Many of the participants revealed that the classroom environment was not one that was productive as it relates to learning. Negative experiences can cause students to distance themselves, potentially resulting in withdrawal from the institution (Tinto, 1997). Participants provided details related to the disruptive behavior of students, role of faculty, lack of faculty control, lack of pedagogy, and other faculty behaviors.



### ***Disruptive Behavior of Students.***

Participants discussed the disruptions that occurred due to the behavior of other students in the classroom. Kelly and Doug described their inside the classroom experiences with their classmates. Kelly stated:

My experience as a student at the college was not the best experience. It kind of unraveled to something that I was not satisfied with as a student. Inside the classroom, some students are there just to be there, some students such as myself are there to learn, and when the other students are not there for the purpose solely to learn and take it seriously, it is disturbing.

Doug asserted, “I would say the inside environment of the classroom is like you have some kids in there that want to learn and they do want to succeed and then have those kids that are the class clown and want to act up.” Kelly further purported:

There is no professionalism in some classes. It is not structured. To me, it is like it was a high school. It just felt like it was a disservice for the people who are trying to learn, trying to get a degree and trying to do something. It seems to be a lot of distractions for the professors in the class and they just get annoyed and seem as if they did not care either as far as the students who are there trying to learn.

### ***Faculty Role.***

The role of faculty is not limited to student engagement and the exchange of knowledge; it also entails maintaining an environment that is conducive to learning.

When faculty members fail to engage students and maintain an environment conducive to learning, the learning experience can be irreparably damaged.

Participants discussed the lack of student-faculty engagement in the classroom.

Monica felt as if her success resided in structure and her ability to engage with her professors. Monica pointed out:

Some classes were easier to adapt to than others. Some professors were more accessible and down to earth than other professors. You had some that you felt like you couldn't talk to on a nonacademic level and then there are some that you felt you were able to go to no matter what.

When addressing interactions with her professors, Kelly revealed:

I believe I could have been more successful in my first and second semesters with the right guidance from the professor and more aggressiveness from the professors as well. When you are looking for their guidance and you are looking for their help as far as teaching you something, you expect more from them... it is the same for the student but you expect more from a professor.

In relation to faculty engagement with students, Adam simply pointed out, "Some of the teachers came off as rash and unruly." The lack of student engagement and the absence of classroom structure posed a challenge for some participants.

Monica further expressed:

It was a lack of structure and the type of person I am. If I cannot grasp something or it does not hold my interest, I will not continue with it. And that was my problem with my experience at the college. Some classes I grasped right away and continued and excelled in and other classes I did not understand it or did not feel like I could approach the teacher with a certain understanding so I walked away from it.

Brett explained that all of his experiences with his professors were not negative but most of them did not seem to want to engage. He emphasized, "My teachers, out of

all my classes, I took maybe 15 classes, like two or maybe three of the teachers were really hands-on. It is like the other ones did not even really care basically.”

### ***Lack of Classroom Control.***

When professors fail to minimize classroom disruptions, it becomes a distraction for the students who want to learn. In addition, if faculty members cannot maintain control of the classroom, they may lose the respect of students. Brett and Doug expressed their perceptions regarding the lack of control in the classroom. Brett indicated nothing was done to curb disruptions in the classroom. He stated, “If you listened, you did. If you didn’t, you didn’t. A lot of people were just on their phones.”

Doug expanded by describing the fear some faculty members possessed. He explained, “I feel like some teachers do not have discipline over the students and I feel like the students overrun the teachers sometimes. They got so nervous and so scared they did not know what to do.”

### ***Lack of Pedagogy.***

Adam and Kelly outlined the faculty’s lack of patience and failure to provide guidance related to course content. Adam contended that some professors expected students to know things that they felt were simple and lacked the patience to give further, more detailed explanations. Adam purported:

Some of them were stuck in their ways, whereas they know  $1 + 1$  is 2, so you should know  $1 + 1$  is 2. Some teachers were not as patient as others. I mean, out of all the teachers I had, there were only two that I had a general dislike for and one of them was--I found out--a teacher that really should not have been there because my complaint was one of 30 towards this teacher.

Kelly also expressed her feelings about the support she received from the faculty as well. She declared, “It makes you not want to go to class when you have professors that are not attentive to your needs or have no sense of urgency to your needs.” Kelly provided a specific example of what she felt was a complete lack of support from her professor. She proclaimed:

It’s like for instance, I was having a problem in a math class I was in. I did not understand what was going on and I was not getting it crystal clear. I don’t understand how I can still get out of a class with an A just by showing up. I have failed every test and asked for assistance from the teacher and all they do is go over it with you, but you’re still not getting it. You go to a tutor and the tutoring is not what you expected it to be. I just did not understand how a teacher could not be attentive to my concern about me learning. I bring it to you in your face all the time and I still got an A out of the class. That does not make sense.

***Faculty Hypocrisy.***

One participant explained why she felt faculty members do not abide by the same expectations that they have for students. Sharon highlighted a particular incident which she felt contributed to her poor classroom experience. She proclaimed:

The teachers are hypocritical to me because I had to withdraw from one class where a teacher was like, “You know I am not going to be here Tuesday because I have something personal to do so you all have that day off.” But when I had something personal to do, there was a penalty for that. So how is it you as the instructor, get to do what you want to do? But me, when I have

something personal, it is a double standard. I am paying you; you are not paying me to be here.

***Sexual Advances.***

In addition to what Sharon considered to be hypocrisy, she further detailed her experiences inside the classroom to the extent she described instances of professors making inappropriate innuendos. While Sharon is the only participant to discuss sexual advances by faculty, this may or may not be a unique occurrence. She acknowledged:

You have challenges with teachers. I don't even know how they were able to become a teacher. You might ask a question and they might give you an answer that you could get on the street from a person. I have had teachers hit on me; just crazy situations. They were crossing the line constantly as far as the faculty is concerned.

***Positive Faculty Interactions.***

While negative experiences can influence a student's decision to withdraw, positive experiences can lead to better integration and ultimately student persistence. Not all participants described their classroom experiences negatively. Darryl, Mark, and Tausha believed the classroom environment was satisfactory and the professors worked hard. Darryl noted, "Inside the classroom most of the classes I took were pretty cool. Like as far as the professors, they were nice people. It was medium sized classes, so it was not really hard to learn. It was pretty cool as far as inside the classroom." Mark maintained, "Inside the classroom...the teachers worked hard." Though Tausha felt the coursework could be more challenging, she provided positive comments about her in class experiences and her professors. Tausha confirmed,

“Inside of the classroom, I thought the teachers were like really connecting with the students and tried their best to help them to pass their classes.”

