

EXPERIENCES AFFECTING AFRICAN-AMERICAN GAY MEN'S COLLEGE
PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

by

VIVIA ELAIR HILL-SILCOTT

(Under the Direction of Laura A. Dean)

ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of African-American gay men in U.S. institutions of higher education can vary. By understanding how they integrate academically and socially into the programs specific to their needs. This study explored the experiences affecting African-American gay men's college persistence and success. Tinto's (1993) model of individual departure from institutions of higher education provided the theoretical framework to understand the influences that contribute to the persistence and college success of African-American gay men. Eight students who attended the same institution and enrolled in their junior and senior year participated in this phenomenological study. Data collection occurred over a span of six-months. Data were then analyzed and clustered to reveal how participants made meaning and described their perceived experiences on campus.

Findings from this study affirmed that deliberate faculty and staff actions, and peer groups support, as well select co-curricular activities and the participants' ability to remain resilient and cope with adversities assist them to integrate, persist, and succeed in college.

Faculty, staff, and peers who affirm their gay identity helped participants to remain persistent. Participants mainly chose to become involved with co-curricular activities that promoted diversity and social justice advocacy. They also learned coping strategies to remain resilient and focused on their academic pursuit.

African-American gay men recount hostility within their on-campus experiences. These unfavorable environments if not addressed appropriately, over time contribute to isolation and eventually an increased in attrition of African-American men. This study extends research on African-American gay men enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education. The implications from this study can be used to further explore the quality interactions for racial and sexual minority students to improve campus climates and advance persistence and college success.

INDEX WORDS: African-American Gay Men, Peer Support, Faculty, Staff, Coping Strategy, Resilient, Isolation, Self-Efficacy, Persist, Success, Academic and Social Integration

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DEDICATION

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"You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains. You raise me up to walk on stormy seas. I am strong when I am on your shoulders. You raise me up to more than I can be."- Josh Groban

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Life on the margin is an all too familiar reality for Black students. More than other racially and culturally different students, Black youth face social and environmental problems that inhibit their achievement, motivation, and educational outcomes. Racism is alive and well in many schools and stereotypes about Black students, especially Black males, persist among teachers and school personnel.” (Ford, 2011, p. 10)

College enrolled African-American men have the highest attrition rate among student groups (Harper & Harris, 2012; Seidman, 2007). Besides the typical challenges associated with college adjustment, African-American men in general, specifically African-American gay men, often enter postsecondary school environments with inadequate college preparation, enormous financial burden because of having a lower socioeconomic status, and the lack of social and cultural capital necessary to navigate college (Strayhorn, 2012).

Research on the academic success of African-American gay college students is sparse; studies on the totality of on-campus experiences of African-American gay men are even more rare (Gresham, 2009). According to the 2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People, African-American students consistently recount hostility; pressure to conform to stereotypes; inadequate treatment from faculty, staff, and teaching assistants; and more acts racism by faculty (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Despite the effect of adverse views of African-American students experienced by African-

Americans at predominantly White institutions (PWI), many African-American gay men persist and successfully graduate from college. As perceptions are a powerful determinant of behavior (Ford, 2011), colleges and universities must explore and develop strategies to create positive environments and affirm gay identity to encourage African-American gay men's achievement.

There is a direct correlation between positive behaviors and increased academic success. According to Bonner and Bailey (2006), students who develop positive behaviors are more resilient and have higher self-esteem. Besides, African-American gay men who take part in campus activities and leadership development show gains in educational and personal outcomes and have fewer issues such as low self-esteem. Despite the positive ways African-American gay men integrate into their campus communities and improve their personal outcomes, the threat imposed by instability in institutional practices and a history of dehumanization may impose some risks to these gains.

The presence of this threat has propelled lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activists to combat hostile threats of homophobia and focus on the decriminalization and de-medicalization of homosexuality. According to Stone and Ward (2011), the gay rights movement advocated to repeal sodomy laws and remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Laws to advance equality and access shift intermittently as shown by the passage of California's Proposition 8 in 2008, which overturned the 2005 Senate bill to legalize same sex marriage. Equally and more recent (June, 2013), the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn said ruling (Toobin, 2013) is cause to consider the possibility of future threats and challenges to human rights advances.

Like marriage equality and other struggles of sexual minority people, history has proven that positive legal victories intended to promote the advancement of minority groups do not often

go unchallenged. There are many examples of attacks on human rights gains, including the passage of the Morrill Act of 1890, which created an avenue to provide financial help to African-American students for attending land grant institutions (Flowers & Shuford, 2011). Despite its passage, Jim Crow segregation practices were used to usurp the educational access the Morrill Act was passed to provide for African-Americans. The effects of the denial of African-Americans' right to valuable education are still felt today (Flowers & Shuford, 2011).

Although the civil rights movements of the 1960s may be a distant memory, unequal access to higher education continues to be a reality for many African-Americans (Seidman, 2007). National data suggests that college enrollment for African-Americans increased by 43% between 1993 and 2004 (American Council on Education, 2005; Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). Despite the incremental gains over the years, the proportion of African-American men to White men remains dismal (Harper & Harris, 2012). In addition, the completion gap between African-American men and the overall student population has widened. According to Harper and Harris (2012), only 33% of African-American men earn college degrees within six years of college enrollment, a rate of 17% below the overall student population. The lack of satisfactory resources to support African-American men perpetuates their under preparedness for college level work, thus lessening their degree attainment opportunity (Harper & Harris, 2012).

Equally significant, Harper and Harris (2012) argued that African-American men must be given high institutional priority to close the racial achievement and opportunity gap. Given the disproportion in the college enrollment and degree attainment numbers of African-American men (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007), issues of campus environment which negatively affect this population must be addressed directly (Harper & Harris, 2012; Patton, 2011). Although the college enrollment and degree attainment figures represent straight,

bisexual, transgender, and gay men, there is an absence of statistics to document matriculation and persistence specifically for African-American gay men (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Icard, 1986). Despite enrollment gains in racial and sexual diversity, African-American gay men remain susceptible to acts of oppression and injustice on college campuses (Dessel, Woodford, & Warren, 2011; Patton, 2011).

Faculty, counselors, student affairs professionals, and peers are positioned to engage African-American gay men in ways that can have a deep impact on their college experience. Safe-space classrooms, co-curricular programs (e.g., athletics, student government, fraternities), and residence hall programs provide a nurturing environment for students. Still African-American gay men often maneuver the workings of campus life in total isolation. Although there is evidence (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Harris & Wood, 2013; Tinto, 1993; Wood, 2012) to support that students who feel connected to college campuses are more likely to persist and graduate, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999) noted that a hostile environment negatively affects academic performance for ethnic minority students.

Indeed, institutional administrators who promote social justice advocacy for oppressed African-American gay men help to develop and keep resilient environments that promote well-being and growth of racial and sexual minority groups (Evans & Broido, 2005). As Ratts, Toporek, and Lewis (2010) postulated that social justice advocacy ensures that all individuals have opportunities to achieve their academic, career and personal, and societal potential in society. Advocacy takes social justice ideals and put them into action, for instance, Evans and Broido (2005) argued that institutional professionals who serve as advocates create affirmative climates. Further, supportive environments that promote academic success and a safe learning environment for African-American gay men (Evans & Broido, 2005; Szalacha, 2003; Robinson,

1998) are often encouraged by institutional personnel who serve as agents of change to recognize and affirm students' individuality (Szalacha, 2003).

Institutional staffs who are motivated to foster a safe environment for African-American gay men help to create social justice climates. hooks (1994) addressed how commitment to advocacy and the need to promote social justice values, habits, and care help to decrease marginalization. When African-American gay men integrate into campus cultures, activities around sexuality and racial identity increase (Espinosa-Hernández & Lefkowitz, 2009) and serve as an imperative to discuss the importance of social justice and the influence of colorblind assumptions. Colorblind caring, though well intended, could also have adverse effect in instances of advocacy and assimilation without regard for race (Gallagher, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Hasazi, 2006). While it is important to address the implication of the colorblind philosophy, which assumes that society give equal access to everyone (Howard-Hamilton, Cuyjet, & Cooper, 2011), issues of diversity and multiculturalism shaped largely by social constructs (Gerstl-Pepin & Hasazi, 2006) and power inequalities account for how marginalized groups are viewed (Howard-Hamilton, Cuyjet, & Cooper, 2011). Cawthon and Guthrie (2011) asserted that when marginalized groups are ignored, their marginalized status and holistic development, or lack thereof, becomes a central part of their identity. Because of the idea that heterosexuality is normal, natural, and preferable as a sexual orientation, issues related to prejudice, homophobia, stereotypes, and self-hate impede the college experience for some (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011).

There is an urgent need for institutions to find and address issues related to the enrollment and college completion rates of African-American gay men. Since there is limited research on the factors related to persistence and college graduation for African-American gay

men, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences that contribute to their persistence and college success.

