

A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF FACTORS AFFECTING RETENTION AND
GRADUATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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by

Kim-Marie Cespedes

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Kim-Marie Cespedes

Barbara Cozza, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF FACTORS AFFECTING RETENTION AND GRADUATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Kim-Marie Cespedes

African American university students experience lower levels of retention on college campuses (Tinto, 2012). Academic support is important during the first year of college to increase the likelihood of future success. Therefore, it is crucial that African American university students, who sometimes find themselves isolated in a predominantly White institution, are given a range of social and academic support that eases the transition into college (Tinto, 2012). This will result in African American students staying within the institution to complete their college degree.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore personal and institutional factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The study focused on the experiences of African American students in a mentoring program at the university. The program focused on skilled-based development, academic support and career opportunities to enhance the overall academic success of African American students within the institution. The significance of the study was to understand, from the student perceptions, the role of the higher education institution in improving the student support base system including peer mentoring, faculty engagement, financial support and academic support.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation work to my parents, Gifton and Danrose Darling, my husband, Andrew, my daughter, Brittany, my son, Michael, my nieces, Tashalee, Tasheika, Haley, Jada, Asheiska, Shaneique, my nephews, Teddyan, Tambert, Teverald, Tarique Shawn, Justin, Jordan and Dante, my sisters, my aunts, and all the African American college students who are wondering if they will complete their college degree. I say, Yes-You can! and Yes-You will! You are the next generation of African American students who need to break the vicious cycle of African American college dropouts by taking advantage of all university opportunities and available mentorship programs. I say persevere and get your college degree (s) knowing that anything is possible if you only take that first step and stay on course regardless of educational inequity.

I dedicate this work to my friend, Jerline. Thank you for your support over the years. I also dedicate this work to my late pastor, Rev. Raphael Johnson who also had a great passion in education and now celebrating in heaven that another one of his mentees did it! This was not an easy process, but I must be thankful especially to my children for allowing me the time to focus on my studies and completely understanding the sacrifices I had to make during the process. Finally, I also dedicate this work to those African American students who might still be struggling in college and doubting graduation. I say you must have the determination and perseverance to excel at all educational and professional levels. Yes- You can and Yes-you will!

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To God be the glory, great things He has done, and I owe it all to Him because He has taught me how to cope during challenging times and knowing that He is still the same God yesterday, today and forever.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

African American university students experience lower levels of student retention on college campuses (Tinto, 2012). They are less likely than whites to make an immediate transition from high school to college which means that higher education institutions should prioritize the factors affecting graduation and retention of African American university students and solutions to solve this problem (Tinto, 2007). Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement indicates that first-year students, on average, spend only about half of the time required for successful learning and students often report that they work less than expected when they started college (National Survey for Student Engagement, 2006). Similar findings also demonstrate that, unfortunately, more than a few students begin college academically underprepared (National Survey for Student Engagement, 2006).

As Tinto (2012) discussed, “At no time is academic support more important than in the first year...the first semester and first weeks of that semester. Early success whether in the beginning of a course or in the first course of a program study increases the likelihood of future success” (Tinto 2012, p. 26). Therefore, it is crucial that African American university students, who sometimes find themselves isolated in a predominantly White institution, are given a range of social and academic support that eases the transition into college (Tinto, 2012). This will result in African American university students staying within the institution to complete their college degree.

The 1990 Student Right to Know Act, passed by Congress in 1990, requires that post-secondary institutions report the percentage of students who complete their degree

program within 150 percent of the normal time for completion (6-year graduation rate). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, among students of different racial and ethnic groups who sought a bachelor's degree at a 4-year college in Fall 2010, the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate was highest for Asian students (74 percent), followed by White (64 percent), Hispanic (54 percent) and Black students (40 percent). In comparison, the four-year graduation rates for first time, full-time undergraduates were 50 percent or less for each racial/ethnic group with the African students at the lowest graduation rate. In 2017, the status dropout rate (percentage of 16-24-year-olds not enrolled in school) for Asian (from 3.1 to 2.1 percent), White (4.3 percent), Hispanic (8.2 percent) and Blacks (6.5 percent). The status dropout was much higher for minority students including Hispanics and African Americans (NCES, 2017). The 6-year graduate rate (150 percent graduation rate) in 2016 was 60 percent for the first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in fall 2010. In comparison, 41 percent of first-time, full-time undergraduates seeking a bachelor's degree received them within 4 years and 56 percent received them with 5 years.

As reflected in the table below, for the 1990 period, 35 percent of Black students completed college in 5 or fewer years compared with 60 percent of whites while 21 percent of blacks completed college in 4 years compared to 45 percent of whites. Taking a longer period to graduate may result from various reasons, including change of schools or majors, dropping out, or taking a reduced course load for financial, academic, or personal reasons. Additional time in college can be costly to the individual by delaying entrance into the full-time labor market.

Table 1*Recent College Graduate Surveys*

Race	4 or Fewer Years	5 or Fewer Years	6 or Fewer Years
White	45%	60%	64%
Black	21%	35%	40%
Asian	50%	68%	74%
Hispanic	32%	49%	54%

Source: NCES (Last Updated: February 2019)

Understanding factors which affect retention and graduation of African American university students are important for institutional practices on improving retention and graduation of African American university students. Academic and social integration are contributing factors to low retention of African American university students, in addition, to the feeling of the isolation and lack of support (Tinto, 2012).

Other problems that African American university students encounter are educational inequities in our educational system, educational policies and practices which means that intervention programs including social and academic integration can help rectify the growing needs of African American university students (Tinto, 2012). Educational institutions should ensure that African American students are given access and opportunity to programs, resources, and services that enhance their educational experiences (Anumba, 2015). This, as a result, could improve graduation and retention for African American University students through network of support systems (Johnson, 2013).

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the phenomena of lived experiences of factors affecting graduation and retention of African American students in higher education by exploring the personal, socio-economic, social and environmental factors that contribute to retention and graduation. This phenomenological research study investigated factors that contribute to long-term improvement in retention and graduation for African American university student through the feedback from students' lived experience. The research study focused on freshman students who are enrolled in a mentoring program geared towards African American students to foster an environment where high potential African American students can be provided with opportunities to excel based on the mentoring program five pillars of success including connectivity, career preparation, personal enrichment, academic success and spiritual enrichment. Creswell (2012) discussed that "the purpose of a proposal is to help an investigator think through all aspects of the study and anticipate problems" (p. 268).

The research study explored the students' lived experiences from different perspectives and analyzed the contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students which includes academic and social integration, financial support, active student involvement in established retention programs, academic support, student faculty-engagement, and peer mentoring. The lived experiences of African American university students play an essential role in enhancing institutional actions and taking necessary measures to improve retention and graduation of African American university students (Tinto, 2012). The research study explored different themes

contributing to the retention and graduation rate of African American students from a phenomenological perspective.

Historically, African American university student retention and graduation rates are lower than Caucasian students due to low socio-economic status and this a challenge that still exists today in higher education. According to the 2014 US Consensus report, African American population is 42,158,238 which is 13% of the US population, yet only 5 million of African American population have a four-year college degree (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). These are alarming concerns that need to be addressed and rectified within universities and colleges across the United States to avoid the vicious generational cycle of low socio-economic status of minorities (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Tinto (2012) discussed that financial need tends to be associated with higher rates of student retention, especially college students from low-income backgrounds. This seems particularly true whether a students' financial aid influence a student choice of attending a private university versus a public university, whether a student attend a four-year college versus a two-year college, whether a student attend full-time versus part-time, or whether student will maintain a job while in college (Tinto, 2012).

As researchers, educators and policy makers, it is necessary to create an educational system to produce the most educated citizens in a culturally responsive environment which will eventually improve retention and graduation of African American university students. Therefore, a high priority needs to be placed on improving retention and graduation for African American university students through an enriched academic curriculum and social support (Tinto, 2012). First, institutions must recognize that they have an obligation to help students stay and complete their academic studies

(Tinto, 2012). This requires institutions to focus on their own existing behavior and establishing conditions within its wall to promote those outcomes (Tinto, 2012. p.6). This requires institutions to take a series of actions through expectations, support, involvement and assessment. “Institutional success in enhancing retention and graduation is not merely the summation of various programs, but a reflection of the systematic nature of those programs and the capacity of an institution to align the actions of its various parts and members to the same goal, namely the success of all students” (Tinto, 2012, p.8).

Therefore, understanding and exploring factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students to meet ongoing needs of higher education is crucial which can impact the need for further exploratory studies on retention and graduation of African American university students. More African American students are aspiring to attend college after they graduate high school, which remains a challenge due to low socioeconomic status, less involvement with student organization, less contact with faculty, less mentorship opportunities and lack of academic and social integration (Tinto, 2012).

Theoretical Framework: Tinto’s Theory of Academic and Social Integration

The theoretical framework in the research study was based on Tinto’s model of Academic and Social Integration. This model and learning theory were used in this research to provide a framework for exploring factors affecting retention and graduation of African American Students in Higher Education. In addition, Tinto’s learning theory was used to understand the phenomenological construct of African American university students’ perspectives on retention and graduation in relation to student learning, faculty and student engagement. Vincent Tinto’s (1975) innovative student integration model

initiated a national dialogue on student retention which has established the base for several theoretical studies on undergraduate retention (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Tinto, 2007). The model indicated that students most likely to graduate are the committed ones who are socially integrated into the campus community (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto (2012) focused on institutional action to promote student retention on campuses and ensure that there is academic and social integration. Understanding students' family background can influence persistence in college and institutions can accommodate and implement support programs, as required, for different student population. Tinto (1987) highly emphasized that, "when the academic and social systems of the institution are weak, the countervailing external demands may seriously undermine the individual's ability to persist on to completion" (Tinto 1987, p. 108).

Tinto's retention theory is crucial in developing and implementing support programs to improve the retention rate of African American university students. These program implementations can be designed to improve academic performance of African American university students from low socio-economic background which will improve retention. Given proper guidance, mentoring and social academic support, African American students from low socio-economic background can model behaviors, develop academic skills and resilience for a positive outcome in higher education (Tinto, 2007).

African American university students from low socio-economic backgrounds encounter many obstacles in higher education, including a combination of financial, social and academic support which can hinder students from making the critical connection to pedagogy and future financial well-being for the next generation (Tinto, 2007). Tinto's theory emphasized the support of peer and social environment. Students

need a sense of belonging and strong academic support, mentorship, advisement and counseling to acquire the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior and social environment. Student engagement and academic support are vital for retention of African American students in higher education and can be used as an indicator for persistence and academic success (Tinto, 2012).

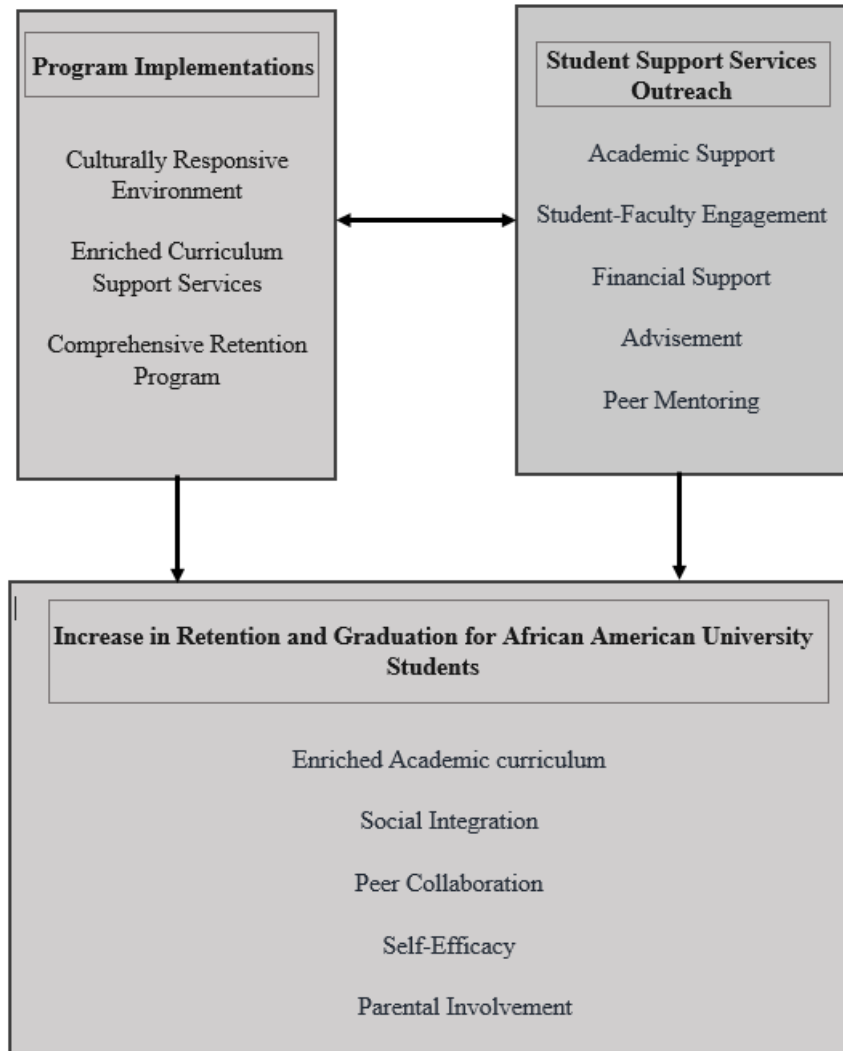
Student interaction with peers can positively influence overall academic growth and personal development, problem-solving skills and self-esteem (Kuh 1993, 1995). This is relevant to the research study on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students and demonstrate how peer collaboration and social integration can have an impact on retention and graduation of African American university students. Students' success and retention of African American university students depend on how students interact with their peers in the classrooms, administrators on campus and supportive faculties inside and outside classroom settings. "Mentoring activities, including faculty interaction outside of class and contact with advisors, are positively related to African American student persistence within higher education" (Himmelhoch et al. 1997).

Academic integration, academic performance and satisfaction can influence retention and graduation of African American students. This means that if the students are to be successful, will need to be given proper guidance and academic support on campus (Tinto, 2012). In addition, African American university student involvement should be supported and encouraged through campus facilities and activities (Tinto, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

Retention and Graduation of African American College Students



The conceptual framework, as is shown in Figure 1, demonstrated how program implementations influence retention and graduation of American students in higher education. The diagram also demonstrated the importance of program implementation in a culturally responsive environment through academic support, student engagement and financial support to improve retention and graduation of African American university

students. Historically, underrepresented students encounter challenges of racial identity and sometimes difficulty adjusting to their institutional environment which can influence how students think, spend their time and can affect students' academic performance and retention (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 1995). Tinto's theory of Academic and Social Integration focused on enriched academic curriculum and social integration to create strong academic support, mentorship and advisement which can improve retention of African American university students (Tinto, 2012).