### ***Academic Integration.***

Academic integration is essential to the retention and ultimate success of college students. One participant, Kelly, specifically discussed her ability to integrate academically. She explained her ability to academically integrate with other students was based on them possessing comparable goals. She discussed her relationship with a select group of students with who she interacted. Kelly conveyed:

Some of the students, I don't know if it is their age, gender difference or what it may have been. A couple of classmates were there with the same goal as me as far as taking classes more serious. So I would say that my integration or interaction with other students was okay. It just depended on the student's goals.

### ***Reminders of High School.***

College provides an opportunity for teenagers to make a transition into young adulthood. The independence associated with college life can aid in the maturation of freshman college students. Thus, the lack of institutional structure and immaturity of students outside of the classroom had an impact on the participants' perceptions. Many of the participants asserted that the institution felt as if it was an extension of high school. Monica commented:

I thought it was going to be a little more structured than it was. You know, going to that college, I found it to be just an extension of high school in certain situations. I thought it would have a little more structure and I actually did end up losing interest in it.

Similar to Monica, Tausha remarked that she had flashbacks of high school when walking the hallways of the college. She stated, “Well, outside of the classroom I thought it was like a high school setting. Some of the students skip class and sit in like the foyers.” Moreover, Tausha continued to express her views of high school as it related to the efforts of some of her instructors. She purported, “But it seemed really high school for a professor to basically tell you to do your work and make you do your work. I feel like when you are in college they should not have to do that.”

Darryl specifically identified the potential dilemma that may arise when attending an institution that friends or acquaintances attend as well. Darryl proclaimed:

The hard thing about going to college is you have to be very focused and there were just so many distractions. Going to college with people I was previously in high school and grammar school with, people I have not seen for years, there were always many distractions, you know; females and everything else. It was hard to keep up, you know, but that is the thing about being self-disciplined.

Sharon explained that she was not there to blend in with other students but observed the high school mentality that existed among the students. She overheard statements that students would make to one another. Sharon purported:

I think I am past that stage in life. I think the younger people probably might go through that [trying to blend in] because you can tell that there is a crowd of like the cool kids that are there just to be cool and then you can tell there is a crowd of kids that come there to learn. I could even hear it in their

conversation as I passed by. “Oh, you’re going to class today? It is too hot for that. You’re lame.”

Brett did not feel the environment was that much of a distraction. His statement was similar to most participants. Brett conveyed, “It was all right. It was not anything too amazing, you know. Basically, it was like a high school. It was not too much confusion like I said.”

Adam did grow up in the surrounding community but he did not know many of the other students at the college. He wondered how well he would integrate amongst other students. He declared, “I never seen any of these people before. How would they [accept] me? Would I be alienated by my peers or disliked by others?” Even with his initial apprehension, Adam conveyed:

Well, at first I thought it was a lot [more] mature people there, but it came off to me as just an adult version of high school. I mean it is not a bad school or anything, but I feel that a lot of things could be done differently.

Kelly did not indicate the environment outside of the classroom was a distraction, she stated she avoided extracurricular activities because the environment was too immature. She purported, “Outside the classroom, I did not really participate in anything outside the classroom. It was just more or less that I was raised to get out of the school and just walk and leave the building, period.” Kelly went on to say, “No, nothing grabbed my interest to even want to participate in anything, because it was just like a high school to me.”

Darryl affirmed that outside of the classroom was chaotic and could potentially be a distraction for students. He remarked that he was observant when he first got to the college but it was different once he got comfortable, “Once I really got



settled in and got comfortable I became completely unfocused kind of quick. It was like there were so many distractions there, you know.” In a high school setting, many of the students hang out in the hallways and foyers of the school. Darryl also provided a glimpse into what it was like when a student is walking through the hallways of the college. He explained:

Outside of the classroom, that is when you have everybody jumbled up in the hallway. Everybody is doing this, everybody is doing that, and it is like your eyeballs are just going in every direction. At the same time you are not really paying attention to where you’re walking; you are just walking.

### ***Campus Security.***

While campus security was not included in the questions asked by the researcher, the topic emerged in a few participant responses. Kelly (2012) stated, “Violence impacts individuals, families, communities, and community institutions (schools and universities) in a manner that disrupts the acquisition of educational skills, thereby impeding success in the academic arena” (p. 1). The feeling of security can directly impact the conduciveness of a learning environment, thereby a student’s ability to learn. Sharon expanded on her own security concerns when she attended the institution. She affirmed:

Like security is nonexistent. They sit there. Do they do their job? Do I feel secure? No. When something happens on the campus, you might get an e-mail. But I have witnessed things happen on the campus and then got the e-mail two or three hours later. It was an armed robbery and somebody took somebody’s coat, shoes, or whatever. I did not actually see it happen but I saw the commotion right after it happened and then I got an e-mail about two

hours later – be careful, alert on campus. Well by that time, we all could have been dead.

Doug provided more in-depth insight to his thoughts and experiences related to the college's security. He expressed:

I feel like it was gang affiliated. Like people would pass somebody in there that they did not like and would want to fight. They met them after school and wanted to shoot and stuff and it was not a safe environment sometimes. I am not saying that it was just like terrible like you could not get off the bus or walk in school or you would get shot. No, I am not saying like that. I am just saying it was not a safe environment sometimes because you had those days when there were fights out there. You had those days when people riot up there and try to meet you after school.

Though Monica did not mention a lack of safety, she did discuss the security guards specifically. Monica said, "Security was nonexistent. They sat behind their desks in the hallway reclined with their feet on the desk; most of the time they were chatting and laughing with the guys or trying to [date] the females.

Conversely, Tausha and Brett provided statements of support in reference to campus safety. Tausha affirmed, "Security was cool. I was friends with some of them. A few of them would talk to me in the hallways all the time." Brett further asserted, "Security guards break the groups up and send you home; no hanging out outside of the school."

In summary, eight of the nine participants in the study felt the atmosphere was a distraction in one way or another. A chaotic environment inside and out of the classroom combined with feelings of being unsafe on campus can be detrimental to

students' ability to learn. Students who admitted to socializing excessively and those with limited interactions with others seemed to feel the environment was constantly plagued by disruptions.

