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Academic Self-Efficacy, Racial Identity, Institutional Integration, and the Educational  
Experiences of African American Male Community College Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Julius Saba Munyantwali

2022

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2022

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Academic Self-Efficacy, Racial Identity, Institutional Integration, and the Educational  
Experiences of African American Male Community College Students

by

Julius Saba Munyantwali

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Mark P. Hansen, Co-Chair

Professor Robert T. Teranishi, Co-Chair

Since the late 1960s, the enrollment of African American students in higher education has steadily increased. Furthermore, the community college system and specifically the California community college system has seen the highest rise in the enrollment of African American students. Despite the rise in their numbers, African American male students who have relied on the California community college system as a conduit to a better life continue to have the lowest academic achievement outcomes and are the most likely to leave college. Although research shows that the persistence and academic achievement of college students is linked to the interactions they have with faculty and their peers, little is known about whether these relationships are also connected to the academic achievement of African American males

attending California community colleges, nor is it understood how psychosocial factors influence the achievement. This dissertation built on a study conducted by Reid (2007) in which Tinto's institutional integration theory (e.g., Tinto, 1993) was extended by assertion that African American males who are academically successful (and not just persistent) are also well integrated in the academic and social milieu of their college campuses. Reid's study also hypothesized that their level of institutional integration which influenced their academic achievement was linked to their racial identity attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs.

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach in which twelve African American male students, who were recruited from one Southern California community college, were interviewed to learn about their educational experiences and perceptions. The goal of the study was to provide a voice to this student subgroup which continues to underperform academically. The findings of the study highlight the importance of race, faculty connections and intrinsic motivation factors in reaching academic goals. The study provides recommendations, based on the findings, for educators, administrators and other community college stakeholders to better assist African American males attending community colleges in California to attain their educational goals.

The dissertation of Julius Saba Munyantwali is approved.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my two sons Kwizera Stephen Munyantwali and Ninziiza Martin Munyantwali who were born during the time it was written. You were the inspiration for the research I conducted, and I hope you see yourselves as more than capable to achieve your own dreams. May you find ways to leave this world a better place than you found it. I believe that with God by your side, nothing will be impossible for you to attain. I love you so much!!

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although higher education enrollment of African American students has rapidly increased since the 1960s, after the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public education was illegal (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003), African American males continue to be greatly underrepresented in higher education, making up only 4.4 percent of the entire student population in postsecondary institutions and only 35 percent of all Black students (Knapp et al., 2006). Additionally, the rise in enrollment of African American males is observed more within the community colleges compared to the other postsecondary institutions due to these institutions' lower enrollment fees, proximity to the community and most significantly their open admission policies (Nettles, 1998).

One in every 14 African Americans enrolled in a postsecondary institution attends a California community college; additionally, one of every seven African American community college students in the nation is enrolled in the California community college system (Foster, 2008), which shows the significant role this system has on the education of African American students. Furthermore, African American males enrolled in larger numbers compared to their female, and White and Asian male counterparts (Bush, 2004).

Unfortunately, although African American males consider the California community college system a conduit to a more successful future, a recent study showed that they have the lowest academic outcomes than any other major ethnic group in the system when considering persistence and graduation rates, as well as average cumulative grade point average (Bush, 2004).

For a better understanding of factors related to academic success, this study will explore

how academic self-efficacy, racial identity, and institutional factors, influence the educational experiences of African American males in one California community college. It builds on the argument by Reid (2007) which suggests that the interaction between internal (psychological) and external (social and institutional) factors may help foster responses that inadvertently help African American males assimilate into their institutional milieu. Reid (2007) extends Tinto's (1993) institutional integration theory beyond persistence by arguing that African American males who succeed academically and not merely persist, assimilate into the institutional milieu alongside faculty and peers (Donovan, 1984; McCauley, 1988; St. John et al., 2004). Reid (2007) further argues that their self-efficacy beliefs and racial identity attitudes may influence their academic and social assimilation within their institution.

In his study, Reid (2007) found that academic self-efficacy and Academic Integration significantly correlated to the African American male students' collegiate GPA. This agreed with the hypothesis of the study and confirmed both Bandura's (1997) and Tinto's (1993) theories. On the contrary however, even though they discovered that racial identity attitudes did not correlate significantly with the students' GPA, their bivariate analysis suggested that the attitudes may indirectly slightly influence the academic achievement and definitely impact their college experience.

By integrating three main theoretical frameworks – institutional integration, academic self-efficacy, and racial identity theory – this study hopes to add to the understanding of factors necessary for the academic success of African American males in California community colleges. The findings would be useful in helping educators and administrators within the California community college system develop practices to improve the academic outcomes of African American males attending their colleges.

## **Background**

The rising cost of higher education and the economy's need for skilled labor, has positioned the community college system as the viable choice for many students to access a postsecondary education which would lead to better career opportunities (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2002; Lathan, 2000). The low enrollment fees, accessibility to the community and open admission policies are some of the many reasons community colleges attract students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Nettles, 1998). Also, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), the system serves students who are non-traditional, which the center defines as financially independent, work full-time, attend part-time, are single parents, have dependents or do not have a high school diploma (McClenney, 2004).

The California community college system is currently the largest postsecondary system in the nation, serving more than 2.1 million students and comprises 116 colleges (CCCCO, 2019). Additionally, compared to any other higher education system in the state, it has the most African American students (Bush, 2004), which confirms studies that suggest African Americans attend community colleges at higher rates than Asian and White students (Chenoweth, 1998; Nettles, 1998).

Of all African Americans students enrolled in California postsecondary institutions, 70% were enrolled in California community colleges in fall 2001, compared to 55% percent of Asians and 60% of White students. Also, Black males enrolled in larger numbers compared to their female, and White and Asian male counterparts (Bush, 2004).

## **Problem Statement**

Considering that African American males enroll in community colleges in higher numbers than other postsecondary institutions, it is important to determine what implications this

creates since the colleges have not been successful in producing African American male students who persist, graduate, and transfer at similar rates as students from other racial and gender groups (National Center of Education Statistics, 2003). Subsequently, these African American male students are depending on the California community college system as their primary means to academic and economic opportunity; however, the system has not been effective in helping the students attain positive academic outcomes (Bush, 2004).

### **Existing Interventions and Gaps in Research**

Tolliver and Miller (2018) explored the following interventions to address the problem of the low completion rates for African American male students: assistance with the cost of attendance which was identified as one of the major barriers; pairing scholarships with mentoring and training programs to help engage and support the students; pre-enrollment academic support such as college preparation; completion of remediation courses while enrolled in college courses; tutoring and academic advising; social integration through fraternities and academic organizations; and support from family and community members such as religious mentors.

Reid (2007) argues that most studies have focused on the external (social and institutional) factors responsible for integrating African American males in the institution milieu instead of internal (psychological) ones. In his study he posits that it is the integration of these factors that ultimately determines the level of success of African American students in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). He explores the relationship between self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, institutional integration and the achievement of African American males at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). There have not been similar studies for two-year institutions, especially within California, and so this study will focus on highlighting the

educational experiences of African American males attending one California community college, in order to gain a better understanding of how colleges can better support these students in attaining their educational goals.

### **Statement of Purpose**

In an effort to understand the internal (psychological) factors currently being overlooked by the research on factors influencing the academic success of African American male students in postsecondary institutions (Reid, 2007), this study will build on Reid's (2007) study by exploring how academic self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, and institutional integration influence the educational experiences of African American males attending a California community college. There is clearly a need to understand the factors correlated to the academic success of this student population within the California community college system since these students depend on the system and view it as a conduit to a better life (Bush, 2004).

### **Research Questions**

By answering the following research questions, the study would help California community colleges better understand what factors are most influential in improving the educational experience of African American males attending their institutions. The findings would add to the existing limited knowledge about these students and hopefully new practices would be implemented that would focus on improving the academic outcomes of African American males who mainly rely on the California community college system as their conduit to better lives (Bush, 2004).

RQ1: How do African American male students attending one California community college describe their educational experience?

RQ2: What factors do African American male students attending one California

community college describe as significant to their academic success?

RQ3: What recommendations do African American male students have for California community colleges in relationship to African American male student academic success?

### **Overview of the Research Design**

This study is an extension of one conducted by Reid (2007) in which he explored the relationship between self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, institutional integration and the achievement of African American males at PWIs. Although the initial study used a quantitative approach to study the correlations, this study used a qualitative phenomenological approach highlighted the lived educational experiences of the same student demographic within the California community college system.

I chose to use a phenomenological study because it provided the appropriate lens through which the participants could highlight and make recommendations regarding their educational experience within the community college system. The approach, which has its roots in sociology (Creswell, 2007), was a viable option since the goal of the study was to provide a voice for the students in order to better understand the phenomenon of the *educational experience of African American male students in one California community college*.

I used a purposive sample of twelve African American male students who were recruited from JC (pseudonym), a community college in southern California with one of the highest African American student population. The data collection occurred through in-depth one-on-one interviews that highlighted the participants' experiences and perceptions while attending a community college in California.



## **Significance of Study**

Most theoretical frameworks used to study African American males in community colleges are based on African American males attending four-year colleges (Wood, 2013). This study added to the sparse literature on African American males in community colleges by exploring how academic self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, and institutional integration impact the educational experience of this subgroup within the California community college system.

Since the California community college system is currently the largest postsecondary system in the nation, comprising of 116 colleges and serving over 2.1 million students (CCCCO, 2019), and also serves more African American students than any other institution in the state (Bush, 2004), it is essential to understand which factors within the system are critical to the academic success of African American male students who already view the system as a path to a better life (Bush, 2004). The findings of the study, which could be presented at statewide conferences, would prove to be relevant to administrators, faculty and staff working within the system in helping this subgroup of students. The saying, “It takes a village to raise a child” could not be truer when addressing the success factors of these students.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Community colleges typically attract students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds due to their low enrollment fees, proximity to communities and their open enrollment admissions policies (Nettles, 1998). In California, the total number of African American students enrolled in higher education exceeds any other state, partly due to the fact that it has the largest number of African American residents in the nation after New York (Allen et al., 2002). The California community college system plays a significant role in the higher education of African Americans in the United States since one of every 14 African Americans enrolled in a postsecondary institution attends a California community college (Foster, 2008). Additionally, African American males enroll in California community colleges in larger numbers than their female, and Asian and White male counterparts (Bush, 2004). Even with the high enrollment of African American males in the California community college system, it has not been successful in helping African American males who are persisting, graduating and transferring at similar rates as other racial and gender groups (Bush, 2004). For this reason, this study will explore the correlation between self-efficacy, racial identity, institutional integration, and the academic performance of African American males in California community colleges with the hope of identifying factors that can be fostered in helping these students succeed.

This literature review explores the academic success of African American male students in the California community college system from four different perspectives. First the literature discusses the enrollment levels of African American males in the California community college system compared to other institutions of postsecondary educations within the state and the factors that drive the enrollment. Second, the literature examines the academic performance of

African American males within the California community college system compared to other institutions of higher education. Third, the review of literature identifies barriers to the academic success of African American males within the California community college system. Fourth, the literature defines and explores how self-efficacy, racial identity and institutional factors correlate to the academic success of African American males in postsecondary institutions.

### **Postsecondary Enrollment of African American Students**

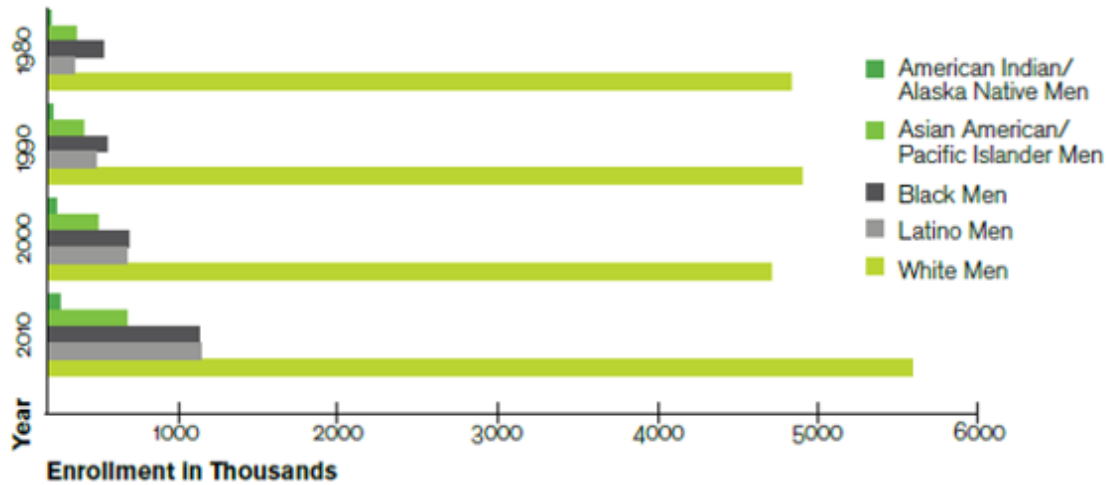
Since the late 1960s the rates at which African Americans have enrolled in college have been on the rise. The enrollment numbers of Black students doubled from 45,000 to 95,000 between 1954 and 1970 after the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public education was illegal (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). By 1970, the enrollment of African Americans was at 7 percent of all undergraduate students which was 4 percentage points lower than their 11 percent representation in the entire population (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). By 2004, the total enrollment of African American students across two and four-year institutions was at 12.5 percent (Knapp et al., 2006), a rate slightly higher than their population representation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Even though there has been an increase in the overall enrollment of African American students, the African American male student numbers have not reflected the increase.

### **African American Male Enrollment**

Despite the progress in increased enrollment of African American students, male students make up only 35 percent of all Black students, and only 4.4 percent of the entire student population (Knapp et al., 2006). Harper and Harris (2012), also highlight the growth in Black male students' college enrollment between 1980 and 2010 (see Figure 1), but also lament at their dismal numbers compared to White male students across all degree levels. With the rise of enrollment numbers of Black males, it should be noted that the significant increase is observed

within the community colleges compared to the other postsecondary institutions.

**Figure 1**  
*Growth in College Enrollments, All Degree Levels, 1990-2010*



Source: U.S. Department of Education (2010)

### **Community College Enrollment**

Due to the rising cost of higher education, and the economy's need for skilled labor, the community college system is positioned as a viable conduit for many students to access higher education and career opportunities (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2002; Lathan, 2000). Also due to their low enrollment fees, proximity to the community and most significantly their open admission policies, community colleges have attracted students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Nettles, 1998). Community colleges also serve a large number of non-traditional students, who are defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) as financially independent, work full-time, attend part-time, are single parents, have dependents or do not have a high school diploma (McClenney, 2004). Based on this definition, 90 percent of community college students who enrolled in the 1999 academic year would be considered nontraditional (McClenney, 2004).

Also, community college students have a wide range of educational aspirations. Most of them (59 percent) desire job related skills; 58 percent want to obtain an associate degree and 47

percent desire to transfer to a four-year college (McClenney, 2004). According to McClenney 2004, close to 50 percent of initial community college students are evaluated as under-prepared for college. McClenney states that “community colleges, undoubtedly, have the toughest job in American higher education” (McClenney, 2004, p.11).

### **California Community Colleges**

Currently, the California community college system is the largest higher education system in the country, comprising of 116 colleges and serving more than 2.1 million students (CCCCO, 2019). It also has the largest number of African American students compared to any other higher education system in the state (Bush, 2004). This data confirm the studies suggesting that African Americans attend community colleges at higher rates than Asian and White students (Chenoweth, 1998; Nettles, 1998).

Seventy percent of African Americans students enrolled in California postsecondary institutions were enrolled in California community colleges as of fall 2001, compared to sixty percent of White students and fifty five percent of Asian students. Additionally, African American males enrolled in larger numbers compared to their female, and White male and Asian male counterparts (Bush, 2004). Table 1 shows the distribution of African American males across the different higher education systems in California as of Fall 2002. Table 2 shows the enrollment of first-time African American male college students across the three main education systems in California for fall 2019.

**Table 1**  
*African American Male Enrollment in California Colleges, 2002*

University of California	California State University	Private and Independent	California Community Colleges
2,109	7,635	7,084	44,197

Source: Table 1 in Bush (2004).

**Table 2**

*First Time African American Male Enrollment in California Public Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2019*

University of California	California State University	California Community Colleges
599	1,044	7,099

Sources: California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (2019); The California State University (2020); University of California (2020).

The tables above show that the California community college system particularly plays a significant role in the education of African American students. One in 14 African Americans enrolled in higher education within the United States are enrolled in a California community college, and one in seven African Americans who are enrolled in a community college are in California (Foster, 2008). Also, only 1.2% of all students enrolled in a public higher education institution within California are Black males. Most of those Black males—82% of them—are in a community college which suggests that these students view California community college as a conduit to a more successful life by earning a certificate or degree, transferring to a four-year college which would eventually lead them to earning a higher salary (Foster, 2008).

Unfortunately, the high enrollment numbers of African American students in California community colleges have not translated into successful academic outcomes for those students.

### **Postsecondary African American Male Academic Achievement**

Despite the progress in enrollment of African American students, their graduation rates hover around 40 percent (Camera, 2016) and only 30.7 percent of them graduate within six years. (Shapiro et al., 2018). Shapiro et al. (2018) also reported lower numbers for African American male students, 26.8% of whom graduated from the institution in which they initially within six years. Harper (2013) noted that at all levels of postsecondary education, African American male students are least likely to stay enrolled and graduate compared to their white

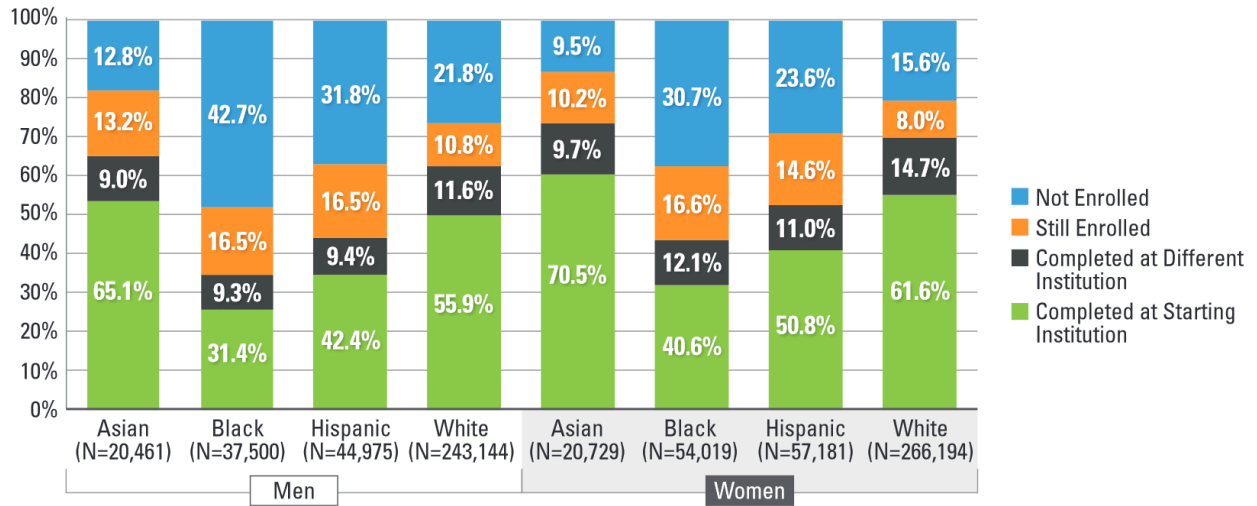
counterparts.

Shapiro et al. (2018) examined the fall 2012 cohort and found that African American males who started at a four-year institution had a six-year completion rate at their starting institution of 31.4% (lowest among the groups examined), compared to a rate of 70.5% attained by Asian females (highest among the groups examined; see Figure 2). The same report also showed that the dropout rate of 42.7% after six years for African American males starting at four-year institutions was the highest among the different subgroups studied. Similarly, Asian females performed the best, with the lowest dropout rate of 9.5% (see Figure 2).

Shapiro et al. (2018) also reported that the completion rate nationwide for African American males after six years at the starting two-year public institution was 17.9% which was worse than the rate of 31.4% for those who started at a four-year institution. Similar to the completion rate at the four-year institutions, African American males had the lowest rate compared to White females who had the highest rate of 35.8% (see Figure 3). The dropout rate after 6 years of 58.9% for African American males at two-year institutions was also higher than those attending a four-year institution who had a rate of 42.7%. Also, similar to the African American males attending four-year institutions, those attending two-year institutions had the highest dropout rate compared to Asian males who had the lowest one of 12.8% (see Figure 3). Since the majority of African American males are enrolled in California community colleges, it is essential to review their success rates within this postsecondary system.

**Figure 2**

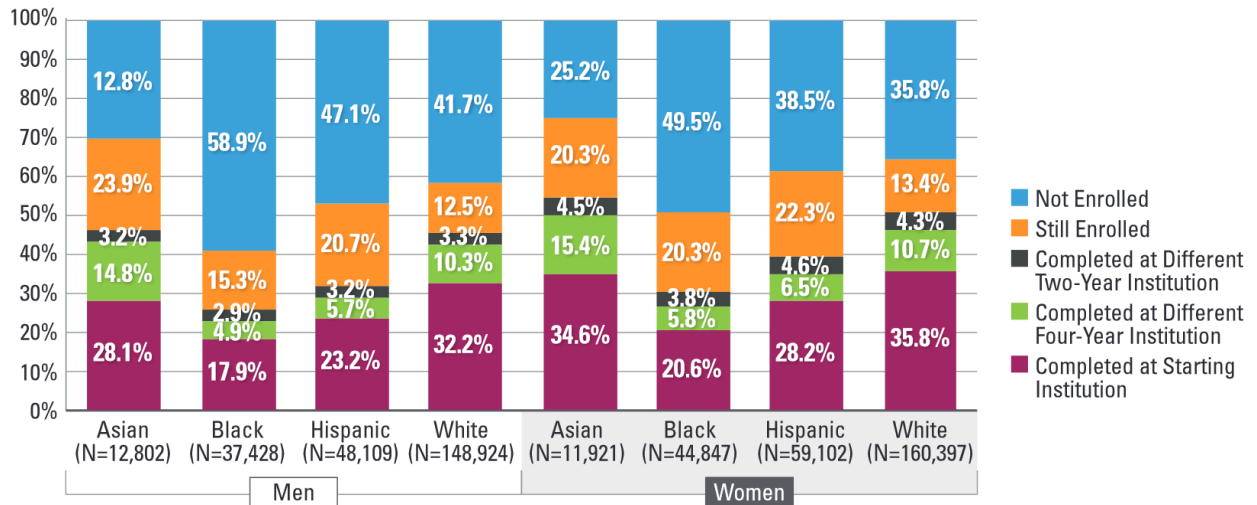
*Six-Year Outcomes for Students Who Started at Four-Year Public Institutions*



Source: Figure 14 in Shapiro et al. (2018).

**Figure 3**

*Six-Year Outcomes and First Completion for Students Who Started at Two-Year Public Institutions*



Source: Figure 21 in Shapiro et al. (2018).

### California Community College African American Male Academic Achievement

Unfortunately, even though African American males in California view the community college as a means to a better life, they have not been successful in meeting their educational goals. A recent study showed that Black males have the lowest academic outcomes than any



other major ethnic group in the California community college system when considering persistence and graduation rates, as well as average cumulative grade point average (Bush, 2004). Similar to the fall 2012 cohort studied by Shapiro et al. (2018), the 2010-11 cohort data pulled from the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s office revealed that African American males had the lowest completion rate of 36.1% compared to Asian females who had the highest rate of 66.7% (See Table 3). The cohort started in 2010-11 and was tracked for five years, with an outcome year of 2015-2016.

**Table 3**  
*Six-Year Completion Rates for California Community Colleges, Cohort Year 2010-2011*

	Female	Male
African-American	36.2%	36.1%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	37.9%	38.3%
Asian	66.7%	63.5%
Filipino	60.2%	53.6%
Hispanic	42.8%	39.1%
Pacific-Islander	44.0%	41.9%
White Non-Hispanic	55.6%	51.2%
All Groups	49.5%	46.4%

Source: California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (2019).