Statement of Problem

Research on both African-American and sexual minority student populations provides evidence to support the existence of hostile campus environments that interfere with academic and social success (Harper, 2013; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Wickens & Sandlin, 2010). While faculty, peers, student affairs professionals, and counselors are sometimes positioned to promote successful transitions for African-American gay men, other environmental issues critical to academic success should not be overlooked. Family dynamics (e.g., role expectations for African-American men) and religion (e.g., the church, which is a source of support for African-American students, but also often holds anti-homosexual stances) are among the central parts of these students' identity, which they use to make decisions about their academic pursuits (Dancy, 2011; Miller, 2007; Pitt, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008). Fried (2011) wrote, "If we change the context, salience changes as well" (p. 72). In essence, a more positive campus experience for African-American gay men could potentially help reshape the group's overall higher education trajectory and yield results that are more favorable.

Flowers and Shuford (2011) also suggested, "The success of African-American gay men is a function of experiences within and outside the classroom, and [which] involves interaction with faculty, staff, students, institutional policies and academic services, and programs" (p. 159). A growing body of research explains the relationship students develop with faculty serves as a cause in their social integration (Tinto, 1993), retention, and success (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Bonner and Bailey (2006) further discussed

psychosocial and social development, noting, “when relationships form between this population of students and faculty, the connection extends beyond academic boundaries” (p. 30).

The dearth of research leads to assumptions about cultural issues and to yet another institutional challenge, which is to understand why African-American gay men are less willing to be “outed” than peers are, even those students who receive support (Washington & Wall, 2006). According to Washington and Wall’s (2006) article on the challenges of being African-American gay men in the academy, this population of students feels pressured to choose between their African-American identity and their gay identity. Another difficulty is that African-American gay men experience social prejudice and discrimination inherent in White society (Savin-Williams, 1996). Because of a lack of significant role model contact necessary to help navigate identity development and transition, sexual orientation is often suppressed. Another hurdle is that like many other college students, African-American gay men have different cultural experiences and must contend and handle heterosexual counterparts and the Black community (Negy & Eisenman, 2005) which makes it difficult to pinpoint and match student services with each individual’s identity development needs.

The absence of relevant information about support systems to improve retention rates and ensure successful college completion for African-American gay men serves as the rationale for this study. Because African-American men are among the least retained group (second only to Native American students) in higher education (Harper, 2010), more research is needed to find out what measures should be taken to increase the success of this population. Further, research is also needed to explore what causes some to complete college and how to reproduce those persistence mechanisms to improve the overall college graduation rate for African-American gay men. Despite adversities related to ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other stressors that increase

social ostracism for African-American gay men (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011; Washington & Wall, 2006), some still stay until graduation. These unfavorable influences incite the need to examine what would make African-American gay men show resilience and persist.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the influences that contribute to the persistence and college success of African-American gay men, who despite adversities, manage to persist in U.S institutions of higher education. The data captured were collections of in-person interviews provided by students who identify as full-time, college enrolled African-American gay men.

The approach described allowed African-American gay men to provide real-life accounts of their everyday lives as ethnic and sexual minorities, which can then be analyzed to discover the experiences that affect their college persistence and success. If factors that emerge from the data analysis point to institutional experiences to account for persistence, then the university community could use this information to create retention and college success programs.

The information discovered from participants of this study could be used to further institutional dialogue around programmatic changes throughout the university. Cottone (2007) agreed that when practitioners engage across learning communities the impact is more widely felt than when counselors try to structure the process of change alone. A social constructivist worldview supported the idea that contextual perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012) of lived experiences shape how African-American gay men navigate the social and academic realms of college to persist and graduate.

Hays and Singh (2012) added that “a social constructivism paradigm helps research participants to gain full understanding of the lived experience through dialogue about their lived

experience” (p. 128). The design of questions allowed participants to deconstruct the meaning of their experiences as African-American gay men in college. When students enroll in college, they experience events following entry [and] or immediately after entrance which could account for the decision to withdraw or remain until graduation (Tinto, 1993).

The longitudinal model of student departure set forth by Vincent Tinto (1987, 1993) informed the study. Tinto’s theory offers an explanation of how interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of an institution and communities lead individuals with different characteristics to withdraw from that institution before degree completion (Tinto, 1993). The theory also proposes a guide for institutional actions to retain students until degree completion (Tinto, 1993), which is applicable to this research in the sense that the present study aims to explore the experiences which cause African-American gay men to remain enrolled rather than leave before graduation.

Tinto said the model’s structure allows institutional planners to identify those elements of the institutional, academic and social environments that may interfere with degree completion (Tinto, 1993). The theory also provides an explanation of the three stages of adjustment individuals face as they seek to successfully navigate the college campus. While the theory also stresses that the actions of institutional members (i.e., faculty and staff) are central to an understanding of the institution’s impact on students learning and leaving (Tinto, 1993), it is important to note that some students may be unaffected by the intellectual life of the institution (Tinto, 1993). As such, some students may provide no explanation based on institutional factors for their departure.

Research Question

The institutional activities to account for college retention and success for African-American gay men could vary. Therefore, a research question was used to shape and determine the scope of the literature review (Hays & Singh, 2012) and to explore how African-American gay men make meaning of experiences that promote persistence and retention through graduation. Conversely, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure which serves as the theoretical framework for this study addresses principles of effective retention and recommends institutional actions to promote retention. "This principle of effective retention describes the enduring commitment of student welfare, a broad commitment to the education....and an emphasis upon the importance of social and intellectual community in the education of students" (Tinto, 1993, p. 145).

The present study considered Tinto's theory to address college success of African America gay men. The theory guided the examination of how students *integrate* and *commit to the institution*. In addition, the theory was used as a lens for data analysis, since it assumes that the *social and intellectual integration with the community helps* students to become competent members of the institution (Tinto, 1993). The questions below guided the research about the experiences affecting African-American gay men that assist them to persist and achieve college success.

Research Question

What are the experiences on campus that assist, and the programs and services on campus that contribute to African-American gay men persistence and success in college?

The research participants for this study were recruited from a large research university in the Southeast region of the U.S. Even though participants attend the same institution, how they

experience the campus environment could offer multiple perspectives into their lived experiences, including their academic and social experiences, associations, and engagements.

Operational Definitions

The terminology used in the study may appear straightforward; however, to avoid any issues of ambiguity, some of the text may warrant further explanation.

African-American: The debate on the identity of African-American students has been a topic of discussion for decades (Flowers & Shuford, 2011). While the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) noted, “African-American refers to a person of origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa,” for this study, African-American was referred to as people with African ancestry who were born and raised in the U.S.

College success: Kim and Conrad (2006) defined success as completing a baccalaureate degree and as a vehicle to professional advancement. As a means of upward social mobility, a degree completion is highly valued in the African-American community (Kim & Conrad, 2006).

Down-Low (DL): A culturally specific term in the African-American community that describes heterosexually identified Black men who have sex with men without the knowledge of their primary female partners (Millett, 2004).

Homophobia: Tierney (1993) defined homophobia as “the fear and hatred of homosexuality, and the assumption that everyone is, or should be heterosexual (or straight)” (p. 51).

Identity intersection: Each individual resides in multiple systems of stratification, which include race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and so forth. The interactivity of such structures forms and modifies one another in ways to create many distinctions within a single individual (Swank & Fahs, 2013).

Lived experiences: Students' perceptions of their experiences on campus placed in context of the institution's climate and environment.

Persistence: Based on Tinto's (1987, 1993) student integration model, Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda (1992), defined persistence as a categorical measure of a student outcome. A key term of this study, it represents students' enrollment in college through graduation. Attrition (antonym).

Resilience: Sanlo and Espinoza (2012) described resilience as a measure of psychological well-being and coping skills.

Significance of Study and Relevance to Student Affairs Professionals

Given the adverse campus climate that African-American gay men are subject to, navigating the institution toward college success could be challenging, which was a point that this study addressed. Thus, Tinto's (1993) *theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education* provided the theoretical framework to understand the influences that contribute to the persistence and college success of African-American gay men. This theoretical model helps to explain why it is that certain individuals, when experiencing conditions of social and intellectual malintegration within the college, will choose to leave, while others persist until graduation despite unrewarding conditions (Tinto, 1993).

Studies seeking to provide an understanding of the academic and social experiences that influence African-American gay men's ability to graduate from college serve as the foundation for developing retention programs specific to this particular population. Thus, research with explicit intent to understand the influences that contribute to the persistence and college success of African-American gay men may also inform student affairs professionals about the connection to people and institutional resources that African-American gay men find helpful. By infusing

social justice advocacy and counseling perspectives into student engagement, faculty members, counselors, and student affairs professionals can work collectively to combat the effects of oppression on the mental well-being of this population of students. Ratts, Toporek, and Lewis (2010) discuss *advocacy competencies* that provide institutional personnel with a structure to address issues of oppression and how to advocate with and for clients. They also provide a conceptual framework through which these support strategies can be applied. This advocacy competence structure provides practitioners strategies that can be carried out to promote resiliency and overall African-American gay men's development (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). Therefore, professionals who aspire to become allies and agents of social change are charged with reducing impediments to minority student achievement including microaggressions, racism, homophobia, and other stereotypes.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies outline a framework to aid practitioners to effectively give voice to marginalized and historically underserved people (Toporek, Lewis, & Ratts, 2010). By recognizing and understanding the nuances of how the campus climate affects African-American gay men's decisions to stay enrolled in an institution of higher education, student affairs staffs are positioned to advocate for programming to promote retention. In addition, faculty, staff, and peers may advocate for gay students by helping to ensure they have access to necessary resources (Toporek, Lewis, & Ratts, 2010).