Significance of the Research Study

Research findings showed that necessary interventions were required through the development of databases that assess and evaluate program development for increased retention. This as a result allowed African American students the same chance to succeed as other groups and offered them a better chance to remain in college after their first year (Sherman & Giles, 2004). The research study was significant as the study explored factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students and the importance of African American students addressing their ongoing needs in higher education. The research study gave an in-depth knowledge of how personal, socio-economic, social and environmental factors affect retention and graduation from a phenomenological perspective.

The research study sought to explore the phenomena of the lived experiences of African American university students and to analyze significant themes contributing to their retention and graduation. In addition to addressing the issues of retention and graduation of African American university students in higher education, racial and socio-economic barriers are associating factors for African American students in higher

education and have been a long ongoing concern (Baber, 2012). This is an area in the research study that was further explored, and the significance of the study was to find effective solutions to solve this ongoing dilemma of low retention and graduation for African American university students. This research study examined other contributing factors that can also be associated with retention and graduation of African American students.

Connection with Social Justice and/or Vincentian Mission in Education

Creating mentoring initiative programs to improve retention of African American students can promote social justice and equity and motivates African American university students to improve academic standards and student development. Historically, underrepresented students encounter challenges and sometimes have difficulty accessing and adjusting to institutional environments and must be cognizant of ways in which underrepresented populations are systemically marginalized (Croft & Brown, 2020). Social justice can create opportunities for all students, including African American students to succeed in the least restrictive environment, regardless of socio-economic status. African American students encounter many obstacles in higher education including a combination of financial, social and academic support which can hinder students from making the critical connection to pedagogy and academic success for the next generation.

Promoting social justice for African American students will allow them a sense of belongingness through a strong academic support team, mentorship, advisement and counseling and can provide student the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior and social environment. Given proper guidance and social academic support,

African American students can model positive behaviors, develop academic skills and resilience for a positive outcome in higher education which in result can increase retention.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What are some characteristics within higher education institution that can improve African American university students' achievement, retention and graduation?

RQ2: What are the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions?

RQ3: What are the lived experiences of African American students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentorship since enrolling within the university?

Design and Methods

Research Design and Data Analysis

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design, including individual interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. A phenomenological qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth review of the research participant perspectives on factors affecting retention and graduation of the students.

The data was coded and categorized with the goal of identifying themes which were used to create a description of the phenomenon influencing graduation and retention of African American students based on their lived experiences.

Participants

The participants were ten African American, second semester freshman who were currently enrolled in the university and participated in a mentorship program which centered on student academic success. The program focused on skilled-based development, academic support and career opportunities to enhance the overall academic success of African American students within the institution. There were four males and six female students. Six of the students were out-of-state residents and four students were in-state residents.

Instruments

The data was collected through observations, student interviews and data analysis of the program materials. The researcher observed the participants in the mentoring sessions and workshops within the institution to observe the social and academic integration with peer and mentors as well as the level of commitment to the program. The researcher was a passive observer and took notes of the interaction between the mentors and mentees. The mentors were African American upperclassmen who had demonstrated academic commitment and excellence. The mentorship session focused on academic goals, tutoring and career opportunities. The data emerged from the observation were substantiated by the participant interview on the importance of the mentorship program. The findings from the observations revealed that mentorship sessions were effective in improving retention and graduation of African American students. The observations and data analysis highlighted the importance of university support, particularly program mentorship on improving retention and graduation of African American students in

higher education. The researcher also conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with the participants to address the primary research questions.

In addition, through the data analysis protocol, the researcher looked at the participants' academic and social integration, peer collaboration, connectivity and self-efficacy within the mentorship program.

Data Collection Procedures

The participants of the study were contacted via phone calls and emails which included a description of the study, the allotted time for interviews and the student confidentiality agreement. Document analysis was collected via program materials which included program manual and scholar goal sheet and occurred in the Spring 2022 semester. During the data collection, participants responded to open-ended interview questions and was able to check data for clarification of accuracy. After the data was collected, there was an opportunity for participants to validate the accuracy of their lived experiences in the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Definition of Terms

The following terms are operationally defined in the current research study to avoid or reduce the possibility of misinterpretation:

Socio-Economic Status (SES): is defined as a measure of one's combined economic and social status. It encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security and social class (Guiffrida, 2005).

Student Success: is defined as how well students are prepared to accomplish their academic, personal and professional goals through development of knowledge, responsibility and university community engagement (Tinto, 1993, 2007).

Student Retention: is the process of ensuring student success or graduation by keeping track of the first-year undergraduate students who continue at the same institution the following year (Tinto 1975, 1993, 1999, 2007).

Historically Black Institutions (HBI): A postsecondary institution of higher education that existed before 1984 with a historic mission of educating African American students while being open to all (DeSousa & Kuh,1996).

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI): is the term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (DeSousa & Kuh,1996).

University: An institution of higher learning where students study for degrees. The institution normally comprises of an undergraduate division which confers bachelor's degrees and graduate division which consists of graduate and professional schools which may confer master's degrees and doctorate. This is an institution which provides a common gateway to academic programs for entering students. Tinto's theories of student retention focused on student support while attending the institution (Tinto, 2012).

College: A postsecondary institution of higher education granting students a minimum of an associate degree (Pascarella & Terenzini,1991,1995, 2005).

African American student: An American student of Black African descent (DeSousa & Kuh,1996). In this research study, the terms "Black" and "African American" students are used interchangeably throughout this research paper. However, the researcher used the term "African American" students to address the primary research questions on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

Chapter 2 discussed the theoretical framework, conceptual framework and review of literature on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. This chapter discussed Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration which was used to investigate the current study on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education.

African American university students experience lower levels of student retention on college campuses. They are less likely than White students to make an immediate transition from high school to college which means that high priority needs to be in place to understand the factors affecting retention of African American university students and finding effective solutions to solve this problem (Tinto, 2007). Understanding factors which affect retention of African American students is very crucial for institutional practices and improving retention and graduation of African American university students. This is an alarming condition which needs immediate attention of the University community, researchers, policymakers and students' feedbacks.

There is an urgency to understand student retention in low-income communities as student retention has become a big business (Tinto, 2007). There are concerns that need to be addressed and rectified within universities and colleges across the United States to avoid the vicious generational cycle of low socio-economic status of minorities. The generational cycle allows African American university students of low socio-economic status to remain at a disadvantage in the education system. These students tend to have fewer financial resources to continue college which affect retention rate of

African American university students. Insight is required to better understand the contributing factors that can also be associated with the retention of African American students which are some of the challenges for leaders in higher education. Therefore, understanding and exploring factors affecting the retention rate of African American university students to meet ongoing needs of higher education is a high priority. The current research study can impact the need for further exploratory studies on retention of African American university students.

Chapter one presented the purpose of the study and introduced factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. Chapter one also discussed the theoretical and conceptual framework. Chapter two will review the theoretical construct framing the study, present the related literature and discuss the themes, related to the research study, in the existing literature.

Theoretical Framework: Tinto's Theory of Academic and Social Integration

The original studies of undergraduate retention began in the 1930's published by the US Department of Interior and the Office of Education where data was collected from 60 institutions to examine demographic characteristics, social engagement and reasons for departure. By the 1960s, massification in higher education across the country became a challenge. The Civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, protest of campus students in response to war, political and social revolutions prompted discussions on the educational equity in America society (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

By the late 1970s, the enrollment rate of undergraduate students began to decline resulting in the emergence of enrollment management for student marketing, recruitment, admission and retention which became a pivotal period for institutional strategic planning

(Berger & Lyons, 2005). Retention literature of the 1990s highly focused on underrepresented populations and students of low socio-economic status. Tinto (1993) emphasized on group-specific intervention and policies to provide quality service to incoming students. Tinto (1999) specified that academic advisement should be integral part of student advisement and development.

Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration theory was used to investigate the current study on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. Tinto (2007) focused on institutional action to promote student retention on campuses and ensure that there is academic and social integration.

Understanding students' family background can influence persistence in college as institutions can accommodate and implement support programs as required for different student population. Tinto's theory emphasized the need for enriched academic and social integration for African American students which can improve retention for African American University students (Tinto, 2007).

Academic and social involvement influenced retention in a variety of ways and the impact of academic involvement arises primarily from classroom involvement and student-faculty engagement (Tinto, 2012). Among all the students, regardless of ethnicity and race, more academic engagement meant that students will put more effort in their studies which will heighten academic performance and increase retention and graduation (Tinto, 2012). Enhancing retention for African American university students requires the university providing academic and social support in a more diverse setting to promote learning and student engagement. Academic support is critical in students' learning outcome and crucial to understanding that "nothing is more important to student retention

than academic support, especially during the critical first year of college, when student retention is still very responsive to institutional intervention” (Tinto 2012, p. 25).

Student retention is also shaped directly and indirectly by internal and external forces, such as students’ sense of belongingness within the institutions (Tinto, 2012). This is especially critical for African American university students during the first year of college where students are assimilating into a new environment and forming new connections with people on campus (Tinto, 1993). This allows the students to engage in meaningful conversations and interact with peers which provides social and emotional support, especially for students who might have felt ostracized in a hostile climate. Social support can come from interaction with the faculty, staff and student peers within and outside classroom settings (Johnson et al. 2007). The students are usually willing to commit to the institution and stay enrolled after their first year (Karp, Hughes & O' Gara, 2010).

Tinto’s retention theory was used in the research study to give a better understanding of the importance of peer collaboration, self-efficacy, social integration and an enriched academic curriculum to improve retention of African American students in higher education (Tinto, 2012). Tinto’s theory emphasized the need for enriched academic and social integration for African American students which will improve retention for African American university students (Tinto, 2012). Tinto’s retention theory is crucial in developing and implementing support programs to improve retention rate of African American university students. These program implementations can be designed to improve academic performance of African American university students especially the students from low socio-economic background which in result will improve retention.

Review of Related Literature

The review of literature related to this study was connected to contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. Understanding students' cultural background and racial identity, students' involvement in campus activities, academic and social integration, academic support programs and parental support can influence college retention and graduation of African American students in higher education.

Influence of Racial Identity/ Culturally Responsive Environment

Empirical studies have concluded that African American university students who experience racial identity issues in higher education may also be impacted by a feeling of isolation and can affect retention and graduation of African American university students based on their education experiences (Baber, 2012). A phenomenological qualitative research study was conducted to examine first year African American Students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and the influence of racial identity development on the educational experience of these students through an interpretive theoretical framework (Baber, 2012). A purposive sampling of fifteen African American students entering their first year at a predominantly white institution participated in journaling and a one- hour semi-structured interviews at three times during the academic year- October, December and March to examine the influence of racial identity development on the educational experience of African American University students.

The findings showed that major themes emerged from the study, including established racial identity, conflict between ideology, resiliency against hostility and uncovering complexity of identity (Baber, 2012). As indicated in the article, other

environmental experiences not identified for this study may influence the educational experience of African American students such as socio-economic background, major choices and distance from home (Baber, 2012). The participants' experiences related to African American identity was sometimes unpleasant where students in predominantly white school experience taunts and branded as an "Oreo" by their fellow peers which is a slang term for someone who is Black but displays characteristic of a White person. Identity support outside the educational institution came mainly from family members as a source of strength and encouragement.

Despite recent concerns on racial identity playing an integral role in African American student university experiences, the findings showed that more theoretical and empirical research is needed to shed light on the complexities of racial identity for African American university students (Jackson & Neville, 1998). These are current and consistent conditions that need further exploration and strategic planning to improve retention of American university students. Implementation of additional academic support service as required are necessary for college success and increase in retention of African American university students. In addition, racial disparity needs to be addressed and an urgent need of implementing effective strategies within colleges to improve retention and graduation of African American students in higher education.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), a branch of the United States Department of Education has indicated in their reports that African American students performed significantly lower than other subgroups. The data showed that only 21% of African American students graduated in four years versus 45% white, 50% Asian and 32% Hispanic who graduated in four years. Among all the subgroups,

African American students have the lowest college retention and are least likely to enroll in college and persist until graduation (Anumba, 2015). In addition to the racially related negative experiences that African American students encounter daily in educational institutions, they experience inequities of educational opportunities which widens the achievement gaps. This continues to be a growing problem for African American students who tend to be more vulnerable in the educational institution and increases the likelihood of dropping of college or not graduating on time (Anumba, 2015).

A study conducted by DeSousa & Kuh (1996) compared black students attending historically black institution (HBI) versus a predominantly White institution (PWI) and their involvement in various college activities and educational gains. The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) was used by more than 300 colleges and universities to assess the quality of students' college experience and analysis of variance was used to determine whether there were differences in educational and personal development from the historically black institutions versus the predominantly white institutions. Multiple variance regression was used to determine whether differences existed in relationships between student characteristics, campus activities, educational and personal development at the HBI and PWI.

The conclusion from the research indicated that black students attending the HBI showed greater effort to academic activities and retention than black students attending PWI. In addition, there were greater gains in personal and social development, critical thinking, history and cultural awareness (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). The research study indicated that black students tend to have a better chance of graduating if they attended a

Black institution” (Allen, 1988). Black colleges tend to provide a more supportive environment for learning opportunities and academic success.

In the research study, black students at PWIs academic progress were lacking due to limited support and culturally alienating campus environment and students’ educational and personal development were also influenced by students’ socio-economic background (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). This can align with the research study on exploring factors affecting retention of African American university students and finding effective strategies through students’ questionnaire to improve relationships between student engagement, academic support and financial services which in result will increase retention.

Academic and Social Integration

Munroe (1981) used the multiple regression analysis to test Tinto’s model of college dropout using a sample from the National Longitudinal Study population including 6018 students entering 4 years colleges on a full- time basis. The Tinto model views academic and social integration as a crucial component of the students’ interaction which can improve retention. The data were handled by pairwise deletion of cases which contained missing values and new multiple regressions were computed using only retained variables. The path coefficients for these variables were calculated where the multiple R is the dependent variable and all casually prior variables are predictors (Munroe, 1981).

The findings indicated that both parents and students have a greater influence on goal commitment than academic integration. The researcher also concludes that Tinto’s notion of academic integration had a stronger effect on institution commitment and

retention than social integration. This align with the researcher study where the implementation of additional academic support services is required for college success and increase in retention of African American students in higher education.