Bush (2004), who conducted a study to evaluate the academic performance of African American males enrolled in California community colleges and at Riverside Community College in comparison to other ethnic and gender subgroups, discovered that they underachieved disproportionately in all areas of the academic outcome measures. Their academic achievement was determined using the outcome variables of graduation rates, persistence rates, transfer rates and grade point average. The study revealed that African American males were the lowest performing subgroup in percentage of the degrees earned, rate of persistence and average cumulative grade point average. Transfer rates were the only measure where these students did

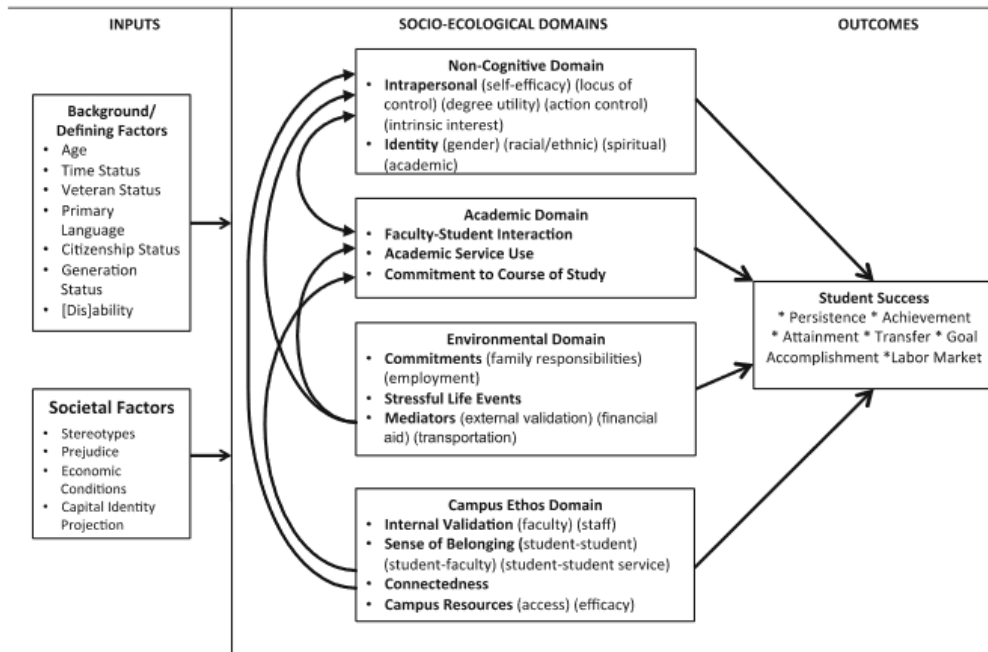
not have the lowest rates, but were still significantly lower than White and Asian students.

Although community colleges are open access institutions, provide quality and affordable education, and serve as a catalyst particularly for Black males who would otherwise not pursue a college education, the large disparities in achievement show that the system is failing African American males (Foster, 2008). It is essential to determine what factors serve as barriers to African American males achieving at the same level as their counterparts in the other subgroups.

### **Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model: An Overview of Factors Influencing the Academic Success of African American Males in Higher Education**

Harris and Wood (2014) espoused the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model which highlights key factors which influence the educational outcomes of historically underserved and underrepresented men in education. The model is primarily influenced by prior research on men of color in community colleges and secondarily on the education of men of color in postsecondary institutions, community college student success, Black masculinity, and ethnic identity development. The model follows Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Outcomes (IEO) model which suggested that programs serving student needs should consider "inputs" significant to students' prior educational involvements, their traits, and other pre-college related factors. The inputs are then streamed through the environment of an educational program, which is linked to the experiences of the students while in the program. Astin (1993) suggests that what happens in the "environment" should be the focus in determining the outcomes for students. Based on this model, Harris and Wood (2014) defined inputs, environments (social-ecological domains), and outcomes significant to underrepresented males in community colleges (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
*The Socio-Ecological Outcomes Model*



Source: Figure 3.1 in Harris & Wood (2014).

Harris and Wood’s (2014) model suggests that inputs influence the way students navigate and understand their college experiences. It highlights four socio-ecological domains that are significant in determining college student success: (1) non-cognitive, (2) academic, (3) environmental, and (4) campus ethos domains. The non-cognitive domain includes intrapersonal and identity factors. The intrapersonal factors point to psychosocial characteristics of students that are directly attributed to the campus climate and the students’ outside lives. They include: self-efficacy (students’ assurance to succeed in academics), degree utility (the alleged importance of a degree), locus of control (students’ perceptions of influence over their academic futures), action control (students’ direct care towards their academics), and intrinsic interest (the honest interest a student has in academic information). The identity factors focus on the students’ racial/ethnic and gender identities, including their spiritual and academic selves. It is hypothesized that the intrapersonal and identity factors interact in the non-cognitive domain

(Wood et al., 2015).

Similar to the non-cognitive domain, the campus ethos and environmental domains influence the academic domain. The academic domain includes students' academic experiences with an emphasis on faculty-student interactions, use of academic services, and student commitment to their course of study. Harris and Wood (2014) suggest that there is an interrelationship between the non-cognitive and academic domains, as affected by the campus ethos and environmental domains, that influence student success.

The environmental domain includes aspects that occur in students' external lives that influence their academic outcomes. These include their family and employment commitments, stressful life events, and external mediators. Stressful life events could be anything that occurs in the students' life that may cause stress. This could include divorce, death, illness, incarceration or loss of employment. External mediators on the other hand include messages students may receive from others about their academic goals, financial aid, and transportation (Wood et al., 2015).

The final domain, campus ethos, refers to factors which shape the general campus climate. These include the affirmations students receive from faculty and staff, and whether students feel a sense of belonging with the other students, faculty and staff. It also includes factors related to the campus' racial climate, and whether there are any aspects of microaggressions and stereotype threats. According to Harris and Wood (2014) these four domains, together with the two pre-college factors, background/defining and societal, as defined in the SEO model, impact student success as measured by persistence, achievement, graduation and transfer in general.

According to Wood et al. (2015), the social domain is noticeably absent from the SEO

model and yet studies such as the one conducted on African American male students at a California community college by Bush and Bush (2010) showed that those who had higher levels of peer interaction reported greater GPAs and certificate/degree completion rates. Wood et al. (2015) suggested that social interactions with other Black males on the “margins” of academic and social life have a negative effect on the students’ success. However, interactions with other Black male students who are academically focused has a positive correlation to academic success. Also, Wood and Palmer (2013) found that African American male students with higher levels of extra-curricular activities had a higher rate of transfer. Although social integration as a whole is negatively correlated to Black male success in community colleges, it is a positive predictor for the transfer of Black male students.

### **Factors Impacting Academic Success of African American Males in Higher Education**

Colleges and universities have taken an interest in the determining the factors leading to low academic achievement of specific minority groups in order to help them graduate once they are enrolled (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). Elliott and Nam (2012) identified the cost of college as being one of the major barriers to college completion for especially First Generation African American males. Even though financial programs such as federal loans, targeting need-based students exist (Gross et al., 2013) and can help students attain a degree, they have to be paid back with interest leaving students with the risk of graduating with significant debt (Houle, 2014) or dropping out due to the financial insecurity it poses (Dwyer et al., 2013). Chen (2012) discovered that students who are awarded aid that they do not have to pay back, such as Pell Grants and the California Promise programs, they are more likely to graduate from college.

Additionally, a study conducted at community colleges showed that primary causes of attrition of students were inadequate financial help, uncertain academic goals, and various life

disruptions (Salaman et al., 2014). Even for those colleges that do provide the necessary support such as tutoring centers, first year program and financial resources, there is a limited number of students who take advantage of the help. Some of the students feel overwhelmed by the many resources are resort to “self-advising,” or they do not seek help due to the stigma related to seeking help (Daniels et al., 2019). Markle (2017), posits that it is more challenging for students from underrepresented groups to seek support because it perpetuates their sense of “not belonging.”

According to Reid (2007), who conducted a study on 190 African American males attending five predominantly White research institutions, he determined that there were three main bodies of literature that address factors that impact the academic achievement of African American male students in four-year colleges. The three main categories in which the literature can be grouped are institutional, psychological and social. The persistence literature posits that students succeed in college when they assimilate into the institution both socially and academically (Jones, 2001; Moore, 2001; Tinto, 1993). The literature on self-efficacy argues that students will persist through obstacles and will use effective learning means if they believe that their behaviors will lead to positive results (Bandura et al., 2001). The final category of the research on racial identity contends that African Americans enrolled at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) respond to university policies and practices based on the perspective towards their reference group identity (Perry et al., 2003).

Few studies have investigated the experiences of African American males in California community colleges. On the other hand, more studies have been done to explore factors that affect the academic success of Black students as a whole (Reid, 2007). In the study conducted by Reid (2007), he chose to make his initial inquiry on studies that focused on Black students at

predominantly White institutions (PWIs). If the studies disaggregated findings by race and gender, he “drilled down” to determine how they differed for Black males. For purposes of my study, I will be focusing on studies that examine Black male students in higher education. For those studies that disaggregate their findings by two- and four-year colleges, I narrow in on the findings for the Black males in community colleges with specific emphasis on California community colleges.

### **Community Colleges**

Although there is a large number of postsecondary students who attend four-year public institutions, there is even a larger number of them who attend two-year public ones during their first year (Horn et al., 2002). In addition to the large number of students the two-year institutions serve, they serve a diverse student body (Horn et al., 2002). African American and other non-White undergraduate students were more likely to attend a two-year institution than a four-year one (Horn et al., 2002).

As discussed earlier, Tinto’s research has consistently shown that social and academic integration experience have been the key determinants to postsecondary student persistence (Zea et al., 1997). In a study conducted by Bers and Smith (1991) examining the student-level data at one community college in the Midwest, they discovered that academic and social integration played a role in whether the students persisted or withdrew from the college. They also noted that social integration played a more significant role in the students’ persistence than did academic integration. In addition, they discovered that the students’ educational goals (e.g. why they were attending school) and employment status (whether they were part time vs. full time) determined more whether the students persisted or not than the academic and social integration experiences.

The majority of the literature addressing factors that influence the success of males of color in higher education focuses on students in four-year colleges (Wood, 2013), with a specific emphasis on predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), and to a certain extent on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Wood et al., 2015). According to Wood (2013), there have been minimal studies on Black male students in two-year colleges as they relate to the research on Black males in four-year colleges and universities. He conducted a meta-synthesis of research on Black males in community colleges and discovered that the majority of the frameworks used on this population are based on their four-year college counterparts.

This discovery assumes that the four-year literature is applicable to Black males in two-year colleges. However, Flowers (2006) cautions against this assumption by arguing that the Black males have different experiences depending on the type of institution they attend. Dabney-Smith (2009) also argues that more studies need to occur to help support efforts focusing on the success of Black males in community colleges.

In more recent years, the focus of the education of Black males has shifted, rightly so, to community college sector. This is important because the community colleges serve as the main pathway for African American males into postsecondary education, and a significant number of them attend two-year colleges and see these institutions as avenues for upward mobility (Wood et al., 2015).

### **Institutional Factors**

Donovan (1984) argues that college student persistence is influenced more by the experiences in college rather than factors before college such as high school performance. The research focusing on persistence claims that academic success in college is dependent on students' ability to adjust socially and academically to their institution (Jones, 2001; Moore,



2001; Tinto, 1993). It is those students who feel more connected to their institutions' academic and social systems that are more likely to graduate (Brown, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This institutional fit would predict how successful students would interact with faculty (Academic Integration) and their peers (Social Integration) since both are essential in determining the cultural climate of the institution (Tinto, 1993).

The opposite is true; if a student feels socially isolated or incongruent, they are less likely to persist in college (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Incongruence, according to Tinto (1993), is the mismatch students feel between themselves and the social and intellectual life of a college. He noted that the majority of students of color experience incongruence which in turn negatively affects their academic performance. In a study conducted by Brown (1995), he found that Black students who found their college culture as "chilly" performed worse than those who found it "warm." This discovery was confirmed by Bowen and Bok (1998) who found that Black students who were comfortable on their college campuses were more academically successful.

More research evidence has shown that social integration plays a more significant role in the persistence of African American students than academic integration (Flowers, 2006). Also, Mallinckrodt (1988) and Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek (1987) both found in their studies that social integration played a key role in the retention of African American students, and those students who perceived stronger social support or participated in social activities were more likely to persist than those who did not. Flowers (2006) notes that the role the institutional type has on academic and social integration has not adequately been addressed by the research literature. He further laments that the research exploring the effects of the institutional type on African American males is even more dismal. The following sections will highlight the different aspects of institutions that have been identified as essential for student success.

## **Perceived Institutional Support**

Although institutions have provided several external supports such as tutoring centers, first year programs and financial resources, there is a limited number of students who take advantage of the help while others feel overwhelmed by the numerous resources which leads to “self-advising” (Daniels et al., 2019). Actual institutional support is therefore evidently different from the perceived support which students attribute as one measure of institutional fit used in different studies (Reid, 2007). The research has focused on both single institutions and also comparisons across schools with different racial compositions. For a single institution study, which typically correlates an institution’s perceived support with academic success outcomes such as GPA, relationships within the campus community were the factor that most positively correlated to the persistence of Black students (Mallinckrodt, 1988). A similar study designed to explore the decline in enrollment and persistence of African American males at a research institution revealed that race was associated ten times more than any other factor (Hall and Rowan, 2001). The study determined that racism was a significant obstacle to the college success of African American males, and postsecondary institutions should implement elements of diversity within their campuses to foster the success of these students. Steele (2003) called for the reduction of “stereotype threat” on college campuses, which he linked to the lower performance of African American students, by increasing the “identity safety” within the institutions. Mentorship programs are one of the means by which institutions can help in mitigating the alienation that some of the African American students feel on their college campuses.

## **Mentorship Programs**

Colleges have used mentorship programs to “improve diversity, promote academic

resources and address students 'unique differences in an effort to improve retention and graduation rates." Although different approaches can be identified in this endeavor, it has helped increase the retention of African American students (Brittian et al., 2009, p. 89). Mentors act as a "sounding board" and source of support as students navigate through major life decisions. African American students as well as other students desired professor mentors who were equally interested in their academic and personal future (Moore & Toliver, 2010). African American students engaged academically since "the presence of African American faculty and staff on campus assist students in identifying individuals like themselves in positions of leadership" (Brittian et al., 2009, p. 89). Mentorship "provides a more supportive environment for African American students" (Brittian et al., 2009, p. 89) on college campuses. In addition to mentorship, colleges should also take an active role in supporting their students financially since that support could be the difference between those students who succeed and those who do not.

### **Financial Aid**

A colleges' ability to support their students financially has also been linked to the recruitment and enrollment of particular student populations (Holley & Harris, 2010). For example, Princeton has been noted to have the largest endowment per student and offer the most generous financial aid packages to low-income students. This has led to higher retention and completion rates for African American students who are able to focus on their academics instead of trying to figure out how to pay for school (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2006). Jones (2001) also claimed that for the most part, financial aid is the top reason students choose to remain enrolled or not. The relational aspect of students' experience in college is another factor responsible for their success.

## **Instructional Style**

Relational learning styles that emphasized a personal approach to instruction were also highlighted by African American students as being helpful for providing a safe and comfortable environment (Booker, 2007). It is important for these students to interact with faculty because it helps them feel heard, accepted and valued as members of the classroom community. On the contrary, when students do not have positive engagement experiences with faculty, staff, or the campus culture, their educational experience is undermined which leads to poor academic performance (Moore & Toliver, 2010). Another predictor to the students' success is the size of the institution they attend.

## **Institutional Size**

Pascarella (1985) discovered a negative correlation between institutional size and persistence for African American male students. In his study of 5,577 students across 352 four-year postsecondary institutions, he found that attending a large public institution had more of a negative effect on degree completion rates for African American males than on White males. Pascarella (1985) attributed this to the idea that as a social system becomes too large, it is harder to form peer groups in which individuals can identify and have satisfying relationships. In contrast, Brower and Ketterhageng (2004) suggested that African American males on large campuses tend to maintain a small radius of friends. Meanwhile, Pascarella et al. (1987), suggested that larger institutions prevent quality interactions between faculty and students.

## **Faculty Relationships**

Faculty expectations, as perceived by students, have specifically been positively correlated to the academic performance of African American students (Reid, 2007). In a comparative study conducted by Allen (1992) on African American students attending

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Universities (PWIs), he discovered that the perceived level of encouragement from faculty was more influential on the students' academic performance than the racial composition of the institution the attended. Reid (2007) suggests that the reason African American students attending HBCUs generally perform better than their peers at PWIs is due to the higher level of positive faculty contact at the HBCUs. This theory is supported by reports from Allen's (1992) study of African American students attending PWIs having lower grades and negative interactions with faculty even though they were recruited as higher-ranking students.

In a study conducted by Pascarella et al. (1987) on a group of 4,597 students nine years after their graduation, they discovered that knowing a professor or administrator personally had significant positive outcomes of development for all student subgroups except White females. Individually knowing a faculty member or administrator positively impacted the educational, occupational and salary attainment specifically for African American male students.

Jones (2001) suggests that the root cause of poor faculty-student interactions as reported by African American undergraduate students is the low expectation of the faculty towards them. Tinto (1993) agrees that informal and formal faculty-student interactions could be stunted by the perceived level of the student's preparedness, regardless of their actual level of preparedness. Brown (1995) highlighted a prevailing myth of homogeneity at a Midwestern university that portrayed African American students as unprepared, unmotivated and unlikely to graduate. The negative belief hindered their learning and constrained their college experience. The outcome was the students underperformed as the negative self-fulfilling prophesy came to pass. In a controlled study by Steel (2003), he showed that African American students who received feedback with high expectations and affirmed for their abilities were more likely to be motivated

to improve their work. Additionally, students who report having positive interactions with faculty also tend to be more socially involved on campus. The next section addresses how social integration correlates with the academic achievement of African American students.

### **Peer Cohesion**

Astin (1993) discovered a positive relationship between students graduating from college and their strong connection to peers. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) argue that campus involvement through college-sponsored activities is one way for students to develop a strong peer cohesion. According to Leppel (2002), this positive association also held true for African American students attending PWIs.

African American male graduation rates have been linked more to campus involvement than their female peers and White students. Campus involvement also accounted for double the completion rate for African American males than measures related to academic involvement (Pascarella, 1985). Leppel (2002) noted however that if the African American males joined more than three campus groups, it had a negative impact on their GPA. According to Pascarella (1985), serving on a college or academic committee had the most significant influence on the completion rate of African American males. Tinto (1993) speculated that African American males gravitate towards formal college committees due to the hardship in integrating informally into campus life. Another reason could be their minority status, which increases the value of their opinions on those committees. Regardless of the reason, this should be noted by institutions as a means to retain more African American males. The following section will highlight the cognitive and psychosocial factors that interact with institutional factors to foster the academic achievement of African American male students.

## **Self-Efficacy**

Many studies exploring the disparity of academic performance between African American college students and their White peers note that African American students have more of a negative outlook on their performance endeavors than White students in regard to setting academic goals (Van Laar, 2000). In Brower's and Ketterhageng's (2004) study in which over 1,000 students attending PWIs and HBCUs were surveyed, it was discovered that African American students used "defensive pessimism" when setting academic goals. This meant that they would have lower expectations for themselves which they would hope to exceed. On the contrary, White students used "strategic optimism" when setting their goals, only being satisfied if they attained a half grade lower than what they anticipated. The researchers speculate that African American students use defensive pessimism to protect themselves from failure and encourage themselves to perform better.

If this is indeed true, the strategy of having low expectations would negatively impact the academic performance of the African American students. According to Bandura (1997), he maintains that one's belief about their capabilities in a specific domain would influence their behaviors in the future which would then determine their performance as self-fulfilling prophecies do. Bandura (1997) named this self-efficacy, which is a human agency that focuses on the belief of one's capabilities to act in a way that would produce a desired outcome. Based on his beliefs about self-efficacy, he argues that students will be motivated to persevere if they believe that their actions will result in positive outcomes (Bandura et al., 2001). Dissimilar to self-confidence which is based on beliefs about current abilities (Combs, 2001), self-efficacy focuses on the belief of one's ability for future outcome-related behaviors. It is for this reason that students will exert less effort if they perceive low expectations from faculty (Reid et al.,

2007).

Stipek (1984) positively linked self-efficacy to academic achievement, outcome expectancies and self-perceptions of competence. Students with self-efficacy are more likely to have better attitudes towards subject matter (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, higher levels of self-efficacy are correlated with more challenging courses taken by students (Eccles, 1994), better conceptual solving skills, and better overall time management (Bandura, 1997). Based on these correlations, understanding the sources of self-efficacy belief would be invaluable in determining ways of increasing it among African American males in postsecondary institutions.

### **Sources of Self-Efficacy**

According to Pajares (2002), there are four main sources of self-efficacy belief: performance accomplishment, vicarious experiences, verbal messages and social persuasions, and finally physiological states. The more academic success students attain, the higher their self-efficacy (Schunk, 1983). Measures of academic achievement such as high school grades of brilliant students help increase their academic self-efficacy (Combs, 2001), which will ultimately increase their resiliency, effort outflow, selection of activities, and the way they respond to challenging academic situations.

Self-efficacy beliefs of students can also be fostered through vicarious experiences of others with whom they relate especially if the students are unsure about their own abilities or have limited experience with a task or situation. The beliefs will increase if a role model who has similar traits is successful (Pajares, 2002). The educational level or occupations of parents could be a factor, or even the accomplishments of an upperclassman. Similarly, the failure of a role model could have negative effects on self-efficacy.

Verbal judgements of affirmation from family, faculty, and peers can build one's



perceived self-efficacy (Pajares, 2002) even though it is easier to lower self-efficacy through negative judgments than raise it with verbal affirmations (Morris, 2004). Individuals can empower African American students by nurturing beliefs in their capabilities. Vogt (2008) also noted that faculty-student interactions such as during research advisement, and simply being available to students has a positive impact on the students' self-efficacy. Additionally, Komarraju et al. (2010) discovered that off campus faculty-student interactions made faculty seem more approachable and perceived by students as being respectful towards them. This led to students having a higher self-concept, a factor that was measured in a similar way to self-efficacy. Honoring these students with awards and elected positions helps bolster their self-efficacy. Equally, adverse comments can negate these self-perceptions (Pajares, 2002).

Students who experience negative emotions such as anxiety, stress and fatigue when performing an academic assignment are likely to judge their abilities as weak. For example, if a student experiences test anxiety and subsequently performs poorly in the subject will have a lesser sense of self-efficacy when taking tests in that course. Less effort may be expended which will eventually lead to a downward spiral combined with less confidence and poor performance (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2002).

### **Academic Self-Efficacy**

One's perception of their ability to attain a particular educational goal is referred to as academic self-efficacy (Zimmerman et al. 1992). Studies show that there is a strong correlation between self-efficacy, persistence, motivation, and performance in educational settings (Bandura, 1986; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Zimmerman, 1989). Other scholars have argued that the strength of one's performance in academic arenas stems from their self-efficacy beliefs (Choi, 2005; Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Miller, 1994; Wood & Locke, 1997).

The impact of self-efficacy and optimism on academic performance, stress and specifically academic expectations was examined in a longitudinal study conducted on college freshman by Chemers et al. (2001). Academic self-efficacy was measured using an eight-item Likert like scale which eventually came to be known as the Academic Self-Efficacy Rating Scale. The scale measured skills related to academic achievement such as task scheduling, note taking, test taking and writing research papers. The results showed that there was a strong correlation between self-efficacy and the students' academic performance. Additionally, there was a positive relationship between the students' future academic expectations and their self-efficacy as discovered in an earlier study by Scheier and Carver (1985). Chemers et al. (2001) showed that students who had high academic self-efficacy in high school were more likely to have high academic self-efficacy in college. This led them to suggest that previous and current educational experiences play an important role in the development of academic self-efficacy.

In a comparable pilot study of sixty-six undergraduate students conducted by Kahn (2013), the relationship between academic self-efficacy, coping skill, stress and academic achievement was explored. The Academic Self-Efficacy Scale was also employed to measure the self-efficacy of the students. The results showed that there was a positive relationship between academic self-efficacy and performance, particularly GPA.

### **Self-Efficacy and Academic Achievement of African American Males in Higher Education**

There is a scarcity of literature on self-efficacy of African American males as it relates to their academic performance in postsecondary institutions. Most of the research focuses on how self-efficacy relates to self-concept, self-esteem (Van Laar, 2000), or how to handle situational stress (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Other studies have explored the correlation between self-efficacy and major or course selection (Gainor & Lent, 1998); how self-efficacy affects the motivation

and ultimately the academic achievement of African American males in mathematics (Noble, 2011). Even more scarce are the studies that explore the impact of self-efficacy on African American males in community colleges. Wood et al. (2015) examined the influence of math and English self-efficacy on the community college academic integration of African American males in their first year.

In the study conducted by Reid (2007), he explored how racial identity, self-efficacy and institutional integration related to the academic achievement of African American males attending predominantly White research universities. Of the one hundred and ninety male students that were surveyed, those who excelled academically had a higher sense of self-efficacy. Similarly, Wood et al. (2015) discovered that those African American male students with higher math and English self-efficacy had more interactions with faculty members and their advisors and were also more likely to use the library resources. These characteristics as previously outlined are highly correlated to strong academic achievement.