Delimitations of the Study

There are several delimitations identified for this study. First, the study used volunteers as research participants; thus, volunteers may share similar experiences and may not reflect a true representative sample of the population examined. Candidates with widely varying

experiences may have abstain from participation in the study, since there was no compulsory requirement to encourage participation. Second, the study used a purposive sampling of participants enrolled at the same institution. Hays and Singh (2012) described this sample population as “experts in relation to the phenomenon under study” (p. 8). Therefore, the subjects who took part in the study reflected a specific geographic concentration, and the number of participants was limited in size. The number of students who self-disclose as African-American gay men at the institution where the study took place is unknown, since the institution is not required to keep such data on students. No other delimitation for the study emerged at the end of data collection.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter described some of the challenges faced by African-American gay men enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education. The study, based on a phenomenological approach, aimed to capture the perceived on-campus experiences of African-American gay men, as well as revealed strategies and other coping mechanisms that lead to college graduation among this population. The study was founded on real-life student experiences, which served as valuable input used for developing programs and other plans to promote African-American gay men’s matriculation and retention. Key terminology used in the study is described, herein.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the influences that contribute to the persistence and college success among African-American gay men. This chapter provides a review of literature that supports the notion that experiences which stem from inside and outside the classroom affect African-American gay men's ability to persist in college and university environments. Specifically, this chapter discusses the history of African-American students in U.S. higher education and enrollment patterns among African-American students, gay men, and African American gay men in higher education. In addition, this chapter explores relevant literature on experiences that contribute to college persistence and academic success. As a compounding factor, this chapter also delves into the implications of multiple identity intersection that contributes to the holistic development of African-American gay men. Tinto's (1993) model for student attrition, which serves as the theoretical lens for understanding the issues affecting students' decision to persist in college, was reviewed in this chapter.

African-American Students in U.S. Higher Education

A Historical Perspective

In the 1960s, "American institutions of higher learning experienced prosperity and called it a problem," (Rudolph & Thelin, 1990, p. 485) because successful colleges were thriving, granting access and opportunity to over half of college aged people in the country (Rudolph & Thelin, 1990). However, for African-Americans, this time was marked by struggles to gain

meaningful freedoms (Rudolph & Thelin, 1990). This was particularly evident in education, where obvious impediments to garner interest and access to American colleges among African-Americans significantly impacted enrollment and graduation rates within this population. In early U.S. history, the colonists did not make commitments to advance the collegiate pursuits of African-Americans (Justiz, Wilson, & Bjork, 1994; Reese & Rury, 2008; Thelin, 2011). However, in the twentieth century higher education became a source of liberation from political and economic oppressions among this group (Justiz, Wilson, & Bjork, 1994).

Only in the past thirty years has African-American college enrollment seen a significant increase (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Jones, 2001; Green, 2001; Sedlacek, 1999; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1994). Despite improved access to higher education, issues involving African-American students remain a major challenge in American higher education (DeSousa, 2001). Over-representation of African-American students in poor performing middle and high schools (Green, 2001) account for the under-representation of this population in gifted programs (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Ford, 2011; Ford & Moore 2013; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008) and thus results in inadequate preparation for college attendance. The prevalence of low college enrollment among African-American men have prompted researchers to consider the experiences of this population, in addition to various aspects specific to college and university campuses, in an effort to conceptualize why particular students persist in college (Astin, 1982; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

The history of African-American students in U.S. higher education shows an abundance of racism among other forms of discrimination. Early beliefs about African-American students' abilities include notions of intellectual inferiority and a perceived inability to understand serious

scholarly work (Slater, 1996). Studies in this area show that many issues affecting African-American students often result in their failing, stopping out, dropping out, or losing interest in education (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). The preponderance of negative campus environments, which include faculty and peer hostility toward African-American students, has also been documented (Fleming, 1985; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Museus, 2011; Sedlacek, 1999; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1994).

This phenomenon can likely be attributed to racial discrimination that prevailed for hundreds of years in the U.S. (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Flowers & Shuford, 2011). Bailey and Moore (2005) noted that from birth, African-American men have endured obstacles and “road blocks” in different U.S. social domains. As a result, African-American men are more likely to have an external locus of control than their peers and may attribute this control over their lives to outside forces (Jones, 2001; Wood & Hilton, 2012).

African-American students have been subject to constant disruptions in their academic pursuits as the result of hostile encounters with Whites, a form of racial mistreatment (microaggression) that is often distressful and damaging (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). To navigate the adverse effects of hostility on campus, African-American students developed coping strategies to lessen the impact of discrimination. For this group of students, persistence required the capacity to “read” Whites carefully (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996) and an ability to ignore racism in a manner which would not exacerbate hostility. The “no response” coping strategies employed by African-Americans to withstand oppression should not be confused with acceptance or capitulation of hate from the dominant group (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). In contrast, the self-efficacy and resiliency of African-American students enable them to use

various protective factors to change their individual circumstances and create a paradigm shift to decide their future (McGee & Martin, 2011).

Given that research on African-American students in general and specifically African-American men have been sparse in literature about college persistence and completion, understanding the critical issues associated with their retention contributed to and strengthen what is known about this population. Converging multiple identities (e.g., race and sexuality) intensify the difficulty that these students face in institutions with a history of stereotyping, discriminatory practices and low expectation from faculty based on presumption of lack of preparation and ability to do college level work (Jackson & Moore, 2008; Jones, 2001; Lewis, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012).

African-American Men in Higher Education

Similar to other groups of students, African-American men also face a number of challenges upon enrollment in college (Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2012). Some of the issues students contend with include adjusting to a new environment, maintaining satisfactory academic progress, and developing relationships with others within their campus community (Cuyjet, 2006). While these situations are common among all students, Steele and Aronson (1995) suggested that African-American men are also subject to stereotypes associated with socioeconomic disadvantage and racial segregation. As a result, personnel at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are more likely to have a negative impact on African-American men, which could be attributed to a misunderstanding of the cultural behaviors and norms of this particular ethnic group (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2013).

Most PWIs also employ a majority White staff. Therefore, African-American men who enroll in PWIs are taught by and receive services from a majority White staff. Although there are

many White counselors who provide access and strong personal sentiments of interest and care (Cuyjet, 2006), the campus environment still maintains discriminatory tendencies toward African-American men (Cuyjet, 2006). Racism and stereotypes are barriers that limit interaction among African-American men and college staff (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1985; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Museus, 2011; Sedlacek, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1994).

Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that African-Americans in U.S. higher education feel their interaction with institutional personnel is unequal to that of their White counterparts. Sutton (2006) also noted that faculty and staff that share their expertise with African-American men from a dominant culture and one-dimensional model unintentionally perpetuate negative sentiment toward them. Thus, adverse preconceptions (subconscious or overt) of faculty can influence whether students decide to leave or remain enrolled in college.

The proportion of African-American male college graduates have been, and continues to remain, low in comparison to their female counterparts (Newman, Mmejé, & Allen, 2012). A national survey of college enrollment within the U.S. indicated that African-American women comprised 63% of African-American students (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, T. D. (2003, 2003). This number also represented the highest proportion of female participation among all racial and ethnic groups in higher education (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004).

A national study that is more recent highlighted that African-American men lagged behind all other groups of students in the high school to college pipeline. Ross, Kena, Rathbun, KewalRamani, Zhang, Kristapovich, and Manning (2012) reported that of first time college attendees in 2010, 63 % were African-American women and 37 % were African-American men. During that same year, universities enrolled 43% White men. This same study noted that the

percentage of all full-time male undergraduates enrolled was higher in 2003–04 than in 2007–08 (52 % in 2003 and 49% in 2007). Yet only 64% of the male population who began college in 2003–04 earned a college degree when compared to 72 % of their female counterpart. Equally, 34 % of African-American males who began college in 2003-04 graduated within six years when compared to 59 %, of White men and 43% of African-American women (Ross, et al., 2012). Among each ethnic population of students who did not persist and graduate from college, African-American men had an overall departure rate of 45% (second only to Native American and Alaska Native students whose departure rate stood at 50%) when compared to 35% of their White male counterpart and 42% African American women (Ross, et al., 2012). At the time of this report, over 20% of African-American men had no degree or were still enrolled in an institution of higher education (Ross, et al., 2012). Cited as the reasons for departure, over 35% of African-American men reported family responsibilities, 33% noted financial reasons and 24.6% said that dissatisfaction played a role in their decision to leave college (Ross, et al., 2012). The remaining 7% gave no specific reasons for leaving (Ross, et al., 2012).