### **Theme Two: Institutional Support**

Study participants asserted that faculty and staff support was lacking during their enrollment at the college. Faculty and staff support is essential to the success of college students. It is especially imperative to African-American students who have such a high attrition rate. Participants discussed their feelings about the level of support received on campus. The majority of participants perceived their interactions with staff to be negative.

#### ***Negative Staff Interactions.***

Negative interactions with institutional staff can have a negative impact on students and ultimately their decision to persist. Interactions with an institution's academic systems will influence students' attitudes toward themselves and the institution (Bean, 1980). Some participants pointed to misguidance, while others highlighted the sheer lack of support.

#### ***General Staff Interactions.***

Adam revealed that he did not receive quality guidance from the Registrar's office and he never met with his academic advisor. He asserted:

Nope, I never saw a counselor. I do not even know who my student advisor is. It was a few people that were supposed to meet with me prior to picking my classes and even when doing that, I noticed that they only let me take electives. A lot of my pre-reqs that I would need if I was to transfer to a major university were nonexistent. When I was picking my courses and asking what

classes I need if I am going for my business degree, they would assign me anything that came up under that but give me none of my pre-reqs. So I think out of the two and a half years that I was there, I got all of my math and English done, but I still have to do my arts, my music, and everything else.

Tausha and Adam made similar comments related to the courses they were enrolled throughout their attendance at the college. Tausha asserted, “As far as explaining what classes you need to get past, like a lot of classes I took, I didn’t need.” Adam stated, “And every time I go there and ask them, well what do I need, they would give me something that I didn’t need instead of providing me what I would need to complete.”

Kelly discussed the implementation of a new program structure at the college. She conveyed, “I would say that it could have been more explainable since they had a new program going on with the different standards.” Kelly also purported:

Instead of them telling us what the changes were going to be in the near future, we were left blind and in the dark about that. So I felt that they kind of manipulated us on certain things, not letting us know. After you talk to your financial advisor and you tell them what your major is and then they are telling you to take all these other classes that do not necessarily have anything to do with your major. And so right there, I think that leaves a bad taste in anybody’s mouth who is trying to get their degree and they are being sent down the wrong path.

Sharon described what she felt was a complete lack of support from virtually every department. She provided detailed accounts of her encounters with the college staff. She confirmed:

You do not get the support you need from the offices that are there to support you, like the financial aid office, the chancellor's office. I have been to all the offices because I am the type of person that if I do not get what I need, I go looking for the answer. I spoke to all those people in all those offices and I did not get the type of responses I think I deserved.

Darryl conveyed that he did encounter a few staff members that were supportive, but the majority of the staff did not seem to have a vested interest in the students. Darryl asserted:

Yeah, I mean a very selective few were real supportive there. You could tell that they were real genuine in what they did and it was a few others that you could tell were in it for the paycheck. They are just there to come in and do what they got to do every day and leave. I mean, they do not really care about the advancement of the students.

Similar to Darryl, Doug stated, "The staff, the teachers, and things like that at the college, like I said, you got some of them there that care. You got some of them that don't." Sharon proclaimed, "As a student you should not have to do the leg work for them. They [are] on salary or they [are] getting paid for what they should be doing to help you out." While some participants discussed the absence of support in general, others were specific in identifying a particular department.

### ***Financial Aid Staff Interactions.***

A few of the participants were extremely vocal about the Financial Aid department and the financial aid process. Brett expressed his frustration related to the financial aid process. He expressed:

I am talking about just to get the financial aid. You have to go over here, do this; you have to show that; you have to make sure you bring your taxes. If you do not have your taxes, you have to get on the phone with the IRS. It is just a lot for the little bit of money. They would send you through a run around when they could just really just have you talk to one person and he could tell you what you need to do instead of sending you to somebody else. Then they are telling you, you have to go get this done and then once you get that done, you have to go see the person in back so they can tell that you did not do it right the first time so go see the first person again. It is too much.

Adam focused his response on the lack of thorough guidance and explanation regarding financial aid and student loans. Adam argued:

I feel like that process at that school needs to be revamped because a lot of students that I talked to find out the details of how intricate the actual process is afterwards instead of them explaining it to us up front and making sure that we understand what we are signing, what exactly this money is allotted for, what would cancel our funds, and just really the details of it in general.

Sharon discussed the potential ramifications of having her financial aid mishandled by the Financial Aid department. She affirmed:

I have almost been dropped from classes because my financial aid was mishandled administratively. I had to actually go and find the lady that was in charge of financial aid and it was a push of a button; she fixed it just like that. But the people would say things like “I don’t know; I can’t find it; I can’t see it; I can’t tell you; too bad.” That is like their attitude.

### ***Library Staff Interactions.***

Sharon further explained her disdain for the institution's library staff. She highlighted an incident she experienced when she was directed to the library by one of her professors. She asserted:

The other thing that I really did not like about the college was the library. You know, that is like the nucleus of the school. You have to be able to know your way around the library, especially if you cannot afford books or if you do not have a computer at home and things like that. You can walk in there and say, "My professor said there is a book here on file" and they respond, "I don't know, well it's not here and I don't know what to tell you, go back to your professor." I do not work there. You know what I mean, and it is nobody on the staff that can answer these questions.

All participants did not express negative comments related to the support received from the institution's staff.

### ***Positive Staff Interactions.***

Conversely, three participants expressed satisfaction with the level of support they received for the institution's staff. Mark and Monica both made similar statements regarding the support given by the staff. Mark maintained, "Everybody was supportive." Monica noted, "They were supportive in my enrollment. They helped guide me through with what classes I would need based upon the degree path that I'd chosen." Tausha was more specific in the satisfaction she received. She purported, "The main support I had was from the child development department. I did not really use too much other support besides the financial aid and the child development departments."

The majority of the participants expressed discontent with the level of support they received from staff and faculty of the institution. A few participants indicated support was provided by some staff and faculty members while, non-existent with others. It was unclear if the participants possessed predetermined expectations of support levels that were not met, or if they were simply not satisfied with the support they received.

### **Theme Three: Decision to Withdraw**

Participants were asked why they decided to withdraw and if they would consider re-enrolling. All of the participants expressed they intended on returning to school whether or not it was at the college. Five participants indicated they left college for personal reasons, while the remaining four said it was due to their experience at the college. Interestingly, all five participants that withdrew for personal reasons said they would return to the college and the other four participants declared they would not return. In addition to discussing why they withdrew, participants offered suggestions to the college for improving the student experience.