Noble's (2011) study which explored the impact of self-efficacy on motivation and eventual academic performance in mathematics of African American college males, showed that the vicarious experiences with teachers, peers and family had the most influence on the students' success in mathematics. In a comparable study done by Strayhorn (2015) that examined factors essential for African American males' readiness for college and consequent success in STEM, non-STEM African American male majors reported to have higher self-efficacy and African American-male STEM majors. Also, there was a positive relationship between the students' academic self-efficacy and their standardized test scores and college GPA.

Okech and Harrington (2002) conducted a study to explore the relationship between self-efficacy and race. They studied a group of 120 African American male college students attending

Texas Southern University. Their discovery was that those students who had positive attitudes about their race also had a higher sense of academic self-efficacy. Even though the study was conducted at a predominantly minority institution and did not measure academic achievement as an outcome, it should be noted that understanding the relationship between Black racial identity and self-efficacy could explain the link between self-efficacy and the academic achievement of African American males in postsecondary education. It would therefore be important to explore the link between one's identity and their academic achievement.

### **Racial Identity Attitudes and Academic Achievement**

According to Phinney and Rosenthal (1992), bigoted actions and approaches from society in general enforces an identity on Black males that make their race and gender relevant to them. This relevance gives rise to suitable behaviors which is in alignment with the idea that societal interactions give voice to the internalized narratives which eventually impact one's behaviors (Wertsch, 1989). Flores-Gonzalez (2002) expounds that even in their college years, African American males, like other students, are challenged with choices to accept or reject predominant beliefs of their reference group. In an effort to associate with a "role-identity," the quest becomes a significant influencer to their current actions (p. 16). She defines role-identity as a "self-definition or an understanding of who one is as a result of occupying a particular role or social category" (p. 14). For example, she determined that students who successfully develop a "school-kid" identity are more likely to stay in school and excel academically. Based on this "role-identity" model, it is arguable that when African American students develop a positive "academic self" consistent with their race and gender, they would be positively affirmed for it (Brookins, 2000; Noguera, 2003).

Minorities who deal with negative stereotypes regarding their intellectual abilities have a

difficult time developing their academic identity (Howard & Hammond, 1985). African American male students may feel that “each engagement in intellectual competition carries the weight of a test of one’s own genetic endowment and that of black people as a whole” (p. 330). As a result, it is highly likely that African American students may avoid areas of academic competition or under perform in contrast to if race was not a factor.

“Stereotype threat” is a social-psychological effect discovered by Steele (1999) which leads the group under the threat to underperform. His discovery, which has been researched empirically, helps explain the reason for the lower academic performance of African American college students than would be predicted by their standardized test scores (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Based on this theory, it is highly likely that when African American male students are in an environment where the negative stereotype is relevant and likely to undermine them, their academic performance may be negatively impacted. According to Steele (1999), if a student consistently underperforms, he/she may eventually pull away from the domain (academic environment) in order to disassociate from it. This leads to a lowered self-efficacy of the student within that domain resulting in avoidance behavior such as lowered academic effort, and minimal persistence which ultimately results in poor academic performance. On the contrary, as discussed previously, African American males who possess a positive attitude about their racial identity have a higher sense of academic self-efficacy (Okech & Harrington, 2002).

Cultural dissonance between a student’s home and college environments could lead to lower academic performance. In a study by Jones (2001), he discovered that African American males attending PWIs experienced this dissonance which could have been a contributor to their low academic achievement. If racial diversity is a benchmark for culture, research shows that the more racial difference for example between a student’s high school and their college, the less

likely the student is to perform well in college (Davis, 1994). On the other hand, if there was more racial similarity between the student's high school and college, they were more likely to perform better academically.

According to Bowen and Bok (1998), if African American male students are not prepared to transition into postsecondary institution that is different from what they are used to, it can be distracting and prevent them from pursuing their academic endeavors. They discovered that some African American students spend more time focusing on what people think and feel about them instead of concentrating on their studies.

Minority students attending PWIs have been successful by learning how to conform to their new environment by "code switching" which enables them to balance their actions by "negotiating strategically between multiple social spaces" (Phelan et al., 1998, p. 146). Some of the ways they may "code switch" is by occasionally changing the way they talk and behave to adopt to imitate the culture of those they are surrounded by or create an identity that blends their home and college environments. Reid (2007) argues that an African American male's personal and community group identity dictates his skill to internally function as well as move across home and college borders. Minimal research has been done on the correlation between academic outcomes and racial identity of African American males in postsecondary institutions.

African American male students have attributed situations such as being the only Black person in their class to "get to them" as being contributors to their high dismissal rates. (Hall & Rowan, 2001). Similarly, Sedlacek (2004) argued that the ability for African American students to handle racism when it occurs is a strong indicator for their persistence. This aligns with studies which show that African American students who are successful in college have better coping skills (Neville et al., 1997) which may cause them to report lower levels of psychological

stress (Neville & Lilly, 2000).

In a study by Hrabowski and his counterparts (1998), they determined that there was a positive correlation between high-achieving African American college male students and their racial and gender identity. This discovery was also highlighted in Johnson's (1993) study of 229 African American students attending a university in South Carolina, in which he determined that the students who were academically successful were able to acculturate more easily.

Not all research affirms the positive correlation between racial identity attitudes and the academic achievement of African American college male students. According to Campbell and Fleming (2000), of the 141 African American male students in their study, there was no connection between their GPAs and their attitudes towards race. Also, Campbell (1996) did not find any link between GPA and the racial attitudes of the 129 African American male students they studied at City College of New York.

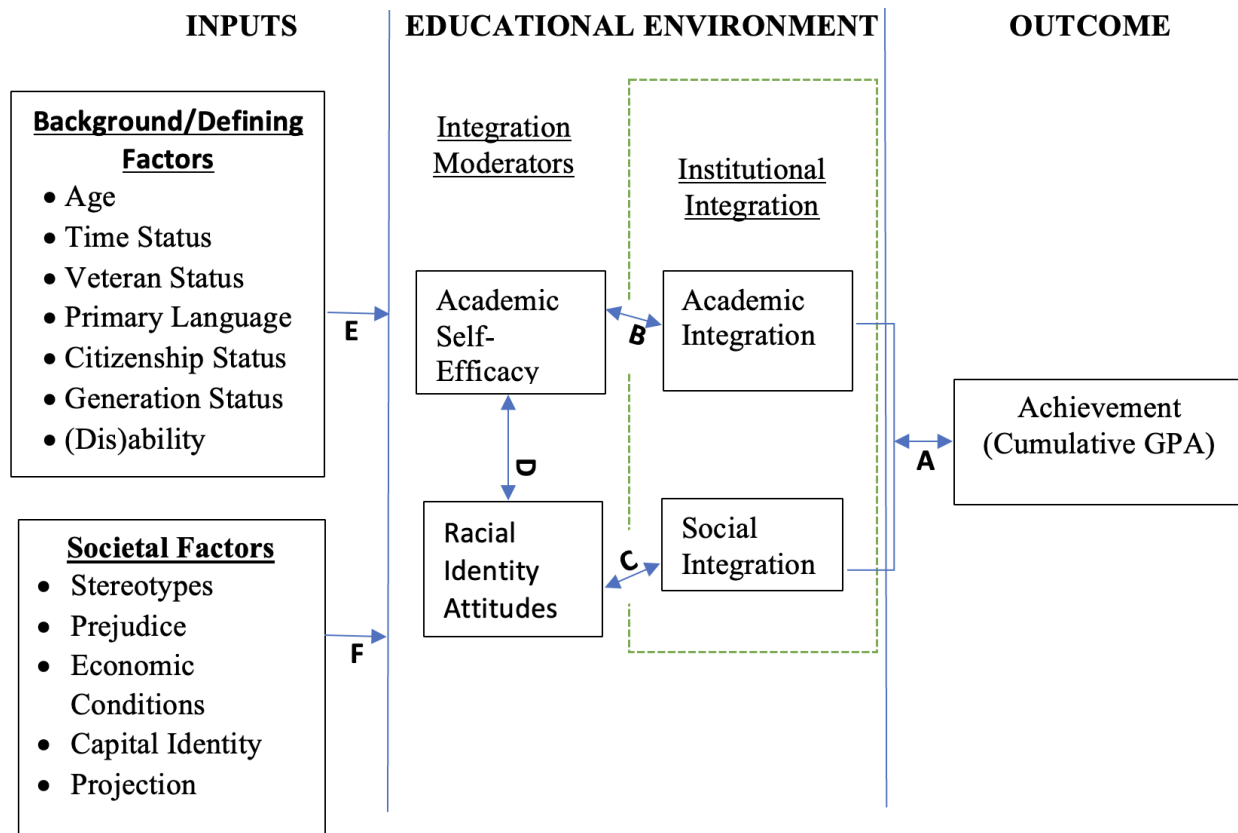
Reid (2007) explains that the reason why African American males will typically perform better if they have a better perspective of their racial identity, is because they would spend more mental energy on intellectual pursuits than matters related to their race. The other reason they give for the positive correlation is because African American male students with positive racial attitudes have a larger social radius from which they can learn effective habit and skills essential for academic success. This is due to them not looking solely to their reference group for affirmation but are inspired by what is best for them individually.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used to guide this study can be summarized by the model in Figure 5. The model is a combination of the collegiate achievement model embraced by Reid (2007) and the Input-Environmental- Outcomes (IEO) model created by Astin (1993).

**Figure 5**

*A Conceptual Model Linking Academic Self-efficacy, Racial Identity, Institutional Integration and Academic Achievement of African American Males in Postsecondary Education*



The IEO model suggests that programs serving students should consider factors (inputs) affecting students prior to their academic environment involvement. These inputs, according to Harris and Wood (2014) who adopted a similar model, comprise of background/defining factors such as age, primary language, and citizen status; and societal factors which include stereotypes, prejudices and economic conditions. The input which can be understood as the factors that influence African American male students prior to them joining community college, are streamed into an educational environment (Links E and F in Figure 5). Within the educational environment, integration moderators such as academic self-efficacy and racial identity attitudes influence the integration of African American males within the institution milieu which would



ultimately impact the academic achievement (GPA) of the students (Reid, 2007).

The study builds on Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional integration which posits that the level to which a student feels that a specific college is a good fit for them depends on how successful they can interact with faculty (Academic Integration) and students (Social Integration) since both are indicators of the cultural climate of the institution. Similar to Reid (2007), the study extends Tinto's (1993) theory by asserting that African American male students who perform well academically (higher GPAs), and not only persist, but integrate successfully academically and socially and vice versa (Link A in Figure 5).

Additionally, Reid (2007) argued that regular and positive faculty interactions were a precursor to higher academic achievement. He noted how only a few studies explored the connection between self-efficacy and the academic success of African American college male students (Okech & Harrington, 2002). Although self-efficacy has been related to math course goals (Gainor & Lent, 1998), adoptive managing strategies (Phinney & Hass, 2003), and higher academic prospects for African American students (Mayo & Christenfeld, 1999), less studies explored the direct connection between self-efficacy and Academic Integration. Similar to Reid (2007), this study hypothesizes that those students with high self-efficacy are more likely to reach out to faculty (Santiago & Einarson, 1998) and vice versa (Link B).

Bandura (1997) suggested that people do not respond similarly to the same societal stimuli due to individual differences. For African American males, bigoted attitudes from the majority of society creates an identity issue that is focused on their race and gender (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992), but their response to those attitudes in an academic setting would vary individually. Also similar to Reid (2007), this study hypothesizes that their response to academics would largely be influenced by their racial identity attitudes. Agreeing with Phelan et

al. (1998), the study argues that those African American male students who have positive mature racial identities would perform well in culturally different settings by learning how to traverse boundaries between their different worlds and vice versa (Link C).

Okech and Harrington (2002) discovered a positive relationship between Black awareness and academic self-efficacy (Link D). This study will further explore this relationship with the African American males studied at one southern California community college. Reid (2007) suggested that a Black male's perceived self-efficacy could be the distinguishing factor that causes him to adopt negative behaviors associated with the prevailing reference group norms (Ogbu, 1990) or developing a secure sense of himself as a member of the ethnic group (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the current research associated with the academic success of African American male students in higher education with specific emphasis on California community colleges. It highlights the large enrollment numbers of African American males in the California community colleges and their disparate academic outcomes. It explores the factors attributed to the low performance and success of this subgroup in higher education. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient research on factors influencing the academic success of African American male students attending community colleges (Wood, 2013). Furthermore, the research addressing the success of these students at community colleges uses frameworks based on their four-year college counterparts. Additionally, most of the studies focus on external (social and institutional) factors and not the internal (psychological) ones (Reid, 2007). In this study, I argue that the success of African American males within the California community college system may be attributed to the interaction of external and internal factors. Understanding these factors and how

they interact would ultimately help educators know how to allocate resources to help foster internal aspects that may have been overlooked.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

The California community college system enrolls more African American students than any other postsecondary system in the United States (Foster, 2008). Also, African American males enroll in community colleges in larger numbers compared to African American females and, Asian and White males (Bush, 2004). The overall rising cost of higher education, compounded with the economy's need for skilled labor has positioned the community college system as a worthwhile solution for an affordable education to acquire career skills (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2002; Lathan, 2000). Unfortunately, even though African American males have looked to the system as a pathway to a better future, they have struggled to meet their educational goals and usually have the lowest academic outcomes (Bush, 2004).

The majority of studies have focused on understanding the external factors responsible for the dismal performance of African American males in postsecondary institutions (Reid , 2007). In an attempt to broaden the research and shed light on the internal (psychological) factors affecting this subgroup of students, Reid (2007) conducted a quantitative study in which he explored the correlation between academic self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, institutional integration and the academic achievement of African American male students attending PWIs. This study similarly explored how self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration influenced the educational experience of African American males attending California community colleges.

The qualitative phenomenological approach this study used allowed for data to be collected from the lived experiences of the study's participants, all of whom were recruited from

the same California community college. The approach employed allowed for the following research questions to be answered:

RQ1: How do African American male students attending one California community college describe their educational experience?

RQ2: What factors do African American male students attending one California community college describe as significant to their academic success?

RQ3: What recommendations do African American male students have for California community colleges in relationship to African American male student academic success?

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A qualitative phenomenological approach, which has its roots in sociology (Creswell, 2007) was chosen a viable option considering the goals of the study. A phenomenology was described by Sonnemann (1954) as the obtaining of a record of an individual's experience. Similarly, Patton (2002) defined a phenomenological approach as the discovery of the way an individual brings meaning to their experiences which then causes them to make them a reality. Also, Moustakas (1994) concluded that a person's experience could only be explained through their sensory observations which according to Paley (1997) create a mindful consciousness. Studies show that the phenomenological approach focuses on phenomena which are based on individuals lived experiences. It is in understanding the phenomena that provides the deeper meaning for the studies (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi et al., 1971; Moustakas, 1994; Sartre, 1956).

According to Hay and Singh (2012), the phenomenological approach was introduced by Husserl (1913, as cited in Paley, 1997), who argued that it was essential to comprehend the lived experiences of individuals. Hay and Singh (2012) claimed that by applying it to the education

arena it would influence the educational approach making it more effective in addressing students' needs.

Based on the theoretical background, I applied a phenomenological approach in order to understand the educational experience of African American male students at one California community college. This approach allowed me to gather perceptions of this specific student demographic through their lived experience. More specifically, I employed the transcendental phenomenological approach since my study focused on the lived experiences of my participants rather than my interpretations of them. Additionally, the participants' voices provided the data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Using a quantitative approach would not have allowed me to capture the experiences of the participants since their voices and perceptions would have been limited which would have misaligned with the goals of my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

## **Methods**

### **Site**

To better understand how self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration influence the educational experience of African American males attending California community colleges, I needed a site that had a high population of African American male students. JC was a viable site that met the criteria for which I was interested. It is part of a large California community college district that serves a large African American population. Among all the 116 community colleges in California, JC was one of the top five colleges with the largest enrollment of African American students. For example in spring 2022 during which the study was conducted, it had a total enrollment number of 9,282 students with approximately 18% of them being African American. Of the 3,519 total enrolled male students attending JC, 635 of

them identified as African American/Black, also approximately 18% of its entire male student population.

### **Participants**

JC students were eligible to participate in the study if they were at least 18 years old; identified as male; identified as African American, Black, or multiracial—with one of the races being African American or Black; and were enrolled at JC in the 2021-22 academic year, including at least one of the following terms: fall 2021, winter 2022, and spring 2022. JC staff identified 546 students who met these criteria. I sent an email invitation to these eligible students, inviting them to consider participating in a one-on-one interview. Twenty-three students responded with interest, and I ultimately conducted a total of 12 interviews. More detailed information on the participants will be highlighted in Chapter 4.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred through in-depth one-on-one interviews with twelve students and with the goal of highlighting their voices. The interview questions focused on the participants' experiences and perceptions during their community college in California (see complete interview protocol in Appendix A). I also sought to identify how academic self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration played a role in the students' educational experience, while also gathering recommendations for practices that they thought would improve their overall academic experience. The interviews ran between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on how much the participants were willing to share and whether additional clarifying questions that were asked. Because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, I chose to interview the participants via Zoom. I also used Zoom to record the interviews. Eleven out of the twelve applicants had their cameras on during the interview, which

allowed me to be present and maintain eye contact, while also seeing their body language. This was important since the study's focus was to gather the students' experiences and perceptions, part of which could be communicated through non-verbal cues.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol, which according to Hays and Singh (2012) allows for flexibility when asking predetermined questions, follow-up questions, changing questions during the interview, or eliminating some questions. Additionally, this instrument includes more of the participant's voice, giving a better perspective of the phenomenon being studied. With the use of the semi-structured interview process, I was able to adjust the questions based on each participant in the study. The questions investigated how the lived experiences in and outside of the educational setting were influenced by factors in and outside of the college campus. The method I used is in alignment with data collection for phenomenological studies since the participants' actual responses helped eliminate my perspective from the process (Creswell, 2007; Englander, 2012; Hatch, 2002).

### **Data Analyses**

In order to accurately capture the participants experiences and perceptions, important factors for the qualitative phenomenological approach, accurate interview transcriptions were an essential part of the data analysis process. I used a web-based service called Otter.ai, which allowed me to upload the interview recorded files into its system which did an accurate job transcribing the interviews while also including time stamps for easy tracking. The system allowed me to go over the transcriptions while listening to the recordings, allowing for easy corrections for sections that were not accurately transcribed.

I then transferred the transcriptions into a coding software system called MAXQDA in which I reviewed the transcriptions again. With the use of the in vivo coding process where the



analysis focuses on the actual spoken words of the participants, I assigned codes to each participant's transcript. This coding process further allowed me to read the interview transcriptions, reminding me of different ideas mentioned, a method that was helpful in creating categories from the large number of in vivo codes. As I created different categories from the codes, I identified broader themes, which are summarized in Chapter 4.

### **Positionality and Ethical Concerns**

The previous Dean of Institutional Effectiveness and Acting Dean of Academic Affairs at JC were familiar and supportive of my research interests. They assisted me through the process of receiving approval to conduct my study first with the district then at JC. Once I received approval from the district and college to conduct the study, the Acting Dean of Academic Affairs further helped me in attaining the email addresses of the student demographic I planned to get my sample of participants from.

When I sent the emails out to the prospective student participants, I carefully positioned myself as a UCLA researcher, and California community college Academic Counselor/Assistant Professor. As an incentive to participate in the study, I informed the students that they would be receiving a gift card as a token of gratitude for their participation.

At the beginning of each interview, I informed the participants that their identity and responses would be kept confidential and that they had the option to stop the interview at any time. I also sought their permission to record and transcribe the interviews, and let them know that my dissertation co-chairs, a third-party transcription company and I would be the only ones with access to the recordings and transcriptions. For any quotations used in write-ups from the interviews, I told the participants that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity.

## **Reliability, Validity, and Credibility**

Given that most of the student participants were recruited predominantly from one California community college, the findings from the study may not be as applicable to other community colleges within the state. However, the twelve participants of the study were diverse in age, some of whom had already transferred to a four-year university and one was still in high school. Two of them were immigrants and a few others were first generational students. This diversity in the sample may have added to the credibility of the findings since there were a number of similarities amongst the participants.

Considering that I am the same race and gender as the study participants, I suspect that some of the students may have answered the questions based on what they assumed I expected. This component of social desirability may have negatively influenced the credibility of their responses. A way I combatted this potential influence was to avoid any leading questions and asking follow-up questions which included asking for real life examples to support what they perceived or experienced. I also made a conscious effort to avoid showing any signs of agreement or disagreement with their responses.

Also, my own experience as a Black male or my previous experience working with African American male students was a potential threat to the credibility of the study. I made sure to focus on the narratives of experiences and perceptions of my student participants which is why I chose to rely on the qualitative phenomenological approach which mainly uses the voice of the participants for the data analysis instead of the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell, 2007; Englander, 2012; Hatch, 2002).

Since I did not have direct access to the students' transcripts, I relied on the students to report their GPAs. Studies show that there is a high correlation between the actual and reported

GPA of college students (Goldman et al., 1990; Hishinuma et al., 2001). Trying to get transcripts would have most likely delayed the process or be denied by the college.

Also, the study assumed that academic self-efficacy, measures of institutional integration, and racial identity attitudes influence the educational experience of African American males at one California community college. It is likely that there are internal factors responsible for the achievement of these students. My study is however building on the research by Reid (2007) who was building on existing research in self-efficacy, racial identity theory, and institutional integration.

Finally, given the nature of interviews in general, the participants answered the questions based on their recollection of the experiences and perceptions they shared. Additionally, factors that may have been important during an experience being shared about may not have been as important at the time of the interview. These human components could have therefore skewed the reliability of information shared. One way I tried to counter this potential aspect of misinformation was by trying to ask the participants about more recent experiences that were easier to recall.

### **Conclusion**

My main objective in conducting this study was to provide a voice for African American males attending one California community college about their educational experiences. The qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how academic self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, and institutional integration influence the educational experiences of African American males attending one California community college was a viable method I selected to highlight the voice. My hope is that stakeholders in the California community colleges will have a better

perspective of these students' experiences, which will inform the way they can be supported for better academic outcomes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the interviews that seek answer the research questions guiding this phenomenological study. Also included is a summary of the process used for collecting and analyzing the data for the study. The results give insight on the perspectives of African American males attending one California community college.

Data for the study was collected through interviews of twelve participants who volunteered for the study. The goal of this study was to explore factors African American male students attending California community colleges consider to be related to their academic success. The main focus of the study was highlighting the voices of the students about their lived experiences while attending a California community college. The participants were asked questions which caused them to reflect on their experiences and perceptions while attending college. This self-reflection was used as the lens through which the research process was conducted, whereby the students lived experiences and perceptions, and not my interpretations of them, provided the analysis of the data (Hays & Singh, 2012).

I used a qualitative approach by interviewing twelve students attending southern California community college to address the each of the research questions. With the first research question (RQ1: How do African American male students attending one California community college describe their educational experience?), I explored the overall experience of the students which revealed findings that encompassed both positive and negative aspects. In each of the categories there were other subcategories the covered finances, academics, relationships on campus, race, identity etc. In the negative category, the students felt that their African American male identity played a major role in their experience. The second research

question (RQ2: What factors do African American male students attending one California community college describe as significant to their academic success?) addressed how the students perceive the relationship between institutional integration, racial identity, and self-efficacy with their academic achievement. The third research question (RQ3: What recommendations do African American male students have for California community colleges in relationship to African American male student academic success?) examined what the students felt that the colleges should continue doing, stop doing and start doing to improve their academic experience.

The study participants were twelve African American male students over the age of 18 years old attending a community college in the greater Los Angeles. I assigned each participant a pseudonym in order to protect their privacy. The next section provides a brief description of the participants, both as a group and individually.

### **Participants**

The twelve participants for the study were recruited through one community college with one of the largest African American student populations in the Southern California region where my recruitment efforts had the most success. The eligibility criteria for the participants were students who were at least 18 years old and identified as male, African American, Black, or multiracial (one of the races being African American/Black). The participants also needed to have been enrolled at the college in the fall 2021, winter 2021 and spring 2022 quarters. I emailed 546 students that JC identified as eligible based on these criteria. Of these, 23 expressed interest. I completed interviews with twelve.

All the participants identified as African American males. One was in the 41-45 age range, two in the 36-40 range, two in the 31-35 range, two in the 25-30 range, three in the 21-25

range, and two in the 18-20 range. At the time of the interview, ten of the students were in at least in their second year of college. One student was taking college courses while still enrolled in high school. Another student had transferred to a four-year college but was completing a certificate at the community college. Nine students were enrolled full-time, taking twelve credits or more. Five had a cumulative GPA in the 2.0-3.0 range; the other seven had a GPA above 3.0. Eight students reported working at least part time while in school. Three reported having at least one dependent. Three students were born outside of the United States, and six had at least one parent who was born outside of the United States. All twelve participants shared that their household income was no more than one hundred thousand dollars. Four students reported that at least one of their parents had completed a four-year college degree. One student was interested in the Health Sciences; two in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM); four in Business; and five in Law, Culture and Society. Next, I will give a brief description of each of the participants in the study.