Tinto (2007) focused on institutional action to promote student retention and graduation on campuses and ensure that there is academic and social integration. Understanding students' family background can influence persistence in college as institutions can accommodate and implement support programs as required for different student populations. Researchers observed economic stratification of participation that led some students to work and attend college part-time versus full-time status which can influence retention and graduation rate. The research study indicates that faculty and staff development are critical to increase student retention and require valid and successful program implementation through formative and summative assessment.

Research studies on *Assessment and retention of black students in higher education* reported that considerable research has been done over the past 60 years to identify students that are likely to encounter difficult experiences on campus and to find meaningful solutions to predict and avoid dropout (Sherman & Giles, 2004). A summary of assessment instrument was used to identify and examine freshman assessment program in relation to retention. The goal was to encourage intellectual and psychological goal, implement major institutional adjustments including tailoring curriculum and continued faculty and staff development to accommodate the needs of diverse student population. Further exploration can determine other factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students and finding effective solutions such as freshman assessment programs to improve retention and avoid dropouts. Research findings show

that necessary interventions are required through the development of databases that assess and evaluate program development for increased retention (Sherman, Giles & Williams-Green, 1994). This in result will allow African American university students the same chance to succeed as other groups have and a better chance to remain in college after their first year.

Academic Support

Tinto (1987) hypothesized that student departure from colleges was a result of students' personal attributes, skills, commitment and campus interaction and integration. In the article, *Past to present: A historical look at retention*. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success*, Tinto (1987) discussed three stages (1) separation from communities of the past, (2) transition from communities of the past (3) incorporation into the communities of the college. Tinto's model of academic and social integration explained student retention of minority students and the need for varying intervention services and academic support programs to ensure students' academic success and retention. He concluded that "no single intervention will adequately prevent all students from departing" universities have to create and implement their own institutional programs to accommodate their budget and meet specific needs of their students (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

Tinto (2007) identified three areas of research and practice that call for further exploration. In the article, *Research and practice of student retention: What next?* *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, Tinto (2007) highlighted the issues of institutional action, program implementation and the continuing challenge of promoting the success of low-income students. The study and practice of

student retention has undergone a number of changes, especially examining and understanding student background in relation to retention and graduation rates. Now there are broader array of factors influencing retention that need to be examined including cultural, economic, social (Berger, 2005) and institutional academic life. Quantitative research studies have been done from mainly residential universities and students of majority backgrounds. Now there are increasingly changes to understand how student retention and graduation rates differs in low-income communities and now student retention has become a big business (Tinto, 2007), in addition, to understanding the gap between research and practice and the challenges of student retention.

Admission Rigor and Graduation

Hunsaker and Thomas (2013) investigated the extent to which admissions criteria affect graduation rates of underrepresented and non-traditional students which comprised a greater portions of the institution's student body. The study was to determine whether factors that previously tested as predictors of graduation rates hold in an analysis of a larger sample of institutions. In addition, the study was to better understand the theoretical integrity of previous graduation rate research when applied to an exclusively land grant institution sample.

The sample included data from the Center for Educational Statistics (IES) which included thirty land grant institutions from 2006 IES data set. The institutions in the sample were selected at random from the original population of one hundred and three institutions in which twenty-three were excluded as two-year institutions and out of the remaining eighty, there were twenty institutions which had incomplete data for the class

of 2006. The remaining sixty institutions were selected every other order to provide a random sample of the land grant institutions in the set.

A regression analysis was used to predict the relationship between Admission rigor and graduation rates. The first hypothesis was to determine if there is a positive relationship between rigor and graduation rates. The second hypothesis was to determine if there is a negative relationship between faculty to student ratio and graduation rates. Both hypotheses were tested though OLS regression analysis of data collected from IES to understand the statistical significance of each of the independent variables related to the graduation rates of the institutional sample. The result for hypothesis 1 was that admission rigor was not a statistically significant predictor of graduation rates ($\beta = -.00020$, $p < .05$, $r = .7894$). The result for hypothesis 2 showed that faculty to student ratio is a positive statistically significant predictor of graduation rates ($\beta = .02686$, $p < .05$, $r = .0631$).

According to Hunsaker & Thomas (2013), if the efficacy of higher education is to be ultimately measured by graduation rates, few topics within higher education are more vital to fully understand. As the researcher, will be investigating more study on relating topic on factors influencing graduation and retention of African American students in higher education. In addition, there need to be further research on implementing comprehensive retention programs which will allow African American students equal opportunity to excel and successfully graduate college.

Perception of Academic Preparation

Student retention is an important metric of success for college students which means that professionals in higher education should ensure that students are academically

prepared to succeed. Rowser (1997) specified that one of the major challenges for colleges and universities is the retention of African American students. The purpose of the research was to examine new African American freshman student survey data to identify possible implications for student retention. A quantitative research study was conducted to examine new African American freshman student survey data and identify possible implications for student retention. A freshman survey data was administered during Orientation week at a midwestern university to assess students' perception on expected GPA, academic college preparation, personal and social preparation. There were 1,107 participants of which were 706 females, 379 males and 22 had no gender assigned. The sample in this study consisted of 25 African males and 64 African American females.

Perceptions of academic preparation from the student survey were quite similar for both African American males and females. Overall, 69% of the females and 72% of the males believed that they were prepared for college. For African American females, 52% females thought they were academically prepared and 44% of the males believed that their preparation was adequate. More than one third of African American students expected to earn a 3.0 or higher GPA for their first year in college, and more than 90% of them expected to graduate in 5 years. Regardless of African American perception been optimistic, research shows that they are at a historical disadvantage and may suffer in academic skills due to background disadvantages and earn fewer credits than whites during their freshman year (Rowser,1997). They tend to begin their college program in remedial courses which do not apply to major or graduation requirements and contribute to the low retention of African American students.

The research study concluded that better communication between students, parents and universities can help to correct some of the unrealistic expectations and student survey data can provide useful information for university implementation and planning of academic support and services to assist in improving retention rates of African American students (Rowser,1997). A post survey was also completed at the end of their freshman year to see if their perception has changed and once analyzed, the results could be used for effective and strategic implementation of freshman incentive programs (Rowser,1997). According to a community survey of student engagement (2005), other factors that threaten retention and graduation from college include being academically underprepared college-level work, attending college part-time, being a single parent, students relying on their own income for meeting college costs, students working excessive hours with low income, low financial support and being first-generation college students. These are conditions that can be associated with low-socio economic status affecting retention and graduation rate of African American students and determine the cause for minority students to enter college underprepared for course level work (Swain et al. 2005).

African American university students' chances for graduation can vary widely and low socio-economic status can be one of the main factors for low retention of African American students in higher education. Historically underrepresented students encounter challenges and sometimes difficulty adjusting to their institutional environment which can influence how students think and spend their time (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 1995).

Comprehensive Retention Program

Comprehensive retention program can play a vital role in retention of African American university students with the proper guidance and support of faculty, academic advisors and mentors. Johnson (2013) conducted a qualitative research study to explore the effectiveness of a retention program for African American students at a predominantly White university to focus on the experiences of African American students, faculty and staff involvement in the student retention program. Overall, the research purpose was to explore how a comprehensive retention program at a predominantly white institution impacted the matriculation of African American students.

Although the Civil Rights of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 has opened more doors for African American students to enroll into college, the challenge still lingers where there are lower retention and graduation rates of African American university students. The African American student population is still achieving less and graduating at lower rates than their White peers (Davis, 2004). African American students enrolled at predominantly White institutions are still grappling with many challenges including stereotypes that can be damaging for African American students.

The participants in the qualitative case study included six students and four retention program directors of which one held a dual appointment as staff and faculty. Three of the students were male and three females who African Americans, ages 18-21 years with a 2.5 GPA or higher. All the participants were actively involved in the university's retention program for at least two semesters. Two of the students were sophomores, 2 juniors and 2 seniors from varying backgrounds. The retention program

staff included two African American females, one African American male, and one Chinese male.

The data were collected via interviews with the retention program staff, faculty and students. The interviews were open-ended questions and designed to explore the participants' experience on campus and in the retention program. There were also collections of university documents including reports, web pages, publications, and students' grades. Data analyses were conducted using coding, memos, constant comparative analysis, and triangulation. The coding process consisted of codes developed from the literature review, documents on the retention program, and transcribed interviews. The data was continuously coded and analyzed as it was collected and the codes were kept in a notebook, color-coded and labeled according to the source of origin. The researcher compared the color-coded codes for similarities and differences and was able to identify emerging themes. Triangulation was used to ensure trustworthiness and reliability of data.

The findings showed the University retention program had a positive outcome of African American students' success and was considered a system of support. Students confirmed that program participation influenced them academically, socially and culturally. Cultural awareness, mentorship and tutoring were the most prevalent themes and African American students embraced cultural identity through active participation in cultural activities. The comprehensive retention program provided more opportunities for African American students to attend cultural activities and make connections in a positive learning environment.

This study connected with current dissertation topic, as it is critical to address the needs of African American students to succeed academically through comprehensive retention program which would improve retention and graduation of African American students. The researcher will continue further research study on factors that affect retention and graduation of African American students and examine effect measures such as the implementation of comprehensive retention program geared specifically for African American students.

Bliss et al. 2018 studied the difficulties that minority male students face at the higher education level in the United States which are on ongoing national issues, such as low retention and graduation rate, and the special attention and support required to help address these issues. The research study was to examine the efforts of a public predominantly white southeastern university (PSEU) in its attempt to address the challenges its minority male students face in their campus life. Data from the PSEU's office for Institutional Research indicated that African men performed lowest among all racial and gender groups. The leadership of the newly founded initiative established a research goal to focus efforts on minority students to provide a place for them to discuss their campus experience. The participants were Black males and Latino males who experience similar difficulties as African American students. A purposeful sampling was used in the research study. There was a focus group of 21 students who were a part of the Minority Male Student Success Initiative.

The study conducted was a qualitative study in which the researcher used interview protocols with the relevant stakeholders to understand more about the Initiative and the Program. The researcher used three different interview protocols for the

participants, stemming from the transactional evaluation model (House, 1978). Notes were taken from separate meetings to understand more about Initiative's establishment. The evaluators gathered additional background information by observing the interactions between administrators and students. Thirdly, the evaluators attended Program's monthly meeting as "observers as participants" (Glense, 2006, p.50) to have first-hand experience with the participants. Audio-recording was used for each interview and to take notes to supplement the recordings which were then transcribed for thematic analysis. The interview data was treated using qualitative data analysis such as coding themes within each and across all participants interviews (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The evaluators transcribed and coded the text of their respective interviews which allowed additional codes to emerge from the interview data using in vivo codes. The evaluators grouped the categories and matching data techniques to identify themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

The findings showed that the participants' views were similar, yet different in the ways they expressed their thoughts. Some of the findings based on the participants' responses included lack of support and mentorship from PSEU which result in low retention of African American students. In addition, lack of support with the issue of self-efficacy lowers retention and graduation rates of Black and Latino males leaving them unprepared to lead successful lives. However, participants involved with the Initiative program were establishing good relationships with their mentors and given opportunities to improve their campus experiences of minority students, their retention and graduation rates.

This research aligned with current dissertation topic on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students through further research and

finding other Initiative's programs that provided additional support to minority students in college. The researcher understood African American students' lived experiences and examined program initiatives that could increase the retention and graduation rate of minority students. This will give African American students the opportunity to have successful lives and become catalyst for change in a society where racial inequalities exist.

Laskey & Hetzel (2011) studied factors that influence the retention and GPA of students in a college program designed for at-risk students. The quantitative research study included variables of personality as measured by the NEO-FFI Inventory, high school and college GPA, ACT scores, the number of visits to the tutoring service, high school profile, and the demographic characteristics of student gender and ethnicity. The current study was conducted at a midsized, private, four-year university located in the Midwest. The sample consisted of 115 at-risk students enrolled in a Conditional Acceptance Program (CAP) ranging from age 17-19. The majority of the sample was female (63.3%, $n = 73$). The CAP program was designed to give at-risk college students who did not meet standard admission requirement a chance to succeed through a supportive academic program initiative. In the first year of the CAP program, students would take a Freshman Year Experience course designed exclusively for CAP students.

Three years of CAP student data were collected. The data extracted from students' records included demographic information (gender, ethnicity), the number of times the student participated in tutoring session, ACT scores, and high school and college GPAs. Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS. T-tests and chi-square statistics were calculated to compare groups. Bivariate correlations and regression

analysis were performed to examine relationships between variables. The NEO-FFI consisted of 60 self-reported items measuring the five personality domains of personality including neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO-FII uses a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) regarding responses on personality traits. Cronbach alphas (a measure of internal consistency) for the five personality domains ranges from 0.66 to 0.92 (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

In this study, the findings showed that there was no significant difference in retention based on gender. Seventy-three percent of the females were retained as compared to 66.7% of the males ($X^2 = .517$, $df = 1$, $p = .472$). The largest group in the sample was Black (42.6%, $n = 49$); thirty-nine percent ($n = 45$) was White, and the remainder were Asian, Hispanic, and Biracial, which is a representative of the University's population. There was no significant difference in retention of the CAP students based on ethnicity. Sixty-nine percent of both Black and Non-Black were retained ($X^2 = .001$, $DF = 1$, $P = .971$). The domains of NEO-FFI showed significant correlations between agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and extraversion. A stepwise linear regression which was performed to identify factors contributing to students' GPA using tutoring as a variable which explained 12.8% of the variance ($\beta = .357$), and conscientiousness, which explained an additional 5% ($\beta = .224$). The result showed that there was no significant difference in high GPA of retained student. However, females admitted to the CAP program had higher high school GPAs ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .50$, $n = 42$) than males ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .44$, $n = 420$ [$t = 2.82$, $d(110)$, $p = .008$]).

The researcher will be investigating factors affecting the retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and closely connecting dissertation to this current research study on factors related to retention of At-risk college students. In addition, will continue to further research study on minorities and at-risk students who need more mentoring and academic supportive programs to successfully complete their college education. It is imperative that universities implement tailored initiative programs to improve minority students' outcome which will increase retention and graduation rates.

Ottley and Ellis (2014) studied how the retention and graduate rate of Black male students in higher education is low when compared to other groups. This study examined the qualitative single case study method that was used to explore a retention initiative designed to increase black college male retention and academic achievement.

Approximately, 30% of Black males who enroll in a four- year college earn a college degree compared to 57% of White male students (Bohrstedt et al., 2015). African American students find it difficult to complete a college degree which should be further explored.