Tausha commented she withdrew for personal reasons and she would return to the college. She affirmed:

I had personal things going on in my life, so that's why I withdrew. It wasn't the [course] work; it was none of that. But overall, I would go back to finish my associates but I do not plan on staying there long. I just want to go in and get it done.

Brett, Adam, and Mark expressed similar sentiments as they conveyed that being a father and providing for their children took precedence over going to school. Each



agreed that financial survival was a priority over earning their degree at the time.

Brett confirmed his feeling related to financial matters. Brett noted:

My overall experience was not too bad. I was getting my credits, building up to my degree. But like I said, at the same time, everyday my kids need something. You know, you have babies you have to buy Pampers, you have to buy shoes; they outgrow everything in a hurry. I would have stayed in school ... if they could have broken the [financial aid reimbursement] check down to like a two-week [disbursement] check or give you a little bit of money instead of giving it all to you four months down the line, it probably would have gone better.

Adam shared similar remarks in reference to being a parent and the associated financial challenges. He asserted:

I left because of personal reasons. I just had a kid. I am still not working. I needed to help out more at home. I plan on going back in the fall semester and trying to finish up.

Mark proclaimed the institution had no impact on his decision to withdraw. He confirmed, "It was not the college that made me withdraw. They were cool. My son was born and I had kidney failure. I had to take a break." Adam and Brett both agreed they would return to the institution. Brett acknowledged, "I would go back to the college." When asked if he would return to the same institution, Adam agreed, "I probably will because it is convenient."

Though Monica cited the lack of structure at the college, she accepted ownership for her decision to withdraw. She asserted, "Like I said at first... I

expected it to be more of a structured environment and it was not.” As a result, Monica declared:

I kind of got sucked into the laid-back part of it and became too laid-back in my classes. I failed a lot of classes which it messed up my financial aid, it messed up my GPA, and I felt like I had gotten too far off the path. I wanted to go on but I needed a new start. So that is why I ended up leaving. I had gotten off track.

Though Monica has since relocated out of town, when asked if she would consider enrolling at the college again if she resided in the area, she replied, “Yeah, I probably would have.”

Sharon maintained she would not return to the institution. When asked if there were any other influences outside of the college that impacted her decision to withdraw, she responded, “Not really. I think it’s just basically what I experienced there.” She also affirmed, “There are some people there that work and understand what is going on, but they are so far and few between that it is hard to gain access to them.” Darryl remarked, “I do plan on enrolling in school again but it won’t be at the college.” When asked why he would not return to the college, Darryl declared:

Like I said, it is too many distractions there. I just want to go somewhere there are smaller classes, you know, more one-on-one with the students.

Somewhere I feel like I can actually be focused and just be worried about me and not have to worry about anybody else; no distractions.

When Kelly was asked if the college would be her institution of choice when she returns to school, she replied directly, “No, it will not be.” She reiterated the lack of institutional support as her reason for withdrawing. Kelly declared:

I would say the level of faculty, instructional support... if they have students that are eager to learn and they are asking for your help, I believe those professors should give those students what they need to be; the tools they need to be successful. You don't just blow them off because the other part of the class is not participating. The ones who have to suffer because you don't want to do your job or you are just frustrated. It's just overall the facility. Like I said, it's just everything; the financial aid, the advisors and how they are not guiding you where you need to be as far as your career and the classes that you need; the [lack of] professionalism. It's a high school, once again, and there is just no structure in my point of view.

Doug conveyed that he believes he will get distracted if he returns to the college. He was asked why he would not return and responded, "Particularly, because of the students--the students there and some of the staff there." Doug added, "When you got those types of distractions around you, what can you do if the staff is not doing anything?" Though Doug indicated the college's environment presents an obstacle to success, he accepts ownership for his inability to block the distractions. He explained, "I could not deal with it because I'm a very distracted person. So a person like me, I knew that me being at that school was not going to last at all."

### **Participant Advice**

Some of the participants offered their personal assessment of the study and their desire for it to achieve its intended purposes. Adam noted, "I wish someone had asked these questions while I was enrolled." He added, "It's not the worst school but they need to pay more attention to what students are thinking and saying." Kelly

placed responsibility with the college administrators to hold faculty accountable for effective instruction. Kelly asserted:

I just hope this study does do what it's intended to do and that more people are vocal, especially in the community colleges and African American community as well because we need to be challenged. We are paying this money and we're taking out these loans and we're not getting what we need to be prepared for our careers that we're trying to pursue. And furthermore, it's just the teachers don't want to do their jobs. They need to start training these teachers better and remove these teachers that don't care and get some teachers that want to do something and make sure that we're learning.

Tausha expressed similar sentiments related to the need to be challenged. She agreed, "The work needs to be more challenging. The work was really simple. Students expect college to be different from high school, at least I did." Sharon directed her comments toward the institutional culture. She purported, "The culture is really not a supportive. I don't want to say there is none, but it is a very, very, very low level." Doug and Brett offered similar suggestions to the institution for providing support to students. Doug commented, "The teachers need to get control of the classroom. They need to demand respect. Until they do that there will always be more lollygagging and less learning." Brett emphasized, "It shouldn't matter if teachers cared or not if you're there to get your degree, but some students need to know they're not in it by themselves. Some [students] may perform better and get more involved if the teachers show they care."

Though most of the participants expressed some form of dissatisfaction with their experience at the college, entirely or in part, that dissatisfaction was not

necessarily a determinant in the participants' decision to withdraw. Approximately half the participants perceived their experiences to be negative enough to cause them to withdraw. The emerged obstacle to completion for the remaining participants was the need to seek employment for the purpose of providing for their families.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed three emerging themes revealed during the interviews with the former students. The themes were institutional environment, institutional support, and obstacles to completion. Specifically, findings from this study indicate that the majority of the participants were dissatisfied with their experience at the college. Additionally, most of the participants believed they were not given thorough guidance or no guidance at all. Furthermore, some participants believed they had been advised to take courses they did not need for their respective programs. However, while some participants cited the institution's failures as their reason for leaving and not planning to return to the college, other participants indicated they left for personal reasons and would return to the college, even though they were dissatisfied with their experience. The final chapter of this study will discuss the findings as they relate to the literature, present implications for institutional improvements, and discuss the recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

This study explored African-American students' perceptions of personal and institutional factors that contributed to their dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college. Phenomenology was utilized to capture "the experience as perceived by the participants" (McMillan, 2008, p. 291). Accordingly, nine African-American students shared their perceptions on their experiences at an institution of higher education. This chapter provides a brief overview of the study and a discussion of the findings as relates to the literature. In addition to implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research will be presented.