Although family responsibilities and financial concerns were noted as causes for departure, Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that student satisfaction with peers and academic integration were also factors that affected academic performance. The prevalence of discriminatory practices which continue to plague African-American men in U.S. higher education contributes to attrition among this group of students (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). A racist campus climate can seriously interfere with the academic success of an African-American student and is likely to have a negative impact on their self-esteem and personal identity (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). Because African-American men have historically been victimized by severe and systemic levels of oppression, they perform poorly in the classroom

and have behavioral problems (Davis, 2003), negative reports and ultimately low graduation rates in secondary school (Billie & Carter, 2012). Researchers added that college enrollment rates for African-American men continue to decline as a direct result of systemic levels of oppression (Jackson & Moore, 2008; Jones, 2001; Lewis, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012). With the exception of Native American students, African-American men having the poorest educational results of all ethnic and gender groups (Harvey, 2008; Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010) which results from inferior treatment by society (Jones, 2001).

African-American Gay Men in U.S. Higher Education

African-American gay men may frequently face significant acts of oppression on predominantly White college campuses which could lead to departure from college. A focus on African-American gay men in U.S. higher education attempt to address the issues that affect this population of college students. In an exploratory qualitative research study of seven participants, Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2008) explained the decision-making processes and retention of some African-American gay men. A key component to the Strayhorn, et al. (2008) study is an examination of how African-American gay men make decisions about enrolling in certain colleges and how such factors affect their ability to remain in college. Though the authors addressed issues of homophobia, gender expression, and spirituality as factors which may reduce the ability of African-American gay men to feel comfortable in college (Strayhorn et al., 2008), there is no one size fits all approach to understanding their challenges and diverse needs (Strayhorn et al., 2008). While the Strayhorn et al. (2008) research is helpful, there are other threats of oppression and stereotypes that warrants further investigation in this area.

Common stereotypes about African-American men are based on a reputation of strength, a propensity to hide emotions, an ability to carry on the family's name, and conquering women

(Cuyjet, 2006; Means Coleman & Cobb, 2007). Thus, because of societal stigma, many African-American gay men are forced to live by the “don’t ask, don’t tell” aphorism to avoid discrimination from the African-American community (Washington & Wall, 2006). Whereas much of what is written about African-American students examines race, culture, and socioeconomic status, the gay identity for African-American men adds another intersecting dimension to their development (Ford & Priest, 2004). For many students, this intersection is incongruent and inconsistent with religious (Washington & Wall, 2006) and family beliefs. According to Goode-Cross and Good (2009), these students could lose their support system by revealing their gay sexual orientation. Furthermore, these individuals may have limited opportunities to develop alternate and safe communities (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009), and some may even turn to drugs, alcohol and even suicide as a relief from heterosexual expectations (Leck, 1998).

For many students, the college environment became a desired setting to reveal their gay identity, and for some, it may be the place for confusion and doubt (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Washington & Wall, 2006). The lack of safety within the various communities, coupled with the search for individuality, may lead to a sense of ambivalence for some African-American gay men. Such confusion and ambivalence may result in loneliness, isolation, and possible depression and could lead to college dropouts (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). In their study, Westefeld, Maples, Buford, and Taylor (2001) found that often gay men, lesbians, and bisexual students suffered from depression and loneliness and felt they had fewer reasons for living. Studies have also found that African-American gay men in U.S. higher education experience mental and physical health problems because of negative social environments created by anti-gay attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). In

addition, it would also be important to understand what strategies and interpersonal factors African-American gay men utilize to remain persistent.

Defining Features of Persistence and College Success

Scholars in higher education exploring the construct of persistence and college success highlight that student success can be defined broadly to include academic achievement; engagement in educationally purposeful activities; satisfaction; acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies; persistence; attainment of educational objectives; and post-college performance (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). For instance, persistence has been studied and understood from the process models of organizational turnover with factors such as attitude and behavior interactions (Bean, 1995; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Further, many features of persistence are described as students' motivation to remain enrolled in college to degree completion or the congruence between student and institution (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1987). Persistence has become synonymous with student success and student engagement is considered the pathway to success in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). In addition, student success represents the values placed on persistence factors that eventually lead to successful completion of a college degree (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Thus, persistence and college success from this perspective are comprised of the individuals' motivation and ability to adjust (Allen, 1999) despite challenges within the academic and social environment of the institution.

The body of research on persistence and success of African-American gay men enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education addresses different criteria to define how they persist and succeed in college. As previously noted, African-American gay men believe they receive lesser treatment from faculty and administrators than their White counterparts do. In response, they

tend to rely on student-to-student contact, both inside and outside the classroom (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996) and other support systems considered valuable in combating these challenges (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010). A consistent body of research suggests that relationships and experiences in college, at least in part, account for students' feeling a sense of belonging to the institution. In fact, some research suggests that building connections to the institution may influence students' decisions to stay enrolled (Carter, 2006; Tinto 1975, 1993).

Persistence in Higher Education

The reason for college persistence for African-American gay men varies by motivation strategies. Goode-Cross and Tager (2011) stated that some students report using different approaches to cope with issues of racism and sexual prejudice to aid their persistence. Other research suggests that gay men who develop close friendships and ally relationships are better able to cope with sexism (Worthington, McCrary, & Howard, 1998) and racism. To this point, African-American gay men's ability to overcome unpleasant treatment is directly related to their ability to persist in college. In a study about this specific population of students, it was discovered that African-American gay men are more likely to persist in an encouraging environment (Harvey-Smith, 2002). Students who establish positive relationships with faculty and staff (Harvey-Smith, 2002) may be empowered to embrace more than one dimension of their identity. African-American gay men who develop these relationships are better able to adjust in social environments than those who do not have rapport with faculty and staff (Henry, Fuerth, & Richards, 2011).

Existing research on academic persistence includes an examination of the strategies students employ to cope with and navigate societal barriers. Research conducted by DeWitz,

Woolsey and Walsh (2009) revealed that the more students engage with their peers, faculty, and administrators, the more self-efficacy skills they learn. Strayhorn (2010) explained that student's ability to complete academic tasks is associated with their ability to persist in college. He added that self-efficacy drives resilience and resilient students use environmental support to further academic achievement and have more positive self-beliefs than their non-resilient peers (Strayhorn, 2010).

Success in Higher Education

Researchers describe college success for individuals as students who maintain above average grade point average (GPA), contribute to the campus environment, and work toward completing a degree (Jones-White, Radcliffe, Huesman, & Kellogg, 2010). According to Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2011), college success is indicative of academic achievement through engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, and achievement of desired knowledge, skills and competencies. Astin (1993) and Tinto (1987) also agreed that institutional relationships formed among university personnel and students are salient to retention and success. Furthermore, students who decide to remain in college beyond the first year are more likely to graduate (Schwartz & Washington, 2007). In addition to academic suitability, a student's background and internal motivations are also important measures for predicting a student's predilection for academic success (Jones-White, Radcliffe, Huesman, & Kellogg, 2010; Radcliffe, Huesman, & Kellogg, 2006; Tinto 1975).

Some researchers have noted that a student's college success aptitude is based on specific variables. Among the results are variables like the SAT and other standardized tests (e.g., ACT), which are taken in high school. These tests, which are intended to measure a student's potential for academic success in college, are often a predictor of traditional White students' likelihood to

succeed (Schwartz & Washington, 2007). Therefore, standardized tests should be used to measure African-American students along with other academic success predicting variables.

In the U.S., African-American men confront many major challenges that could inhibit their success across the education spectrum. They are also subject to lowered expectations from education professionals. Therefore, predicting the academic success of this particular group of students must include a consideration of an academic institution's environmental factors, pre-college preparation, students' background characteristics, academic performance, and social involvement in the greater campus community. In addition, Washington and Wall (2006) noted that success for African-American gay men includes the variables noted above plus their ability to cope with adversities and to develop strategies to achieve self-efficacy and persistence. For African-American gay men, finding a gay-friendly campus may be difficult because many institutions still harbor heterosexism and homophobic beliefs (Washington & Wall, 2006).

Enrollment Patterns of African-American Gay Men

African-American men represent the most at-risk population of students for dropping out of college (Cuyjet, 2006). Data on college attrition rates for all student populations reveals that the number of African-American students reported to dropout is more than double that of White students (Nguyen, Bibo, & Engle, 2012). There is additional evidence to support that a higher percentage of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students leave college in comparison to heterosexual students (Lucozzi, 1998).

In addition to challenges that impede academic success for all college students, African-American gay men endure issues of racism (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Savin-Williams, 1996; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007) and homophobia (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Washington & Wall, 2006). Existing research has shown that African-American gay men

experience more academic and social challenges in college, relative to White gay men and African-American women. Thus, African-American gay men are at a higher risk of failure in educational and social environments that are unaccepting of who they are (Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010).