The researcher used a purposeful sampling and the study participants included 10 African American males. The researcher contacted 20 active members and recent graduates and only 10 agreed to serve as participants for this study. Participants consisted of 1 graduate student, 4 seniors, 1 junior, 2 sophomores and 2 alumni. The study conducted was a qualitative research study which relied on individual interviews, document analysis, and focus group to gain the perceptions of the study participants. The researcher used document analysis to give voice to the phenomenon, interviews which

were semi-structured, and focus group interviews which were flexible, unstructured dialogue between the group and the researchers (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The researcher conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with student participants and two separate interviews with both administrators. The method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with participants and averaged approximately one hour. The researcher conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews to engage in discussion and explore how students and administrator perceive the research study. The document analysis provided contrasts between the administrators' perceptions of retention and the participants' perception. The document analysis is a written document which helps to contextualize the case study (Bowen, 2009). In addition, the focus group interviews were flexible and a good way to reach data saturation for this study since semi-structured interviews took place with the same participants as those in the focus groups. The focus group add a group perspective about the phenomenon that semi-structured interviews do not provide.

The findings in this study provided a framework for understanding the need for retention-based initiatives for Black college males, the organizational structure of such initiatives, and how the vision and implementation of the initiative align. The identified themes were supported through the program initiative, a sense of family and community involvement to improve the program and internal needs and obstacles through expansion upon the nature of the inner-self and college experience lives.

An implication for current research study was to build on these results and find effective measures for university implementation and planning of academic support and services to assist in improving retention of African American students in higher

education. Ottley & Ellis (2014) emphasized that based on the data provided, educators, faculty, and administrators should discuss ways to engage Black college males on campus that promote their well-being, academic aptitude, social integration and retention.

Impact of Families on Academic Success and Persistence

Guiffrida (2005) discussed the implications for improving African American university student retention and college success. The qualitative research study was to understand ways in which African American students at PWI perceived their families impact their academic success and persistence. A total of 99 African American students from a predominantly white institution participated in the research study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit students from various levels of academic achievement. The sample included 15 students who left the university (leavers), 65 academically low achieving students (low achievers) and 19 academically achieving students (high achievers). Low achievers ranged from 0 to 2.5 GPA and higher achievers' GPA ranged from 2.8 to 3.93. Demographic information was collected for the students including their family's level of income, educational attainment and family size. Their financial needs were represented by three categories including high need, medium need and no need. The data was collected and analyzed using comparative method which included constant joggling of the researcher between collecting data and developing working hypothesis. Data were collected from each group in small focus group and then data was coded. The result showed that high achievers had significant influence of their families on academic achievement and retention while the leavers and low achievers thought more financial support from home would have created less stress in college and a higher chance of

academic success. In conclusion, more financial support means a better chance of academic success and an increase in retention of African American university students.

Conclusion

The review of existing literature explains some of the factors influencing retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and solutions for improving retention and graduation of African American university students. Chapter one presented the purpose of the study, introduced factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and the theoretical and conceptual framework. Chapter two supported the theoretical construct use to frame the study, presented the related literature and discussed the themes, related to the research study, in the existing literature. In chapter three, the researcher will focus on a qualitative research methodology to examine the students' lived experiences through students' interviews, observations and document analyses.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students and understand their lived experience from a phenomenological perspective. Qualitative methodology allows a researcher to investigate the research study in depth to provide a more in-depth analysis of the real lived experiences of the research participant (Creswell, 2012).

Phenomenological qualitative methodology was used in this study to explore different themes contributing to the retention and graduation of African American university students. The most important aspect of the phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of the research participants and to truly allow the research study to explore the phenomenon that the research is investigating (Alase, 2017).

The researcher chose phenomenological research to gain a deeper perspective of African American University students' experiences in college and factors affecting their retention and graduation in higher education. The research study also provided different perspectives of African American students' experiences encountered in their freshman year of mentoring program. This mentoring program is specifically geared towards African American university students with skilled-based development, support, and opportunities to enhance their overall academic success within the institution. The mentoring program is designed to help incoming freshman navigate their college experience through leadership development, advisement, peer mentoring which enhance

student academic success and will contribute to improve retention and graduation of African American university students.

Creswell (2016) highlighted that good research begins with the selection of a specific research topic, problem or area of interest, and a paradigm which is the model to use as a guideline for implementing design actions. This view is also supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.157) and defining research paradigm as “a set of belief that guide action” of the researchers’ perspectives. In qualitative research, participants provide a framework for suitable explorative research design that prevent biases while gathering, analyzing and organizing the data. The qualitative paradigm based on the ontological assumption questions the nature of reality and the analysis was used to understand why a certain phenomenon occurs (Creswell, 2016). This meant that subjective analysis and multiple realities can exist based on the research participants. Creswell (2016) indicated that phenomenology focuses on individual lived experiences within a phenomenon and the paradigms in the human and social sciences helped us understand the phenomena being studied.

Creswell (2012, p.76) stated that “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon.” He also mentioned that “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p.76). Qualitative data will be collected and analyzed using interviews, observation and document analysis (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The research was designed to focus on student-faculty engagement, financial support, peer mentoring, belongingness and academic support for improving retention and graduation rate of American students in higher

education. This research was designed based on the conceptual framework developed from the literature review of studies on retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and guided by Tinto's model of Academic and Social Integration.

Chapter one presented the purpose of the study and the theoretical and conceptual framework. Chapter two reviewed the theoretical construct framing the study, presented the related literature and discussed the themes, related to the research study, in the existing literature. Chapter three will research the students' lived experiences through students' interviews, observations and document analyses.

Methods and Procedures

In order to provide reliable and valid description of the lived experiences, phenomenological data analysis uses a methodology of analysis of specific statements (Creswell, 1998; Sadala & Odorno, 2001). Baber (2012) states that "phenomenological analysis positions these statements within larger theoretical frameworks to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon of interest."

As indicated by Creswell (2016), the data was collected by the researcher through the interview, observation and data analysis. The interviewees were the primary unit of analysis (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000) with their informed consent (Bailey, 1996, p.11; Arksey & Knight, 1999). The initial data collection instrument was the interview protocol will include 10-12 semi-structured, open-ended questions (see Appendix E). The interview questions focused on the lived experience of African American university students in higher education (see Appendix E). The research questions focused on the psychology, social, environmental and socio-economic model for improving retention

and graduation rate of American students in higher education. Each student participated in 45 minutes, unstructured in-depth phenomenological interviews for the research study (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Observations of the students during their participation in the mentorship program was used to triangulate the findings from the interviews. Documents analysis was used to further develop the findings. In addition, field notes were collected as secondary data storage which is crucial in qualitative research since humans tend to forget quickly when relying on memories for recollection of information (Lofland & Lofland, 1999).

The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and journal entries, bracketing the perspectives research participants offered line by line, and allowed the participants to review transcripts and make corrections if necessary. Bracketing in phenomenology aims to explore human experience and to ensure that the researcher does not influence the participants. Bracketing allows separation of the researcher's experiences from the data (Creswell, 2016). Recorded audios from the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed and categorized into patterns by the researcher to extract meanings from the perceptions of the research participants. The data was sorted into categories. Once interpretations were made from coding and categorization, developing themes were formulated.

Research Questions

The research study explored factors affecting retention and graduation of African American Students in higher education and the primary research questions investigated were:

- RQ1. What are some characteristics within higher education institutions that can improve African American university students' graduation?
- RQ2. What are the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions?
- RQ3. What are the lived experiences of African American university students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentors since enrolling within the University?

Setting

The selected institution was a Catholic university in the Northeastern region of the United States. This institution was an ideal location for interviews to be conducted since the researcher was familiar with the setting and student demographic population. However, the researcher did not influence the interviewees' responses but instead researcher was open-minded, subjective, non-judgmental and incorporated attentive listening (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). In addition, the researcher attended the university and have extensive knowledge of the institution.

The institution is located in an urban metropolitan city in Northeastern United States which has a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 17,000 students with a gender distribution of 42 percent male students and 58 percent female students. The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted access to the university site and granted permission for participants to participate in the research study based on protocol review. A formal letter (see Appendix A) was sent to the university for IRB approval to conduct research on the campus.

Interviews took place in a secured room located on campus convenient for student participants and researcher. All interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder with the permission of the research participants. The researcher provided each student with a journal for recording interview reflections. Journals was unstructured although students will be given specific instructions to reflect and record on experiences that might influence retention and graduation rates of African American students in higher education. The journal entries were collected between interviews and participants were allowed to review transcriptions for any necessary adjustment (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The timeframe for the data collection via interview was in Spring 2022 semester and data collection took approximately two months.

Participants

Creswell (2016) indicated that 10-12 participants can allow research study to reach saturation and recommends long interviews with up 10-12 research subjects for a phenomenological study. The research sample were freshmen enrolled in a mentoring program geared towards African American students. The study utilized a purposeful sampling of ten first-year, African American university student participants who were currently enrolled in their second semester at a private institution located in the metropolitan area of New York City.

The research participants were given a participant consent form with ethical guidelines on interviews conducts for both researcher and participants, outlining that the research participants could stop participating at any given time (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Before the beginning of each interview, the researcher discussed the interview guidelines with the research participants (Miles & Huberman & Saldana,

2014). Pseudonyms were assigned to research participants to ensure participant anonymity. The sample included four males and six females to ensure appropriate representation of male and female participants. Participants' demographics are captured in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Ethnicity	Status	Gender	Residence
Participant 1	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	F	In State Resident
Participant 2	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	M	In State Resident
Participant 3	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	F	In State Resident
Participant 4	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	F	Out of State Resident
Participant 5	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	F	In State Resident
Participant 6	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	M	Out of State Resident
Participant 7	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	F	In State Resident
Participant 8	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	M	In State Resident
Participant 9	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	M	Out of State Resident
Participant 10	African American	2nd Semester Freshman	F	Out of State Resident

Data Collection Procedures

The qualitative approach to research inquiry was a phenomenological approach. The data collection instruments were interviews including open-ended conversation with key participants, direct observations on campus, and documents analysis. The procedures for conducting the interviews included open ended questions that focused on understanding the central phenomenon in research study (Creswell, 2016).

For the interviews, the participants of the study were contacted via phone calls and emails which included a description of the study, the allotted time for interviews and the student confidentiality agreement. During the data collection, participants responded to open-ended interview questions and was able to check data for clarification of accuracy. After the data was collected, there was an opportunity for participants to validate the accuracy of their lived experiences in the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Observational research was applied to the current research topic associated with the retention and graduation rate of African American students in higher education through fieldwork observation in a natural setting to collect data and document record using words instead of numerical values, example notetaking. Observation was another method used for collecting data on graduation and retention and was used to understand some of the problems that African American students in higher education encounter. Participant observation was used in my study as a guide to understand the social academic, environmental and socio-economic model for improving retention and graduation rate of American students in higher education.

Data was collected through observation of African American students who were in their second semester of their freshman year and enrolled in a mentoring program geared towards African American students within the institution. Mentoring was one-to-one session with assigned mentor to engage the student with academic discussions, personal enrichment, and career opportunities. During the sessions with the mentors, the researcher observed research participants' academic and social involvement and level of commitment to the program, mentorship workshops and study sessions. The researcher took notes during the mentoring sessions. The data collected from the mentoring sessions were validated by the participant interviews.

Data was also collected through data analysis protocol to look at the participants' academic and social integration, peer collaboration, connectivity, and self-efficacy within the mentorship program to address the primary research questions. Document analysis included a review of program materials that were provided to the participants as part of the program's academic workshops, personal networking, study rooms and the network of faculty and administration that provided academic and career assistance.

The purpose of collecting data from different kinds of participants is a form of data triangulation to compare data findings (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Holloway, 1997). The timeframe for the data collection via interviews, observations and data analysis was in the Spring 2022 semester. The data collection took two months.

Data Analysis Approach

In order to provide reliable and valid description of the lived experiences, phenomenological data analysis uses a methodology of analysis of specific statements (Creswell, 1998; Sadala & Odorno, 2001). "Phenomenological analysis positions these

statements within larger theoretical frameworks to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon of interest” (Baber, 2012). The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and journal entries, bracketing the perspectives research participants offered line by line and allowing participants to review transcripts and make corrections if necessary. Recorded audio from the interviews was transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed and categorized into patterns by the researcher to convey meanings from the perceptions of the research participants.

As indicated by Creswell (2016), the data was collected by the researcher through the interview and observation process, sorted into categories, formatted in narrative and researcher presented the findings into written format as qualitative text. Once interpretations were made from coding and categorization, developing themes were formulated for research data analysis.

As noted by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014), effective analysis method is a high priority for conducting qualitative research and depending on the philosophical approach of the qualitative researcher, multiple methods can be used for analyzing data. Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014) data analysis approach was used as a guideline for implementing design actions.

The researcher coded the data which is a multi-step process. The researcher created a list of codes with definition that were derived from the conceptual framework, research questions and the data chunks (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Examples of the start list codes included academic achievement, academic support, collaboration, belongingness, faculty, graduation, mentorship, race and ethnicity, financial support, retention, self-efficacy, social support, socio-economic status, collaboration, and

belongingness. Second round of coding provided descriptive, interpretative and pattern codes which reflected additional details from the start list and new themes emerged. Dedoose software application was used to manage the qualitative data and generating new themes for further exploration of qualitative data obtained from interview transcript on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American student in higher education.

The researcher used “factoring tactic” as a part of research evidence which allowed the researcher to narrow down the themes based on the data that was collected from the interview transcripts, field notes, and observation notes (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 1994). Another tactic that was used is “noting patterns” where researcher observed the repeated themes that emerge from the transcript interview and field notes. This was a meaningful guide to further understand the research phenomenon and generating pattern codes through chunking and sorting (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The Dedoose matrix chart that was selected is the packed code cloud which helped the researcher to visualize code applications usage for retention and graduation of African American students in higher education.

Trustworthiness of the Design

The study explored factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education which poses challenges for leaders in higher education. The qualitative approach to research inquiry was phenomenological, qualitative research to address the research questions. This included in-depth unstructured interviews to capture the lived experiences of second semester, African American students, observations of the students who were in a specific mentoring program to

understand their level of commitment to the program through workshops and study sessions and data analysis to look at the participants' academic and social integration, peer collaboration, connectivity, and self-efficacy within the mentorship program.