### **Overview of Study**

The conceptual framework utilized for this study (Figure 1) incorporated the underpinnings from Bean's (1990) student attrition model integrating concepts of academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) concepts on the correlation between individual's beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and intentions were also incorporated into the model. While extant literature on minority students focuses on pre-college characteristics of students that identify their likelihood to persist in college (Astin, 1970, 1984; Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 1997), few scholars have examined the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of African-American students related to their persistence in the pursuit of a postsecondary education. With this in mind, the primary focus for this study was to explore the following questions: 1) How do non-completer African-Americans students previously enrolled at a two-year community college perceive their experiences at the institution? 2) Are there common perceptions of these African-

American students related to their personal and academic lives? 3) How did their experiences impact or influence their decision to withdraw from pursuit of their postsecondary education?

In order to gain insight to the experiences as perceived by the African-American students and to garner an understanding of their decision to withdraw from college, nine African-American students formerly enrolled at a two-year community college participated in qualitative interviews. Participants included five males and four females of varying ages. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more in-depth and idiosyncratic thoughts related to the African-American student experience in higher education. Accordingly, each participant provided a viewpoint for understanding the thoughts and distinctive challenges faced by African-American college students.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Astin (1984) believed student learning and development was directly impacted by the quantity and quality of student involvement. While participants had varying levels of academic and social involvement, none conveyed a high level of both academic and social involvement. Participants were either highly active socially or placed greater involvement academically while avoiding high levels of socialization with other students. Moreover, extant literature suggests that institutional policies and practices that initiate positive interactions between students and an institution's academic and social systems will create the opportunity for better integration (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1999). Negative experiences for students would have inverse results. The majority of participants were dissatisfied with their experience during their enrollment at the college.

Tinto (1975) believed students begin college with intentions related to earning a college degree and those commitments are impacted on an ongoing basis by their interactions with an institution's social and academic systems. While all of the participants enrolled under the premise a college degree would benefit them financially by helping them establish a career, nearly half of the participants (Kelly, Sharon, Darryl, and Doug) withdrew because of their inability to integrate into the college's social and academic systems. The absence of a student having positive relationships with classmates and faculty members will likely result in the student's withdrawal from college (Tinto, 1975). Though some of the participants had interactions with classmates, most expressed displeasure with the quality of their interactions with faculty members.

Bean (1980) theorized once a student enters college, his or her high school experiences, academic goals, and level of family support govern their ability to integrate. He also believed factors external to the institution can impact student's beliefs. All participants indicated their family and friends were supportive of their decision to attend college. In addition, five out of nine participants (Adam, Monica, Tausha, Brett, and Mark) withdrew based on their financial survival or the need to provide for their family. Though Bean (1980) believed students' academic performance also impacts their decision to continue enrollment or withdraw, only one participant (Monica) mentioned her academic performance as a partial influence on her decision to withdraw.

Bean and Metzner (1985) argued nontraditional students require minimal interaction with other students. Nontraditional students are generally older, working, and usually commute to their institution. Two of the participants (Kelly and Sharon)



were over the age of 30 upon enrollment and thus met the classification of nontraditional. However, Kelly and Sharon did indeed withdraw partly because of their inability to integrate into the institution's social and academic system and the lack of structure and absence of advising. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) theorized that the frequency and content of student's interaction with faculty members and other students will have a direct impact on student's decision to persist.

The frequency of interaction between participants and their classmates varied from minimal to what some participants considered to be excessive, and ultimately a distraction. Participants with minimal interaction with classmates expressed that those interactions were limited to discussions about coursework, while participants with excessive interactions socialized about non-academically related topics. In addition, all participants highlighted the low quality content and frequency of interactions with faculty members.

Through the participants' perceived experiences, three major themes emerged from the interviews and thus provided insight to the beliefs and perceptions of the participants. The emerged themes were institutional environment, institutional support, and decision to withdraw.

### **Institutional Environment**

The literature on institutional characteristics, policies, practices, and students' sense of belonging in an institution's academic and social systems did provide context (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). Participants expressed that during their enrollment at the college, they perceived the institution as having the atmosphere of a high school. While some participants were unable to integrate into the social system of the institution because

of its purported immature environment, others felt they integrated too much, which is a component that did not emerge in the review of the literature.

The majority of the participants lived in the community surrounding the institution and knew some of the other students attending the college. However, that fact either created an atmosphere of distraction or invoked students to want to distance themselves from their classmates. Those participants that chose not to immerse themselves in the institution's social and academic systems eventually withdrew from the college because of the environment.

Participants discussed faculty members' inability to control their classrooms. Students' involvement with classmates and faculty members, extracurricular activities, and classroom engagement all influence students' sense of belonging (Astin, 1984). The lack of classroom control inhibited students from becoming involved in a chaotic environment, thus negatively impacting their sense of belonging.

Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) confirmed that students who reported higher levels of social involvement also indicated increased social integration resulting in commitment to the institution and intent to return. In accordance with Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009), participants who were more socially involved did integrate better, and thus stated they would return to the institution if they return to college. Though the level of integration was not enough to avoid withdrawal, it appeared substantial enough for participants' commitment to re-enroll at the institution. However, the word distraction was mentioned by several participants when discussing the institutional environment, including participants that were socially involved.

## **Institutional Support**

Institutional commitment plays an integral role in an institution's ability to retain students (Tinto, 1993). Moreover, institutions have opportunity and responsibility to convey commitment to their students through the consistent communication of the high level of concern that exists for its students' well-being and development (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008). This study provides current data that proves students can be, and indeed are, impacted by the perceived level of support and commitment received from an academic institution.

Literature suggests a student's ability to adapt to a college will greatly depend on the student's perception of the institution's level of commitment (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Though more than half the participants contended they withdrew for reasons other than the lack of institutional support, six of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the support they received from the staff at the college. Some participants were dismayed by the support provided by the college in general, while others articulated discontent with the lack of support from specific departments.