While the task of recruiting and enrolling young African-American men has grown increasingly complex, higher education officials struggle to identify what impacts college attrition and how to increase retention among this particular student population. In line with other research in this area, African-American gay men are among the male populations with the lowest retention rates (Cuyjet, 2006; Washington & Wall, 2006). Historically, researchers have also found that there is a shortage of data on the exact number of self-identified African-American gay men in the U.S. (Icard, 1986). More recently, Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2000) reported that researchers are reluctant to draw general inferences about the U.S. gay and lesbian population from samples because of inaccuracy in reports that capture data with regard to sex. Furthermore, because institutions of higher education do not document sexual orientation or preferences as part of their recruitment process, there are no definite data on the number of sexual minority students enrolled in college (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). Taking this information into account, the enrollment, retention, and attrition of African-American gay men cannot be easily documented, in part, because there are no demographic data that capture students sexual orientation for purposes of college admission.

Enrollment

According to census data from the U.S. Department of Education, there are over 20 million undergraduate students in the United States. Of that number, only 5.18 % are African-American men (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). As research suggests, their female

counterparts outnumber African-American male students by nearly 2:1. They are also trailing behind both White men and women on the National Assessment of Education Progress and college entrance exams (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008). Detailed findings on the achievement gap between White men and African-American men show that African-American men face several challenges, which may inhibit their college success (Bailey & Moore, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008). Studies on the k-12 educational environment for African-American youth point to a lack of college preparation opportunities (Bailey & Paisley, 2004) and limited parental involvement that is needed to support male (heterosexual and gay) students (Strayhorn, 2008). Holcomb-McCoy (2007) reported on the correlation between high teacher certification scores and student achievement results, which revealed that certification scores were lower among k-12 teachers in school districts where there is a large concentration of African-American students.

Few scholarly investigations on the college enrollment patterns of African-American gay men exist. Most current research compares student enrollment by race, ethnicity, and gender demography or other measures that do not include sexual orientation. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) reported that in 2002 the number of African-American men account for 4.3% of all college goers, which is the slowest growth rate (most recent census data noted above) of all college-enrolled students, a number which has failed to increase since 1976. The researchers also pointed out that of this population of students, nearly 67.6% are unlikely to complete college within six years (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008). Recent national survey data suggested that the college departure rate of African-American men far exceeded the other groups (Ross, Kena, Rathbun, KewalRamani, Zhang, Kristapovich, & Manning, 2012). For instance, the

data showed that college attrition for White men stood at 41% and 57% for African-American women (Ross, et al., 2012).

Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2008) found that gay identity is an invisible characteristic that may be directly linked to matriculation and other decision reasons African-American gay men use in their college selection process. Recent research on sexual orientation and college choice found that campus climate is a significant part of one's decision to enroll (Burleson, 2010; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008). Strayhorn et al. (2008) found that African-American gay men who enrolled in PWIs sought an environment that affirmed the "coming out" process and regarded their PWI experience more positively than being African-American and gay in the African-American community. As a means of preserving a safe space, students enrolled at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) only revealed their sexual identity to select, close friends (Patton, 2011).

While many gay men reported that their enrollment in college played a role in their "coming out" process (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011), some enrolled African-American gay men with weaker academic credentials placed more emphasis on their masculinity, racial identity, and academic pursuit and focused less on their sexuality (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Because some African-American gay men lack satisfactory academic preparation for college-level work, much of what is known about this student group is focused on marginalization and stereotypes. In support of this idea, Strayhorn (2008) reported that negative descriptors are often associated with African-American men, which could lead to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Given what is known about stereotypes and pathologies (e.g., racism and discrimination) associated with homogeneity among this population of students, masculinity is

often used to shape opinions of the [in]appropriate roles and behaviors of African-American men (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2010; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

Retention

Although the number of retained African-American heterosexual and gay men enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities may appear dismal when compared with African-American women and White students, some African-American gay men do remain enrolled in college until graduation. Research done by Goode-Cross and Tager (2011) and Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2008) found that African-American gay men who establish relationships with accepting peers believe that this contact is important for feeling safe, which may influence the decision to remain enrolled. It is important to note, however, that the decision-making process used by African-American gay men to decide whether to remain in school is enigmatic.

Although retention rates may increase among students who feel a sense of security on college campuses, the possibility remains that non-academic factors (e.g., financial, social, and familial) could result in the students' departure. Almost 90% of the respondents in a study about African-American men who have sex with men at PWIs said that their parents would disagree with their gay identity, and less than 2% reported being open about their sexual orientation (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). African-American gay men recounted feelings of being unwelcome in African-American communities (Washington & Wall, 2006). Researchers also noted that multicultural retention programs are often informed by heterosexist assumptions (Washington & Wall, 2006). The primary reasons for retention among African-American gay men remain perplexing; however, support (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008) and safety remain as key factors.

While it is well understood that there are many facets associated with students' decision to stay enrolled in college, an understanding of the factors that support favorable decisions for African-American gay men is still unknown. In the last decade, several researchers have assessed aspects of African-American gay men's experiences on college campuses (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006). These studies were specific to participant's particular areas of interest and added much to the literature on retention trends for African-American gay men. Except for the qualitative study on the college decision-making process of African-American gay men that examined conditions that are critical to their success (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008) all other studies have focused on environmental challenges faced by this population of students. Evidence from these studies suggest that relationships formed, as well as purposeful engagement with peers, faculty, and staff, contributed to the decision to stay enrolled in college. The participants noted that because of feeling supported, they felt safe as African-American gay men on campus, which, in turn, led to their retention.

Findings from these studies mirror other relevant research in this area. For instance, in one study, participants recounted their ability to form genuine relationships, used to establish a social support niche to improve their intersecting identity development (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008). These findings are in alignment with existing literature that suggests that a sense of community and safety promotes college retention. How African-American gay men decide to remain enrolled in college warrants further investigation, given that their lived experiences to explain the retention phenomenon are different. In particular, it is important to discover how they hone in on personal inner strength and resilience (Masten, 2001) in dealing with experiences which, when resilience was impaired would cause drop out.

Attrition

College departure rates continue to be a major concern for institutions across the United States. While the implications for attrition impact the revenue stream and investment of the institution (O’Keeffe, 2013), there are other adversities associated with being a college dropout. For example, when students do not feel adequately supported by faculty and staff they become disconnected from the institution. This lack of integration between students and professionals outside the classroom is a contributory factor toward college dropout (O’Keeffe, 2013). Lounsbury, Saudargas, and Gibson (2004) added that students faced with emotional issues and those who are less conscientious (and less inclined to meet expectation) are more likely to leave college without a degree.

One of the challenges faced by ethnic minority college students is minority stress which is the interruption to the college adjustment and integration process. This stress is more likely to cause students to feel discouraged about staying in college (Wei & Liao, 2011). Howard-Hamilton (1997) said many African-American men struggle to develop resistance strategies needed for personal and academic survival. For instance, being the only African-American gay man in a class can be a form of minority stress, especially when faculty and peers of the majority culture expect him to be a representative voice for all ethnic and sexual minority groups.

Experiences like these can affect a student’s decision to drop out of college. Studies also suggest (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008; Cuyjet, 2006) that minority stress may arise when sexual and ethnic minorities feel invisible and low expectations are expressed by faculty because of gender and ethnic stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). These negative preconceptions may include the idea that African-American gay men are less intelligent (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011) than their white counterparts. Herndon

(2010) noted that stressors experienced by some students are produced and promoted by the institution, underlining the notion that a campus environment can have a significant effect on the well-being of African-American gay men.

African-American gay men who have been exposed to a lack of support within the college environment including intense instances of racism and homophobia are more likely to drop out (Cuyjet, 2006; Fleming, 1985; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Museus, 2011; Savin-Williams, 1996; Sedlacek, 1999; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1994; Washington & Wall, 2006). Students who do not establish supportive networks may not know how to maneuver the institution (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010; Worthington, McCrary, & Howard, 1998), learn the skills needed to avert distractions (Goode- Cross & Tager, 2011), or establish necessary advocacy support (Strayhorn, 2010). African-American gay men who transfer to other colleges may continue to perceive hostility associated with previous institutional environments, which may lead to mistrust and isolation from affinity groups (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Researchers have also noted that African-American gay men who transfer from one college to another report poor academic performance and in some instances, they were unable to connect socially, which could possibly be residual effects from past institutional experiences (D'Augelli, 1992; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Leck, 1998; Patton, 2011).

African-American gay men who drop out of college often attribute hostile treatment to their sexuality (Patton, 2011). These students believe that their sexual identity is not a choice, yet still, they are confronted with and endure acts of oppression because of being gay. In order to cope, some African-American gay men subscribe to a false-heteronormative agenda by choosing to reveal their identity only in the presence of a closely-knit group (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009;

Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). The marginalization that African-American gay men face inhibits their ability to integrate into mainstream communities. It may cause some of this population to embrace the negativity perpetrated toward them. African-American gay men who leave college because of their inability to cope with homophobia may sometimes choose to deny being gay in an effort to fit into homophobic African-American communities (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009).

Many African-American heterosexual and gay men alike handle college departure by speaking negatively of the classroom environment (Bailey, 2006) and their overall views of the institution (Cuyjet 2006). Studies about college dropout rates for African-American men who chose not to re-enroll often report the prevalence of working in the service industry (e.g., food preparation, wait staff, and janitorial), earning less, and being subject to more frequent job changes (Cuyjet. 2006). Studies note that some African-American men who drop out of college may engage in activities that include anti-social and criminal offensive behaviors (Courtenay, 2010; Cuyjet, 2006; Hong 2010).