The role of the researcher was to complete good research with trustworthiness, creditability and consistency to avoid research bias in research study from direct participants and observer participant (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Trustworthiness ensured that the studied phenomenon was presented correctly and worthy of attention by the readers. It was critical to understand the methods used to collect data and how creditability, transferability, dependability and confirmability were validated in qualitative research studies to generate empirical research studies which can sometimes become a challenge. Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlighted the concept of trustworthiness of research study through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the extent in which good research can be established through member checking to test the research findings and interpretations with participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Transferability allows researchers to facilitate the transferability judgement through thick descriptions so that the findings can be generalized (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Dependability ensures that readers can examine the research process which should be clearly documented, logical and. Lincoln and Guba (1989) emphasized that confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved.

Validity and reliability are also two key aspects in research that can determine if findings in research are credible and trustworthy, including the support of the research community to validate that the qualitative findings of research were truthful and

defensible (Johnson, 1997). Validity in qualitative research determine the accuracy and credibility of the research findings through valid research instruments such as accuracy of observation, interviews, archival records and documentations. Validity indicates trustworthiness in connection with events associated with the research approach and exploration through various research methodologies (Golashani, 2003). Reliability in qualitative research focus on the consistency and stability of data been collected accurately with similar results after been repeatedly done over testing periods. However, it was important to note that too many participants can become problematic and that the researcher needed to balance participation and observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Validity and reliability will increase transparency which in result will reduce research biases in qualitative research (Singh, 2014). Bayler (2012) emphasized that trustworthiness and rigor play a crucial role in the interviewing process and participants should be able to develop a sense of security with the confidentiality of the research to respond to questions without any hesitation.

In the research study, which explored factors affecting the retention and graduation of African American students in higher education, some of the threats to validity and reliability were descriptive validity, interpretation validity, research bias and reactivity. Descriptive validity ensured that all the data collected on participating African American students in their freshman year were collected and recorded accurately. A possible threat was that researcher could paraphrase words or phrases of the interviewees incorrectly or used a shorter form and not collect all the required data to produce empirical research findings.

Interpretation validity was necessary to capture the observation in order to interpret factors that caused low retention of African American students in higher education and avoiding the threats of interpreting data based on researcher's own meaning or to make the situation seem worse than they are, but instead understanding the viewpoints of the students being studied and the meanings that they attach to their specific responses, words and phrases (Johnson, 1997). Important that open-ended questions were used to allow participants to elaborate on their responses by giving more important information and true feelings of their concerns instead of giving scaled answers.

Research bias may sometimes be present but is unacceptable in research study and the goal was to minimize this measure of threat to validity and reliability in research study. Researchers should avoid racial, gender or cultural bias in research to ensure that research is truthful and consistent with significant research findings, and they are not impacting the research study outcome. Researcher was aware of the possibility of introducing research bias and described the guidelines that was used to phrase questions for the participants and avoided interpreting findings in researchers' own personal views.

Lastly, it was imperative to be aware of the reactivity threat which could alter participants' behavior and knowing that the researcher's impact on the study does exist, where data collected on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education could be influenced through reactivity. Overall, researcher adhered to the major criteria to allow transparency in the validity and reliability of research study on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The strategies used in qualitative research to minimize errors was

made available to the reader, in addition to the threats to validity and reliability found in the research study. These strategies confirmed the presence of trustworthiness and consistency in the research findings on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American Students in higher education.

Research Ethics

The researcher is responsible for participating in training on ethical conduct of human subjects' research prior to being involved in human subject research activities. In order to protect and respect human subjects, researcher needs to follow research protocol and obtain consent from IRB to conduct the research and ensure that there are moral and ethical guidelines (Roger et. al., 2018). Researcher is required to inform research participant that consent to participate in research is voluntary and participants should be given specific information on research project in which they will be participating with no hidden agendas.

Participants should understand the purpose of the research study and be informed of any risks associated with participation in the study. Identifying a vulnerable population from which to sample and recruit is a choice to be determined with ethical implications. Vulnerable populations are usually considered research subject groups with a long history of exploitation (Vogt et. al., 2012). They are usually willing to participate in research studies through means of incentives such as compensation.

Researcher Role

The research study focused on factors affecting retention and graduation rate of African American students in higher education. The researcher's role in the research study was to understand the phenomenon being studied in order to conduct good

research. Researchers' role in qualitative research is to implement a research study analysis, safeguard participants, and ensure proper collection of data (Creswell, 2016). The research study will explore factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The researcher's role in the current research study is to understand the phenomenon being studied in order to conduct good research. The researcher is an African American doctoral student and a first-generation college graduate who have observed fellow African American university students either dropping out of college or not graduating on time. The researcher explored the contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American university students and found effective strategies that could improve retention and graduation of African American university students. The researcher's positionality in the study was to gain a deeper perspective on retention and graduation from the lived experiences of African American university students, therefore, focused research interview questions in a manner that allowed participants to express their true emotions and feelings (Banks, 1998). The role of the researcher in the qualitative research study was to gain access to observing participants thoughts and true expressions.

Banks (1998) discussed that the lived experiences of researchers influence their knowledge, values and the construct of research question. Based on historical past, African American students which is an underrepresented group, tend to be a disadvantage group and at the risk of being a vulnerable population. The population in the research study addressed the issues of under-representation of African American students in higher education and associating risk factors affecting graduation and retention of African American university students which poses challenges for leaders in higher

education. The role of the researcher in this qualitative research study was to implement a research study analysis, safeguard participants, and ensure proper collection of data (Creswell, 2016).

As the researcher, there needs to be non-judgmental views on my part as the observer participant and interviewer since potential bias could impact the outcome of research study (Banks, 1998). Therefore, researcher was open-minded and understood the feelings and thoughts of the research participants based on their lived experiences, while following research protocols and ethical guidelines during the interview process. The researcher understood the participants' culture, personal experiences and the meaningful impact their perspectives will have on the research study.

In addition, the researcher's role was to ensure that standards are maintained, and proper techniques are used to code data, analyze data from the interviews (Miles & Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Therefore, data was safely collected and stored appropriately. As an indigenous-insider researcher, strategies were developed to ensure that participants were comfortable speaking freely and have the assurance that their ideas were valued, and data kept confidential (Banks, 1998). The researcher's role was to have a good interpretation on the data analysis in order to build connections between the pieces of data exploring the phenomena of graduation and retention of African American Students in higher education. In addition, analyzing the research data from an indigenous insider perspective with shared knowledge, values and beliefs further provided valuable research data on retention and graduation of African American university students while maintaining cultural integrity (Banks, 1998). As the researcher, the goal was to strive

towards objectivity and imperative that community culture is respected while gaining knowledge and insightful experiences from the research participants (Banks, 1998).

Conclusion

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design, including individual interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The data was coded and categorized with the goal of identifying themes that was used to create a description of the phenomenon of factors influencing graduation and retention of African American students based on their lived experiences.

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students and understand their lived experience from a phenomenological perspective. Qualitative methodology allows a researcher to investigate and provide a more in-depth analysis of the real lived experiences of the research participant. Creswell (2012) discussed that “the purpose of a proposal is to help an investigator think through all aspects of the study and anticipate problems” (p. 268). Phenomenological qualitative methodology was used to further explore factor affecting retention and graduation of African American students in Higher Education.

Chapter one described the purpose of the study. Chapter two provided a review of the related literature on contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students and their lived experience from a phenomenological perspective. The research method, including the data collections methods, was described in Chapter three. Chapter four will present the findings and the emergent themes and subthemes from the data analysis. Qualitative data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews, observations of mentor and mentees and content analysis.

Description of Research Participants

There was a total of 10 participants interviewed for the research study. There were six female and four male African American students. Six of the participants were in-state residents and four of participants were out-of-state residents. The participants were enrolled in their second semester at a private higher education institution located in the

metropolitan area of New York City. The research participants were given pseudonyms in this study to ensure participant anonymity. Participants' demographics are captured in Table 2.

The participants were also enrolled in a mentoring program geared towards the success of African American university students. The program was an initiative by the Division of Student Affairs aimed at fostering the retention and graduation of African American students. As part of the program, the students were required to engage with mentors for academic and career advice. In addition, students were provided access to academic workshops, personal networking, study rooms and a network of faculty and administration for academic and career assistance.

Participant 1 is an African American female student, second semester freshman and in-state resident. Participant 1, an in-state resident, freshman in her second semester majoring in biomedical sciences, also highlighted the importance of having a sense of belonging from a cultural and retention perspective. Participant 2 is an African American male student, second semester freshman and in-state resident. Participant 2, an in-state, African American male student emphasized the importance of mentor support as an integral part of university support. Participant 3 is an African American female student, second semester freshman and in-state resident. Participant 3, an in-state, African American female student discussed the importance of faculty engagement to overcoming academic obstacles. Participant 4 is an African American female student, second semester freshman and out- of state resident. Participant 4 underlined the importance of any mentor-student relationship to a successful semester.

Participant 5 is an African American female student, second semester freshman and in-state resident. Participant 5, a second semester, African American female student also highlighted the importance of mentor support. Participant 6 is an African American male student, second semester freshman and out of state resident. Participant 6 highlighted the importance of support services when students are away from home. Participant 7 is an African American female student, second semester freshman and in-state resident. Participant 7, a freshman in her second semester highlighted the importance of making connections through campus activities such as engaging with different clubs and organizations. She shared her experienced as an active African American student on campus.

Participant 8 is an African American male student, second semester freshman and in-state resident. Participant 8, a second semester, African American male student discussed how self-motivation was important to achieving good grades and maintaining an optimal GPA. Participant 9 is a male second semester freshman who is an Out of State Resident African American student. Participant 9, a second semester, African American male student also highlighted the importance of program mentorship. Participant 10 is a female African American student second semester freshman who is an Out of State Resident. Participant 10, a second semester, African American female student also highlighted the importance of mentorship for improving retention.

Findings

Using multiple cycles of coding, four themes emerged from the data. The first theme that emerged throughout the study was university support. Within the first theme, three sub-themes emerged: program mentorship, faculty engagement and career

opportunities. The second theme was belongingness. Within the second theme, three sub-themes emerged: cultural awareness, student bonding and campus activities. The third theme was students' academic commitment. The two sub-themes that emerged under students' academic commitment were self-motivation and grade point average maintenance. The fourth theme that emerged throughout the study was parental & financial support. The two sub-themes emerged under parental & financial support were scholarship support and tuition support. Table 3 summarizes the themes, subthemes and data sources.

Table 3

Overarching Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes	Data Source	Trustworthiness
University Support	Program Mentorship Faculty Engagement Career Opportunities	Observations Document Analysis	Member Checking Triangulation of Data Source
Belongingness	Cultural Awareness Student Bonding Campus Activities	Interviews Observations Document Analysis	Member Checking Triangulation of Data Source
Student Academic Commitment	Self-motivation GPA Maintenance	Interviews Document Analysis	Member Checking Triangulation of Data Source
Parental & Financial Support	Parental Support Tuition Support	Interviews	Member Checking Triangulation of Data Source

Theme 1: University Support

RQ1: What are some characteristics within higher education institution that can improve African American university students' achievement, retention and graduation?

The findings showed that university support, including program mentorship, faculty engagement and career opportunities, were key characteristics in higher education that improved African American university students' achievement, retention and graduation. These characteristics served as a building network to empower students academically and socially in their professional and learning development. Mentor support, faculty engagement and career opportunities as integral parts of university support were highlighted, in the findings, as crucial for African American students to continue their studies at the institution and to allow for an opportunity of shared experiences with advisors, peers, and mentors. The participants addressed how services offered through program mentorship, faculty engagement and career opportunities impacted their lives within the university. Based on observation findings and document analysis, active engagement sessions, a sense of belongingness, career discussion sessions, and academic discussions were important to maintaining good academic standings. This form of university support allowed students to remain in college and complete their degree. The data collected from the observations and document analysis was an important part the data analysis and was validated by the data collected from the interviews. The majority of the data came from the interview which confirmed the importance of mentoring session for African American students to improve retention and graduation.

Subtheme 1: Program Mentorship. Program mentorship highlighted the importance of student-mentor relationship to students' retention. Participant 4, a second semester freshman highlighted the importance of university support in providing African American students with a range of resources that complemented their academic learning experience and ensured that students had the required support to remain within the institution and complete their studies.

“I say making sure that the playing field is leveled for all students in receiving the same opportunities to receive mentorship and academic support from the school and from outside organizations, things like that. I think those would be like the biggest ones.”

Participant 1, a freshman in her second semester, in state resident underscores the importance of mentor support particularly at a predominately white university.

“I must say that this institution has provided the mentor support that I'm looking for, and numerous opportunities. And this will help me complete my studies as an African American student. I appreciate the school community. Because I have friends who specifically went to HBCU but I didn't want to go to HBCU. I didn't want to just be limited to one group. I knew I would only be relating to a limited group of students, and I wanted to be exposed to different culture. I'm not saying that HBCU is better or because I'm also a part of the NCAA Association as well.”

Participant 1, an in-state, African American female student also emphasized the importance of mentor support to achieving good grades and ultimately to improve student retention.

“My mentor also gave me a lot of advice and input and I want to be able to do the same for someone else. All that's beautiful academically, last semester, it was hard. Getting into the groove of chemistry, because it's always been a hard subject for me, but with my mentor providing some assistance has helped me with chemistry class. And I managed to pass that class, shockingly, because it wasn't looking so good in the beginning. But I'm happy I passed it and was able to keep my GPA above 3.5. Because that's my goal for this semester. I want to always keep it above 3.0. It's been better. I've grasped chemistry much better this semester than last semester. It's been going well. I have high hopes that I'll do better this semester.”

Participant 2, an in-state, African American male student also emphasized the importance of mentor support as an integral part of university support.

“For the first semester, I didn't talk to my mentor as much as I should although she is very good. She tried reaching out to me, and it was hard for me, to be honest. You know, I must honestly say that she tried her best. And it wasn't until recently, where I was having a conversation that we just met at the dining hall. I was talking to her, and she was giving sound advice on my academic studies and career opportunities. Imagine if I talked to her earlier. I would have been in a better place. That's a success for me. Just put yourself out there! I must say that I was a bit shy, and I didn't want to talk to anyone, but I needed help. I just didn't know how to seek help. Talking to my mentor really opened my eyes to how much I can achieve, and we can lean on each other for help.”

Participant 4 underlined the importance of any mentor-student relationship to a successful semester.

“I have a mentor; I don't speak with her too often. She texted me about possibly meeting up and I text her back. It's just like, I can never really find a day and we're both busy. And you know, she's also a student. But when we first met up at the beginning of the year, we went over some goals as far as what I wanted to achieve for the semester, and for the year overall, one of which was getting all A's for the semester and keeping up on work, getting better at time management, all of which I was able to achieve. So, I would consider that a success. I think the best example of a success story for me would be just achieving the goals that my mentor and I set out at the beginning of the year.”