Luis was the youngest participant, less than 20 years old. He was still in high school and took some college courses to get ahead while also meeting his high school requirements. He currently has over a 3.5 GPA and plans to major in a STEM discipline. He and one of his parents were born outside of the United States. His mother completed her Associate's degree, however he was unsure about his father's educational background

Parker is a full-time student taking at least 12 units each semester with a GPA over 3.0. He's in his 30's pursuing a major in the Business field. He has one dependent and works part time while attending school. Both he and his parents were born in the United States, but he was uncertain of either parent's educational background. He is on track to transfer to a four-year college where he plans to attain his bachelor's degree.

**Table 4***Background Summary of Participants (n=12)*

Pseudonym	Age	Meta Major	# of Dep	Average Units/Semester	Work (h/w)	GPA	First Gen	Household Income	Born in US?	Parents US-born
Luis	18-20	STEM	0	<12 (Part Time)	0-10	3.6-4.0	No	\$0-\$25K	No	One
Parker	31-35	Bus	1	≥12 (Full Time)	10-20	3.0-3.5	Yes	\$75-\$100K	Yes	Both
Rex	41-45	Soc Sci	0	≥12 (Full Time)	0-10	2.6-3.0	Yes	\$0-\$25K	Yes	Both
Brayden	21-25	Soc Sci	0	<12 (Part Time)	20-30	2.0-2.5	Yes	\$50-\$75K	No	None
Charles	36-40	Law	1	≥12 (Full Time)	10-20	3.0-3.5	No	\$0-\$25K	Yes	One
Carter	31-35	Hlth Sci	0	≥12 (Full Time)	0-10	3.6-4.0	Yes	\$0-\$25K	Yes	Both
Damien	25-30	Soc Sci	0	≥12 (Full Time)	50-60	2.6-3.0	Yes	\$25-\$50K	Yes	Both
Daniel	36-40	Law	5	<12 (Part Time)	0-10	2.0-2.5	No	\$25-\$50K	Yes	None
Easton	18-20	Bus	0	≥12 (Full Time)	10-20	3.6-4.0	No	\$75-\$100K	Yes	None
Jaxon	25-30	Bus	1	≥12 (Full Time)	30-40	2.6-3.0	Yes	\$25-\$50K	Yes	Both
Jacob	21-25	Soc Sci	0	≥12 (Full Time)	20-30	3.0-3.5	No	\$25-\$50K	Yes	Both
Oliver	21-25	STEM	0	≥12 (Full Time)	20-30	3.0-3.5	No	\$50-\$75K	No	None

Rex was the oldest participant (in his 40s) and was pursuing a degree in the Law, Culture and Society major fields. He was not working, did not have any dependents, and reported taking about 15 credits each semester. He reported a GPA a little less than 3.0. One of his parents had some college education while the other only completed the sixth grade. His entire family was born in the United States.

Brayden is in his early twenties. Both he and his parents were born outside of the United States. He began college at a four-year university but was unsuccessful there, which led him to drop out and start attending a community college. He indicated that he planned to graduate from community college but was open to start working without the degree, if that were an option. He reported working close to 40 hours each week and attended school part time. His current



cumulative GPA was less than a 3.0. His parents' highest level of education was graduating from high school.

Charles was another student interested in the Law, Culture and Society major categories. His long-term goal was to eventually get into graduate school. He is almost forty years old, works part-time and attends college full-time. His GPA was around a 3.0, and both his parents had some college education without the four-year degree. He was born in the United States, however one of his parents was born outside the United States.

Carter was in his mid-thirties and pursuing a degree in the Health Sciences. He had already completed an associate's degree in a different field but needed to complete some prerequisites for the Health Services degree he was pursuing. He was in his mid-thirties and had also attended community college in northern California. He was currently not working and reported taking an average of 15 credits each semester. His GPA was more than 3.5. Both his parents' highest level of education was graduating from high school. Both he and his parents were born and raised in the United States.

Damien was in his late twenties and already had an associate's degree. At the time of the interview, he was pursuing a second associate's degree in the Social Behavioral Science field as a foundation to eventually get into medical school. He was working 50 to 60 hours each week, while also attending college full-time, and his GPA was less than 3.0. Based on what he knew about his parents' education, they both had less than a four-year degree. Both his parents were born and raised in the United States.

Daniel already transferred to a four-year university and was in the process of completing an associate's degree with about a 2.0 GPA. He attended multiple community colleges in southern California and planned to work in the law enforcement field. He was using his

education to get a higher paying job for future employment. He was over forty years old, attending college part-time, not working and had five dependents. Both his parents graduated from a four-year college and were born outside of the United States. He was born and raised in the United States.

Easton was in his early twenties considering a major in Business. He had also attended other community colleges in the Los Angeles area and was currently working part-time while attending college full-time. His cumulative GPA was over 3.5 and his goal was to transfer to a four-year college but was not exactly sure what he would like to major in when he does. Both his parents were born outside of the United States and one of them completed their four-year degree. He was born and raised in the U.S.

Jaxon was also in his twenties considering a career in Business. He worked and attended school full-time while supporting one dependent. His current GPA was a little less than a 3.0 and had also attended other community colleges in the Los Angeles area. He and his parents were born in the United States, and neither of them graduated from college. He was about to complete his associate's degree and planned to transfer to a four-year college. Both he and his parents were born in the United States.

Jacob was another student in his twenties with a major in the Social Sciences. He was considering pursuing graduate school but getting a bachelor's degree was his initial goal. He too had attended other Los Angeles community colleges. He worked part-time while attending college full-time and had a GPA a little over 3.0. Both his parents attended graduate school and were born in the United States. He was also born in the United States.

Oliver, also in his twenties was pursuing a major in the STEM field. He was attending college full-time while working part-time and had also attended more than one community

college in the Los Angeles area. His current cumulative GPA was about a 3.0 and was planning to transfer to a four-year university with the possibility of pursuing a master's or doctoral degree. He and his parents were born outside of the United States, and one of them was attending graduate school.

## **Findings**

Several themes emerged when exploring the experiences of African American male students at one California community college. I present the African American male students' perspectives on their experiences at one California community college, followed by factors they describe as being significant to their academic achievement and then describe recommendations they have for California community colleges with respect to improving the academic success of African American males. The main findings that emerged from the data led to a deeper understanding of the experiences and factors influencing the academic achievement of African American male students at one California community college. The following sections describe the findings of each of the research questions.

### **Research Question #1 Findings**

This section has findings to answer Research Question #1: How do African American male students attending one California community college describe their educational experience? The participants identified positive and challenging aspects to their college experience. However, the challenging ones outweighed the positive. Also, in respect to the challenging aspects, all twelve participants shared similar experiences for some such as feeling racially isolated and disadvantaged.

## **Finding #1.1: Students Identified Institutional Supports as Positive Aspects of Their College Experience**

Ten out of the twelve participants discussed institutional aspects that they felt were significantly helpful in their educational experience. The main aspects identified, and which will be discussed in more detail in this section, were financial support, specialized college programs, faculty connections and the college's infrastructure.

### ***Financial Support***

The students highlighted the financial supports that they received from the colleges as a positive part of their college experience. They felt that it lessened their financial burden while they pursued their education and was the reason, in some instances, they did not drop out of school. Although the financial assistance did not completely cover the additional costs the students incurred outside of school, it significantly reduced the financial stress which helped the students focus more on their education.

The California College Promise Grant (CCPG), formerly known as the Board Of Governors (BOG) fee waiver, was highlighted as one of the main supports offered by the state to students, allowing them to attend college without paying tuition. Charles said, “[Y]ou know, being able to go to school, for free, that bog waiver is awesome. I know that's through the through the state and stuff and that's really helpful.” Some California community colleges have adopted Promise Programs that guarantee all first-time college students free tuition for the first two years. Easton mentions, “[I]think the one that I found really the most helpful was the promise program ... [F]ree [for] two years, ... [O]bviously, that helped out.”

Six out of the twelve participants expressed an appreciation for the financial support offered to attend college. The supports they identified were in the form of grants, scholarships,

and other funds that covered necessities ranging from school supplies to covering their rent. Damien said, “[T]hey have given me emergency scholarships, you know, emergency grants...[L]aptop scholarships. So my school has been very good to me, they really have been very helpful to me in almost every way possible.” Jacob shared similar sentiments highlighting how financial support from the college allowed him to get books and laptops which he would have had a harder time getting since most of the money he gets from working goes towards paying for his basic necessities:

I was able to apply to scholarships and actually received one at the beginning of fall that was able to cover like a good majority of the books that I needed to buy. So it was a really cool thing. And I feel like stuff like that is very helpful for people with my background who have to work, but are really working to get rent, bills paid and all that, and then having, you know, so little money for books and for laptops and all that stuff.

Additionally, some of the students highlighted how the extra financial support extended to them during the COVID-19 pandemic made it possible for them to continue attending school and also showed them that others were invested in their success. Jacob said,

So just the amount of resources I was able to really obtain, starting I think, from the pandemic going on, has been something that has really, really helped that change of me being like I’m in this by myself and now having a school and community college district that's helping me is giving me that opportunity to be like, well, I'm not by myself, like these people want to see me succeed.

Rex also mentioned that the financial support he received from the college during the pandemic was what helped him to stay in school. He said, “[Financial help during] COVID, it’s what enabled me to have a thought to get into school. Housing is stable and secure ... The fact

that I have income enables me to go to school.” The other students made similar sentiments regarding how the financial support they received through the colleges during the pandemic allowed them work less and focus on their academics.

It was evident from the participants stories that if they were not receiving financial support for college, they would most likely not consider pursuing an education since they need to work to cover the cost of their basic needs. The next sections highlight additional nonfinancial resources within the college system that the students attributed to their positive educational experience.

### ***Specialized College Programs***

The students identified some programs on their campuses such Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) and Umoja, which played a significant role in supporting them during their educational journey. They appreciated how the programs were geared towards students from similar racial and socioeconomic background to theirs. They felt like the faculty and staff in those programs paid closer attention to the students’ needs and made an effort to support them in nonfinancial and financial ways.

Four out of the twelve participants talked about the invaluable ways the specialized programs helped them navigate through the community college system. The support of the programs, which includes but is not limited to financial support, was highly praised and attributed to as the reason for the students’ success. Jaxon said, “I am a part of the Umoja program ... they've been helping me out with my schoolbooks and things like that and I'm very greatly appreciative.” In addition to the resources provided by the programs, guidance from counselors within the program was another aspect Jaxon talked about,

Oh, [Counselor's Name]. He's the Umoja counselor. Oh, my god. I love [Counselor's Name], he's my go to guy. He helps me with books. He helps me with my ed plan. He helped me see exactly how far along I was so I don't take any unnecessary courses; take what I need to take so I can get on out of there.

Carter also talked about the other resources the programs provide in the statement below:

I'm in several student supported programs like EOPS, Next Step, Umoja. So they support me a lot in terms of like book vouchers. You know, when you need gift cards, emergencies and just providing a whole bunch of resources and stuff like that, job resources, and all that kind of stuff. Referrals to different, and even if they can't help you, you know, there's at least somebody that's going to find out alternate resources of where you can get what you're looking for.

The programs provide a holistic approach in supporting the students. In the sections that follow, I will talk more about how these programs also provide a sense of community for students and how they attribute the positive connections they make with the faculty to their positive college experience.

### ***Faculty and Staff Connections***

The students also highlighted how positive connections with faculty and staff, in and outside of the classroom, were positively significant to their overall educational experience. Those connections made them feel seen, heard, and valuable within the college community. Additionally, those positive connections served as opportunities for some of the students to identify role models on their college campuses.

Five out of the twelve participants shared about how their positive relationships with faculty and staff, helped them feel supported with their college experience. They talked about

those instructors who took a genuine interest in the students' success left a lasting impact on them, that they desired to stay in contact with the professors even after leaving the college.

Easton said,

Certain teachers, I think anywhere you go, some are gonna be, you know, the most amazing professors who genuinely care about their job and really want to see every student succeed, and some are just there for a paycheck as well. You know, some professors I've had have been, you know, very influential to me. I still try to keep in touch.

Similarly, Jacob shared,

My experience has been really good. I feel like through the [District's Name], I've been able to really reach out to teachers, professors, counselors, who I honestly feel like would be those people that can reach out to me, let me know when I need something to do, or even make those relationships with people where I can eventually count on them if I needed like a letter of rec later in college.

The non-instructional faculty, specifically counselors, were also mentioned as contributing to a positive college experience for the student. Jacob stated,

One of my counselors, counselor, I think, [Counselor's Name], she's one of the counselors that actually helped me put together my student educational plan, and she's been able to like, she actually will email me personally, like once every three months, just to make sure that I can schedule another appointment with her so that we can talk about my educational plan, because she knows that I've been through community college for a while, and she kind of saw within the past year, how much I've been working to kind of complete it.



The students could perceive those faculty members who cared about them and those who were there just to do the job. These findings were not as surprising as the one that follows.

### ***College Infrastructure***

Surprisingly, five out of the twelve participants mentioned the colleges' infrastructure as contributing to their positive educational experience. The infrastructure mentioned ranged from software programs to buildings. The main themes that emerged as they talked about the infrastructure were how it eased their access to educational information and how it affected their mental wellbeing. Daniel stated, “[T]hey're updating buildings and parking and, you know, things like that. And sometimes, just your environment can help your psyche. Or at least for me, anyway.” Similarly, Oliver shared how the college campus up-keep has a positive impact on his psyche. He said, “a good campus goes a long way in my mental, a clean compass. You know, I find the bathroom clean, that's ideal. It's not going to ruin my day. So, I appreciate the unseeable work.”

The technology employed by the campuses is also viewed as significant aspect in enhancing the students' experience. They shared how having access to computers and the internet allows for them to complete their assignments without having to worry about not having it at their home especially during the pandemic when most of the learning was switched to an online modality.

Jacob said,

But then also the amount of technology that's available. And it doesn't have to be take home technology, but allowing kids to come in. Like the computer lab, I think the computer lab was closed to the public due to COVID. So just allowing places like that so students have more time to actually study and can actually do the work on their own time.

Similarly, educational technology platforms like Canvas, easily allowed for remote access to assignments and feedback from instructors. This improved the students' learning experience, and in some cases increased their overall confidence. Rex elaborated on this idea:

Canvas also is another thing that has really been helpful and instrumental because Canvas, you know, it shows your progress, it shows you your grade. You know, it's all real time. You know, like I said, it's really cool for someone like me, you know, who needs that confidence boost. You know, it's a confidence builder to go from 84 to 89 in a week. That's a confidence builder.

Almost all the participants had something positive to share about their college experience. They appreciated how the colleges had implemented means to help them in various ways and especially during the pandemic which negatively impacted most things. Brayden said, "I mean, I feel like the college is doing more than enough. Like they already have their whole plate, full with everything they're doing online. The professors already have to completely change everything."

### **Finding #1.2: Students Identified Personal and Racial Factors as the Main Challenges to their College Experience**

Despite all of the help the colleges offered, the participants perceived and shared about significant challenges in their educational experience which covered multiple areas. All the participants had something to share about experiencing challenges in their educational journey. The challenges encompassed issues related to lack of sufficient time to dedicate to school, racial struggles, difficulties navigating school, and personal problems.

### ***Limited Time Commitment***

Majority of the participants of the study talked about their challenges with not having enough time to dedicate to their education. Most of them shared about their need to work in order to take care of their basic needs. They saw work as a priority since they would not have a livelihood without it. Others talked about their family responsibilities as being the main reason they are unable to give enough time to their academics. In the following sections, I will address how they described work and family responsibilities as hindrances to their academic time commitment.

### ***Work Responsibilities***

Work was highlighted by the majority of the participants as the main reason they were unable to dedicate enough time to their studies. Majority of the students interviewed worked at least part-time and a few worked full-time. They all appreciate the importance of an education, but also addressed the need to work in order to survive. Although they acknowledged and appreciated the financial support offered by the colleges as highlighted in the first finding, some of them expressed that the support was not sufficient to cover all their essential needs, which meant that they had to work as their first priority. Jacob spoke about making his work a priority:

Like I said, I work. I'm one of those people, if I can work 40 plus hours a week, I would do that, just because I live with me and my girlfriend. So, it's just two of us in the household. So, it's, I think, like, sometimes I do prioritize the work a little more over schoolwork.

Luis, the dual enrollment student, also mentions he is unable to focus entirely on his course work since he needs to look for work due to his socioeconomic status, He says, “sometimes I have difficulty keeping up with my coursework ... My socio-economic background is kind of pretty

low...It's been pretty hard at the moment. So, you know, I was using that time to apply for jobs or whatever.”

Jaxon felt that the instructors should understand that some of their students need to work, and that their work is a priority over school. With that understanding, they should accommodate for late assignments from students who had to take care of work responsibilities. He told one of his instructors that he needed more time:

Like you're upset that my project is late. I won't say my rent is late. So, like, give me a break, I need a little more time to do this. I can't just tell my job. “Hey, man, I gotta leave right now. I got an assignment due.” They don't care.

He continues to say, “I'm not nine years old. I have to be at work. I gotta work. Like, there's no ifs ands or buts because you gotta live.” Although other students were not as blatant about needing extra time for assignments due to work, they made it clear that it was going to take priority over their schoolwork.

### ***Family Responsibilities***

Other responsibilities related to family were also highlighted as taking priority over school. Being the sole provider or caretaker of the family meant that the students needed to focus on their families more than their academics. Parker shared that he needed to place his family's needs before his own even though it meant falling behind in school:

It's honestly more of a family thing for me, that kind of slowed me down. Because I'm, I have a close-knit family. And it was more of my family didn't have no one else. And I'm the only man. And so, it was kind of hard to really stay back and really help ... And then it was just like, my dad wasn't there...So it was more of just making sure that I put my family before myself, and it kind of set me back a little bit.

Similarly, Daniel shared how dealing with custody issues with his ex-wife has caused him to put his education on the side and focus on his family:

I'm trying to make sure my kids are situated before myself. Money is important and so a lot of times, I'll push my educational stride to the side and take care of this. I'll put my focus to the side to kind of square away one thing, and so kids, and the epidemic, and ex-wife and a few sideline factors.

As stated in the examples above, family responsibilities were in most cases connected to financially supporting them which meant that the students needed to work. This challenge, similar to the work responsibilities factor, is related to the students' socioeconomic status, one of the two underlying predominant themes that emerged in their discussion of their limited time commitment to education. The other theme was their racial identity to which the following challenging factors were associated.

### ***Racial Loneliness***

Despite the fact that JC is among the five California community colleges with the largest African American student populations, all the students interviewed shared experiences in which they felt like they were the only ones with their racial identity at some point or another during their educational experience. The awareness of their "only oneness" as they recollected was followed by a sense of sadness or desire to see others that shared the same racial background. Jaxon spoke clearly about this sense of loneliness:

In my experience, I feel like I'm outnumbered a lot. That's what it is like, it's not enough of my brothers with me at school. So therefore, I tend to feel alone. Like, I'll see one, maybe two or three Black guys, like out of everyone and I'm like, okay, there should definitely not be three Black guys on a campus this big... That's an issue.

Even in situations like Luis' when he thought it was cool to be the only one in STEM courses, he was left with a longing to have others with his same racial background in those classes. He said, "I guess it's kind of cool seeing you're like, the only African American in Engineering or STEM classes, but it's kind of sad as well, because you're the only person there." Brayden shared similar sentiments about his classes in which he was the only African American:

Like just the classes I took, they weren't like any, like, I can't look around and see like a bunch of like African Americans I could like relate to. It's mainly just more either predominantly Latino, Asian, or Caucasian. So, there's no like, predominantly like African American groups I can relate to unfortunately, at least I haven't seen because I mainly like, like I said, Political Science and Business Economics.

The racial loneliness expressed by the students makes them feel like they do not belong on their college campuses. They feel like "visitors," as Charles shared,

Yeah, you know there's isn't, there's not many of me around. There's not many you know Black men around you know ... I see a lot of white people up there, Asians, I see multiple Asians up there more than I see Blacks you know. Even just Black period. Women or female. Just go to Black men, I'm one of the, you know, feel like a like a unicorn sometimes, you know or like something, like an alien or something you know. That's why I say probably like a visitor because I don't really see us too much.

As a result of the loneliness, the students tended to compare themselves with students from other racial groups. Their loneliness was exacerbated not by the fact that they were the only ones or one of the few of their race, but that they did not share in some of the good things some of the students from other races enjoyed. In the next section I discuss how this aspect of racial disadvantage was another challenging one the students had to experience.

## *Racial Disadvantage*

All the participants expressed a sense of feeling disadvantaged for being an African American male. Brayden stated, “I feel like still being a Black person in America is still mostly a disadvantage.” Carter shared similar sentiments regarding his experience as an African American male in the community college in comparison to other racial groups. He said, “I think Black males already have a disadvantage to them anyway.” Some of the examples that were given to support the claim of being disadvantaged based on their racial identity were tied to the lack of opportunities they identified while being on campus. For example, Easton said,

I think a lot of these other racial groups, they are the people I see working at the offices. You know, having these little student jobs at the front desk, at the Financial Aid Office at the Counseling office. And then I think because of that, they're able to, I don't know, whether it's their community or whatever it is, they must know something that, you know, people of color just aren't being told about how to, you know, potentially get a little part time job on campus, or how to become more involved with the school itself, but they all somehow seemed to know, the way to do it.

The other component that the participants talked about in connection with feeling disadvantaged, is how they feel that their intelligence and socioeconomic status are being perceived because of the color of their skin. Daniel shared how he feels that people will take African Americans less seriously just because of their racial identity. He shared his inner dialogue of what the perception from other racial groups would sound like:

Oh, you're African American. Oh, you must be on county or you have to hustling or you're just here for a free check. Uh, I feel like based on my color I'm counted not out, but counted down a little bit. Um, versus other cultures. I feel that other cultures

definitely, you know, even if they didn't open their mouth yet, based just off their color, I think that our, like, they'll kind of put us down here, generally speaking, and they'll put other cultures you know, pretty much up there just based off their face. They didn't even open their mouth yet. Oh, Asian respond. Oh, you Black, swatch this in.

Socioeconomic status is another factor which some participants attributed to feeling disadvantaged in relation to students from a different racial background. Being African American to them was synonymous with having a lower socioeconomic status. Charles articulated this idea clearly when he said,

It can also be an economic, social issue because you know, Black people aren't necessarily connected to, to wealth through their family members. And I'm not a sociologist, I haven't you know, I haven't done any studies, but none of the people I know are connected to any money and none of the other Black people I know are connected to much success.

Jaxon perceived that some educational institutions used their affordability as a way to control the African American populations on their campuses:

White kids get all the funding in the world to go to these \$50,000 a year schools, and Black kids, we have to fight penny, nickel and dime... That's how top universities control their Black population. They make it \$50,000 a year ... Call it Private. That's (N-word) control.

The overall sense of feeling disadvantaged when compared to students from other racial groups was clearly expressed by all the participants of the study. Some were objective in saying that there are other disadvantaged students from other racial groups but that was more the exception than the norm when it came to African American students. Due to the negative



connections some of them attributed to their identity, there was a sense of feeling the need to be careful on campus due to their racial identity. I will discuss how this “racial carefulness” was another challenging factor in their educational experience.

### ***Racial Anxiety***

About half of the participants expressed a sense of feeling anxious about how others perceived them based on their physical appearance. Their identity as an African American male was a source of anxiety in certain situations on their college campus. In addition to their identity, other physical attributes such as being muscular, tall, or having locked hair, added to the anxiety due to the stereotypes they felt they would be connected to. For example, Damien said,

You know, it's, it's like sometimes like whenever I go somewhere or whatever, like, for okay, because I'm a guy that is muscular built. Sometimes for me, whenever I go somewhere, it kind of bothers me whenever I go somewhere, because people will see me and the first thing that comes to their mind is ‘there's this dark skin muscular guy..., he's going to beat me up or something.’ They sense I'm going to beat them up or do something harmful to them when I'm not even that type of person. So, you know, that bothers me really bad when I go somewhere, like, and you don't have to speak in order to show that you feel a certain way towards me.