Participants cited the library staff, Registrar's office, faculty, academic advising, and the financial aid departments as the specific entities that influenced their perceptions related to institutional support. For example, participants expressed the need for the financial aid process to be streamlined. In addition, participants highlighted instances when academic advisors enrolled them in classes that they do not necessarily need for their respective degrees. Participants did not discuss the frequency with which they sought advising from particular departments; however, they were vocal about the absence of quality direction from advisors.

While the participants were adamant about the lack of support received, some of them expressed perceptions of staff members even being nonchalant about providing assistance. Though a few participants indicated they withdrew from the college due to the lack of support, none of them implicitly stated that the level of support directly impacted their academic performance. Instead, participants discussed being enrolled in classes that were not beneficial to their matriculation. Participants encountered challenges that may have needed to be addressed by a specific department or combination of departments. These challenges, compounded with the lack of institutional support, contributed to some of the participant's decision to withdraw.

### **Decision to Withdraw**

Undoubtedly, college officials should be concerned with student attrition. In alignment with the literature, findings in this study indicate that students begin college with certain expectations and their experiences at an institution can have a direct impact on their decision to withdraw. More specifically, interactions with an institution's academic and social systems will influence a student's attitudes toward himself or herself and the institution (Bean, 1980). Accordingly, college administrators must focus their attention on controlling, to the fullest extent possible, the institutional atmosphere and students' experiences.

All of the participants withdrew because of their experiences while enrolled at the college or for personal reasons. The predominantly cited personal reason was the need to get a job to support their families. Tinto (1997, 1998, & 1999) argued that negative encounters and experiences reduce students' integration into an institution's academic and social systems, causing students to distance themselves and ultimately

withdraw. Based on the data, participants who failed to integrate socially did so by choice. Kelly and Sharon both indicated they were not at the college to socialize and because of the immaturity of many of the students, they chose to avoid integrating socially.

Students expect college to be a safe place to learn; a place where they can feel free to express themselves and learn from one another (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) believed collaborative peer support was of significant importance in motivating students. Conversely, while several participants mentioned concerns about lacking campus security and their physical well-being, Sharon discussed hearing students chastise other students for attending classes. This type of behavior can diminish the effectiveness of an institution's learning environment.

While the institutional environment and lack of institutional support contributed to nearly half of the participants' decision to withdraw, financial concerns emerged as the other prevalent factor in participants' decision. Socioeconomic status has a greater impact on students' opportunity to pursue a college education than their ethnic background (Carter, 2006; Hanson, 1994; Hearn, 1984). Though participants conveyed they were not provided a clear understanding of financial aid, paying for college was not their challenge, but rather their personal financial survival. The participants expressed the need to focus their energy on finding employment and working to take care of their families and provide for their children.

As the literature review suggests, the success of minority students is going to be contingent upon institutions' capacity to engage these students, which includes ongoing academic support (Spanier, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). As a result of the findings,

this study implies that African-American students need and desire institutional support to improve their probability of success.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this study have numerous implications related to policy and practice for faculty and administrators at institutions serving predominantly African-American students. Moreover, academic communities can utilize these implications to facilitate discussions regarding African-American student retention. Driven by the findings of this study, the implications for policy and practice will revisit the three major themes of institutional environment, institutional support, and decision to withdraw.

### **Institutional Environment**

The findings from this study are in accord with the literature on the influence the institutional environment can have on students' decision to persist (Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Likewise, identification of these barriers will be essential to cultivating innovative strategies to improve African-American student retention (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Accordingly, the implementation of specific remedies addressing negative influential environmental factors could directly impact students' decision to persist.

As it is essential to their success in college, the institutional environment must be conducive to learning for students. Moreover, administrators must assess and minimize, if not eliminate, distractions for students inside and outside of the classroom. While the college already has security personnel and a disciplinary process, measures should be taken to ensure issues that arise from disruptive students are addressed expeditiously to curtail problems both inside and outside of the

classroom. This, in turn, could lead to improved behavior by students and the expulsion of those that continue to be problematic to the college.

One of the most significant findings of the study was the emergence of the topic of campus security, which was not included in the interview questions. Student safety, while on campus, must be the highest priority for the college's administration. Two participants (Sharon and Monica) conveyed that security guards are present, yet seem to exhibit a lackadaisical demeanor. The institution's administration is responsible for ensuring that security guards present a posture of attentiveness and authority on campus. Sharon also mentioned a two-hour delay in receiving notification regarding an incident that had taken place on campus. The administration must be certain that students are notified of on-campus incidents in a timely fashion.

Another participant (Doug) discussed students being gang-affiliated. While the institution does have formal standards of conduct, these written standards of conduct do not specifically mention gang-related activities. Establishing and adhering to a zero-tolerance policy for students participating in gang-related activity could curb some of the gang-related violence on campus. In addition to minimizing violence on campus, it could provide an atmosphere of peace and tranquility that many of these students will not experience at any other point outside of the college.

### **Institutional Support**

The literature provides a concrete framework for understanding that minority students, specifically African-American, require extensive institutional support. In order for high-risk African-American students to be successful, it appears that institutions must utilize intrusive advising as a means to keep these students focused, and ultimately successful in pursuit of a college degree. Administrators should ensure

that staff members are consistently providing guidance through the enrollment process for the appropriate courses of their major. In addition, advisors should encourage students to complete financial aid paperwork in a timely fashion, develop college-level social and study skills, and assist in maturing their decision-making skills. This approach could cultivate student growth and enable student success.

Faculty members should work to improve on the level of student engagement. Braxton, Bray and Berger (2000) believed that students exposed to frequent instructional organization and clarity by faculty members, generally are more confident about their academic achievement. Faculty members must create and maintain a rigorous routine that subjects students to a pattern of engagement that maps a clear road to academic success. In addition, faculty members teaching first-year students have an incomparable opportunity to shape student behavior early in their academic careers (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Faculty members should take measures to limit classroom distractions for students, which may ease the burden of competing for students' attention. Frequent instructional organization and clarity by faculty members can aid in building students' confidence about reaching their academic achievement (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000).

The effective use of student performance monitoring systems to maintain communication between faculty members and advisors can provide early alerts for students facing challenges. To further its effectiveness, administrators could also implement an auditing process to ensure faculty members are utilizing the performance management system and incorporate use of the system in faculty and advisor performance evaluations. This proactive approach may allow faculty



members and advisors to work together in creating strategies for students to overcome challenges and obstacles.