African-American men who do not integrate academically into institutions (Holloman & Strayhorn, 2010) typically have a higher attrition rate because they are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have experienced inferior schooling before college (Holloman & Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 1993). They may also experience the inability to find and connect with other students who come from similar backgrounds (Holloman & Strayhorn, 2010). Isolation from the lack of a critical mass often results in depression, suicide ideation, and anxiety, as well as personality and conduct disorders (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Westefeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001). Some of these conditions may influence African-American gay men's decision to re-enroll or remain a college dropout.

Savin-Williams and Cohen (1996) reviewed literature about the causes that affect retention of gay youth, and found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students dropped out of public school largely because of peer harassment. The authors noted that many dropouts used drugs and alcohol and have exchanged money or drugs for sex (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). This departure from high school creates a void in the number of African-American male college goers (Cuyjet, 2006). Newman (1998) suggested that victimization risk is greater among LGB college students because of added psychosocial risk factors (e.g., coming out).

Experiences and Conditions which Contribute to Academic Success

Researchers and college administrators alike have engaged in efforts to better understand how collegial experiences affect persistence and college success for African-American gay men. Homophobia, racial discrimination, alienation, and exclusion are considered among the most impactful experiences on American college campuses, particularly at PWIs (Carter, 2006; Washington & Wall, 2006). Studies found that more than one-third of students who identified themselves as LGBT reported incidences of harassment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), which could cause departure prior to degree completion.

Researchers also noted that African-American students perceive prejudice and discrimination as part of their first year college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, alienation and exclusion by faculty and peers is associated with a wide variety of negative effects including anxiety (Carter, 2006), stress (Cuyjet, 2006; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Wei & Liao, 2011), and poor academic performance increasing the likelihood of students stopping out and a lesser chance of obtaining a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Faculty Interaction

Faculty engagement is often cited as playing a significant role in college students' academic persistence (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Interaction in the form of sponsorship, mentorship, and advising have consistently been found to influence how students feel about the campus environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), as well as how they develop meaningful relationships that improve persistence (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006).

Previous research has shown that when strong associations between faculty and students exist, the results of those engagements are often the best predictors of student persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In addition to educational practices (e.g., academic advising and mentoring) which could lead to favorable higher education results, there is a significant difference in the persistence rate of students who interact with faculty compared with those who do not have regular contact in engaging relationships (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006).

Interactions with Peers

According to Hurtado (2001), exposure to diverse faculty, staff, and students plays a key role in student learning and development during the college years. For students of color who interact with a diverse group of peers, there is an increase in critical thinking skills, writing ability (Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006; Stage, Muller, Kinzie, & Simmons, 1998), and overall growth and development (Pascarella & Edison, 1996). Harper and Quaye (2007) asserted that peer engagement provides opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships and to enrich educational experiences (e.g., taking part in learning communities, summer research programs, and fraternities and sororities).

Consistent with the notion of peer group engagement, ethnic and sexual minority students present a powerful socializing agent in shaping persistence (Cuyjet, 2006; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Flowers & Shuford, 2011; Harper, 2006b; Longerbeam, Johnson, Inkelas, & Lee, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although data in this area is sparse, research on ethnic and sexual minority college students suggests that peer groups that challenged acts of oppression were viewed as supportive (Longerbeam, Johnson, Inkelas, & Lee, 2007). Astin (1993) noted that peer support is the most potent source of influence in a student's growth and development during college.

Similarly, sexual minority students rely on peer group support to lessen alienation (Longerbeam, Johnson, Inkelas, & Lee, 2007). Sexual minority students may take part in co-curricular activities that are based, in part, on the fit of the student's peer-environment (Longerbeam, Johnson, Inkelas, & Lee, 2007). For example, lesbian and gay students are more likely than heterosexual students to take part in arts and music activities, and gay and bisexual men are less likely than heterosexual men to take part in intramural sports (Longerbeam, Johnson, Inkelas, & Lee, 2007).

Affinity Group Membership

Affinity group membership emerged as central to avoiding isolation in sexual minority college students after the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (Dilley, 2002). Group formation and support programs began with students who sought to gain equality in access and participation, funding for student organizations, and governance to reflect gay ideology and inclusion (Dilley, 2002). By definition, affinity group is an active and social-communicative clustering by which individuals try to get others to like and feel positive toward them (Bell & Daly, 1984). Bell and Daly (1984) suggested that seeking affinity with another person (or group) is often central to

avoiding isolation. A person who cannot garner affection, support, attention, and other social reinforcements from those around them is likely to suffer from social and personal turmoil. In addition, an individual's sense of personal worth increases for members of an affinity group, which results from knowing that others like them (Bell & Daly, 1984).

Affinity groups that help orient African-American gay men to academic and social communities through participation in campus life serve as a positive foundation for academic persistence and success. Research reveals that besides positive views of the campus environment, African-American gay men must be engaged in culturally relevant co-curricular programs and other opportunities for involvement (Newman, Mmeje, & Allen, 2012). A strong correlation exists between engagement, academic success, and persistence (Harper, 2009; Newman, Mmeje, & Allen, 2012). By recognizing and integrating the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community members, LGBTQ students can be fully integrated into the greater academic community.

Other factors contribute to the decisions that African-American gay men make about remaining enrolled or leaving college. The occurrences that make up African-American gay men's collegiate experience include affinity group membership; resilience to include mechanisms to navigate heterosexism, homophobia, and other discrimination; and family and community support (e.g., social environments) where they matter and can feel at home (Washington & Wall, 2006). Affinity group membership, the support African-American gay men receive through safe and brave space (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010), LGBT resource centers, and Gay Student Alliances (Washington & Wall, 2006) should provide the balance of resources and services that encourage a welcoming and safe environment (Jordan Dungy, 2003) needed to succeed in college.

Affinity groups can also exist in the form of peer support, study groups, and learning communities that encourage collaboration. Student affairs divisions (which typically house LGBT resource center, housing, and student activities) can positively impact African-American gay men's persistence, since this is the institutional unit that disperses student organization funding and has overall influence on the effectiveness of services and programs (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011; Jordan Dungy, 2003). Dilley (2010) noted that gay student groups are beneficial for helping some students find new friends and establish positive relationships. Affinity groups are important sources of academic and social support. Cawthon and Guthrie (2011) suggested that the ultimate best practice to support LGBTQ students is to create campus resource centers where students and their friends are the primary focus. If African-American gay men believe that their safety, well-being, sexual orientation, and gender identity issues are addressed, they are more likely to persist in higher education institutions.

Cawthon and Guthrie (2011) described University of Massachusetts Amherst's 2 in 20 residential programs to address the specific living-learning needs of students interested in an LGBT residence hall. The researchers noted that even though controversy surrounds housing accommodation for LGBT students, many institutions have created similar special interest housing alternatives. Cawthon and Guthrie credit the program's positive reactions to effective affinity group support, fundamental experiences that are important for their development, growth, and successful integration into the campus. Queer studies programs and Lavender Graduations are some examples of programs that are positive and bring visibility to LGBT members of the campus community. Queer studies are important because they provide LGBTQ students with psychological and emotional benefits by providing a space to explore and establish an understanding of sexuality in a historical and cultural context (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011).

Queer studies classrooms also serve as resources for collaboration, where faculty can support students and augment the work of counselors and student affairs professionals.

Role of Family and Community

The support that students receive from family and community can increase their motivation to remain focused on academic pursuit in college. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) agreed that family members and peers are among the most common and central relationships for adolescents and young adults and play an important role in academic outcomes. For instance, when individuals do not feel supported in academic settings, the emotional support that they receive from friends and family can serve as a source of comfort (Leppel, 2002). Further, family support is also described as the transmitter of values that dictate how men and women from certain cultures should behave when they arrive on college campuses (Pérez-Jiménez, Cunningham, Serrano-Garcia, & Ortiz-Torres, 2007).

Bonner (2010) noted that the family is a staple in the lives of African-American students because it provides safety, emotional security, affection, and guidance. For African-Americans, the going to college process for a member of the family is a collective effort, which may include the extended family, church, and community (Bonner, 2010). The family serves as a source of encouragement for African-American gay men and promotes successful adjustment to college (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010). Research shows that when students receive encouragement from parents and family members, they are more likely to remain enrolled in college (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Bonner and Evans (2004) agreed that family could be instrumental in battling overwhelming feelings of bewilderment for African-American students. Parents and family who consistently show support through participation in campus events help students feel comfortable

with their college transition (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005) and encourage the continuation academic pursuits. Students who feel supported by their families are likely to achieve academic success (Astin, 1993; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

However, research on family and community support has begun to shift focus to include more emphasis on campus community support. While family support is a positive influence in the pre-college experience of ethnic minority students, research in this area has indicated that during college, students are better served from within the institution to enhance adjustment to the new environment (Baker & Robnett, 2012). In addition, regular interaction outside of the college environment, such as family obligations, may hinder academic success by focusing on individual's roles outside of school (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

Identifying a system of support to help navigate the campus climate is among the most important factors for ensuring persistence and college success for African-American men (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Gresham, 2009; Icard, 1986; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008). Establishing this support, especially for African-American gay men, is essential because the reaction from family and communities is often one of rejection after one's gay identity is revealed (Ford, & Priest, 2004). There is a strong need for African-American gay men to connect to their families and communities that are familiar with the adverse effects of hostile campus climates, in much the same way that other minority student groups benefit from this type of support. The need support is critical for African-American gay men as well, since all students gain academically when key relationships exist with family, role models, and significant others who can help guide one's college journey.