As a result of the anxiety that arises due to their physical appearance, some of the participants shared about how they will monitor their behavior when interacting with people from other racial groups on campus. For example, Parker said,

[M]y height, because I'm six five. And so most people kind of are intimidated by me, by my height, and then me being an African American male, you know, they could get a little shaky about things, but I'm very nice and I'm you know, I try to come off very

friendly that way people don't get nervous...and especially with me having locks in my hair now too, it kind of gives another look, and people kind of you know, double take but I try to be as friendly as I can, in that way they don't look at me the wrong way.

Similar to monitoring behavior, Easton talked about how he sometimes code switches when he is around students from other racial groups:

I think the factors of speaking might be influenced by my race. I think sometimes I catch myself participating in code switching, in which sometimes, depending on who the students might be, I speak in a different way. Or subconsciously, it's something I catch myself doing and I'm like, why am I doing this?

The anxiety in some cases was exacerbated by police presence on campus. Jacob shared how he is uncomfortable seeing police on his campus due to his identity, something he feels that students from other racial groups do not have to deal with:

So, it has been something that I think about a lot. I do feel like a lot of students can't really relate to my experience as a Black male going to school, because ... I have a really high anxiety for police officers. So going to school, when there's like a lot of Sheriffs on campus, or a lot of police officers on campus, I do feel a little taken back or a little more aware. And I feel like most students don't actually really have to go about that.

Similarly, Oliver talked about how having fears related to his identity causes him to monitor the situations he gets into. He said, “[A]s an African American male, I know I'm high risk. I have fears that my non-African American counterparts might not have...I'm very careful of situations I get myself in.”

The anxiety brought on by the participants identity, especially in relation to their race, posed a challenge to their educational experience. They not only had to deal with the difficulties

that come with the pressures of being a student, but also had to be aware of their surroundings and their behavior when interacting with people from other racial groups. In some cases, the students talked about how they were outrightly treated differently because of the color of their skin. In the next section, I will address the racial biases which were another challenge in their educational journey.

### ***Racial Bias***

A couple of the participants talked about experiencing bias due to their race. In some cases, they perceived the bias as subtle, such as being asked questions that made the participants uncomfortable. For example, Oliver said,

I haven't had a horrible experience, maybe some questionable conversations. But I guess it's [due to] cultural differences. But yeah, I've had some questionable conversations about stuff I wouldn't say to person like me.... I will perhaps get a question that wouldn't be asked to a non-African American.

In other cases, the bias was clear which negatively affected the participants. Oliver shared about those experiences when he said, “[I]t has also affected me negatively...it has biased my view. Sometimes, you know, when it's tough to stay objective, and sometimes when it's justified, justified emotion, when you know people are being clearly bigoted.” Brayden also shared about experiencing negative feelings due to racial bias. He said, “And yeah, it feels kind of bad seeing the way how differently you're treated because the color of your skin.” In addition to challenging factors related to racial identity, the participants also talked about other challenges universal to most college students. In the next section, I will address the difficulties associated with college courses, especially Math and English, which were addressed by three of the students.

### *Difficult College Coursework*

A fourth of the participants talked about the difficulty they experienced in passing some of their college courses. Math and English were highlighted as the most difficult courses to pass, and one of the participants, Jaxon stated that this was common for most African American students, as he said, “Specifically reading and math. Those are the two things that Black people struggle with. I struggle with math whereas my friends struggle with reading.” He further went on to share that his challenges with Math played a significant role in decreasing his confidence in pursuing his academic goals when he said, “Math, math. I mean, it's like, getting burned out in math. Like those are the things that I worry about that could possibly decrease my confidence.” Similarly, Rex talked about how not passing his math class is preventing him from moving forward academically. He shared,

Like, it's hard. Like, I'm gonna take statistics for like, the fourth time. Because I can't seem to like pass the class, but then I'm so driven to get through school, that I'll just I have to pass a class. I don't really have any other choice. You know, like, I don't, I can't imagine like, remediating back, you know, to pre-algebra and then carrying it forward, you know, back to Statistics. No, I'm just gonna have to hire somebody to tutor me, you know.

Charles talked about his struggle with Math with a sense of hopelessness, like he could not seem to pass the course however hard he tried. He was not having the same issue in other courses, and shared how seeking out help in his math course was to no avail:

[W]ell, I knew it was gonna be long, it's definitely been arduous. So when I was struggling with those math classes, it really made me it really got me like, you know, it really like, stunted my optimism, I guess, because I was taking these classes and I took

them for years. You know, I finished all the science, finished with everything, the English, history, all that stuff. But I was struggling with these math classes. I probably took that class, the class before it, a total of, oh my gosh, it's a ridiculous amount, probably over 20 times those two classes. Broke them up, you know, to where like, you just take the first half of the class, and then the next weekend, take second half of the class. I failed; it didn't matter. I tried different schools. I failed everywhere. I was spending more time in the study center than the actual class.

He also mentioned how he doubted his ability to transfer to a four-year university, and how he had wasted a lot of time trying to pass math. He believed he would have completed a few degrees in the time he spent trying to complete math:

[The] math class really, really took a toll on me, man. I took those classes for years, and semester after semester. Summer and winter and fall and spring and just failed them all...[T]he single thing, that comes to mind is the amount of time that it took for to get those math classes done. [T]he time that I spent there, I mean, I could have been done with my bachelor's degree already, even going part time. I'd have been in law school right now. That's really discouraging, because when I look back on that, it's just like, God, it raises my stress levels a little bit already, just a little bit, because I'm thinking back to that time when I was apprehensive, and stuff. And then when I think about how much time, wasted, it's just like, oh, my gosh!

A couple of other students talked about the difficulty of their major and college coursework in general. Luis considered switching his major due to the challenges he was having:

Yeah, I was thinking about switching majors, maybe to Computer Science.... Yeah, I've been working on trying to adapt to the classes, but maybe I was thinking about what my

passions are. And if I want to proceed.... Oh, it was stressful at first, but I've learned to adapt a bit...having to do both my high school coursework college coursework.

Brayden alluded to the general difficulty of college as a matter of fact when he stated, “[C]ollege has always just been difficult, like school in general. So, I don't think it's anything that they're doing... I think it is difficult.”

In addition to the difficulties associated with the actual coursework, about half the participants talked about challenges navigating the college educational system which will be addressed in the next section.

### ***Education Navigation Challenge***

Navigating the community college education system was highlighted as one of the main challenges facing the participants. Some of the participants were frustrated because they took courses they were not supposed to take, which ended up prolonging their time at the community college. In most cases, they blamed themselves for not seeking out the guidance in regard to the classes they needed to take. For example, Daniel said, “[M]y first year in college was messed up because I was taking classes that didn't even go with my major.” Similarly, Charles said,

[W]hen I first enrolled in school, I was taking all these business classes, because I had no guidance, I just had myself. And I didn't, I didn't seek out the counselors' help, I didn't see anyone to help, I was just taking these business classes. And it turns out that many of those business classes weren't transferable.

Jaxon talked about his frustration in not seeking out guidance early enough when he said, “I'm mad it took me this long. Because I wasn't focused. I wasn't, I didn't have the help and guidance that I do now.” And Parker shared how he is still trying to figure out the process:

Ah, honestly, I've just been kind of winging it. I never really had the proper, I would say, like formal introduction to college ... I will honestly say that it was kind of thrown down on me. And so, I've just been trying to figure it out ever since.

Easton on the other hand shared that he was not given the right information, by stating, "You know, no one told me that there are certain courses that were not UC transferable, and only CSU transferable. And so, courses, you know, weren't transferable at all, they're just more elective courses."

It was clear from the stories shared by the participants that they recognized that getting the right academic guidance would have made their educational experience better. The lack of accurate information regarding the classes they needed to take prolonged their time at the community college and was a source of frustration for them. In most cases the students took the responsibility for not seeking out the help, but in some cases stated that they were not informed that some of the classes were not required. Some of the participants attributed their challenges with navigating the college education system to their lack of adequate college preparation, another challenge to their education experience, that will be addressed in the next section.

### ***College Unpreparedness***

A fourth of the participants talked about not being adequately prepared for college which was a source of difficulty in their educational experience. It was implied that the lack of preparation was at the high school level or in the first year of college. For example, in talking about study skills, Jacob said,

In high school, we weren't taught studying skills, we weren't taught skills of learning what type of learners we are, and learning what type of things we kind of gravitate toward. So as a kid earlier, I didn't have any concept or any true connection with that.

Similarly, Parker shared about the difficulty with college work due to not being prepared for it when he said, “I would say some of that work, I'm not used to, especially in college, I feel like some of the things I didn't get taught... it's been a little bit more difficult to understand.” Also, Rex, a student who transferred back to a community college after attending a four-year university, mentioned how he felt like he was “socially promoted” without actual preparation. He said, “And instead of anyone actually intervening in a way that what would sustain me, they, they just socially promoted me. You know, so I was ill equipped. The first day that I stepped foot on [College’s Name] campus.”

The transferring process or the different pathways available to college students were other aspects of the education experience that the participants highlighted as being another area of unpreparedness. For instance, Jacob said, “So I didn't really know too much about school, about college and the pathways you can take So, coming out of high school, I wasn't really given any help or assistance when it came to college stuff.” Likewise, Easton said,

I think I walked out of high school, alright, thinking I know, just take, you finish your IGETC, and that's it and then you're transferring out. But I think it was more than that, you know, no one told me that there are certain courses that were not UC transferable, and only CSU transferable. And some courses weren't transferable at all, they're just more elective courses.

Although the majority of the factors the participants highlighted were attributed to negative external influences, they also talked about personal factors that negatively impacted their educational experience which will be discussed in the following section.



### *Negative Personal Factors*

About half of the participants talked about factors in their personal lives that negatively impacted their educational experience. Majority of the factors they spoke about occurred in the past but still had a residual negative influence on their life in general, their academics being one of the areas affected too. Some of the factors were issues the students are currently dealing with which are also negatively impacting their education. Rex shared about how his experience with the criminal justice system at an early age shadowed the rest of his life:

[I] was pretty much kind of pushed into that school to prison pipeline ... although I've never graduated to prison, I've had like stints in county jail ... [I] didn't even start very young, I just got a charge very young. But that colored everything going forward for me, because I was behind.

Carter talked being setback due to his background as a first generation and foster care student. He said, "I'm a first generation ... I was a foster youth as well at one point." Damien talked about how having violent experiences in his childhood, coupled with mental health issues affected his educational relationships:

[I experienced] violence at such a young age that now I'm not a violent person, but that's my immediate response. I have to think and stop myself, because [it happened] to me when I was 17 or 16. [That] impacts me because, you know, like, when I'm trying to do schoolwork or anything, if someone is speaking to me, they might just be communicating to me, [and] on my end I may be sitting there taking it the wrong way, and getting angry and reacting the same way...[Being] emotionally overwhelmed impacts everything, especially when you already have depression problems are ADHD. We already have mental health problems. It just makes everything so much, much worse.

Similarly, Daniel talked about mental health challenges that affected his school:

I was definitely, you know, depressed and stressed out and a lot of anxiety going on. And a lot of the outside factors were [affecting] how I move. I'm so worried about this, that I can't focus [on] school [can't get] certain things done.

The COVID-19 pandemic added yet more stress to the participants lives, while also negatively impacting different aspects of their educational experience. For instance, with the shift to the online learning model, some students like Brayden felt that the lack of face-to-face interactions with professors hindered the building of relationships with them. Brayden stated, “I do feel like having that one-on-one with the professor, like seeing them, having easy access to their office hours. But I can't say online does make it easier [since] you can't have that one-on-one face-to-face relationship.” Similar to the loss of easy access to faculty, the challenge of accessing other resources on campus was another negative aspect as a result of the pandemic. Easton said,

[G]oing online ... has made it more challenging to reach [college resources] because now you have to go through some virtual site or something like that. Or if you go in person ... [they say] they're not taking any in-person questions, even though you might have just one simple question. ... [Y]ou either have to email, which they don't respond. I called [an office on campus] many times, they never reply to any of my calls ... [I]t takes a while to find a way to reach out to them.

Oliver talked about the challenge of having to study from home due to the pandemic. His home was not conducive enough as a learning environment which ultimately negatively impacted his academic performance. He stated, “It was horrible...[The pandemic] was an unexpected situation...[R]emote learning was really not ideal for me. I dropped grades.”

These stories show how the students' challenging educational experiences were not isolated to factors they experienced while in college. The participants talked about experiences that covered a wide range of areas that could be linked directly to their colleges but some of them external to the colleges. Brayden made this clear when he shared that his college was doing a good job, specifically the instructors, and his main challenges were outside the college. He said, "I like the college. The teachers are pretty amazing...It's just mainly factors outside of college that really affected me. The college is doing its best, and I just have to put the effort [in it]."

Even though the participants such as Brayden were appreciative of the efforts provided by the colleges to assist with his overall educational experience, it was evident that the students' challenges played a more negative significant role in their academic journey. For some challenges, such as the financial strains that were mentioned, the supports they received did not prevent them from seeking out other sources of income such as working while in school.

### **Research Question #2 Findings**

This section will highlight the findings which answer Research Question #2: What factors do African American male students attending one California community college describe as significant to their academic success?

The students mentioned a range of factors as significant to their educational success—some in positive ways, and others in negative ways. The majority of the positive ones were linked to personal motivators and some were connected to the relationships with faculty. The negative factors they identified were related to their racial identity.

## **Finding #2.1. Students Perceive Positive Relationships with Faculty as Significant to Their Academic Achievement**

The second research question explored factors that the students found significant to their college academic achievement. The factors that emerged spanned both the negative and positive influences to their academic success. The most significant influence the students highlighted were the relationships with the college faculty. The relationships they talked about highlighted different aspects of the education experience that they found essential to their academic achievement that will be discussed in the following sections.

### ***Academic Engagement and Encouragement***

Seven out of the twelve participants talked fondly about the way their instructors were academically engaging and encouraging. The engagement took on different forms such as being quick to respond to emails or creating a space for conversations outside of the allotted class time. For example, Jacob said the following about one of his instructors,

[H]e was actually one of the first teachers at [College's Name] that... would have those conversations, he'd show up early to class... [or when] casually walking in. [He also] provided me the reference to reach out to some of the people that he had known.

Additionally, they also talked about how accommodating the instructors have been with the switch to the online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Carter stated, "I mean, the faculty interaction is very different because we take only online classes, but they're pretty good at messaging back in like a responsive manner ... I feel like they're even more flexible."

Similarly, Brayden shared about how responsive his instructors are which has helped with his academic confidence. He said, "[T]he professors are really cool, especially now, but the online

learning is completely different... [Professors hard work] trying to make it as seamless as possible really boosts my confidence.”

The other aspect of the engagement the students talked about was how encouraging some of their instructors were. Charles recalled some of the encouraging instructors who had a significant impact on his academic success:

[S]he was just really encouraging me, I mean, really encouraging, really open. Everything was learning, you know, nobody knew anything in her head...[She created] a nurturing environment and lead nurturing towards learning. [The] one vocabulary teacher, and she was just a really good example for me. [A] really good presence in my academic, nonacademic setting ...really more than helpful... in between helpful and loving... [B]eing in her class, speaking with her, was very encouraging. [I] still think of her...[I] had another history teacher, she was really encouraging...she made me feel like a genius...[S]he said all my papers were A's and she just really liked talking with me after class. She was really, really cool. She was sad to see me go when I left. And you know, those are good experiences, regardless of the academic part. You know, they just feel good and, and it's nice to feel good when you're in a place that you're trying to better yourself.

Carter also talked about some practical ways one of his instructors encouraged him to be better. He said, “Let's just say like providing feedback, especially like in my writing, helping me dig deeper and making me a better writer, pushing me and making sure I'm pushing myself to the limits.” Similarly, Daniel talked about how one of his instructors was very engaging in the class and that it he looked forward to going to class and was motivated to do well:

[Just] seeing you know, how into the class he was, encouraged me to do better. I knew I was the same age [and thought] I better get an A ... [H]is mannerisms and the fact that he cared, made me want to do better. [Since] our age was so close, I'm just like, oh my god, I gotta get it together ... [B]eing in a class and around a professor that was just really engaging in the class, it almost felt like I needed to be here, as opposed to I had to be here. So that that particular professor just gave that feeling of I can't wait [for] the next class.

From their responses, it appeared that the more the students perceived a care and interest from the instructors, the students desired to do better in those instructors' classes. It is like they were indebted to those instructors for encouragement and engagement. The other component that stood out in the faculty relationships was the aspect of race which will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Faculty from Similar Racial Background***

In addition to having encouraging faculty, the participants shared how positively relating with faculty from a similar racial background was important to them. They perceived those faculty to have more of an interest in their academic success. As Daniel explained,

Well, the professor that was very encouraging, he was African American as well. And I'm not saying he was right, but I do feel that he gave us a little more attention. I felt that he wanted us to do better because he knew that this color is hard. So I felt like he took the extra step based on us being African American.

Similar to Daniel, Jacob highlighted the importance of connecting with faculty who are men of color in a mentorship relationship. He said, “[Provide] more opportunities [for] like a mentorship or program where Black men can actually talk to men of color who are at the higher level [in the]

institutions, who can reach out to them and ... build that rapport.” He gave a practical example of how one of his professors played a significant role in providing that kind of mentorship that ultimately helped in his career path decisions:

I actually had a professor of mine...he was our sociology professor. [H]e was actually one of the first professors I had at [College’s Name] and so we kind of had this really good rapport...he's actually been able to help me get insight on the things that I want to do. So, I eventually want to go into the educational system, and like do something within administration. So, he’s actually been able to [connect me with] people who are running [the] school district, school board within the area, people who are teachers, who are just now becoming teachers, or people who are also being becoming lawyers. So, he's been able to connect me with a lot of those people. And through that, I've been able to get a lot of good insight about my future, like career.

I experienced this need for faculty connection and mentorship when one of the participants, Rex, sought my personal advice on how he should move forward academically. Basing on my own positionality a Black male faculty in the community college system, I could tell that he valued my perception of what he needed to do. He asked,

What's your perception about, about where I am versus where I need to be? Um, and I know, you haven't seen a transcript or, or any of that stuff. But like, what's your assessment? Or whatever of like, just your perception of like, where I'm at, you know.

His question showed a level of trust which I am assuming he felt due to us sharing a similar racial background. Unfortunately, most of the participants perceived their racial identity as negatively impacting their academic achievement as will be discussed in the next setion.

## **Finding #2.2: African American Male Students Perceive the Factors Negatively Impacting their Academic Achievement as being Connected to their Racial Identity**

Nine out of the twelve of the participants talked about experiences which highlighted their race as a factor that negatively impacted their academic performance. The students talked about how it affected different areas of their life which ultimately had a negative influence on their education. In the following sections, I will discuss in more detail the different aspects of how the participants felt and how they were negatively correlated with their racial identity and academic performance.

### ***Socioeconomic and Family Background***

A third of the participants felt that their socioeconomic and family backgrounds could have played a role in their poor academic performance. As they discussed the hardships they experienced based on these backgrounds, they attributed some of them to their racial identity. For example, Easton said,

I think for example, when I was really trying to do well, in one of my calculus classes, and I just bombed the first test, not good whatsoever...I felt kinda like my racial background played a little role in it, because like, I really have no help in comparison to all these other kids...I've talked to them [and they said] oh yeah, I have a tutor that helps me with this, [or] my dad is an engineer so he helps me out with this stuff...[M]y parents work in construction and at the DMV, nothing [with] calculus related... I can't pay for a tutor who's gonna charge me \$60 an hour. So all these things [made me think] maybe my racial identity...or just societal type of thing, socioeconomic status, play a role in my education in a way.



Similarly, Jaxon felt that his family, not having the financial resources that other families have access to, is one of the reasons he has had academic challenges. He said, “Those are the two things that Black people struggle with. I struggle with math whereas my friends struggle with reading... [O]ur parents don't have the money to put us [in] Sylvan Learning Center... I'm saying like we need resources.” He also talked about how he perceived a lack of academic accountability from the African American families:

[For] Black students, our parents don't usually hold us to academic standards. So that means we're less driven. Or other parents of other races, specifically Asians, they press their kids very heavily to do well in school. My parents don't wish it like that... [T]hey don't seem like they really cared about school...[A reason to get] out the house for a couple hours... that was it, you know, it wasn't really school... grades weren't really an important factor.

Charles had similar perceptions as he shared how he sometimes wonders whether his racial and family background played a role in his poor academic achievement:

I do wonder sometimes, like if I would have been different race, would my life have been different? And then I wonder, you know, I look at my present day, and you know, yeah, like, would my life have been different? you know, would my college experiences have been different? would I have passed those classes faster? would I've been done now if my parents knew more how the system works? you know. If I had more people around me who have been through school, who... have more success in their life, more uncles, more cousins...[I]t can also be an economic, social issue because you know, Black people aren't necessarily connected to wealth through their family members.

As a result of feelings that the participants expressed in which they related their race to a lower socioeconomic and less educated background, there emerged another aspect of low academic self-efficacy which will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Low Self-Efficacy***

About half of the participants talked about experiencing feelings of self-doubt and low self-confidence in relation to their ability to succeed academically. Majority of the negative feelings stemmed from the perception of their identity and socioeconomic background as it relates to academic achievement. For example, Charles said, “Each semester, each month, each day, I really struggle in school. And I don't know if that's because I'm a Black male, or if it's because I'm poor, I don't know if I'm poor because I'm Black.” Brayden similarly talked about not feeling good enough in college due to his own background:

I do get kinda depressed sometimes, especially during college, I just don't feel like I'm good enough. So that kind of weighs me down a little bit, I think that also has to do [with] my background, [since] a lot more people [have] more economic opportunity to do more stuff [and I don't].

Rex also shared how he felt that his identity negatively affected his confidence and educational trajectory:

The things that decrease my confidence is the negative self-talk. The history itself, you know, like the odds for a Black man with my background and experience. And then how, you know, my own personal biography fits in within that.

He continued to say,

[Race] colors the whole picture. Because I've come in already with some baggage, you know, and some deficits, you know, in relationship to my identity, my perception of

identity. You know, because I really didn't have a lot going on in high school. I really didn't have a lot going on in middle school. I was a special education kid that was pretty much kind of pushed into the school to prison pipeline.

Easton felt that some of his low self-confidence was as a result of comparing himself to peers who also made some negative remarks:

So I felt I was on a slower pace than many of my peers, you know, who had made you know, microaggression remarks in the past, and I felt like I was really not achieving what I really wanted to 100% of the way.

Additionally, the participants shared how similar negative interactions with peers and faculty made them feel unwelcome, another factor that emerged, and will be discussed in the next segment.

### ***Sense of Belonging***

Four of the twelve participants talked about negative experiences with either peers or faculty that made them feel like they did not belong at the college, and in some cases like Daniel's, was the cause of ending their educational journey. Daniel shared about an experience with one of his instructors:

I felt like he was being racial. [I] felt like he'd been, excuse my language, a real [Expletive], and I was just done. I pretty much checked out after that. [After] that situation, I completely checked out. I basically ended that school semester based off of that experience.... [I] just pretty much left that situation [which] was very, very discouraging. He was racist. He really was. I'm sorry, but he was.

Brayden also alluded to overtly being treated differently when he said, "And yeah, it feels kind of bad seeing the way how differently you're treated because of the color of your skin." And

in other cases, like Oliver's, there were subtle ways in which the students were made to feel. Oliver said, "I've had some questionable conversations about stuff I wouldn't say to person like me." As a result of these unconformable experiences, some of the participants expressed a desire to be in an educational setting in which there were more individuals from the same racial background. For example, Daniel felt he would probably be more successful in such a setting:

In regard to my academic success, I feel that just being or going to a college/university that's more in my area, where my color is the majority, I feel I will probably succeed a lot better, versus if I was outside of my element somewhere else. And again, it sucks, but that's just from personal experience.

He continued to share how he seeks out professors from a similar racial background as him hoping to have a more comfortable academic experience:

[S]ometimes I'll try to look at the professor who's you know, who's teaching the classes [and] get a little bit of their background. For example, [if there's] one class where I have one option of a, I'm just using random names, but let's say Sanchez, and a Jefferson, I went ahead to Jefferson. You know, so I try to navigate it to where there's a need for a comfort level, I tried to make it as comfortable as possible for, you know, for myself.

In the same vein, Jaxon talked about his appreciation of the Umoja program that caters to African American students. He said, "That made me feel so much better knowing there's an office specifically dedicated to Black students. I appreciated that a lot...[thinking] here's an office that's specifically dedicated to people that look like me." Similarly, other students talked about their experience in the Umoja program and highlighted it as one of the factors that they attribute to their academic success. The program will be discussed in more detail in the next section, along with other factors the participants found significant to their academic success.

### **Finding #2.3 Personal Factors Were Identified as the Main Sources of Motivation Towards Academic Achievement.**

The participants also had a lot to share regarding experiences that were influential in helping pursue higher academic goals. Most of the factors they highlighted were intrinsic (for example self-efficacy and being role models) with a few extrinsic (such as the Umoja program) ones. In the following segments, I will be discussing in more detail the factors the students talked about starting with the Umoja program which was previously highlighted in the last section.