Participant 5, a second semester, African American female student also highlighted the importance of mentor support.

“Well, I will say when I first started first semester, I had a mentor from the mentoring program. And she helped me have detailed my schedule by different classes and what I needed to do every single day. And if I ever needed help, I could request it. And I keep in touch with her up to this day. With my advisor, she helped well although I had to switch my advisor for the second semester. She helps me a lot because I go to her whenever I find something wrong with my grades or to inquire about classes that I have to take for the next semester. I feel like whatever class I get and the connection I make with my professors can help me with whatever I decide to do in life and completing my studies. My experience with my freshman advisor has been helpful. She encourages me to keep on track

with my GPA and not to let anything ruin it. And if I ever need help, I can speak with her.”

Participant 9, a second semester, African American male student also highlighted the importance of program mentorship.

“I also was part of another mentorship program, and I had a mentor that was great. Great guy to talk to today. And he went to college. So, he kind of knew all the steps to fill out applications, emails, going through college visits, all that. He was the one that picked me up and took me for my orientation and he's the one that really helped me get settled and really understand the whole college process because my mom and dad really couldn't help me. They did as much as they could, but they really couldn't do as much, so it was good to have him. Even though he was not family, he was there for me. That was helpful.”

Subtheme 2: Faculty Engagement. Faculty engagement emerged as important to students' experiences. The findings highlighted shared experiences from the participants with their professors and academic advisors that were important to ensuring that they completed their studies. Participant 1, an in-state, African American female student further elaborated on the impact of faculty support to her as an African American student to ensure that she remained in college and complete her degree.

“I was with one of my professors. And she was telling me what I could do to improve my study in my practice hours and free time. And she even gave me extra credit because she saw that I was putting in the work and my grades were improving, and her office hours were very helpful. For my bio professor, that lady is one of the best professors. I didn't understand this specific chapter. And then I

went to her office hours a few times and she broke down the assignment for me step by step.

Participant 2, an in-state, African American male student underlined the importance of faculty engagement to overall understanding and continuing with the coursework.

“So far, I have had good professors. I mean, it’s a hit or miss, and I think it's so interesting. My professor was teaching a topic that I did not understand and one day after class, you know, I went to his office, because I didn't understand one topic. I also wanted him to clarify the scoring as well. And we clarified it, and we had a conversation which went from the topic to life itself. I was explaining to him my personal background history and he reminded me that this is an honor class. It's a tough class and I think that they teach you things, you don't necessarily need to learn about. And so, coming into some of these freshman classes can be quite challenging and it's like high school again and regurgitating information.”

Participant 3, an in-state, African American female student discussed the importance of faculty engagement to overcoming academic obstacles.

“The obstacles faced are mostly academic, but I've been able to overcome those by going to the tutoring center and getting tutoring. If I know that I'm having a problem with a specific topic, it's on me and will seek help from either the professor, tutor or somebody. I will make a very valid point there. It's not just how they teach you that matters but it's how they treat you that matters. I mean professors who care about and are good to you. Professors are going to be professors, regardless, it's like, there's not much you can do, especially if they

have tenure, because I had an experience with a professor's this semester. And he, he's not the nicest person. And I was talking to my friends about him. And I'm like, guys, like, he really just picks on us, over and over and over. And then my friend was like, oh, we reported him last semester, to the head of the Biology department. And he came back to class. And he was like, oh, I got a new haircut. Because you guys are like trying to get me fired. But turns out he has tenure, so he doesn't really care about what's going on. So, professors like those discourage us from staying in school. It's just a reminder that professors get tenure can do what he or she feels like without any consideration, I guess.”

Participant 9, a second semester, African American female student emphasized the need to feel connected with the professor and the professor to be engaged with the students.

“Sometimes I find it hard to, like, make a connection with my professors. It seems to me like a disconnect. I don't think that the professors prompt me in class, I just sit there. And if I have something to say I raise my hand, sometimes they call on me, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they notice. Sometimes they don't. But they don't really prompt me. They sometimes expect me to be there and sit there without saying anything or asking questions.”

Subtheme 3: Career Opportunities. Career opportunities refers to opportunities offered to students to achieve career growth. The findings highlighted the importance of access to career opportunities to keep students focused on degree completion. Participant 10 a second semester, African American female underlined how important internship opportunities are to affirming degree choice and completion.

“Maybe more internships in different majors or fields or just more opportunities to get more money or further education in that field or that degree. I just feel that getting more internships and planning career events for African American students and making them feel more comfortable can make an impact on them completing their degree.”

The participant highlighted that building a community for minorities within the institution can be a game changer in retention and graduation of African American students completing their academic studies. Participant 7, a second semester, African American female student highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for career growth.

“My mentor from the mentoring program lets me know about all the opportunities that's available on campus. Having such a program is one of the biggest supports for me and just being in that space where you're aspiring to be great and be successful. The mentorship program exposed me to so many things not solely academics. They're building all this connection; they're interested in your development. Totally, like every aspect of it.”

The analysis of the collected data demonstrated that university support was a common theme among participants in the data analysis. Program mentorship, faculty engagement and career opportunities were the sub-themes that emerged from the theme of university support.

Theme 2: Belongingness

RQ2: What are the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions?

Belongingness, specifically cultural awareness, student bonding and campus activities were contributing factors that affected the retention of African American students in higher education institutions. Campus activities provided opportunities for students to bond through similar background and cultural experiences. The participants thought that belongingness contributed to their decision to remain within the university and complete their studies. The opportunities to engage in campus activities allowed the student to have a sense of identity and promoted active engagement that allowed them to remain focused on the requirements for graduation.

Subtheme 1: Cultural Awareness. Cultural Awareness refers to differences and similarities between cultures when interacting with members of other cultural groups. Students' sense of belonging on campus was a top factor in retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The findings showed that fostering a sense of belongingness on campus can impact students' overall college experience and cultural awareness. Participant 6, a freshman in her second semester, also an out-of-state resident, discussed the relevance of feeling comfortable on the university campus and completing her college degree.

“I think it's all about feeling comfortable within the university and then if you're not comfortable in it, then you're going to reduce your motivation to come to class, or to participate. So, for me, finding the reason why I want to stay is important. It is also easier for me to engage with students from similar cultural backgrounds. I do feel like there's a place for me.”

Participant 1, an in-state resident, freshman in her second semester majoring in biomedical sciences, also highlighted the importance of having a sense of belonging from a cultural and retention perspective.

“I have connected with people whom I can relate to and share similar experiences. It’s more difficult for me to become engaged with students of different ethnicities although this is a predominantly white institution. But I still try to find my way of making that connection. You get an opportunity because there are so many clubs. There are so many clubs to join and see the different cultures and how they interact. It is so interesting, because now I want to participate in different activities and make connections through this whole new experience. Because when you hear your friends talking about certain issues that you'd never heard otherwise, really opens conversation.”

Participant 4 an out-of-state, African American female student highlighted the importance of having a sense of identity on campus and how this affected her decision to remain within the institution.

“This is like a predominantly white institution and the feeling of belongingness is a high priority. There's sometimes a lot of tension and the feeling that certain voices are not being heard. However, I haven't had any issues where I had to go to any sort of higher up and talk about discrimination. I feel like I really don't know a lot about the history of the school. I don't know if the voices of groups within the school have been heard, or if their demands have been met. If you know what I mean”

Participant 3, an in-state, African American female student discussed the importance of diversity in the curriculum to support the sense of belongingness.

“Right now, we need diversity in the curriculum to incorporate other cultures and allow students to embrace their identity and feel a sense of belongingness. The curriculum right now is just okay, so like first year writing, and the core classes, the curriculum doesn't really focus on black education.”

Subtheme 2: Student Bonding. Student bonding refers to the ability of students to connect and socialize with each other in the academic setting. Student bonding helps students to make connection and forge a school community for positive academic learning and success.

The findings also highlighted the challenges that the participants encountered in making connections with students outside their ethnic cultural background and adjusting on campus. Participant 10, a non-resident freshman in her second semester indicated that interaction on campus with students is limited and possibly could lead to isolation or not returning to the institution.

“There is not much of an interaction between me and my classmates. They tend to just sit in the classroom, and does not say anything or like, they come in already knowing people and are only talking to those people.”

The findings accentuated the need for a shared community for African American students in higher education to build social connection. Participant 3, an in-state resident, second-semester freshman who commutes to campus emphasized the need for social connections.

“There must be a community that you have around you. You need your own social connection. When I started university, it was my chance to talk to people and make friends. During the first semester, I didn't really talk to people. But then I met students with similar backgrounds, and this is where I started making connections. I would say that me and my classmates have a very good relationship. We have a social connection now.”

Subtheme 3: Campus Activities. Campus activities refers to the variations of clubs and activities that students are actively engaged in for meaningful connections outside of the classroom requirements. Participant 4, a freshman in her second semester emphasized the importance of campus activities to her feeling of being a part of the university community:

“If I didn't have those things that would make me want to continue, especially in a predominantly white institution, where there is a sense of loneliness that may lead to some sort of isolation. The feeling of not belonging can be a dangerous feeling and can lead to a lot of other issues like not wanting to socialize and participate in class. And that could lead to not completing or getting the grades that you want, or not graduating. I think is good to have more support for black students and making sure that there's a feeling of inclusivity for all students.”

Participant 7, a freshman in her second semester highlighted the importance of making connections through campus activities such as engaging with different clubs and organizations. She shared her experienced as an active African American student on campus.

“I am very involved on campus in different organizations and the university can help to make us all feel included by funding more activities. Fundings need to be allocated more evenly to organizations, especially those clubs which don't get a lot of advertisements so that students can have a place in those organizations. I think most people find the place where they belong, like having classes with the same people in your major or meeting people during club time.”

The participants strongly emphasized the need for inclusion and a sense of belongingness within the institution. The findings showed that the participants valued a strong need for inclusion within the institution curriculum and social settings to ensure that black students have a sense of belongingness on campus. The analysis of the collected data demonstrated that belongingness was common among participants in the data analysis. Cultural awareness, student bonding and campus activities were the sub-themes that emerged from the theme of belongingness.

Theme 3: Student Academic Commitment

RQ3: What are the lived experiences of African American students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentorship since enrolling within the university?

Student academic commitment, including self-motivation and GPA maintenance emerged as a theme, from the analysis, that was key to the lived experience and ultimately graduation and retention of African American students.

Subtheme 1: Self-motivation. Self-motivation refers to the student’s intrinsic drive to focus and set goals. Participant 3, an in-state, African American female student emphasized the importance of this internal drive.

“Classmates can affect you on a level if you make them affect you. I’m the type of person that lets nothing bother me. Not that I don’t care what’s going on. I’m getting my education and staying connected. And yeah, something that another person does in the class doesn’t really bother me, unless they’re directing it at me or becoming disrespectful. But otherwise, I am focused and keep my eyes on the prize. For me to complete a degree is just about the finances because if you don’t have the money to continue to college then there goes the problem. Most of the time, you must be self-driven because no one is going to do it for you. And I need those grades, because for the sciences, you must do classes at different levels in order to advance to the next level. We must repeat the class if we don’t pass it. And nobody’s trying to repeat that chemistry class. Because I know I’m not trying to repeat that chemistry class. So that’s like one big challenge.”

Participant 8, a second semester, African American male student discussed how self-motivation was important to achieving good grades and maintaining an optimal GPA.

“And I did really well in class, and my GPA for last semester was spending that time with the professor and going to the office hours as well as showing you have an interest in different things can make an impact on graduation and in your career success.”

Participant 2, an in-state, African American male student, emphasized the importance of an inner drive.

“I must admit, you encounter a lot of pressure been a freshman. You know, it’s a lot of pressure already to know how to do certain things and how to navigate your college career but motivation goes a long way and having your own inner drive is

a big thing. Self-motivation goes a long way, it really does. Because at the end of the day, at 1am, in the morning, when you have to write a paper, no one's there with you and if you don't have that self-motivation and that drive to do it, then you won't do it. These are some of things that can cause you to drop out.”

Participant 7, a second semester, African American female student echoed the importance of self-motivation.

“I think if students are more engaged on campus, they will be more willing to seek out the resources that they need and know where to go and look for them and are the students who are driven to stay in college and complete their degree.”

Subtheme 2: GPA Maintenance. GPA maintenance refers to the tools and strategies used to maintain an optimal grade point average over time. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of these tools and strategies in maintaining balance.

“And I've experienced both sides of the spectrum. And one side is you can get self-motivated because you can see the end goal. And at the end of this, I'll look back and appreciate this process. Where other side, it can be a deterrent as well, because you could be so focused on getting good grades to keep your scholarship, but you don't get the real experience of college. You don't get to do extracurricular, you don't get to socialize with friends, because you're solely driven on getting A's and keeping your scholarship, that everything else is secondary. It shouldn't be like that, and I had to learn that early. And so balancing both sides, it's really, I think is paramount. Because you're here in college you must work hard, but you only have four years to enjoy, and you will never get

these years back. You know, and so I've tried to balance both. And yeah, I've experienced again, I've experienced both sides.”

The analysis of the collected data demonstrated that student academic commitment was common among participants in the data analysis. Self-motivation and GPA maintenance were the sub-themes that emerged from the theme of student academic commitment.

Theme 4: Parental & Financial Support

RQ2: What are the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions?

Parental & Financial support was the fourth theme that emerged from the data analysis and were highlighted as contributing factors affecting retention of African American students in higher education institutions. Parental support and tuition support emerged as subthemes in the data analysis and highlighted the importance of these contributing factors to retention and graduation of African American students in higher education institution.

Subtheme 1: Parental Support. Parental support reviewed the role that parents and family played in students' emotional guidance. The findings showed that parental support, though not always academic, provided the structure that the students needed to continue with their studies. Participant 9, a second semester, African American female student expressed the importance of parental support to improving retention and graduation.

“My mom didn't even finish high school, I think. But I'm here doing chemistry and she is very supportive. Like, even though I know that doesn't understand my

work, I'm saying that she's still there, like supporting me. My mom is a big part of my academic success ever since I was a child. Ever since, she has been pushing me like. In high school I used to stay up late to study for a test and she'd be right up with me. Even when she was tired. She would be right there making me tea or coffee or anything that I need to stay awake. So, she is like a big part of my life. My dad, since he got the stroke, is not really like himself. My mom is also like my father. He still motivates me a lot to stay in school even though they don't understand the subject matter, but just knowing that someone is there for the support matters. So that I agree it does make a difference in completing college when you have someone to encourage you.”