In general, African-American men on U.S. college campuses, with the exception of all-male HBCUs, will meet a small percentage of the student body who share both race and gender in common. This means that families and past student communities can help reduce some of the institutional stressors (Cuyjet, 2006; Herndon, 2010; Wei & Liao, 2011). According to Herndon (2010), spirituality and religion also provide a source of support for African-American males. The opportunity to practice one's religion benefits African-American students, particularly those who attend majority institutions (Herndon, 2010). Several researchers recognized that religion and spirituality are an important part of students' lives (Dean & Grandpré, 2011; Washington & Wall, 2006; Watson, 2006).

Unfortunately, for many African-American gay men, neither family nor community support is available to them. This lack of reinforcement, especially from the African-American church community, is a major loss for students in this population, since many congregations are not open and affirming of gay people (Washington & Wall, 2006). Researchers agree that many African-American gay men struggle to connect their religious views and values to their gay identity (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008; Washington & Wall, 2006).

Racial Microaggression, Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Resilience

Although experiences and influences to advance persistence and success for African-American gay men vary inside and outside the classroom, the effects of hostile and derogatory attitudes from majority culture could interfere with academic gains. Whether by overt rudeness in communication, or unintentional insensitivity which demeans African-American gay men, institutional personnel must be mindful of the power and impact of microaggressions, as they could hurt and oppress people of color due to their invisible nature (Sue, Nadal, Capodilupo, Lin,

Torino, & Rivera, 2008). In fact microaggressions toward marginalized groups of people are defined as the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory, negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). In short, institutional personnel have a responsibility to be mindful of underlying messages, internal biases, signals, and the effects on individuals who hear them.

African-American gay men differ in their persistence and college success needs. Demographic, academic, and social characteristics account for variance in how they respond to microinsults (overt or covert communication which convey rudeness), microassault (intentional discriminate), and microinvalidation (exclude the experiences of minority people) which are rooted in gender based and heterosexist discrimination (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). These individual differences may account for how students cope and respond to inferior treatment.

Homophobia and heterosexism represents fear and hatred toward members of sexual minority groups. It is also a powerful social force that governs sexuality and perpetuates inequality (Fine, 2011). *Homophobia* is a word first used in 1969 to explain heterosexuals' fears that others might think they are a sexual minority person (Herek, 2004). Herek emphasized that heterosexual society framed the "problem" of homosexuality in sexual minority people and not in people who were intolerant of gay men and lesbians. Likewise, in describing the rationale for society's antipathy toward non-heterosexual people, *heterosexism* is the term be used to refer to the systemic beliefs about gender, morality, and the danger by which homosexuality and sexual minority people are defined as deviant, sinful and threatening (Herek, 2004).

Therefore, sexual minority people must develop coping strategies to withstand the harmful effects of homophobia and heterosexism. In her study about resilience of transgender youth of color, Singh (2013) underscored that research participants who developed racial and ethnic pride and who were able to identify and navigate racism felt empowered to manage and cope with family relationships and connect with supportive communities and they learned how to nurture themselves. Similarly, it would be important to understand what capabilities African-American gay men had to withstand hardship and be able to succeed academically despite negative and oftentimes challenging experiences.

African-American gay men in college must be able to find role models, interest groups, and a safe space to reach their full potential. Issues surrounding homophobia and heterosexism, as well as the lack of survival strategies, make the college experience challenging for many African-American gay men. It also affects this population's ability to persist and succeed socially and academically. Cawthon and Guthrie (2011) regarded homophobia as a critical health issue that permeates society and oppresses LGBT people. Homophobia and heterosexism remain a daily struggle for sexual minority college students (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011), and the effects of these issues can cause African-American gay men to feel isolated. In worst-case scenarios, students begin to harbor feelings of self-hate because they internalize prejudices and stereotypes (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). Experiences related to homophobia and heterosexism perpetuate stereotypes and can lead to college drop out for African-American gay men.

To handle discrimination and prejudice, African-American gay men develop resilience strategies to contest stereotypes and to remain focused on academic pursuits. The belief that heterosexuality is superior, along with negative portrayals of African-American men, contributes to the marginalization of this population. Singh (2010) noted that when sexual minority clients or

students question their own self-worth, they negatively internalize heterosexist values, beliefs, and ideas. The author stated that counselors should work with clients to confront and deconstruct any negative perceptions they may have internalized. Strayhorn (2010) stated that in the face of adversity, marginalized students must be able to withstand vulnerabilities (e.g., homophobia and heterosexism) to achieve academically. He added that resilience enables individuals to persist in the face of obstacles, threatening, and often uncertain conditions (Strayhorn, 2010).

Identity Development and Formation

Racial and sexual identity development research helps to shed light on how individuals come to understand their multiple identities and the various intersections of these parts of their lives. Identity development theorists and researchers note that changing conditions in society, differing circumstances, and student identity development and formation help to define and solidify growth processes (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The concept of identity development is difficult to define, but offers models that can be used to provide a better understanding of how identity issues are resolved (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Particularly, identity development models help to shape how practitioners comprehend the manner in which students interact with institutions and vice versa.

From the early 1970s, research pioneers in the field of minority identity development have examined racial and sexuality identity development models that serve as the basis for understanding growing populations of diverse students in higher education. Often cited theories include the Cross (1971) model, which was intended to explain how African-Americans come to terms with their race. Similarly, the Cass (1984) and D'Augelli (1994) models help to delineate lesbian/gay identity formation from environmental and biological standpoints. Jones and

McEwen (2000) also found that sexual orientation, race, class, and gender intersect to form the core of an individual's identity.

African American Identity Development

Many theorists and researchers have deemed identity development and formation as central to understanding how individuals comprehend the implications of their ethnicity and its role in their lives (Phinney, 1990). Cross (1971) believed that African-American identity development continues throughout one's life span and accounts for racialized experiences during childhood. Cross's theoretical model of Psychological Nigrescence is often cited in research around Black identity development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). This model is based on the idea that personality traits, individual worldviews and values, and the significance of race directly influence one's approach to life. In Cross's model, identity development occurs in growth stages.

According to Harper and Harris (2006), in the Cross model, African-Americans come to terms with their Blackness and position their identities among others from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Revised from the original five-stage model, this four-stage model is a sequential development process where individuals move from one level of identity to another (Helms, 1993). In the first stage, *preencounter*, African-Americans have not experienced any encounters that would cause them to question the salience of their Black identity and may have only a superficial interest in Black causes (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2011). In *encounter*, the second stage, African-Americans experience micro-assaults, which may result in depression or guilt because of an encounter (Flowers & Shuford, 2011). Stage three, *immersion-emersion*, is the most critical because in this phase, African-Americans withdraw into Blackness and a Black world and "act" in stereotypical Black ways (Helms, 1993). Immersion is

characterized by anger over White racial oppression. Emersion allows African-Americans to engage in catharsis within a supportive Black community. In the immersion-emersion stage, individuals passionately celebrate African-American culture, as they move toward internalization of a new identity.

In stage four, *internalization*, African-Americans accept and are respectful of Black culture. The blending of personal and Black ascribed identity causes a shift in an individual's ability to interact with different groups outside Black culture. Most recently, Cross's work was referenced in a study which examined dual (Black and gay) identity development. The Psychology of Nigrescence model, among the popular work in the field of African-American identity, provides a four-stage roadmap for student affairs practitioners to use to acquire an improved understanding of how to foster African-American student growth (Flowers & Shuford, 2011). Although this study highlighted the lived experiences of African-American gay men that are important for persistence and college success, the lived experiences cannot be separated from their racial and cultural identity which impacts how the research study is informed.

Cass Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation

Equally cited in student development settings is Cass's Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation. Cass's model is similar to the Cross one in that it is a stage based and traverses an individual's transition from minimal awareness to acceptance of gay identity (Cass, 1984). Cass' six-stage model is linear and begins with *identity confusion*. Individuals at this stage of gay identity formation have awareness, feelings, and thoughts about an attraction to others of the same sex. During this stage, individuals become curious, confused, and anxious about the perceptions of being gay. In stage two, *identity comparison*, an individual accepts the possibility of being gay. This stage is marked by the individual's ability to address social stigmatization and

alienation and to develop a clearer picture of unexplained feelings. Stage three, known as *identity tolerance*, consists of a person acknowledging that they are probably gay and looking to establish contact with other gay individuals to reduce feelings of alienation (Cass, 1996).