#### ***Umoja Community***

The Umoja program was applauded by three participants as extremely supportive in providing them with resources and a community to pursue their educational goals. The program's goal is to enhance the cultural and educational experience of mainly African American college students. It provides counseling and teaching components which Oliver attributed to his successful educational journey:

The community at school...the Umoja program at [College's Name], it's a great program. It has great counseling. I credit a lot of my trajectory over the past few years to Umoja ...[A] good number of my classes are part of the Umoja program, and my experience with them has been a different approach to teaching from the professor's. They are professional, but still, getting out of their way to be accommodative of different [student] needs...and that goes a long way in trying to be confident in what you're doing.

Carter talked about how the program provided a community for him as an African American male. He expressed that it was important for his academic success to connect academically with other African American males:

Well, for instance, like Umoja I know because of my race, you know, I have that support system because that's specifically for, you know, just not Black males but Black students overall. So, whether that's like having info sessions on HBCUs transfer sessions, or block schedules where everybody is taking the same classes together for that specific program.

That helps a lot because they're just there because they want you to succeed together.

Similarly, Jaxon talked about the importance of having a program focused on African American students and also mentioned the resources he had access to through the program:

I am a part of the Umoja program... they've been helping me out with my schoolbooks and things like that and I'm very grateful for that. That made me feel so much better knowing there's an office specifically dedicated to Black students. I appreciated that a lot.

Carter also highlighted resources he was able to get through the Umoja program and other similar programs:

I'm in several student supported programs like EOPS, Next Step [and] Umoja. So, they support me a lot in terms of like book vouchers [and] gift card emergency... a whole bunch of resources and stuff like that, job resources,... referrals to different [resources]. Even if they can't help you, you know, there's at least somebody that's going to find out alternate resources of where you can get what you're looking for.

The participants responses regarding the social and practical support provided by the Umoja community showed how influential external factors can be to the overall motivation for students to succeed academically. In addition to the community support they received on campus, the students also talked about how significant the support they received from their

families and other community members which was another factor that will be discussed more in the next section.

### ***Educational Support System***

The importance of their support systems such as family, friends and mentors in the participants' educational journey was strongly emphasized during the interviews. Some of them talked about how indebted they felt towards their families for the sacrifices they made so that they could have an education. Brayden, whose family immigrated to the United States for a better life, stated,

Well, I feel like I really owe my parents [to] at least get out of here. You know, they gave me such a great opportunity by coming here. I couldn't imagine having all the stuff I have right now if it wasn't for my parents. So I do feel like, they're the biggest influence.

Daniel shared similar sentiments:

Well, my grandmother, passed away, you know, she was just very adamant about, you know, our family just doing better. And that's the reason why my family came to America in the first place. I'm actually first generation American born in the States. And so just being here in the land of opportunity, and wanting to do more, more than what they did, is just like, you know, it's kinda like the ultimate goal. It kind of pushes me [since] they came here for us, to do it, not to squander it. So, I gotta, I gotta, I gotta get up and do the work.

Rex talked about how education was very important to his family and how they instilled that same value in him. He understood the importance and made it clear that it was a motivating factor in his academic pursuits:

I come from a family that really nurtured and cultivated education. [T]hey hadn't really attained much, my family, but they had a dream and a vision for like, their kids. You know, that's why my grandparents left the south and came up here to LA, you know, mostly because they had a vision for the kids. [D]rawing on that understanding and all that history really helps me out a lot.

Additionally, guidance from others who have been on a similar academic journey was another factor within the support systems that participants mentioned. Jacob shared about his partner who has been influential in his academic journey by providing direction when he was unsure what to do. He said,

[T]he support system I have around me... my partner, she's actually a graduate from [University's Name] so a lot of the times when I have a question [regarding] setting up my Student Educational Plan, or [anything] around a lot around those lines, she has some insight on that. So being able to use her, kind of as a resource too, has been something that's been very beneficial for me.

Similarly, Parker talked about friends who have inspired him to continue with his educational pursuits:

So well, my two best friends one, I've known her since elementary school, and the other one I've known since middle school. They both attained Master's degrees, and I've grown up with them and so just seeing their success has really motivated me, especially now to want to continue my studies and to be able to cross that stage, you know, and to have something to look back and be proud of.

Without the support systems the participants talked about, it is unlikely that they would be interested in pursuing or continuing an educational path. In addition, the external influence



from their family and friends, the participants spoke about intrinsic factors, to be highlighted in the next sections, that seemed to play a more significant role in the students drive to academic success.

### *Academic Performance*

Almost half the participants mentioned how getting good grades made them feel good about themselves and encouraged them to continue to keep moving forward and do better in their educational endeavors. Some of them mentioned how their good academic performance played a role in increasing their confidence in even doing better in school. For example Rex said, “[I]t’s really cool for someone like me that, you know, [who] needs that confidence boost, ... [T]o go from 84 to 89 in a week. That’s a confidence builder.” Similarly, to Carter, he mentioned how already having an Associate’s degree and doing well on his assignments has given him the motivation to keep moving forward and even interact with his professors in a more confident manner. He stated,

Also getting that first Associate’s degree really helped motivate me because it was like something that I finally got. It was like tangible and I finally got to see it, so it motivated me more to finish. And then getting good grades, not necessarily in the science prerequisites, but just overall, is a huge motivating factor ... Getting good grades on my assignments, getting good feedback from my professors...[Having] a couple of professors [wanting] to stay in contact, keep in touch with me and [some agreeing] to let me use them as references... It gives me confidence that I’m a good student academically.

For some students like Parker, who may not be aware of how hard they are working, seeing the high GPA is a motivational factor to keep moving forward towards his educational goal:

I checked my GPA, and it was like, 3.9, I'm like, gosh, I really put in a lot of work, and that really motivated me...that's why I've just really been trying to push forward man, because even though I've been dealing with a lot, I still have a lot to be thankful for. And I'm definitely not gonna let it stop me from achieving goals.

The students' remarks show how important feedback and grades are in motivating them to keep pursuing their academic goals. It also showed that it increased the students' self-efficacy to pursue even higher goals as will be discussed in the next segment.

### *Sense of Self-Efficacy*

Half of the participants felt confident about meeting their academic goal and were not hesitant in their educational pursuit. As mentioned before, it may be due to their previous strong academic performance. Rex, who talked about feeling more confident because of good grades, had his eyes set on even higher educational goals. He said, "I'm going to get, you know, a PhD. You know, and a master's in, you know, if I can get a postdoc or some sort, I'll be doing that too." Similarly, Damien, who already has a college degree, talked confidently about getting his second one and then eventually going to medical school:

I already have a college degree. And so, this will be my second one. And then with this one, though, I plan to transfer, hopefully into medical school. That's why I kind of wanted psychology because I'd like to try to push into medical school... I always wanted to be... a doctor or physician assistant.

Jaxon also seemed to have a clear idea of what route he wanted to pursue academically. He talked about careers and how he had changed his mind and was planning to switch his career goals. His confidence which is reflective of one with high self-efficacy would be a contributing factor to his academic success. Concerning his future academic goals, Jaxon said,

I wanted to be a doctor, you know, but I realized as I grew older, I realized science isn't really my thing... I don't really like research like that...I will be a much better attorney. I will be much better. I like business. I don't like bullies... I'm definitely going to ... switch from being in the medical profession to the legal field...I would do better on the LSAT than the MCAT.

Other participants also talked confidently about planning to complete their college degree and even attain doctorates. The high level of confidence with which they spoke showed a high sense of self-efficacy which is usually a precursor to academic success. Surprisingly, if the students perceived that other individuals had low expectations of them academically, it served as a demotivation to succeed, a factor to be discussed in the next section.

### ***Performance Pressure and Proving Others Wrong***

A third of the student participants talked about experiencing a certain amount of pressure to perform well academically based on what they perceived as other individuals not believing in their ability to academically succeed. This perception of a negative belief from others seemed to have a positive impact on the students' motivation to do well academically. It was a motivation to prove those with a negative belief in them, wrong. Jaxon talked about how his being the only Black student in his class motivates him to do well since he perceives that his classmates may expect him to be the one that would fail the class:

I'm one of the ... only men there that's a Black student. In like most of my classes, I'm the only Black guy ... I gotta represent. I can't let them think Black people are stupid, or we'll just fail ... [Creating a scenario] 'Who failed the class? Guess? The Black guy.'

[I'm] like nah... I'm not happy about nobody failing. You know, I'm just happy that the F [on] the transcript wasn't mine ... I had to prove I made the A, regardless of what everyone else made, I made the A.

Damien talked about negative experiences in high school in which he was looked down upon as still significantly motivating him to do better in school now. This is what he had to say about those experiences and how it shaped his academic experience:

When I was in high school, people used to make fun of me a lot. They used to make fun of me and call me stupid and all this other stuff. They were really very jealous of me ... So even though it happened when I was in high school, I use it to this day as the motivational force needed to push myself to do it, even though I don't feel like doing it every day, I'm tired. Or I feel like it's a waste of time, I had to think long term, you know, I have to go back to remembering how I was treated when I was in school, that they said I was stupid ... I would never do this, or I would never [be] where I am today. They said I would never be able to accomplish [much]. I use that as a motivational kick. It helps to keep moving forward.

Easton also talked about similar negative experiences he had growing up which have shaped his attitude towards his educational goals. He stated,

[I] don't want to let people win ... growing up, sometimes people would be like, "Oh, you know, why choose an easier major?" [or] "Why don't you do something else?" or stuff

like that. You know, like, little micro aggressions ... I don't want to let them, you know, see that they might have been, right ... kind of fueling me in a way.

The perception the students had of others not believing in their academic abilities caused them to feel pressured to perform academically. Those who talked about the academic pressure were also students who had good grades, including Luis who currently has a 4.0 GPA. He said, [I feel] lots of pressure cause I feel like I'm the only one ... [I]f I do STEM, it's like, "Okay, well, you like STEM?" It's not ... a predominantly African American field ... okay, perform. It's like, "Okay, we wanna see how you perform as this identity and coming from this social group."

He also expressed the view that no matter how well he performed, his credibility would be questioned because of his race:

[People think] you didn't earn the spot, it doesn't matter if you got a 4.0 GPA, you got in because of your race ... [Y]ou're most likely going to crash the ISS Space Station if you ever go on to work at NASA, or whatever.

He therefore feels that it is his responsibility to do well, not just for himself, but for others who share the same racial background:

[I]f I don't perform ... academically well to a certain standard, any people coming after me, are going to be let down [and may] have to go through certain things [because of what] I did. I've been focusing on destroying, you know, any prejudice or whatever.

Daniel, in a similar vein, felt that he needed to succeed academically as an African American male to have a decent life in California:

Well, I'm just saying African American males period. There's a lot of things that people feel about us already predetermined. And then there's a lot of expectation ... especially

living in California, and being Black, Yeah, gotta have a little paper to, you know, to function.

This aspect of feeling academic pressure and wanting to prove others wrong could also be considered a fear of failure because that failure would confirm what the students perceived others thought about them. It was therefore important for the students to succeed and hence negate the perceived negative thoughts. This factor to pursue success is closely related to the aspect of spirituality and resilience which the participants also identified as significant and will be discussed in the following segment.

### ***Spirituality and Resilience***

Two out of the twelve participants mentioned how their spirituality was significant in helping them focus on their academic achievement. Rex felt that his faith gave him purpose and confidence to persist. He said “[S]pending a lot of time reflecting on God and my purpose and life and, and just like spiritual things, and then kind of understanding, not even kinda but having an understanding that ultimately it's just me.” Similarly, Daniel stated that it was his faith gave him the strength to persevere in college:

I just feel that my faith is getting stronger. And it's given me strength to persevere. It's given me that hope that this is going to work out, this is going to happen. However, the details may come in, it's just given me more gas to go, my faith.

Additionally, Rex also expressed an inner determination to not give up regardless of all the hardships he has faced:

But, you know, obviously, there has been some sort of like plan or guide of some sort, you know, pushing me along, you know, my journey, you know, despite me, you know, in those hits, or blows, you know, or obstacles or barriers or experiences that I had, that

definitely should have just cut me off all together. You know, I shouldn't be a derelict. I mean, for all intents and purposes, you know, or, or just or crippled, you know, to the, to the extent that, you know, I'm just unable to function psychologically, or mentally, you know, or emotionally, which is just to be disconnected. And, you know, I recognize that that's not the case. [K]nowing my history and where I've come from, and what I've experienced in these young 43 years, you know, chances are, where I'm supposed to be headed to, I'm gonna get there.

The statements from these two participants made me believe that they had a faith in a power larger than themselves that gave them ability to keep pushing forward regardless of their circumstances. The resilience that kept them focused on their academic pursuits and success was due to their spirituality. A similar intrinsic motivator to their academic achievement was their desire to be role models by bringing about positive change which will be expanded on in the next section.

### ***Being a Role Model and Influencing Change***

Six out of the twelve participants talked about wanting to make a positive difference or be a role model of other African American males. They saw their academic achievement as a tool they could use in influencing others, and so they were inspired to be academically successful. Jacob clearly highlighted how this desire to be a role model has significantly shaped his educational journey:

[I] think as an African American male, one reason why I've been pushing myself more and more lately to complete school, is just because when I do have those classes that are on campus, I do rarely see African American males. So that does push me like a lot to go and finish school and to show like, the young men in my family, and the young men who

look like me that I work with, that, you know, like going to school isn't just a thing that you do if you know how to play sports, or if you have, like some other type of skill that a college wants to give you a scholarship for. This is something that as an African American male, can be very useful, very powerful for us. And that's, like, my main drive to finish school ... [Also] my background of wanting to always show people that, you know, this isn't just a set thing, we can become more and more [if we] include that educational piece that we have to go through.

Similarly, Easton, felt that if he was successful in school, it would show others like him that they too can be successful:

I'm not going to be the first one, but I would like ... show that it is an option to people. And [show] people,..“Oh, if Easton did it ... other people can do it too” mindset, rather than just kind of being more lax about it and not trying to pursue it.

In the same vein of being a role model, the desire to make a positive change in some of the current systems, was another major influence to the students' academic achievement. For example, Charles said,

I want to affect change in like local communities and in the courts and in the Criminal system. So that's partly why I want to be an attorney. And that motivation is what got me to enroll in school in the first place. That motivation is what pointed me to the major of law and ... why I'm taking the paralegal courses now. Just the ability, the possibility of really affecting real change, in significant institutions ... like in courts, you know, Congress, City Council, anything like that ... [G]etting a Law degree puts me in a position where I can do specialized work, you know, legal work, ... I want a Law degree to specifically argue cases in front of the courts and get laws changed ... [T]he possibility



of what I can do as an attorney, I just keep those in my head, and that's what keeps me keeps me going.

Daniel also viewed his academics as the resource he could use to make a change in the law enforcement system:

Because of my age, I would like to be based on academics a little bit more so than in the physicality of it. Okay, so same badge and gun, but I'll be at the station, you know, operations administration, you know, things like that. If you want to change it, change it from within ... that's the reason why I want to go into law enforcement.

Based on these and other responses from participants, it was evident that they saw the value of being successful academically, and the many opportunities an education would avail to them. They also saw how their academic achievements would be inspirational to others with similar backgrounds as them. Their understanding of the positive outcomes of an education and its ability to positively impact their futures and change some of their current situations, also played a significant role in their academic journey, as will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Goal of a Better Future***

Seven of the twelve participants talked about education as a means to a better future. Some of them were in difficult situations, barely making ends meet, and realized that pursuing and succeeding in education would be the solution to the dead-end alternatives they had. The discomfort of their previous or current circumstances, along with the desire for a more promising future became the driving forces for academic achievement for most of the participants.

Parker saw his current job as a hinderance to his ultimate financial goal, which led him to pursue an education:

I work in hospitality and I've been doing it for a while ... I've really worked hard and the pay sucks, and so it kind of slowed me down a little bit ... [I] work [hard] and just feel like I don't get enough back in the end ... [T]hat's why I just want to press forward with going to school in that way I can have that degree to kind of back me up to where I need to go.

Similarly, Daniel stated that having a degree was the only way for him to get a better paying job:

Now it feels more important to finish school, because I feel like most good paying jobs, they require a degree just to apply, before they even get into, you know, "can you do this?" And "can you do that?" You have to have a bachelors even to submit the application. So, it's important for me to have this under my belt ... my dad said that a degree has no expiration date on it. Once you get it, you get it. So, my goal is to get it and use that as a tool to get a good paying job.

Another factor related to desiring a more secure future was the fear of ending up in a worse financial situation. For example, Jaxon felt like he could potentially end up homeless if he did not make the right decisions now. For him, pursuing and being academically successful was the right choice:

I personally, I look at skid row. And I look at people on the streets, young guys my age. I think to myself, well, I'm not them, but that could change. And I don't want that change. I don't want to be there. So, like, let me figure something else out...[I]t's better to lose money than it is to lose time. Because you know, like, the older you get, the harder it gets...let me go ahead and just try to weather the storm right now.

For Damien, the decision to pursue an education was a matter of life or death. He feared that if he chose a path other than academics, he could potentially end up dead like some of his peers:

I just want to do something different because the area I come from more people have died from drinking [and] driving accidents, than I have ever seen my entire life ... So I use that as a way to motivate myself that, you know, I [want] to be different. I don't want ... my mom to have to, you know, come to the morgue and identify her son.

The statements and others made by the majority of the participants showed how important they viewed education as a viable option to a brighter future. For some it led to a better future and for others it prevented a worse one. Even though education was seen as a better option for some, more than half of the participants viewed it from an even better perspective; not as a “have to” but as a “want to” because of the positive aspects that will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Educational Interest***

Of the participants interviewed, seven out of the twelve expressed a genuine interest in education. They did not see it as something they had to do, but something they actually wanted to do because of all the good things it had to offer. The reasons for their interests covered various aspects such as the real-life applicability, prestige, family influence, and passion for the course content. While talking about the applicability to a family situation of what he was learning, Parker said,

[When] my grandfather ... passed away, I started seeing how all these classes ... finance classes, accounting classes, everything [started] to make sense. Because we're dealing with Trust accounts, and we're dealing with all these things. And now it's really starting to make sense, it's real life for me and I could apply [it] at home. [It's] more confirmation for me ... everything's starting to make sense ... I can just put this towards something and I can really apply [it].

Rex expressed his love for schooling and referred to himself as an academic. To him being in school is being in his element:

I love my majors. And I love the coursework ... I'm a student, you know, I'm an academic, you know, I'm an intellectual, all of those things. I'm in my element, in school, you know, exchanging ideas, researching ideas, putting together arguments, you know, that's all me.

For Jacob, he saw completing college as a prestigious goal that not even winning the lottery would deter him from this goal:

When I dropped out of my community college, my first year after high school, I had no intent to going back. I was hoping that I can somehow win a lottery somewhere and just become a rich person. But now, even if that were to happen, I still want to be a college graduate, who is eventually a doctor, that's still a goal for me.

The statements above and other similar ones were evidence of the passion for education the participants felt. They were not going to school because they were told to or saw it as a means to an end; they were passionate about their education and that is what was motivating them to be successful in their studies. Hearing their stories gave a clear picture of the drivers in their lives for academic achievement.

Overall, there were more factors that positively influenced the academic success of participants from JC than negative ones. From the stories shared, it was evident that good relationships with faculty and other personal motivating aspects were highlighted as factors that significantly positively influenced the participants' academic success. Additionally, racial identity issues were identified as negative influencers to the students' educational journeys. For

some of the negative factors identified, the participants had recommendations for the colleges to assist with the academic success of African American male students.

### **Research Question #3 Findings**

The findings in this section will answer Research Question #3: What recommendations do African American male students have for California community colleges in relationship to African American male student academic success? This question explored aspects within the community colleges that the African American male students thought could be improved to improve their academic success. The students were asked what changes they would make to their community college if they had the influence. Most of them said they were satisfied with their colleges' efforts in helping them succeed. However, there were some areas of improvement they highlighted that addressed the student as a whole such as, more focused support for African American students, proactive faculty support and accountability, academic recognition and retention, more course flexibility and accommodations, mental health and basic life skills support, and incentivizing resource knowledge.

#### ***More Focussed Support for African American Students***

Three out of the twelve students talked about the need for more support specifically for African American students. Some of the suggestions they had regarding the support included taking the time to understand the backgrounds of the students and offering more resources such as mentors or programs on campus to help them overcome obstacles unique to their student demographic.

Jaxon had a lot to say about the specific supports that he felt needed to be increased at his college. Regarding instructors, he suggested, "I feel like the teachers need to be a little bit more understanding of like, like strengths and weaknesses Black students." Also, when talking about

resources on campus, he highlighted the Umoja program as being a vital one for African American students, even though it is not staffed adequately. He said,

[Currently] they're making the Umoja office a part time thing, an experiment basically... [S]ometimes we have Umoja, sometimes we don't ... That's the big thing ... I'm actually having to use e-textbooks right now versus textbooks [because] I couldn't get them from the Umoja office ... E-textbooks are not helpful ... I can't really look at screens like that ... Well that bugs me man ... I got to do a review of my experiences and Umoja students as well, so we can try to save not lose that program.

Jaxon also talked about the need for more diversity on his college campus when he said, "I could ask for more diversity, there ain't enough Black students ... I just wish there were more Black students ... That makes you uncomfortable being the only Black student in the classroom, looks real uncomfortable." Similarly, Daniel felt there needs to be a focus on diversity within the colleges, as he said, "I just definitely want everyone to... keep diversity and inclusion when you're making decisions about campus life, professors, students, individuals, because we're all here together."

Another recommendation was for increased opportunities for African American males to be mentored by other men of color. Jacob said, "[Provide] more opportunities [for] like a mentorship or program where Black men can actually talk to men of color who are at the higher level [in the] institutions, who can reach out to them and ... build that rapport."

The suggestions regarding diversity and support made by the students make it clear that they feel like although there is general support on their campuses, additional supports geared specifically to African American students would help improve their academic outcomes. Similar to the unique support based on racial background discussed, some students also recommended

for faculty to be more proactive in their approach of supporting students, a suggestion that will be covered in more detail in the next section.

### ***Proactive Faculty Support and Accountability***

Five out of the twelve student participants recommended a more proactive approach from faculty when asked about areas of improvement at their community college. They felt like some of their professors were not really interested in teaching and were only there for the paycheck. The interest displayed by faculty which could be gauged by their student engagement, intentionality in reaching out to students inside and outside of class and providing constructive feedback, played a significant role to the students' academic success.

Daniel, when asked what changes he would implement if he was the head of his college, mentioned how he would make sure his faculty are there for the right reasons so that the students can gain the most from their college experience:

[I would] personally sit down with each faculty member, staff member and just make sure their hearts are into it. I think success in college is based on the individual, but it's also based on a professor, it goes both ways. If a professor isn't teaching you in such a way for you to get it, then both of you guys are just people in the room.

Similarly, Parker talked about the importance of professors taking the time to connect with their students in order to get a better understanding of their backgrounds. He believed that the holistic understanding would positively influence their teaching approach, which would then positively impact the students' academic performance:

I know that teachers have a hard time doing it, but you know [they can try] to have one-on-one with the students, even if it's a few minutes, just to kind of see where they're coming from and their background, because it helps with teaching a lot ... [I]f you teach

one sided not everyone is going to learn that way. [If] you kind of see who your audience is, and open up a little bit more, [it] helps out a lot.

Jacob, also talked about the importance of faculty being flexible with their availability for students since not all students may be able to make it to their office hours due to different work schedules. Based on negative interactions with some faculty, he recommended for them to have a more inviting approach:

I've had teachers and counselors who do actually take that step to kind of introduce themselves. I've had teachers who you go into the class, and they're just like, alright, when it's 3:30, 'I'll talk to you the next class', and wouldn't really be open to have those discussions, or their office hours are a lot earlier so it's really hard to make it especially when you're a working student. So being able to have those teachers and counselors who can be somewhat flexible at times with office hours, or with just being able to have those conversations, if I do need somebody to kind of guide me a little further on, like signing up for some programs, scholarships, or even if it's like, just getting some help with homework.

In addition to the proactive approach from faculty, one of the students, Parker, talked about the importance of extra accountability to help him stay on track. He felt that the extra accountability, which could be as simple as checking in on him to see how he is doing, could go a long way in helping him attain his academic goals. He said,

I would just say the accountability role, because sometimes, like I know, for myself, when I have someone there, that's like looking out for me and saying, "Hey, is this done? How's things going?" It helps out a lot. ... [It] keeps me on my toes ... just like having a trainer, you know, you meet like, once a week, you know, you have someone [and]



they're like, "Hey, [I'm] here for you, whatever you need," but then at the same time, they're pushing you to keep moving forward.