Participant 9 explained that parental experience was an important part of parental support and guidance. Some students may have that experience where their parents and other family members attended college, so they can kind of rely on them to set expectations for college.

“I didn't really have that much. Because no one really went to college except my sister but the only good part about it is that I had the support of both my parents and siblings. Some students only had one parent or one sibling.”

The analysis of the collected data demonstrated that parental & financial support was common among participants in the data analysis. Scholarship support and tuition support were the sub-themes that emerged from the theme of parental & financial support.

Subtheme 2. Tuition Support. Tuition support highlighted the importance of academic and program scholarship in supporting students' academic goals for degree completion.

The findings underlined the importance of tuition support to minimizing financial concerns and staying focused on the studies. Participant 7 emphasized the importance of tuition support particularly at a private institution with a significantly high tuition cost.

“Because this a private institution, some students might not get enough financial aid which could become very expensive. This can affect student from completing their studies.”

Participant 3 also discussed the importance of tuition support to retention.

“For me to complete degree is just about the finances because if you don't have the money to continue to college then there goes the problem. So absolutely, yes, your financial status or your socio economic, economic status will determine where you go from here. So if you've got the money, if you're like in the upper class, middle class, you will be able to complete your college degree. Finance plays a big role in you getting a degree. I wouldn't say I'm fortunate because it's still hard for me. I'm pretty sure many others out there are still struggling to finance their tuition or still trying to figure out if they will be able to complete college. Unfortunately, it's just heartbreaking thinking about having the potential of not completing the degree due to finances.”

Participant 3 further emphasized the importance of scholarships to balancing tuition cost and additional fees.

“I'm only disappointed at how much it costs. Although scholarships are helpful because you get the extra funding but there are different variations of the problem. The fact that I must pay extra fees for books and software outside of what I'm already paying to go to this school is not reasonable and imagine students who

can't afford it. And I see how it could create a problem for them in completing their studies or not completing their program or not getting the grades that they're looking for.”

Participant 1 also discussed the importance of financial support to balancing costs.

“We must pay additional lab fees to do our assignments and for additional software systems to use to complete assignment, which I think is not fair because we're paying so much money in tuition, especially in a private institution. I'm paying so much money in tuition just to come back and pay an additional fee just to do my homework and assignments. The labs are helpful because you get to practice different variations of the problems but I'm disappointed at how much it costs. The only other thing I financially looked at is that I could see that the tuition being raised. The tuition is already high, which could possibly prevent me from completing my studies. I'm hoping there can be a change, especially for the students who can't afford it.”

Participant 9, a freshman in his second semester and an out of state resident majoring in Sports Management emphasized the importance of financial balance and support.

“I have a big role because I don't want to burden my parents and they really don't have a lot of money. My parents struggle and would always tell me how I this is what happens when you go to school and how I should set that example to kind of do better. So, I feel that was kind of a big issue for me. I kind of didn't want to let people down. So, I always put that extra stress on myself just to get that scholarship. So, when I received that scholarship, I was happy. But even that money still left on the payment it still stresses me out. I suppose there's a lot of pressure, and it kind of sucks. But I feel like some kids that come from wealthy

families don't really have that stress to deal with. They have the choice to really do what they want to do instead of worrying about money. Because I know at one point, I wanted to teach but I had to really think about how much teachers get paid and the kind of life I want to have. I don't think it was going to really match up so I decide to major in Sports Management.”

The information provided by the student highlighted the importance of tuition support to helping students stay focus on their coursework.

Conclusion

Throughout the analysis of data, four overarching themes and two to three sub-themes emerged for each theme. The first overarching theme, university support, and the three sub-themes: program mentorship, faculty engagement and career opportunities, emerged as some characteristics within higher education institution that can improve African American university students’ achievement, retention and graduation. The second overarching theme was belongingness and the three sub-themes were cultural awareness, student bonding and campus activities. The theme of belongingness addressed the research question that explored the contributing factors that affected retention of African American students in higher education institutions. Students’ academic commitment, and the two sub-themes: self-motivation and GPA maintenance emerged as themes that showed the importance of the lived experiences of African American students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentorship since enrolling within the university. The fourth overarching theme, parental and financial support, and the two sub-themes, scholarship support and tuition support emerged as contributing factors that affected retention of African American students in higher education institutions. Chapter

five will provide the reader with interpretation of results, relationship between results and prior research, limitations and implications for future practice.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students and understand their lived experience from a phenomenological perspective. Qualitative methodology allows a researcher to investigate the research study in depth to provide a more in-depth analysis of the real lived experiences of the research participant. Creswell (2012) discussed that “the purpose of a proposal is to help an investigator think through all aspects of the study and anticipate problems” (p. 268). Phenomenological qualitative methodology was used to further explore factor affecting retention and graduation of African American students in Higher Education.

The study was guided by three research questions. The first question explored some characteristics within higher education institutions that can improve African American university students’ graduation. The second question looked at the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions. The third research question explored the lived experiences of African American university students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentors since enrolling within the University.

Chapter one described the purpose of the study. Chapter two provided a review of the related literature on contributing factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students. Chapter three described the research method, including the data collections methods. Chapter four presented the findings and the emergent themes from

the data analysis. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of each finding, relating them to the research questions and the theoretical framework.

Interpretation of Findings

Research Question #1

The first question explored some of the characteristics within higher education institutions that can improve African American university students' graduation. Tinto's model highlighted the relationship between student graduation and student integration into the campus community. The analysis showed that belongingness was key to retention and graduation of the students. The findings showed that the sense of belongingness, specifically creating the opportunities for cultural awareness, student bonding as well as creating opportunities for student engagement through campus activities was integral to student integration into the campus community. The findings highlighted that this participation in the campus community was important to the students' retention and completion of their studies.

Tinto's theory also emphasized the support of peers and the social environment. The findings of this study endorsed the basis of Tinto's theory and highlighted student bonding as fundamental to a sense of belonging to the university community. The students were more likely to stay the course if they felt like they were making connections and were included in the university community.

Research Question #2

The second question looked at the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions. Tinto's retention theory emphasized the role of support programs to improving the retention rate of African

American students. The finding of this study highlighted the importance of support programs such as program mentorship, faculty engagement and career opportunities to improve students' retention. The study was in line with Tinto's retention theory and students were more likely to continue their studies if they had the institutional support necessary for the completion of their course and degree.

Students felt more supported when the faculty was available during the courses which led to more positive experiences for the students in the courses where the faculty was actively engaged. The mentor support provided by the mentorship program provided the necessary resources for the students in developing the skills required to maintain the student academic commitment. The study highlighted that student academic commitment contributed to student completing their degree and the skills were important to maintaining self-motivation and grade point average.

The finding also highlighted that parental and financial support played an integral role in students' degree completion. The study showed that this support was especially important to the students in the first year of their program of study. The tuition support provided by academic and program scholarships played a major role in allowing students to focus on their academic coursework, to engage in the university community and to remain enrolled. Parental support also emerged as crucial to student retention and graduation. The students emphasized the role of parental support in maintaining focus and remaining within the institution.

Research Question #3

The third research question explored the lived experiences of African American university students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentors since

enrolling within the University. The lived experiences of the study participants showed that the support of university community shaped their approach to completing their coursework and impacted their perception of achieving program completion.

Implications of Findings

The study was guided by Tinto's Theory of Retention. This was a qualitative study that explored the factors affecting retention and graduation of African American College Students at a private University in the metropolitan region of an urban city in the northeast United States. The purpose of the current study was to understand factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education based on their lived experience. Addressing the issues of under-representation of African American students in higher education have posed challenges for leaders in higher education. The research study examined how factors such as university support, belongingness, student academic commitment and parental and financial support, are associated with the retention of African American students. The current study found that student engagement, academic support and financial services are also vital for retention of African American students in higher education and can be used an indicator for retention and academic success.

The findings did apply to concepts found in Tinto's theory of academic and social integration. The findings supported Tinto's theory which emphasized the need for enriched academic and social integration for African American students to improving improve retention (Tinto, 2007). Understanding students' family background can influence retention in college as institutions can accommodate and implement support programs required for different student populations. The study highlighted the

institutional action need to promote student retention on campuses and to ensure that academic and social integration for all students.

Relationship to Prior Research

The study supported the themes identified in the existing literature on the factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The existing literature reviewed in this study emphasized the influence of racial identity, academic and social integration, academic support and the impact of families and academic success and persistence on student retention. Similar to prior research this study found that the core system of university, program, financial and parental support was important to student retention and graduation.

Further research studies compared black students attending historically Black institution (HBI) versus a predominantly White institution (PWI) and their involvement in various college activities and educational gains (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). Prior research indicated that black students attending the HBI showed greater effort to academic activities than black students attending PWI. Black students enrolled at HBI were more likely to reach graduation than peers attending PWI. In addition, there were greater gains in personal and social development, critical thinking, history and cultural awareness (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) tend to provide a more supportive environment for learning opportunities and academic success of African American students (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996). Similar to prior research, this study found that racial identity was important to retention. However, this study did not completely support the prior studies that emphasized the institution type as important to retention and graduation. In the current research study, African American students at the

private university in the metropolitan region of an urban city in northeast United States reported that academic progress was linked more to belongingness, university support, student academic commitment and parental and financial support. The findings showed that the distinctions were not in the type of institution that the student attended but in the type of support provided by the educational institution.

The study supported the prior research premise that when students' perceptions and experiences with university support systems affected the perception of the ability to continue their course of study. Diverse institutions that lack the social, institutional and financial support have a significant effect on the retention rate of African American college students.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation in the research study is time constraint. The research study was completed within less than a year which limits the duration for follow-up interviews with the research participants. The research study is delimited to a group of 10 African American college students selected by the researcher within a specific mentoring program at the institution. This qualitative research solely focused on second semester African American students, the perceptions of African American college students and their experiences on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American in higher education. The perceptions from the perspectives of faculty, administrators and staff were not considered as a part of the research analysis instead the research analysis was generated from the unstructured phenomenological in-depth interviews of the research participants.

Recommendation for Future Practice

Research studies conclude that university support, belongingness, student academic commitment and parental & financial support are crucial to increase student retention and require valid and successful program implementation through formative and summative assessment. Desousa and Kuh (1996) found that peer-related activities had a more positive effect on African- American students' educational and personal development which in result increase retention. Overall, more research needs to be done to better understand the conditions affecting the retention rate of African American college students in higher education and best solutions for implementing effective strategies and retention programs.

Tinto's retention theory can be used as a model for developing and implementing support programs to improve the retention of African American university students. Tinto emphasized the need for enriched academic and social integration of African American student in higher education to promote retention on campus (Tinto, 2007). Improving retention for African American university students requires the university to provide academic and social support in a more diverse setting to promote learning and student engagement. As aforementioned, academic support is critical in students' learning outcome and crucial to understanding that "nothing is more important to student retention than academic support, especially during the critical first year of college, when student retention is still very responsive to institutional intervention" (Tinto 2012, p. 25).

Extended mentorship program should be created for African American students at all levels of their academic year and not just freshman year to monitor their progress and help them remain in college and complete their studies. This would make an impact on

African American academic success and completion of their college degrees within the institution. More Educational Equity Initiative programs can be created within higher education institutions to ensure that underrepresented groups including African Americans are given fair chances to excel meaning that they can find a sense of belonging within the institution and given the academic and social support from the institution to succeed. These are programs that should be initiated throughout all colleges and universities within the United States with the assistance of the US Department of Education providing funding for retention program initiatives to end decades of repeated cycle of low retention for African American students and programs that will advance educational equity and promote social justice.

A further recommendation for future practice is that institutions conduct quarterly surveys on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students, the group with the lowest graduation based on national survey data (NCES, 2019). This would provide an opportunity for institutions to receive current and frequent feedback from students' perspectives and execute more efficient measures and actions to improving retention and graduation of African American students. Institutions also need to take the time out to listen to the voices of historically disadvantaged and underrepresented groups and provide university support through comprehensive retention program to accommodate African American students' sense of belongingness on university campuses.

It is imperative that we understand these ongoing concerns through additional surveys which can identify the necessary resources to support students' academic progress and to provide effective communications with students from the time they

enrolled until the time they graduate. This in result can improve the retention of African American College students and provide a stronger educational gain and personal development outcome.

Recommendation for Future Research

Researcher and educators need to be asking specific questions to address the issues of retention of American college students. How do we effectively reduce a vicious generational cycle of low retention of African American students? Higher education institutions may not have completed effective strategic planning to provide effective academic, financial and social support for African American students. Based on the findings in the research study, belongingness, university support, student academic commitment and parental & financial support have a significant effect on the retention of African American students.

However, further research studies need to be conducted through more interviews and university surveys to determine which methods and strategies have been improving retention of African American students in higher education. Another recommendation for future research would be to review the students in the current study in their second, third and fourth year to understand the factors that shaped their experiences over the four years and compare how the experiences shaped their progression.

Overall, more research needs to be done to better understand the conditions affecting the retention rate of African American college students in higher education and best solutions for implementing effective strategies and retention programs.

Conclusion

The research study concluded that a sense of university support, belongingness, student academic commitment and parent and financial support are critical to improving retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. Desousa and Kuh (1996) found that peer-related activities had a more positive effect on African-American students' educational and personal development which will improve retention and graduation of African American students. However, more research needs to be done to better understand the conditions affecting the retention and graduation of African American college students in higher education and best solutions for implementing effective strategies and retention programs.

Overall, the findings of research study concluded that African American students could excel and remain in college with sense of belongingness on campus through the university support, student academic commitment, parental & financial support and mentorship programs. This would allow African American students the same chance to succeed as other groups have and a better chance to remain in college after their first year (Sherman & Giles, 1994). The research concluded that better communication between students, parents and universities can help to correct the phenomenon of factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education.

It is imperative that we understand these ongoing concerns through the lens of students' lived experience and provide the necessary resources to support students' academic progress and to provide effective communications with students from the time they enrolled until the time they graduate. This can improve the retention and graduation of African American College students and provide a stronger educational gain and

personal development outcome. There is an urgency for researchers and educators to further explore the issues of retention and graduation of African American college students and which tasks and programs are necessary for more African American students to remain in college and complete their degree.



APPENDIX A LETTER OF CONSENT

Student Participant Consent

Title of Research Project: A qualitative inquiry of factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in Higher Education.

Institution: St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439

Introduction: I am a doctoral student at St. John's University. I am doing research on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and would like you to participate in my research study.