### **Decision to Withdraw**

Concurrent with the literature, participants in this study identified their reasons for withdrawing as either their experience at the college or personal issues mostly connected to financial concerns. In addition, many students were unaware of the resources that were available to them on campus to aid in their success. Even though approximately half of the participants specified they withdrew for financial issues outside of the institution, they implied that opportunities and resources were not presented to them by their advisors. Administrators should implement a more intrusive advising process. Perhaps, this could be accomplished by mandating mid-semester meetings with advisors and students. Advisors should have more intentional discussions with students to discuss concerns that affect their academic success and determine their best course of action.

Given the proportion of low-income African-American students enrolled in college, administrators should focus on building relationships with businesses in the community to solidify potential employment opportunities for students facing financial challenges. Career development advisors can assist students in securing employment that aligns with students' academic objectives. Full-time or part-time opportunities can be explored contingent upon students' academic workload. Academic advisors, in conjunction with career development advisors, should work with students to create a manageable balance between their work and academic schedules. This may allow students to address financial concerns about supporting their children while remaining enrolled in school.

## **Future Research**

This research focused on how African-American students' perceived personal and institutional factors that contributed to their dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college. Considering the limitations and findings of the study, there are implications for future research that may be considered by higher education scholars. Accordingly, gaining further insight into these implications would contribute to the literature regarding African-American student attrition. Furthermore, the implications for future research would provide administrators with a framework to explore retention remedies appropriate for at-risk African-American students. While this study identified emerging themes of African-American student experiences and perceptions, there remain a number of opportunities for future research.

First, this study yielded the results of the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of African-American students who attended a two-year community college. It would be enlightening to replicate this study, but comparing students' beliefs and perceptions at a 2-year institution to those of students at a 4-year institution. This would provide insight to the beliefs and perceptions of students at different institution types.

Second, this study gathered participants' family combined annual income ranges and parental educational attainment levels. However, this information was solely used for demographic purposes. It would be informative to determine if patterns or trends emerge related to participants' socioeconomic level and their parents' educational attainment. These correlations may provide valuable information related to student persistence.

Last, a study focused on the perceptions and experiences of students that graduated from the institution would be appealing. More specifically, the study could

be conducted to solicit their experiences and perceptions to determine if there are any similarities to students who have withdrawn. In addition, if there are similarities, a study could be conducted to determine what impacted their decision to persist.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, African-American students have higher rates of attrition than White students. In addition, African-American student attrition presents a serious, long-term challenge for higher education administrators who continue to deal with the dilemma of improving the retention rates of these students (Carter, 2006). As a result, findings from this study revealed data on African-American student experiences at a community college and delineated how they perceived those experiences. This study suggests that African-American students indeed believe a college degree would benefit them but requires intensive support and guidance to be successful. Moreover, through outlined experiences, this study provided insight to administrators who are attempting to understand what influences African-American students' decision to withdraw. Lastly, this study provides information that will hopefully encourage administrators to scrutinize how their institutions support these students and implement effective strategies that will improve African-American student retention and completion.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Email to Prospective Study Participants**



## APPENDIX A: EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for volunteering in the study I am conducting to complete my doctoral studies at Benedictine University. As I shared with you, my research topic is “African-American College Students: A Qualitative Study of Selected Factors Affecting Dropout.”

I am looking forward to meeting with you on [Date] at [Time] in [Location]. The interview should last between 45 minutes to an hour. I am mailing a letter with more details to the address you provided on your Participation and Demographic Data Form.

I appreciate your assistance and look forward to seeing you on Date. If you have any immediate questions, you may contact me at (773) 844-2648 or by email at wendellonealjr@gmail.com, my Dissertation Director, Dr. Quincy Martin III at (312) 402-8770 or by email at qmartin@triton.edu, or the IRB Committee Chair, Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke at (630) 829-6295 or by email at aclarke@ben.edu.

Wendell B. O’Neal, Jr.  
Doctoral Student  
Benedictine University

Appendix B  
Informed Consent Form

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Title of Research Study

African-American College Students: A Qualitative Study of Selected Factors Affecting Dropout

### Project Director

Wendell B. O'Neal, Jr., Doctoral Student  
Benedictine University – College of Education and Health Services, Ed.D. Program in Higher  
Education and Organizational Change  
wendellonealjr@gmail.com, (773) 844-2648

In partial fulfillment of Dissertation under the supervision of  
Dr. Quincy Martin III, Triton College, Associate Vice President of Student Affairs  
River Grove, IL 60171  
qmartin@triton.edu, (312) 402-8770

### Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the factors that contribute to African American students' dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college in a major city in the Midwest

### Potential Risks or Discomforts

The researcher expects that this project will pose no risk to participants. If you wish to discuss these or any other discomforts you may experience, you may call either Project Director listed in # 2 of this form or the IRB Committee Chair listed in # 6 of this form.

### Potential Benefits to You or Others

This project will not provide any direct benefits to you, as participants, but will be used to provide insight in exploring the factors that contribute to African American students' dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college in a major city in the Midwest.

### Alternative Procedures

There are no alternative procedures. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to decline to respond to any question or withdraw from the interview at any time. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in human research, please contact Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke, IRB Committee Chair, Benedictine University, aclarke@ben.edu, 630-829-6295.

### Protection of Confidentiality

Records of this study will be kept private. Any published reports will not include information that makes it possible to identify a subject. All research records will be stored securely with only the project directors having access. Consent forms, audiotapes and transcripts will be retained for a minimum of seven (7) years before being destroyed.

### Signature and Consent to Participate

Federal and Benedictine University guidelines require that we obtain signed consent for the conduct of social research and for participation in research projects, which involve human subjects. After this study's purpose, procedures, potential risks/discomforts, and benefits have been explained to you, please indicate your consent by reading and signing the statement below. You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (print )

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I consent to participate in the study and have my interview digitally recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C

### Participation and Demographic Data Form

## APPENDIX C: PARTICIPATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

### *Personal Information*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Alternate Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street Address

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Credits Earned: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your mother:

- ☐ High School/GED    ☐ Some College    ☐ Associate Degree    ☐ Bachelor Degree or higher  
☐ Not Sure

Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your father:

- ☐ High School/GED    ☐ Some College    ☐ Associate Degree    ☐ Bachelor Degree or higher  
☐ Not Sure

Please indicate your family's combined annual income range:

- ☐ Less than \$20,000    ☐ \$20,000 - \$39,999    ☐ \$40,000 - \$59,999    ☐ \$60,000 - \$79,999  
☐ \$80,000 or more

### *High School Data*

High School Attended: \_\_\_\_\_

High School GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

### *Interview Date and Time*

Interview Date Time: Select One Date

- ☐ Day 1: Monday Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Day 2: Tuesday Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Day 3: Wednesday Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Day 4: Thursday Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Day 5: Friday Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Day 6: Other (if the dates above are not convenient, please fill in a date and time that is more convenient)

Day

Time

I am interested in participating in this study and give Wendell B. O'Neal, Jr. consent to contact me for interviewing.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Prospective Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix D

Confirmation Letter to Prospective Study Participants

## APPENDIX D: CONFIRMATION LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE STUDY

### PARTICIPANTS

<Date>

Dear <Title> <Lastname>:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the study I am conducting as a doctoral student at Benedictine University to complete my dissertation on “African-American College Students: A Qualitative Study of Selected Factors Affecting Dropout.” The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the factors that contribute to African American students' dissatisfaction and eventual withdrawal from a community college in a major city in the Midwest.