These responses show that students desire more interaction with instructors and would like for them to show more interest in their academic journey. The interest could be in the form of a casual greeting or more constructive feedback on their assignments. Also, checking in on the students to find out how they are doing make a significant difference in helping the students stay on track to their academic pursuits. Similar to showing extra interest in the students' academic journey, other students expressed the need for recognition of academic achievement, another recommendation which will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Academic Recognition and Retention***

Three of the twelve students interviewed talked about the need to be recognized for academic achievements as a way to encourage and retain enrolled students. They felt that any acknowledgment and signs of care from the campus would play a significant role in encouraging the students to stay enrolled and strive for better academic achievement. Rex felt that celebrating students' achievement of different milestones, however small, would bring about a sense of pride within the campus community which would cause students to want to succeed academically:

[D]efinitely celebrate each milestone that the students achieved, even if it was something, you know, seemingly miniscule. [For example] such and such got a scholarship [or] Dean's List. [M]aking like a big deal about it, like a huge deal, like, posters up all over campus with a picture and pins, and just ceremonies and rituals, and rites and all of that kind of stuff to really get people to buy in.

Easton, talked about how being recognized for his academic achievements increased his confidence, and made him feel like his efforts did not go unnoticed. He felt appreciated and seen,

a factor that would potentially help him continue pursuing his academic goals and striving for more success:

[T]hings that have boosted my confidence [is receiving] from the college ... at the end of the semester, end of the year, [an] email [stating] “Because of your GPA, you have made the Dean's list for this semester.” [T]hat is always a confidence boost [because] my work is not going unnoticed.

Daniel further discussed ways in which he thinks students can be encouraged to stay in school. He felt that it was just as important to keep students enrolled as it is to get them to enroll. He talked about the importance of the colleges creating a caring community so that students can want to stay in enrolled, and for them to be supported to succeed while enrolled. He said,

[I would] deal with the staff first because ... they're the gatekeepers, once a person enrolls. Once [students] enroll, it's like they did their work, now it's going to be our job to maintain and keep them, and make sure that they succeed. [For example] I could have had you as a student last year, but let me check on you this year. I mean, I'm not saying like ongoing, but it's just making sure that the ‘we care’ factor is implemented all over the place, it makes a difference. [If you’re] having a bad day, but this campus is so inviting, you'll forget about that [because] the school, the campus, teachers, the environment, can bring you out of that.

Again, these responses highlight the theme of caring for the students by recognizing their achievements and implementing practices that will help them feel seen and valued. This extra touch, as talked about by the students, has the potential of not only keeping the students enrolled, but also keep them inspired to highly achieve in their academic pursuits. Part of the caring component that the student participants highlighted was providing more flexibility and

accommodations to the ways classes are offered and conducted, which will be discussed in more detail in the next segment.

### *More Course Flexibility and Accommodations*

Two of the twelve student participants talked about how some of the course offerings and policies were not conducive and acted as a barrier to their academic endeavors. Both felt that some policies regarding payment for classes and withdrawal from them were not well thought out and are a source of stress to students who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the students felt that the times when courses are offered are not friendly to students who are working full-time and hoped for more flexibility with the times classes meet.

Oliver, when asked about recommendations for improving the academic success of African American males at his college, had this to say about the withdrawal policy: “I’ll probably make the ‘W’ [a] more accommodative withdrawal penalty [because it’s] inconvenient ... [I]t takes a bit more than a week to learn if you’re going to be comfortable with your professor or the class.”

Similarly, when Jacob was asked the same question, he talked about a negative experience he had that almost caused him to leave school:

I know that admission, sometimes if you do not pay for your fees, that they will drop you from classes. And I think that’s one thing that I would probably take away just because, again, as a working student, and as a student who has to pay for units, or doesn’t have to pay for units, but within that process of having to pay, one unit can be very sensitive, but then also, if I’m a student who needs to pay rent, or bills at the time, like I’m going to, I’m going to weigh my factors and probably just pay my rent and bills rather than go to class ... So I think that’s something that I would change ... the effect of how a bill can affect

what classes you're in ... I would rather just make it that if you don't pay your bill by the time like you need to transfer out, they won't submit your transcript, which I think some schools do ... [I] kind of struggle [in] between the semesters, so throwing that on me at the time was one of the most stressful things. I told myself that I was so close to dropping out, like, for this semester, I'm just like, no, like, I'll just try it again next time. And then after talking with my counselor, I was able to be like, okay, like, I need somebody to kind of reassure me a little bit that I don't need to completely drop everything.

He further talked about the challenges of finding classes that worked with his work schedule and recommended for more options for when classes are offered. He said,

One thing that I think the college can do is offer more late classes. Again, I work with a lot of kids. And so, most of the time I'm working from like, early morning, all the way to like six o'clock at night. So, trying to make a college class in between that can be very difficult. And they don't offer all the classes that could be offered in the morning at nighttime. So ...you have to wait either until a class becomes open online, [or find] one [that] fits [your] schedule exactly, which most of the time is very hard. Or ... [by] some magic chance they have that class at night ... one major thing is being able to offer classes at night and more classes that students actually need to complete ... [and] transfer out.

Removing barriers was the theme that emerged from these student responses. The students clearly wanted to be in school and had a desire to succeed but felt that they were encountering obstacles due to some of the policies and ways things were done at their colleges. Their recommendations were infused with ideas of removing some of the barriers they faced as

students. Mental health challenges were another barrier a student talked about, support for which was another recommendation made that will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Mental Health and Basic Life Skills Support***

Three of the twelve participants had recommendations regarding support for students in the areas of mental health and preparation for other life experiences such as career. These students felt that students from minority backgrounds do not typically talk about issues related to their struggles with mental health and also do not have the skills to communicate effectively especially with individuals in authority. The support for helping these kinds of students should not just be focused on their academics, but the “all around success of the individual” as Damien phrased it.

Damien further highlighted the fact that students attending community colleges may have never had a job before, and the colleges should take the opportunity to help these students grow “all around” by giving them jobs on campus in which they can learn the necessary skills to be successful after college. When asked what he would do to help African American males succeed if he was in charge of his college, he stated,

I will try to make it easier for them, make their life easier. I will try to provide them the opportunity on the school campus ... like I will try to give them a job. You know, cleaning this or cleaning that. I think it's called work study, but I think [it] falls under financial aid. But as opposed to just financial aid, I ... would use this as a whole you know, or deal with a student to help the student out ... [A] lot of students who are coming into college are young, they may not have been exposed to a job. They may not know how to work, so we can bring them into the environment and begin to teach [them about] work... [T]each them how to communicate ... [W]hen they have an issue with someone

else, how to interact with other people, other students, ... how to respect authority, you know, communicate with authority, and then have an opportunity. So you're basically in an environment where you're growing, and learning, and moving forward. So put someone in that kind of environment. I mean, it's just all around success for the individual.

Similarly, Brayden recommended that the community colleges should provide sufficient training for students to get into the workforce without needing to first get a four-year degree. He felt like the community colleges put a lot of focus on transferring to a four-year college with not much emphasis on starting a career after community college. Connecting students to companies after they complete their Associate's degree should be just as emphasized as transferring. He said,

[Providing] integration with bigger companies ... I think an Associate's degree should be a good ending goal for a lot of people ... I don't think everyone should be forced to transfer to a different college. [With] an Associate's degree [you should] have the proper foundation to either continue your education or [start working]. [Colleges can] have companies come [to the college] and do interviews and stuff like that. So [providing] more access to companies.

Damien also recommended for the colleges to implement ways of supporting male students from racial minority backgrounds with mental health issues. He felt that students like him typically do not like to talk about their mental health problems or just do not know how to communicate about them. He believed that mental health challenges were significant in preventing students from similar backgrounds as him from attaining their educational goals. He spoke about the predicament when he said,

The ability to come forward and be honest, that you struggle with the mental health issue. That's probably the number one and biggest thing, because I know for a fact, all my friends, pretty much ... they generally do not like to speak about it. So to go to school, work and to be struggling inwardly, and because of their background could be struggling with something, you know, terribly, terribly overwhelming, and they'll never speak. And so I've learned as I've gotten older, that the more you try to hold on to things and keep things, you know, to yourself, or in order to keep it inside, it only gets worse as you get older, it only gets worse ... [R]unning from a problem doesn't fix itself, you know, at some point, you're going to have to fix it ... I see in a lot of students, they are unable to deal with this, they don't have the ability to, to communicate and just be honest and just admit [to] themselves and understand it's okay to ask for help.

These student recommendations continue to highlight the need for a holistic approach when supporting African American male students. Although most colleges provide mental health services, most of the resources focus other student support services such as financial aid and academic support services, students have not taken advantage of the resources because of a lack of awareness. The next section highlights some of the suggestions that the student interviewees had regarding improving the awareness of resources available to students.

### ***Incentivize Resource Knowledge***

Although the participants had an overall sense of services offered by their college, some of them as highlighted in some of the previous sections, did not take advantage of the supports afforded to them. Some for example even acknowledged that they should have talked to someone to find out what classes they needed to take but did not. This is common among most community

college students whereby they are aware there is help, but do not really know how to access it. This reveals a gap between the services available for students and the actual use of the services. Easton had a recommendation on how to bridge this gap based on an experience in his freshman year. He suggested incentivizing the process of learning about the support services on the college campus. He proposed that colleges with promise programs could make it mandatory for students who would like to be considered for the programs to complete a tour of the college where they can visit different offices and learn about the various services provided on their campus or even join a group on campus to help with their integration into the institution. He said,

[The college made you] do a certain checklist of things ... to really receive your full promise program. So the first semester of college, we had to speak to a counselor to set up an educational plan, speak with I think a Career Counselor as well to see what potential options you would like, and speak to like a Transfer Counselor ... it [was] like a scavenger hunt type of scenario, where you're getting you know, valuable information each step of the way.

He also suggested using incentives to get African American male students to participate in college groups which may help with their overall identity. He said,

I would [also] include ... in some way, shape or form, whether it's through the Promise program, to make these guys participate in a school group for at least a semester. I think that'll really help a lot of them find their identity.

Easton's suggestion may not be feasible considering that it may not be approved by the policies in place with regard to Promise programs. However, the heart of the suggestion is that most students need to be encouraged to seek out the help that is available to them. Just because the colleges are providing services, does not mean that the students will seek out and use those



services. Easton's recommendation highlights the need for some kind of incentive needing to be in place that will give the students an extra push to seek out the resources they may ignore to use.

The participants' recommendations highlight the importance of viewing African American male students as whole individuals when implementing supports for their academic success. The participants also made clear that merely providing supports did not necessarily mean that those supports would be accessed, and it was important to take a more proactive approach to ensure students access those resources. Most importantly, the recommendations had an underlying tone of care for the students which in most cases would be perceived by positive relationships with faculty and staff at their respective colleges.

### **Summary**

Overall, the findings from this study provide valuable insight into the educational experiences and suggestions of African American male students attending one California community college. Some experiences—such as the challenges based on their identity as African American males—were shared by all the participants. Others—such as the need for more flexible course offerings—were mentioned by only a couple students. It is possible that the findings based on the sample of twelve students who were willing to participate in the study may have been different from students who did not participate. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings in depth, consider limitations of the study, and provide suggestions for future research and recommendations for improving supports for students.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the college experience of African American male students attending one California community college. This chapter begins with a brief summary of the findings related to each research question. Second, it discusses connections between these findings and prior research literature, noting areas of agreement and highlighting new insights. Third, it addresses the limitations of the study, discussing factors that may have impacted the confidence and generalizability of the findings. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for practice (for community college and K-12 administrators, faculty, and staff) and for future research.

#### **Summary of Findings**

This qualitative study sought to answer three research questions. The first question investigated how African American males attending one California community college describe their educational experience. The responses collected relating to this first question included both positive and challenging aspects of the students' experience. The positive factors they identified included supports received financially and academically through some of the specialized programs, encouraging and helpful interactions with faculty and college infrastructure that supported learning. The challenging aspects that emerged were mainly related to the students' racial background, and included feelings of loneliness, disadvantage, anxiety and discrimination. The second research question concerned the factors that the African American male students attending one California community college found significant to their academic success. The students identified positive relationships with faculty as essential to helping them succeed academically but saw their racial identity as a hindrance to it. Additionally, they attributed their

academic success more to intrinsic motivation factors than extrinsic. The final research question of the study focused on what African American male students attending one California community college recommended as areas of improvement for their community college system. The majority of the recommendations favored a holistic approach to the support structure for the students. Students appreciated the supports that were currently in place but felt that there was a lack of the “all around” care of the student which included their personality, career and mental health development. The following section will discuss how the findings from the study relate to previous research done around the similar topics.

### **Discussion**

Chapter Two of this research study presented research showing that African Americans attend community colleges at higher rates than Asian and White students nationwide (Chenoweth, 1998; Nettles, 1998). This is especially true in California (Bush, 2004), where the community college system is the largest higher education system in the country (CCCCO, 2019). Additionally, the research showed that African American males enrolled in California community colleges in larger numbers compared to their female, and White male and Asian male counterparts (Bush, 2004). Despite this high enrollment of the African American males who view the California community college system as a conduit to a more successful life (Foster, 2008), the research shows that they have the lowest academic outcomes than any other major ethnic group in the system (Bush, 2004). Furthermore, Chapter Two discussed research that explored the relationship between academic self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes, institutional integration and the academic achievement of this subgroup attending higher education institutions (e.g., Reid, 2007). This section will identify how the findings from the study relate to the prior research.

## **Connection to the Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework used to guide this study adopted elements from Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Outcomes (IEO) model and Reid's (2007) collegiate achievement model and can be summarized in Figure 5 within the Conceptual Framework section in Chapter Two. The IEO model, posits that students' prior college experiences "inputs," should be considered since they play a significant role in the ways students integrate into their educational environment. The model identifies the "inputs" as background or defining factors such as age, citizenship status, generation status and (dis)ability. Societal factors also fall under the "inputs" and include stereotypes, prejudice, and economic conditions.

All the interview participants talked about factors that the model would categorize as "inputs" when discussing their educational experiences. The majority of these factors had a negative impact on their college experience. Jaxon talked about needing to support himself because of his age and socioeconomic background. He argued that his instructors should not hold him to the same standard as teenagers who are being supported by their parents and have more time to complete assignments. Jacob reported not having adequate information about the college system prior to enrolling. He had to figure out how to navigate through college on his own, a commonality amongst first-generational students. Charles and three other participants talked about dealing with racial prejudice as children, and its effects on the rest of their lives.

Four participants also highlighted some positive impacts of the "inputs" such as how being an immigrant, first-generation immigrant and student motivated them to do well in school. Daniel shared how his grandmother immigrated to the United States to provide a better life for her family. He therefore feels that he ought to make every opportunity of what he has to honor the sacrifices she made. His motivation to succeed in college is strongly rooted in his identity as

a first-generation immigrant. Oliver also talked about how being an immigrant with a background in a different educational system provided him with tools that have helped him academically succeed. Although some research, such as the study conducted by Donovan (1984), showed that college student persistence is influenced more by experiences in college rather than factors before college, the responses highlighted thus far from the participants of this study show that factors before college do play a significant role in the way the students experience their educational environment which eventually impacts their educational outcomes.

The framework then makes connections between factors within the educational environment and the academic achievement of the students. Previous studies explored how the integration moderators (academic self-efficacy and racial identity attitudes) influenced each other and the overall institution integration of the students within the educational environment (Reid, 2007). In the next sections I will discuss how the findings of this research study relate to previous research about how the factors within the educational environment interact with each other to influence the integration of the students within their institutions.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Pajares (2002) argued that students' self-efficacy can be fostered through the vicarious experiences of others with whom they share similar backgrounds, especially if they doubt their abilities or have limited experience with a task or situation. Those beliefs would increase if a role model with similar traits is successful. According to the responses from this research study, two of the twelve participants reported that having faculty from the same racial background they could look up to positively influenced their confidence towards achieving their academic goals. Parker talked about how the success of his peers who pursued master's degrees was a significant influence in encouraging him to succeed academically. Their educational success made his own

success appear attainable. Easton also talked about one of his professors who immigrated from Jamaica and had to deal with different challenges but eventually became a professor. Her example gave him the confidence to continue and succeed on his own academic journey. He felt that if she could succeed under such hard circumstances, he too would be able to overcome his obstacles and be academically successful.

Vogt (2008) also noted that faculty-student interactions in an advisement relationship or by simply being available to students had a positive impact on their self-efficacy. Similarly, Komarraju et al. (2010) discovered that off campus faculty-student interactions made faculty seem more approachable and perceived by students as being respectful towards them, another factor that was attributed to the higher self-efficacy of students. Five of the twelve participants in this research study talked about the positive academic impact that having positive interactions with faculty in and outside of the education settings had on them. Carter mentioned that a couple of his professors wanted to stay in touch with him after he graduated and were willing to have him use them as reference for his future endeavors. Jacob also talked about how one of his professors would be in his class earlier than the scheduled time and have casual conversations with students. This practice led to Jacob finding a career path that he was passionate about and helped him feel more confident about his academic pursuits. Easton also talked about casual conversations he had with professors and how that helped him see that they were humans just like everyone else. This realization helped him easily connect with his professors which then helped him be more confident in his academic and career pursuits.

Furthermore, previous research conducted by Chemers et al. (2001) showed a positive relationship between students' self-efficacy and their academic performance. Additionally, an earlier study conducted by Scheier and Carver (1985) presented a positive correlation between

students' future academic expectations and their self-efficacy. Responses from six of the twelve participants of this research study highlighted how good academic performance positively influenced the students' confidence in continuing and succeeding in their education. Carter mentioned that he already had an Associate's degree and that initial achievement was tangible enough to give him the confidence to pursue another one. Similarly, Parker talked about facing some challenges during his educational experience. But when he checked and saw that he had 3.9 GPA, he was surprised and proud that his hard work had paid off. His excellent performance made him feel like nothing could stop him from achieving his academic goals. In addition to the six responses emphasizing the impact of good academic performance, all twelve participants stated that they were confident about meeting their academic goals. Five participants also had high future academic expectations such as pursuing graduate, medical and law school. Rex and Jacob are considering pursuing doctorates, Damien is considering medical school, and Jaxon is considering law school. The participants spoke with confidence about their future academic goals, which was telling of their high academic self-efficacy.

In addition to studies highlighting factors correlated to students' high self-efficacy, Wood et al. (2015) explored the influence of math and English self-efficacy on African American male community college students. Their study showed a positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement. It also showed that those students with higher math and English self-efficacy were more likely to use the library resources and had more positive interactions with faculty and their advisors. Three out of the twelve participants from this study talked about their challenges with math and English, and how those challenges affected their sense of academic confidence. Jaxon stated that he was getting "burned out" from his struggles with math and that his peers were having similar struggles with English. Rex said he was going to take Statistics for

the fourth time and felt that it was hindering his academic progress. Similarly, Charles said that he was spending more time seeking help for his math courses than he was in the actual classes. He felt like he was starting to lose hope about transferring to a four-year college, and his goal of going to Law school at some point seemed unattainable. He was successful in his other courses, but math seemed to be the barrier to his educational goals.

Mental health was also highlighted in previous studies as playing a role in self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997) and Pajares (2002), students who experience negative emotions such as anxiety, stress and fatigue when engaging in an academic assignment may judge their abilities as weak. If they experience those negative emotions when taking tests in specific courses, and subsequently perform poorly in them, they will have lesser self-efficacy when taking tests in those courses. This may lead to them expending less effort in those subjects, which leads to a downward spiral with less confidence and poor performance. Damien, one of the twelve research study participants, talked at length about his struggles with mental health and how those struggles clouded his sense of academic ability. He said that dealing with depression and ADHD made everything so much worse. He also talked about how his physical abuse as a teenager mentally affects the way he relates with others, adding challenges to his educational journey. He said he has encountered a good number of students who are dealing with the same mental health issues but are afraid or do not know how to communicate these challenges. He says that it affects them academically, but they do not usually seek help.

Okech and Harrington's (2002) study explored the correlation between self-efficacy and race, discovering that there was a positive relationship between the two. Their study of a group of 120 African American male college students attending Texas Southern University showed that those students with positive racial attitudes also had higher levels of self-efficacy. Four of the



twelve participants of this study mentioned having low self-confidence academically and attributing it to their racial identity. Charles talked about struggling in school and wondering whether it was due to his racial background. He wondered if he would have passed his classes faster and had a better educational experience if he was from a different race. Rex also stated that he believes that race colored everything in his life. He believed that some of his educational deficits were due to his racial identity. Also, Jaxon stated that his identity as an African American male meant he was going to be disadvantaged in most of the systems existing within this country. The next section will explore in more detail the comparisons with previous research and new discoveries related to the racial identity attitudes of African American males attending California community colleges.

### **Racial Identity Attitudes**

A study by Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) showed that prejudiced actions and stereotypes from society in general enforces an identity on African American males that makes their race and gender significant to them. This significance gives rise to appropriate behaviors based on the environment and situations in which the males find themselves. Phelan et al. (1998) discovered that minority students attending PWIs have succeeded educationally by learning how to conform to their new environment by “code switching,” a balancing of actions when dealing with multiple social spaces. Additionally, Reid (2007) argued that personal and group identity of African American males influence their ability to internally function as they move across home and college boundaries.

In spite of the fact that JC is one of the top five community colleges in California with respect to the number of African American students, all twelve study participants talked about challenges related to their educational experience due to racial related factors such as loneliness,

anxiety, prejudice and feeling disadvantaged. Brayden talked about how he was discouraged by the way minorities were treated differently because of the color of their skin. He also talked about how aware he was of being the only African American male in most of his classes and on his college campus. Similarly, Charles stated that he felt like a “unicorn” being one of the very few African American males on his campus. He said that he felt like a “visitor” or “alien” on his college campus which made him feel uncomfortable since there were lots of other students but none of them looked like him. Parker talked about how self-conscious he was about his physical appearance, being a very tall Black male with locked hair, which he perceived as making him appear intimidating. To prevent any perception of physical intimidation, he tries his best to be as friendly as possible so that people do not look at him the “wrong way.” Damien similarly addressed how his muscular build as a Black male makes him perceive people as thinking he is aggressive and yet he is far from that, and yet he cannot avoid that perception. Jacob mentioned that being a Black male makes him feel anxious whenever he sees police officers on campus. His race and gender identity caused him the anxiety and he felt that other students did not have to deal with what he deals with. Easton talked about how he “code switches” sometimes by talking differently when he is around students from different backgrounds. He does it unintentionally and then wonders why he was acting that way.

Based on Steele’s (1999) study, I expected that students who experienced stereotype threat would be negatively impacted in their pursuits of academic success. In contrast, the responses from ten of the twelve participants of this study suggested that when the African American male student encountered a form of stereotype threat, instead of letting it negatively affect them academically, they chose to focus on the motivating factor in their lives to keep them in college and to excel academically. The factors that positively influenced them despite the

threats were more intrinsic than extrinsic. Damien and Jacob were inspired to prove people wrong who thought that they could not academically succeed. Damien remembers being made fun of, called stupid and told that he would not succeed in life. He said that whenever he encounters anyone else who insinuates that message, it gives him the motivation to not quit and keep moving forward to disprove those naysayers. Similarly, Jacob remembers the times he experienced microaggressions such as being advised to choose an easier major if he wanted to be successful. He also said that disproving those individuals was key to his motivation towards academic success. Other factors such as the desire to make a positive societal change, be positive role models for other young African American males and hope of a brighter future, played a significant role in preventing the stereotype threat from negatively influencing the students from being academically successful. For Charles, who failed his math course several times, the possibility of being an Attorney and influencing the judicial system is a stronger driving force than any threat he could encounter. He has his eyes set on making changes in his city council, courts, and congress. On the other hand, Parker who felt he was in a dead-end career, saw his education as an opportunity to change the course of his life, leading him to a more fulfilling career and future. He also acknowledged that there were several stereotypes about his demographic but he “could care less” about what people think.

Also, not all the previous research affirms a positive relationship between racial identity attitudes and the academic achievement of African American college male students. In Campbell and Fleming’s (2000) study of 141 African American male students, there was no connection between GPA and racial identity. The responses from two of the participants from this study are consistent with this finding. Daniel, the participant with the lowest GPA, had one of strongest responses reflecting a very positive racial identity attitude. He mentioned that people may think

he did not do good academically because of his race. He challenged that thinking and stated he may have not done well that time but that could change. He also shared how when he encounters negative law enforcement, he is respectful and complies with all the requests, showing them that he is not who they think he is. He says that he does not allow the negative perceptions hold him down but believes that African American males are rising, and it is their time regardless of what others think about them. Brayden, the other participant with the second lowest GPA, also had responses consistent with a positive racial identity attitude. When asked how he thinks race impacts his academic journey, he said he did not give it much weight. He tries not to focus on his race and sees himself as Brayden. He said he was not bothered by the negative societal perceptions about African American males.