Procedures: In this study, I will be asking you questions about factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and recommended strategies to improve retention and graduation of African American university students. As a part of this process, I will ask you to participate in an interview which will take no more than 45 minutes. The in-depth unstructured interviews will address the primary research questions and will include open-ended questions that focus on understanding the central phenomenon in the research study. The interview will take place in the mentoring classroom on the university campus. You will also be observed during your sessions in the mentoring program to understand the level of commitment to the program workshops and study sessions. Academic and social integration, peer collaboration, connectivity, and self-efficacy within the mentorship program will also be analyzed using a data analysis protocol.

Possible risks or benefits: There are no known risks involved with participation in this

study. However, I will be asking you to take time from your busy schedule to volunteer in this doctoral research study. The benefit of participation in this study is that this research may help the investigator to better understand associating risk factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The research aims to help the university in implementing additional programs that can improve retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. Participants will be allowed to review the transcript for any necessary adjustment before transcripts are coded.

Confidentiality: Your name and any information provided will be kept confidential.

Your identity will not be disclosed. Your participation in the research study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any time. If there is anything about the study that is unclear or if you have any questions about your participation in the study, you may contact the primary investigator, Kim-Marie Cespedes at cespedek@stjohns.edu or (914) 374-5517 or contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Randall Clemens, Associate Professor at St. John's University, at clemensr@stjohns.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact St. John's University Institutional Review Board, IRB Coordinator, Dr. Marie Nitopi at nitopim@stjohns.edu or (718) 990-1440.

I am 18 years or older and I agree to voluntarily participate in the above-described study. I have received a copy of the consent form.

_____ I agree voluntarily to be audio-taped during interviews.

Printed Name of Student Participant

Signature of Student Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date



Mentor Consent

Title of Research Project: A qualitative inquiry of factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in Higher Education.

Institution: St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439

Introduction: I am a doctoral student at St. John's University. I am doing research on factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and would like you to participate in my research study.

Procedures: In this study, I will be researching factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education and recommended strategies to improve retention and graduation of African American university students. As a part of this process, I will be interviewing student participant of the programs but will also be observing interactions between mentor and mentees.

Possible risks or benefits: There are no known risks involved with participation in this study. As a mentor in this program, you will be included in the student observations. The benefit of participation in this study is that this research may help the investigator to better understand associating risk factors affecting retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. The research aims to help the university in implementing additional programs that can improve retention and graduation of African American students in higher education. Participants will be allowed to review the transcript for any necessary adjustment before transcripts are coded.

Confidentiality: Your name and any information provided will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be disclosed. Your participation in the research study is completely voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any time. If there is anything about the study that is unclear or if you have any questions about your participation in the study, you may contact the primary investigator, Kim-Marie Cespedes at cespedek@stjohns.edu or (914) 374-5517 or contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Randall Clemens, Associate Professor at St. John's University, at clemensr@stjohns.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact St. John's University Institutional Review Board, IRB Coordinator, Dr. Marie Nitopi at nitopim@stjohns.edu or (718) 990-1440.

I am 18 years or older and I agree to voluntarily participate in the above-described study. I agree voluntarily to participate in the student observations focused on mentor-mentee interactions. I have received a copy of the consent form.

Printed Name of Mentor

Signature of Mentor

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX B RESEARCH PROPOSAL PLANNING TABLE

A Qualitative Inquiry of Factors affecting Retention and Graduation of African American Students in Higher Education

Key Concepts	Problem	Purpose/ Significance	Research Questions/ Approach
<p>The critical elements that frame the broader problem or issue that this study addresses (bullets of major topic and sub-topic elements)</p> <p>A. African American College students experience lower levels of student retention on college campuses and are less likely than whites to make an immediate transition from high school to college which means that high priority need to be in place to understand the factors affecting graduation and retention of African American College students and finding effective solutions to solve this problem (Tinto, 2007).</p>	<p>Broader Problem or Issue</p> <p>The research study will seek to explore the phenomena of the lived experiences of college students and analyze significant themes contributing to the retention and graduation rate of African American students. In addition to addressing the issues of retention and graduation of African American College students in higher education, racial and socio-economic barriers are associating factors for African American students in higher education and have been a long ongoing concern (Baber, 2012). This is an area in the research study that will be further explored, and the significance of the study is to find</p>	<p>How this study will respond to the researchable problem</p> <p>The purpose of this research study is to explore the phenomena of lived experiences of factors affecting graduation and retention of African American Students in higher education by exploring the personal, socio-economic, social and environmental factors that contribute to retention and graduation. Research will also explore different themes contributing to the retention and graduation rate of African American students from a phenomenological perspective. In addition to addressing the issues of under-representation of African American</p>	<p>The questions that will guide the design of this study</p> <p>A. phenomenological qualitative methodology will be used in this study to explore different themes contributing to the retention and graduation rate of African American college students The research will be guided by the following questions: Overarching Question: How can retention and graduation be improved for African American students in higher education? Sub-questions: 1. What are some characteristics within higher education institutions that can improve African American</p>

<p>B. Vincent Tinto's (1975) innovative student integration model initiated a national dialogue on student retention which has created the base for several theoretical studies on undergraduate retention (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Tinto, 2007). The model indicated that students that are most likely to graduate are the committed ones who are socially integrated into the campus community (Tinto, 1975).</p>	<p>effective solutions to solve this ongoing dilemma of low retention and graduation for African American College students. Research study will also examine other contributing factors that can also be associated with the retention and graduation rate of African American students.</p>	<p>students in higher education which poses challenges for leaders in higher education, research study will examine the contributing factors that can also be associated with the retention and graduation rate of African American students.</p>	<p>university students' graduation?</p> <p>2. What are the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions?</p>
<p>C. Tinto (1987) discussed three stages (1) separation from communities of the past, (2) transition from communities of the past (3) incorporation into the communities of the college. Tinto's model of academic and social integration explained student retention of minority students and the need for</p>	<p>Researchable Problem or Issue (the "hole" in the current research) Research findings show that necessary interventions are required through the development of database that assess and evaluate program development for increased retention. This in result will allow black students the same chance to succeed as other groups have and a better chance to remain in college after their first year (Sherman & Giles, 2004). Research study is significant as this study will explore factors affecting retention and</p>	<p>The Significance of doing this study (Who will benefit from the knowledge that this study will produce and how?) Understanding and exploring factors affecting retention and graduation of African American college students to meet ongoing needs of higher education is a high priority which can impact the need for further exploratory studies on retention and graduation of African American College Students. More minority students are aspiring to attend college after they graduate high school, and more are attending. Research study will</p>	<p>3. What are the lived experiences of African American university students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentors since enrolling within the university?</p> <p>The methodology (research tradition) selected to design this study. Qualitative data will be collected and analyzed using interviews, focus groups and observations. Research will be designed to focus on the theme of student-faculty engagement, financial support, peer mentoring and academic support for improving retention and</p>

<p>varying intervention services and academic support programs to ensure students' academic success and retention.</p> <p>D. African American Students from low socio - economic encounter the many obstacles in higher education including a combination of financial, social and academic support which can hinder students from making the critical connection to pedagogy and future financial well-being for the next generation (Tinto, 2007). Students need a sense of belongingness and strong academic support team, mentorship, advisement and counseling to acquire the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior and social environment.</p>	<p>graduation of African American college students to meet ongoing needs of higher education. The research study will give an in-depth knowledge of how personal, socio-economic, social and environmental factors affect retention and graduation from a phenomenological perspective.</p>	<p>be beneficial to minority students in higher education to meet the growing demand of the workforce and socio-economic stability.</p>	<p>graduation rate of American students in higher education.</p>
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<p>Given proper guidance and social academic support, African American students from low socio-economic background can model behaviors, develop academic skills and resilience for a positive outcome in higher education (Tinto, 2007)</p>			
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APPENDIX C METHODS MATRIX

(Adapted from Maxwell *(2013))

Research Questions: What I need to know	Why do I need to know this?	Sampling Decisions: Where will I find this data?	Data Collection Methods – What kind of data will answer these questions?	Whom do I contact for access?
1. What are some characteristics within higher education institutions that can improve African American university students' graduation?	To find effective strategies for improving graduation of African American university students. To obtain more information on students' demographic and economic background such as gender and income status range that might affect graduation.	Using purposive sampling of students, interviews will provide data for research study. Academic support documents from the mentoring program will be analyzed and students' interaction in the program will be observed.	Qualitative data will be collected and analyzed via data document analysis, observations and in-depth unstructured interviews with six African American university students	Director of mentoring program for African American second-semester Freshmen at an Urban, Catholic university
2. What are the contributing factors that affect retention of African American students in higher education institutions?	To explore contributing factors that have an impact on retention of African American students.	Student interviews will include additional questions regarding information on factors such as students' demographic and economic background.	Students will be interviewed to further explore contributing factors that impact retention of African American university students.	Director of mentoring program for African American second-semester Freshmen at an Urban, Catholic university

<p>3. What are the lived experiences of African American university students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentors since enrolling within the University?</p>	<p>To assess the lived experiences of African American students with academic advisors, peers, instructors, and mentors.</p>	<p>Data will be obtained from individual students' interview.</p>	<p>Individual students will be interviewed to assess their lived experiences.</p>	<p>Director of mentoring program for African American second-semester Freshmen at an Urban, Catholic university.</p>
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APPENDIX D CROSSWALK ANALYSIS TABLE

A Qualitative Inquiry of Factors affecting Retention and Graduation of African American Students in Higher Education

Interview Questions	Research Question	Literature Review	Theoretical Framework
1. I appreciate you taking the time for this interview. Please start by telling me a little about yourself.	RQ3: What are some characteristics within higher education institution that can impact African American university students' achievement, retention and graduation?	Influence of Racial Identity	N/A
2. Can you tell about some of your success stories at the University? (Can you tell me any success stories with your academic advisors, peers or mentors?)	RQ3: What are some characteristics within higher education institution that can impact African American university students' achievement, retention and graduation?	Academic and Social Integration, Academic Support, Program Implementation/ Program Initiative	Tinto's Theory
3. Please share your experience on some of the challenges encountered by African American students in higher education.	RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?	Student Involvement in Campus Activities, Admission Rigor and Graduation Rates	Tinto's Theory

4. How do you think these challenges can affect you completing your college degree?	RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?	Student Involvement in Campus Activities, Admission Rigor and Graduation Rates	Tinto's Theory
5. Describe your experiences with your instructors, academic advisors and mentorship since enrolling within the University?	RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?	Academic Support Program Implementation/ Program Initiative	Tinto's Theory
6. What impact does socio-economic status has upon you completing your degree here at the University? (How would consider your financial circumstance impacting you on completion of your studies?)	RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?	Impact of Families on Academic Success	Tinto's Theory
7. How would you describe the impact of family on your academic success?	RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?	Impact of Families on Academic Success	Tinto's Theory

<p>8. Can you think of some of strategies that can improve retention, graduation and success of African American students in higher education? (Can you think of campus activities which can improve success of African American students? (Are you involved in any campus organizations?))</p>	<p>RQ3: What are some characteristics within higher education institution that can impact African American university students' achievement, retention and graduation?</p>	<p>Academic and Social Integration, Academic Support, Program Implementation/Program Initiative</p>	<p>Tinto's Theory</p>
<p>9. Are there any specific freshman academic/service program that have been most helpful to you? If so, please give a brief description of the program and your experience.</p>	<p>RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?</p>	<p>Academic and Social Integration, Academic Support, Program Implementation, Comprehensive Retention Program/ Program Initiative</p>	<p>Tinto's Theory</p>
<p>10. What kind of educational opportunities would you like to be offered to underrepresented students to ensure that they remain in college?</p>	<p>RQ2: How can contributing factors that affect retention and graduation of African American university students be addressed in higher education institutions?</p>	<p>Perceptions of Academic Preparation</p>	<p>Tinto's Theory</p>

11. Thanks for sharing your thoughts and experience with me. Is there any additional information you would like to provide before we close?	N/A	N/A	N/A
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APPENDIX E INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Topic: Exploring factors affecting retention and graduation of African American Students in Higher Education

Participants: Student Interview Protocol/African American university students

Place: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee:

- a. Participant Interview 1
- b. Participant Interview 2
- c. Participant Interview 3
- d. Participant Interview 4
- e. Participant Interview 5
- f. Participant Interview 6
- g. Participant Interview 7
- h. Participant Interview 8
- i. Participant Interview 9
- j. Participant Interview 10

Interviewer Questions:

1. I appreciate you taking the time for this interview. Please start by telling me a little about yourself.
2. Can you tell me about some of your success stories at the University? (Can you tell me about any success stories with your academic advisors, peers or mentors?)

3. Please share your experiences on some of the challenges encountered as an African American student in higher education.
4. How do you think these challenges might affect you completing your college degree?
5. Describe your experiences with your instructors, academic advisors and mentorship since enrolling within the University?
6. What impact does socio-economic status have upon you completing your degree here at the university? (How would consider your financial circumstance impacting you on completion of your studies?)
7. How would you describe the impact of family on your academic success?
8. Can you think of some strategies that can improve retention and graduation of African American students in higher education? (Can you think of campus activities which can improve success of African American students?) (Are you involved in any campus organizations?)
9. Are there any specific freshman academic/service program that have been most helpful to you? If so, please give a brief description of the program and your experience.
10. What kind of educational opportunities would you like to be offered to African American university students to ensure they will remain in college?
11. Thanks for sharing your thoughts and experience with me. Is there any additional information you would like to provide before we close?

APPENDIX F OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Date:
Time:
Site:
Duration of Observation:
Descriptive Description of Participants:
Note Taking on the Social Setting and Location of Participants:
Note Taking on Activities and Interactions of Participants:

APPENDIX G DOCUMENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Documents and Data Analyzed

Document Selected	Data Analyzed
Program Manual	Pillars of Success Student Requirements Network Learning Outcomes
Scholar Goal Sheet	Academic Success Career Preparation Connectivity Personal Enrichment Spirituality

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Vita

<i>Name</i>	<i>Kim-Marie Cespedes</i>
<i>Baccalaureate Degree</i>	<i>Bachelor of Science, City University of New York, Lehman College, New York Major: Computing & Management</i>
<i>Date Graduated</i>	<i>January 1999</i>
<i>Other Degrees and Certificates</i>	<i>Master of Science St. John's University, New York Major: Childhood Education</i>
<i>Date Graduated</i>	<i>January 2012</i>
	<i>Advanced Certificate St. John's University, New York Major: TESOL, K-12</i>
<i>Date Graduated</i>	<i>January 2016</i>