As an African-American formerly enrolled at a community college, you can provide valuable insight that can be used to assist the college, educators, policymakers and other stakeholders with information from your experience to develop program and policies that support the transition of other African American students into higher education, particularly at a community college.

Based on your Participation and Demographic Data Form, your face-to-face interview will be conducted on DATE at TIME in LOCATION on the main campus, ROOM #. The interview should last between 45 minutes and one hour.

Please be assured that your identity and responses will be treated confidentially and the information obtained will be used for this study only. Upon completion of the study, you will be given the opportunity to review the gathered information for accuracy if you desire.

This is an at-will study and your participation is strictly voluntary. At any time, you may refuse to participate or withdraw your consent and terminate participation without any consequences. If you choose to participate, any question you may have regarding the study will be answered as honestly and accurately as possible.

As a reminder, I will email and call you the day before the interview. I look forward to learning about your educational experiences. If you have any immediate questions, you may contact me at (773) 844-2648 or by email at [wendellonealjr@gmail.com](mailto:wendellonealjr@gmail.com), my Dissertation Director, Dr. Quincy Martin III at (312) 402-8770 or by email at [qmartin@triton.edu](mailto:qmartin@triton.edu), or the IRB Committee Chair, Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke at (630) 829-6295 or by email at [aclarke@ben.edu](mailto:aclarke@ben.edu).

Thanking you in advance.

Sincerely,

Wendell B. O’Neal, Jr.  
Doctoral Student  
Benedictine University

## Appendix E

### Telephone Script for Reminder Call to Prospective Study Participants



APPENDIX E: TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR REMINDER CALL TO  
PROSPECTIVE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Hello,

My name is Wendell O’Neal. I am a doctoral student in the Ed.D. in Higher Education and Organizational Change Program at Benedictine University. This call is to remind we are scheduled to meet tomorrow. Is tomorrow at <Time> still convenient for your interview?

If yes,

Thank you for your time. Please bring your completed and signed documentation. I will see you tomorrow.

If no,

I am sorry that we won’t be able to meet tomorrow. What is a convenient date to reschedule?

When date is provided:

Thanks. I have marked my calendar to see you on Rescheduled Date.

## Appendix F

### Reminder Email to Prospective Study Participants

## APPENDIX F: REMINDER EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE STUDY

### PARTICIPANTS

As a reminder, we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, Date at Time in Location. The interview should last between 45 minutes to an hour. Please bring your completed and signed documentation.

Please feel free to contact me at (773) 844-2648 or by email at wendellonealjr@gmail.com, my Dissertation Director, Dr. Quincy Martin III at (312) 402-8770 or by email at qmartin@triton.edu, or the IRB Committee Chair, Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke at (630) 829-6295 or by email at aclarke@ben.edu if you have questions or need information about tomorrow's interview.

Thanks again for your participation.

Wendell B. O'Neal  
Doctoral Student  
Benedictine University

Appendix G  
Interview Protocol

## APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Pre-Interview Checklist:

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Purpose of Study     | <input type="checkbox"/> Confidentiality            | <input type="checkbox"/> Length of Interview |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review Consent Forms | <input type="checkbox"/> Signature on Consent Forms |  |

### *Possible Introductory Questions (Intended to build a rapport with participants)*

When did you first begin to think about going to college?

Did you always plan on attending the College?

1. Tell me about your student experience at the College.  
Potential Probes:
  - a. What were some of your experiences inside and outside of the classroom?
2. When you enrolled at the College, was your intent to graduate with a degree or did you enroll on a tentative basis?
3. How were you able to integrate academically and socially?  
Potential Probes:
  - a. Was it something that you did, something done by the school, or a combination of both? If so, what was done?
4. Tell me about your relationship with other students?  
Potential Probes:
  - a. Were you popular among your classmates?
  - b. Did you communicate with your classmates outside of school?
5. During your time at the College, what did you believe was the benefit of earning a college degree?  
Potential Probes:
  - a. Was there a particular motivation for pursuing your degree?
6. Tell me about your thoughts on financial aid, student loans, and your ability to pay for school and survive financially while enrolled in school?  
Potential Probes:
  - a. Did you have a clear understanding of repaying your student loans?
7. How do you feel about the staff and faculty while you were enrolled at the College?
  - a. Were the faculty and staff supportive to you during your enrollment?
  - b. What type of support was provided?
8. How did your family and friends feel about you going to college?
  - a. Were your family and friends supportive during your time in school?
  - b. Did you feel alienated because of your enrollment in college?
9. How important was a college degree to your financial stability?
  - a. Did you feel that you would be in a better financial position if you earned a degree?

10. What were your thoughts about college before you enrolled? Did those thoughts change or remain the same after enrollment? Why?
11. Tell me how your overall experiences at the College impacted your decision to withdraw from school?

*Interview Wrap-up Questions*

1. How much ownership do you accept for your decision to withdraw?
2. Were there any influences outside of the College that impacted your decision to withdraw?
3. Do you plan on enrolling in school again? If so, at the College?
4. Do you plan on pursuing a bachelor's degree?
5. Which of the following had the greatest impact on your decision to withdraw?
  - Ability to integrate academically and socially
  - Financial concerns
  - Level of faculty and institutional support
  - Lack of academic preparation
  - Other?
6. Is there anything else you'd like to share that I have not asked?

Post-Interview Checklist: ☐ Thank Participant ☐ Questions ☐ Confidentiality

Appendix H  
Notes Form

## APPENDIX H: NOTES FORM

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]