### **Institutional Integration**

In their studies, Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) discovered that if a student feels socially isolated or incongruent, they are less likely to persist in college. Tinto (1993) described the incongruence as the mismatch that students may feel between themselves and the social and intellectual environment of their college. He noted that most minority students experience incongruence which eventually negatively impacts their academic performance. Four out of the twelve participants of this study talked about feeling isolated on their campuses and how it made them feel uncomfortable. Brayden mentioned that not seeing people on his campus that look like him makes him feel awkward and to some degree like he does not belong on his campus. Charles shared similar sentiments when he said that he feels like a unicorn, alien and visitor on his college campus because he is one of the few African American male students. Jaxon also stated that he feels alone on his campus, being one of only three African American male students he

sees on his campus. He feels that it is a very negative aspect of his institution, especially since he considers his college to be a large one.

Daniels et al. (2019) also discovered that even though colleges provide different supports such as tutoring, first year experience programs and financial help, there is a small number of students who take advantage of the help while others feel overwhelmed by the numerous resources which causes them to self-advise. Reid (2007) concluded that actual institutional support is different from the perceived support that students attribute as a measure of institutional fit used in other research studies. According to responses from seven out of the twelve participants of this study, there is evidence of the students not taking advantage of the resources available to them. Charles mentioned that when he first enrolled in college, he did not seek out help from the counselors and as a result took about 30 credits of courses he did not need. This delayed his transfer process, since those credits were not transferrable to a four-year university. Daniel also talked about how he was taking classes that were not related to his major until he started meeting with a counselor. He also stated that there were resources he recently learned about due to the pandemic but had always been available. He said that that awareness had led him to start being more intentional about discovering the resources that are available to him. He wished that his college had made more of an effort to showcase the various resources to the students. Luis, when asked about receiving tutoring support stated that he did not know how to access it and acknowledged that there were a lot of other resources on his campus and he had not taken the time to learn about them.

Another study by Hall and Rowan (2001) concluded that prejudice was a major barrier to the college academic success of African American males, and that postsecondary institutions should implement elements of diversity to support the success of these students. All twelve

participants of this study stated that their educational experience was different from students from other racial backgrounds. They felt that their race negatively influenced their academic journey for various reasons addressed in the previous section and chapter. Daniel, one of the participants of this study, talked about an experience he had with one of his professors who he believed was racist. He mentioned that he addressed the issue with the administration at his college but nothing was done. He said he was very discouraged about the whole situation and that it caused him to stop attending college that semester. Also, four of the twelve participants of this study made statements acknowledging the importance and help they had received from services that were geared towards students from African American and other minority group backgrounds. Carter said that his college was doing a great job supporting students like him. He further said that the book vouchers, and emergency monies programs like EOPS and Umoja provided, were significant in helping him continue with his academic journey. Also, when talking about the Umoja program, Jaxon stated that he felt so much better about his college when he found out that there was an office specifically dedicated to African American students. He also said that he was not part of any other groups or programs on his campus except the Umoja program. Parker also stated that he was only involved in the Black Lives Matter Club on his campus which was run by his professor who was African American.

Brittian et al. (2009) discovered in their research that African American students engage more academically if there are faculty and staff on campus who look like them. They also found that colleges which used mentorship to improve diversity, promote academic resources and address student differences, had higher retention rates of these students since it provided a more supportive environment on their campuses. Moore and Toliver (2010) also discovered that African American students desired professor mentors who were equally interested in their

academic and personal future. According to the responses of six of the twelve participants in this study, the personal connection and interest from faculty and staff, especially when they were from a similar racial background, played a significant role in helping the students stay academically engaged on their college campus. Damien recalled that the only person that he would talk to whenever he was going through personal hardships on his college campus was an African American lady who worked as an assistant to one of the Vice Presidents. He said that she would hear what he was going through and usually find the right resources he would need. Parker, earlier noted, said that his African American professor's intentionality in connecting with students, encouraged him to join the Black Lives Matter Club, something he did not initially plan on doing. Easton talked about one of his professors whose personal story greatly inspired him. His professor was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, and immigrated to the United States by herself. She worked hard and was able to make significant strides in her professional career. Easton mentioned that her example made him feel that he too can go on and become great in whatever endeavor he decides to pursue.

Booker (2007) also discovered that relational learning styles that focused on a personal approach to instruction were also identified by African American students as being essential for creating a safe and comfortable educational environment. According to the study, students found it important to interact with faculty because it helps them feel heard, accepted and valued as part of the learning community. Conversely, when students have negative interactions with faculty, staff and other members of the campus community, their academic experience is undermined which could lead to low academic performance. Additionally, Steele (2003) discovered that African American students who receive feedback with high expectations and are praised for their abilities by their instructors, were more motivated to be academically successful. Five out of the

twelve participants of this study talked about instructors they had who were extremely good at connecting with the students academically. They made an effort to show up earlier for the class or stay later so they could talk to their students. Charles recalled one of his professors who created a nurturing educational environment. Charles always felt encouraged whenever he talked to her about his education. He said she made him feel like a genius and expressed a sadness about him completing her class. Corey also talked about professors who encouraged him by providing positive feedback, especially when it came to his writing. He said they were dedicated to seeing him become a better writer and making him push himself academically. Daniel also talked about one of his professors who was every engaging during his class. The professor's approach made Daniel look forward to the class meetings, and he said he did not just attend for the sake of it, but actually wanted to be in the class.

Mallinckrodt (1988) and Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek (1987) found in their research that social integration played a vital role in the retention of African American students, and those students who perceived stronger social support or participated in social activities were more likely to persist than those who did not. Also, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) argued that campus involvement through college-sponsored activities allows students to develop a strong peer connection. Additionally, Pascarella (1985) showed that campus involvement was substantially more important to the completion rate of African American male students than academic involvement. Contrary to the reviewed research, eight out of the twelve participants of this study stated that they did not participate or seek out opportunities to engage in the campus activities. Their interactions with other students were mainly in class, and even when there was an opportunity to socialize after class, there was no interest or other obligations such as work, or family took priority. The students were more interested in focusing on their academic pursuits



than socializing. The pandemic was another factor the students attributed to not really being able to socialize as much since majority of their classes were online.

Although most of the previous research conducted on self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration of African American male students was at four-year colleges, the findings, as discussed thus far in this chapter, show a consistency with the demographic of students attending two-year colleges. Also, the review of studies on social integration conducted at four-year colleges showed that students, including African American males, thrived when they were socially connected to their peers. However, this study, as shown from the responses of the participants, provides a different perspective on the necessity of social integration at the community college level. Although the students appreciated positive interactions with other students, they did not see it as a vital part to attaining their academic goals. They appreciated seeing other students on their campuses who looked like them, but actually interacting with them or getting involved in campus activities was not prioritized. This discrepancy could further be explored in similar future studies on community college students. It may also be attributed to limitations of this study which will be discussed in the next section.

In summary, I found that the self-efficacy and institutional integration of the African American male participants was positively influenced if they had a good relationship with faculty, and more so if the faculty were from the same racial background. Secondly, their academic performance also influenced their level of self-efficacy, math and English performance playing a key role. Thirdly, racial identity attitudes influenced their self-efficacy and institutional integration. Fourth, social interactions with peers did not play a significant role in the institutional integration for the students. The positive influence of faculty on African American male students, especially those from the same racial background, was not surprising and is

consistent with prior research (e.g., Brittian et al., 2009; Pajares, 2002; Komarraju et al., 2010). The role previous academic performance played on self-efficacy was also not surprising since it agreed with earlier research (e.g., Chemers et al., 2001; Wood et al., 2015). The challenges associated with racial identity attitudes were consistent with the prior research (e.g., Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992; Phelan et al., 1998; Reid, 2007), however there was an additional nuance in which some of the students used the negative racial identity perceptions from others as motivation to academically succeed. I was surprised that social interactions with peers were not viewed as significant to the student participants' institutional integration considering that the prior research highlighted it as a factor (e.g., Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

### **Limitations**

Given that this study provided significant information on how self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration influenced the educational experience of African American males attending one California community college, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The sample of participants in this study was small, comprised of twelve African American male students recruited from one community college in southern California (though some mentioned that they had attended other community colleges within the state).

My initial plan had been to survey at least a hundred students African American or Black male students attending five community colleges in the Los Angeles area. Of these students surveyed, twenty would have been selected to participate in a follow-up interview to explore in more depth significant themes that would have been identified from the survey responses. Although I was successful in getting the approval to conduct the study at the five community colleges, the initial recruitment of survey participants yielded only fourteen respondents. Part of

the challenge in the recruitment process was not having access to the contact information of the demographic I was targeting and relying on contacts at the colleges to reach out to the sample population. As a result of the limited response, the study's design shifted from mixed methods to a qualitative approach. Fortunately, one of the colleges provided me access to the contact information of the demographic I was targeting, and I was able to recruit twelve participants for interviews. Due to the limited number of participants, possibly due to the departure of students of color from the CCC during the pandemic (Kelliher, 2022), and the fact that participants were recruited from a single site, the findings from the study may not be representative of other African American males attending community colleges in Southern California, or in California at large. In addition to the small sample size influenced by the factors mentioned, the time period in which the study was conducted played a significant role. Considering that the study was done during a pandemic which quickly changed the lives of most individuals, most of the participants' responses were colored by the impact of the pandemic on their educational experience. I might have received different responses had I conducted the study during a period that was not influenced by a global pandemic. Thus, this study may not be reflective of experiences of African American males attending California community college during a pandemic-free world.

Accuracy of participants' responses was another concern of the study. Considering that the interviews were conducted online via Zoom, there were a few issues with technology. In a few instances, some of the participants did not have a clear internet connection which made it hard to hear their responses. The challenge of clearly understanding the responses prevented me from asking a pertinent follow-up question which could have revealed more valuable information. Instead in those cases, I moved on to the next question in the interview protocol instead of asking the participant to repeat their response. Thankfully, the responses were being

recorded. I was able to review them later but was not able at that time to gather additional information. Additionally, given the nature of interviews in general, the participants could only respond based on their recollection of an experience at the time of the interview. Also, the accuracy and salience of what they recall may be an additional limitation. The recalled information may or may not include all the facts that occurred during an experience that was being shared. In regard to salience, what may have been important to the participants at the time of an event, may not necessarily be considered important later on, at the time of the interview. Also, there is a likelihood as the interviewer, I may have influenced the way the participants responded. They may have chosen to share more or less with me, but my overall sense is that they were more willing to share and provided very candid responses. Due to these human components, the information gathered could somewhat be skewed.

Despite the study's limitations, it provides a platform for future studies to understand the factors significant to influencing the educational experience of African American males attending California community colleges. This study may be useful to educational practitioners, educational leaders, policy makers and African American male students and their families as they navigate through the obstacles relevant to the student demographic attending the California community college system.

### **Recommendations**

The findings from this study are consistent with prior research highlighting factors such as relationships with faculty, racial identity attitudes and previous academic performance, which were identified as significant to the educational experience of African American males attending postsecondary institutions. Additionally, I believe the findings of this study provide a basis for a different approach in the way this student demographic is supported at the community college

level versus the four-year colleges. Like any other research study, this one unveiled a number of important recommendations for educational partitioners, leaders, policy makers and other stakeholders involved in the educational journey of African American males within the California community college system. The following sections will discuss recommendations based on significant themes that emerged from the study. These suggestions include establishing programs which specifically support African American male students, providing more accountability for African American male students, rewarding students who seek out student services and increasing financial aid for full-time students.

### **Colleges Should Establish or Strengthen Programs with a Specific Focus on Support of African American Students**

It was evident from the responses made by the African American male students participating in this study that their educational experience was negatively impacted by factors they attributed to their racial background. They perceived their experiences to be more challenging than those had by students from other races. It was therefore significant to them when they identified supports that were geared specifically to students like them. The Umoja program highlighted by a few of the participants in the study was recognized due to the supports it directed towards the African American students. In educational environments where African American males feel like “visitors,” “aliens” or “unicorns,” it is important to help them feel seen and supported. It would therefore be essential for Student Services divisions at the respective community colleges to have supports that are geared specifically to the African American student population.

The support program could take on the form of a college department or organization and should be overtly advertised to the college community so that all students are made aware that

there is a place for African American students to be supported. This explicit form of publicizing about the African American supports would be a clear way for students who identify with that racial background to be seen and feel welcomed in the educational spaces on their college campuses. The program would provide supports including but not limited to financial, social, tutoring and mentorship depending on the student's needs. The supports could even be a referral to another office or department on campus, however the students would first be connected to this African American support program as their primary one if they choose. The program would therefore function as a hub from which African American students would connect with other offices or programs on campus.

Career and life preparation as well as mentorship were specific areas, recommended by some participants, that the support program can focus on in helping the African American student population on campus. The program would have some student worker positions that would allow the students to stay on campus while acquiring job skills. Additionally, the students would be assisted in finding jobs through the Career Centers or directly with organizations or companies that would be identified as viable options for recruiting community college graduates or interns. Additionally, the support program would prepare the students for the real world by teaching skills, also recommended by the participants, such as communication, conflict resolution, time management, financial literacy and how to interact with different authorities. This would allow the students to develop holistically while in college so that by the time they are ready to move on, they are prepared to deal with the regular challenges in a proper way.

Furthermore, to address the mentorship component which the students felt was important for African American males, the program would recruit male faculty and staff to serve as mentors for the male students in it. The faculty and staff would be trained in specific areas that

are pertinent to the needs of African American male students. Also, in an effort to build the mentorship aspect and provide the students with people they can view as role models, the colleges should employ more African American faculty and staff who have experience in working with African American students. Similarly, a peer mentorship program could be implemented in which third or second year African American male students can be paired with incoming first-time freshmen.

Additionally, with the intention of building a community on college campuses that African American males can engage in, learning communities and cohorts targeting this group of students should be created through the support program. The program could also partner with the Associate Student Government bodies on their campus to create events and activities that African American males can actively participate in or even organize.

Whether or not the students choose to connect with this support program on their campus, the mere presence of it on their college campus would speak volumes to them about their presence, directly or indirectly, positively impacting their educational experience.

### **Colleges Should Support African American Male Students Through Academic Accountability, Engagement, and Recognition.**

Other suggestions presented by the student participants of the study focused on creating ways to receive more academic accountability, accommodations, and recognition. There was a sense of needing faculty to be more proactive in seeking out the students and taking more interest in their educational journey in an effort to keep them enrolled and succeeding. As part of keeping them enrolled, there was also a desire to see more flexibility in the academic policies which some of them felt were too stringent and did not allow for accommodations due to unexpected life circumstances or students who had other life demands. Then, as a way to acknowledge the

accomplishments of the students, awards or recognition would be offered at the end of each semester.

Based on the suggestions of the students, it is evident that there is a need to provide faculty and staff with additional trainings on cultural responsiveness. Seminars or workshops covering information on cultural backgrounds of different ethnic groups and best practices of how to work with African American males in a college setting are essential. Also, topics on ways to hold at risk students accountable while also engaging with them in a positive way outside of the classroom. Additionally, organizing social events where African American male students and faculty can interact to get to know each other better. It would provide for the opportunity for the students to see the faculty as fellow humans and decrease any intimidation that may be present. The faculty would also have a chance to learn more about the students' backgrounds and challenges which may influence the kind of support faculty would extend to the students.

Additionally, learning how to academically engage African American male students, for example by pulling from their own experiences, as well as other well-known African American males during class discussions would help them feel like they do add to the educational community. Also including literature in their required class readings which they can relate to may be a way for them to see themselves influencing the culture and hence take more of an interest in their academics.

Finally, to recognize academic achievements it would be encouraging if students who made a significant improvement or who attained a specific GPA were recognized each semester or even halfway through the semester. This would serve as a confidence booster for those students who may be considering quitting or not taking their education seriously. If the faculty



could be involved in the recognition process, it may allow for more positive relationships to be cultivated between the faculty and students.

### **Colleges Should Use Incentives to Increase the Utilization of their Services**

Considering that there is an unawareness of the different resources, ranging from financial to academic supports, available to for the students, it is essential for the colleges to do a better job in making their services known. Although colleges have made an effort in highlighting the different resources available to their students, there has been a lack of initiative on the students' part to take advantage of those resources. Student Services divisions should therefore take a more proactive approach by considering ways they can encourage their students to make use of the resources available to them. One possible way would be for the colleges to make sure that the students are aware of the different resources available to them and where to find them. The Student Services divisions, in collaboration with the Financial Aid offices or other sources with funding, should consider rewarding students who make an effort to reach out to the different services availed to them. The incentives would be for students who reach out to learn more about the resources or for those who actually use them. This recommendation is consistent with what some participants suggested as a way to improve the use of services available to students.

### **Colleges Should Further Study How to Financially Support Full-Time Students**

Although the California community colleges have provided significant financial support to students in general, majority of the student participants in this study shared about their need to work in order to cover additional expenses. The current level of financial assistance provided by the state is not sufficient to cover the additional expenses incurred by the students which is causing them to dedicate a large portion of their time working while attending school. Their work responsibilities interfered with their academics, which added additional challenges to

pursuing their educational goals. In an effort to alleviate this financial strain, policy makers should consider researching and implementing more effective financial support systems for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attending college full-time. Additionally, students may need to be discouraged from working extra hours if they are receiving additional financial assistance to cover their expenses. Financial Aid staff and counselors would need to encourage the students to focus on their education share more about the long-term benefits of completing their academic goals versus continuing to work extra and not giving their full attention to school. Since this appears to be a more complicated issue to address, more research may need to be done regarding how students can balance their academic work with meeting their basic needs.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While this study explored understanding how self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration influenced the educational experience of African American male students attending one California community college, it did not identify how these factors correlated to the academic achievement of the students. The initial objective of the study was to replicate Reid's (2007) study in the California community college system, which explored the correlation at predominantly White four-year research institutions. Unfortunately, since I was unable to replicate his study due to the low response rate from students, further research should be conducted to understand the correlation within the California community colleges.

Also, since the study was conducted during a pandemic which significantly influenced the educational experience of the students, it would be important to conduct a similar study during a time period where there is not much influence from the pandemic. Most of the participants did not necessarily feel the need to interact with other students since most of their

learning was done online and there were not many opportunities for them to connect with other students. Although the previous research showed the importance of social integration in the educational experience, my study showed otherwise, possibly due to its timing. Also, due to the culture of community colleges where most students go to the college campus specifically for business i.e., attending class or gathering specific information, there is no large emphasis on social interaction. Most students, as perceived by this study's participants, are not really interested in socializing with other students. Further research should therefore be conducted to explore the significance of social integration, under ordinary circumstances, on the academic achievement of African American males.

Additionally, the study provided helpful insight into how self-efficacy, racial identity attitudes and institutional integration play a role in the educational experience of African American males enrolled in community colleges in California. Future research could examine the extent to which the same factors affect African American females, and other student groups (e.g., Latinx, White or Asian students). Consequently, conducting comparative research not limited to African American males would provide additional insight into what factors are specifically significant to the educational experience of African American male students.

It was also enlightening to hear about how similar the educational experiences of Black male students who recently immigrated to the States were to those who were born and raised here. Also, three out of the twelve student participants who were born outside of the States and had recently immigrated identified as African American and had very similar racial identity attitudes to those students who were born in the States. They spoke about how some of their perspectives were influenced by being immigrants, however identified with the majority of views expressed by the African American males born in the States. The interview questions did not

delve too much into their immigrant experience and how it impacted their educational experience. Future research could explore more of the differences in educational experience between Black males born in the United States and those who immigrate after high school.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided invaluable insights concerning the educational experiences of African American males attending community colleges in California. By adding to the prior research which mainly focused on this student subgroup's experience at PWIs and other four-year postsecondary institutions, the study offered a voice to the unique experiences of this student demographic at the community college level. As was discussed earlier when defining the problem, the California community college system enrolls more African American males than any other postsecondary system, and yet these students have some of the lowest educational outcomes. This study has provided a better understanding of the factors that impact their educational experience, and this understanding should inform efforts to support these students.

Additionally, this study revealed that African American male students still feel very isolated and out of place even in a community college like JC, which has one of largest African American student populations in the state. This dispels any assumption that they should feel more comfortable within the California community college system since it enrolls most students from the same demographic. The study therefore highlights the importance of creating spaces in which students feel welcome and supported. The study further revealed how race plays a significant role in the way these students experience their educational journey. Specifically, many view their racial background as negatively influencing their academic experience. Although significant strides have been made to bring about equity within the California community college system, the study's findings from one California community college show

that race may need to be considered more within the system during the creation of new policies and review of existing ones.

Similarly, although the California community college system is the most affordable one in the nation, this study shows that African American male students still experience a sense of financial insecurity while attending college. The system has done an excellent job in providing access to higher education at a minimal or no cost, and yet the findings from this study show that the financial supports are not enough causing the students the need to work part or even full-time. Understanding how the current financial support structure is not working for all the students could provide insight to policy makers into necessary changes that may need to occur.

Finally, this study revealed that the African American male students attending one California community college have some perspectives into how their educational experience could be improved. I found that students desired to academically engage with faculty and staff and that they were also aware of the breadth of support resources available but were not entirely sure how to access them. The fact that students had desire to engage but lacked knowledge of how to do so puts the onus on the community colleges to reach out to the students for accountability and support. It is going to take several strategies to support African American male students. These strategies may need to be continually changed depending on the needs and challenges facing these students. However, the community college system owes it to them since most students view the system as a conduit to a better life.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Warm Up/Background Questions**

1. What college do you attend?
2. What year are you in school?
3. How many credits do you typically take each semester?
4. How many hours do you work per week?
5. How many dependents do you have if any?
6. What's your age range?
7. What is your academic major/program of study?
8. What are your academic goals?
9. What is your cumulative GPA as of last semester?
10. What was your final cumulative high school grade point average?
11. How many years of formal education did your mother obtain?
12. How many years of formal education did your father obtain?
13. What's your approximate yearly household (everyone living in your home) income (in U.S. dollars)?
14. Were you born in the United States? \_\_ Yes \_\_ No
15. Were one or both of your parents born outside of the United States?

#### **Experience at the Community College**

1. When you started what were some of your long term goals? What do you hope to get out of your time in college? (academic goals?)

*Probe: What is your top priority in college e.g. learning new skills, getting a certificate/degree, transferring to a 4-year college?*

2. How do you feel about the progress you're making towards your goals? Have your goals changed since you started? Do you feel you're on track to meeting those goals? Are you feeling confident in attaining your goal?

*Probes: What are internal things that increase your confidence? What are internal things that decrease your confidence? What are external things that increase your confidence? What are external things that decrease your confidence? What are some factors in your background that increase your confidence in achieving your goals? What are things you experience in your classes/with your college that boost or diminish your confidence? How do you think the college could be supporting you and the other students in meeting your goals? What are some of the other aspects of your college experience apart of remote instruction and pandemic*

3. What factors have influenced your progress towards those goals? What are things that have helped? What are some of the challenges?

*Probes: What contributes to that confidence? What challenges/undermines that confidence? How confident do you feel about your academic goals?*

4. How would you describe your experience at the community college?

5. What types of campus activities have you been a part of?

*Probe: What kind of clubs, events, projects, organizations, etc. have you been involved in on campus?*

6. How would you describe your experience with the faculty members?

*Probes: What are some ways faculty members have helped you in your college experience? What are some ways faculty members have made it difficult for you to succeed in college? Who are some individuals on your campus who have helped you succeed? How? Are there any individuals on your campus who have made it difficult for you to succeed? How?*

7. How would you describe your relationship with other students?

*Probe: What are some ways other students have helped you in your college experience? What are some ways other students have made it difficult for you to succeed in college?*

8. What role/influence if any do you think your identity as an AA male has had on your experience?

- a. Do you think your college experience is different from other racial groups? Probe: What factors in your interactions with faculty, staff and students do you think are influenced by your race?
- b. How do you think your race plays a role in your academic journey in higher education?
- c. Have you ever made a negative/positive connection between your academic abilities and on your identity as a Black male?

9. What does your identity as an African American male mean to you in general? How does that identity play out on your campus?

*Probes: What have been some of the more important influences on your identity? How has your identity changed over time (including your time during college)?*

10. How are you navigating being a student at the community college?

*Probes: In what ways do you think your college could have supported you more in navigating college? What kind of institutional supports did you find helpful? What resources such as financial aid, tutoring, mentoring, counseling etc. have helped you succeed in college? If you were in charge of the college you attend, what are some factors you would include to help students like you succeed? Factors you'd exclude that you believe prevent success for students like you?*

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