Identity acceptance, the fourth stage in the Cass (1996) model, is characterized by a tenuous inner sense of self and frequent contact and friendship with members of the gay community to promote a positive self-perception. In the fifth stage, *identity pride*, individuals feel proud of the positive portrayals of gays and are angered by stigmatization. As a result, they limit contact with heterosexual peers, build loyalty to gay community members, and focus on gay causes and issues. *Identity synthesis*, the sixth and final stage of development, embodies all aspects of an individual's life, not just sexuality identity. During this stage, gay people judge others based on their personal qualities, there is less separation and distinction between heterosexual and gay peers and sexual identity is seen as one part of one's overall identity (Cass, 1996).

Although Cass's model focuses on the general adult male population and omits differences in racial and ethnic identity development, student affairs practitioners may glean from her work how students perceive their identity. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) discussed several stages and theoretical models specific to life span approach to people of color identity development.

D'Augelli's Life Span Model of Sexual Orientation Development

Life span identity development models assume that sexual orientation identity develops over the course of the lifespan and that every individual goes through their own unique experiences. A recent grounded theory study on gay identity development suggested that the path to sexuality identity is not linear, but rather individuals recycle through different phases of

development (Stevens, 2004). Stevens maintained that individuals often experience critical incidents (i.e., occurrences outside what is deemed normal) which cause dissonance, ongoing disclosure and self-assessment of gay identity (Stevens, 2004). Researchers pointed to the fluidity within multiple identities (D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996) which is in contrast to linear, sequential models of development (Cass, 1984). Among the most widely cited life span sexuality identity development models, D'Augelli's (1994) model addresses the value of diversity and recognizes the value of having visible gay and lesbian faculty and staff (Stevens, 2004).

The life span identity development model proposed by D'Augelli (1994) takes into account social context and represents a wider range of experiences than the previously discussed models (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This model addresses the environmental effects on an individuals' sexual orientation. According to D'Augelli, the model highlights the importance of identity disclosure, as well as connecting to and integrating with the gay community. The model is comprised of six interactive processes, which allows flexible movement to occur over the life span.

The first of these non-linear processes is *exiting heterosexual identity*, in which an individual recognizes the existence of gay and non-heterosexual feelings. This is also the period in which individuals share information about their gay identity with others. The second process is the *developing of a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity*, which involves thoughts and desires relating to being gay and connecting with others who affirm nonheterosexual identity. The next process is *developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity*, consists of an individual developing a support network of people who accept their sexual orientation (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The fourth process of D'Augelli's model acknowledges

becoming a lesbian- gay-bisexual offspring. As part of this stage of the process, an individual decides to disclose their gay identity with family and redefine their relationship after disclosure (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

During the fifth process, *developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status*, individuals establish meaningful relationships and are able to engage in non-heterosexual intimacy. Lastly, the sixth process involves entering *a lesbian- gay-bisexual community*. In this final step of the D'Augelli' s model, individuals develop a heightened political activism and awareness. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) recognized that D'Augelli's identity development processes operate independently and are not ordered in stages. This model has the potential to represent the experiences of specific racial and gender groups (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Race and Gender Identity Intersections

The advancement of research to explore the intersection of identities is based on the work of scholars who studied women of color from a multicultural feminist perspective. This interlocking system of race, class, and gender (Hill-Collins, 1999) allows an individual to experience privilege and oppression statuses simultaneously when race, class, and gender are combined. Further experiences, identities, and social locations never fit neatly into a single category (McCall, 2005). McCall noted that there is a need to study the intersections of complex identities since accurate information about an individual's lived experiences cannot be garnered from inferences. For example, in an effort to understand the race and gender experiences of Black women, White female's perspective and the experiences of Black men were used to address the experiences of Black women (McCall, 2005).

In addition, identity intersectionality research shows that gender and race are interdependent and cumulative of identity constructs. Hill-Collins (1999) maintained that

although the hierarchy within social structures (i.e., unequal power relations) generate injustice, race and gender can fuse to create unique experiences, new opportunities to foster social justice for women of color and all other groups (Hill-Collins, 1999).

Like other groups oppressed by race, class, and gender, the formation and development of identity of African-American gay men have received very little attention in the research literature to date. The limited number of studies on minority identity intersections (Flowers & Shuford 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and more specifically African-American gay men, has led college personnel to apply identity development theories formed and designed from research on Whites to this student population. These White based theories (Torres, Howard –Hamilton, & Cooper, 2011) are often applied to African-American gay men without the consideration of race, gender, and sexuality. As Flowers and Shuford (2011) have noted, even within the confines of limited research, the psychosocial development of African-American women, African-American heterosexual men, and African-American gay men are studied from a racial based model, and often from the standpoint of the influence that race has on academic achievement, student involvement, and perceptions of the institutional environment.

The literature on the intersection of this population has mostly remained separate from a collective total of identities. For example, researchers like Washington and Wall (2006) looked at spirituality, family influence and self –naming of Black gay men, and Harris (2003) focused his research on the low rate of campus involvement for Black gay men. In contrast and to highlight the dearth of research in the area of intersectionality of identities, Poynter and Washington (2005) asserted that theories seldom address how multiple identities intersect. Further, Patton (2011) added that besides the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI)

created by Jones and McEwen (2000), student development theories that explore sexual and racial identities are mutually exclusive.

African-American Gay Men Identity Intersectionality

Comprehensive literature on race and sexuality identity for African-American gay men is scarce, and existing work gives little attention to the impact of sexual orientation in the identity development process (Washington & Wall, 2006). Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) model of MMDI provides a conceptual framework for understanding identity intersections within individuals based on personal beliefs and choices. Identities are constructed and expressed differently according to the values, norms, and expectations and what individual view as most salient (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The MMDI model (Abes et al., 2007) comprises multiple identity dimensions that are influenced by the most significant parts of a student's varying social identities. This model is marked by concurrent, non-hierarchical experiences that make up an individual's multiple identities (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

The context in which a person experiences life (e.g. family, sociocultural conditions, and current experiences) is central to one's identity dimensions. The importance of identity dimension is fluid and dependent on contextual influences. Thus, identities are prioritized at varying times and concerning different circumstances based on what is perceived as most important (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). MMDI highlights the complexities of students' perceptions of their multiple identities, as well as how they come to perceive them. In addition, the model encourages student affairs professionals to develop their capacity by defining a meaningful identity intersection while helping students to develop more complex and empowering identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Abes, Jones, and McEwen's model also

provides the framework for understanding the continual construction of multiple identities and their relation to each other (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

The lived experiences of African-American gay men encompass the totality of their identity intersections. Thus, understanding their holistic development includes gaining knowledge about how students mature and make meaning of their developmental processes (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The convergence of multiple identity development such as of race and sexuality occurs simultaneously and could affect individual's interpersonal growth. Therefore, this study focused on and describe the levels of maturity in identity development, which accounts the inner strength to cope with adverse environments and resilience to persist.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework for the current study is Tinto's theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education. According to Tinto (1987, 1993), this theory claims that the likelihood of persistence increases when students integrate into an institution's academic (e.g., good grades) and social communities (e.g., peer interaction, faculty, and staff interaction). College persistence requires adequate adjustment, as well as meeting a minimum standard of academic performance. Unfortunately, not all students are able to meet these requirements and successfully complete college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). This study draws from the integration approach Tinto noted, which aims to understand the social and academic communities in which students experience college (Carter, 2006).

According to Tinto's model, students come to college with variance in background characteristics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 1993) to include abilities, race and gender identities. This model which Tinto developed to study student retention and departure puzzle has become the focus of much empirical study in college

student departure (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). This model of academic and social integration consists of several parts. First, students' performance in the classroom determines the extent to which they are able to integrate into the academic fabric of the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986). Second, the manner in which students interact with peer groups and faculty affects their overall social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986). Last, a combination of social and academic integration leads to increased commitment to the institution. When commitment levels increase, the likelihood that a student will remain enrolled and persist through college improves.

The present study examines African-American gay men's college experience and how related experiences influence persistence and college success. Literature on the lived experiences of African-American gay men and Tinto's (1993) theory serve as the framework on which the study was based. Tinto's model is widely used to explain the relevance of students' experiences in relation to college persistence.

History of the Theoretical Model

Tinto's model emerged from Durkheim's 1951 study on suicide, which in the context of higher education, parallels collective social and intellectual integration models (Liu & Liu, 1999). Durkheim's theory was used to examine and explain the link between modes of suicide and the society within which it occurs (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's theory analyzes the differences in departure rates between and within institutions (Tinto, 1993). Durkheim believed that suicide arises when individuals cannot integrate into society. Tinto credits college dropout, for some students, to a lack of integration and commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto wrote about this model in 1975, when he introduced the theory of student retention (Tinto, 1975). This

theory, which used a Durkheim-like sociological model that draws the likenesses between Tinto and Durkheim's work, explains why students leave college. A little over a decade later, Tinto refined the model in a later version published in 1987 and again in 1993. In the later version of his theory, he expands the model by shedding light on the influences of academic and social environments of the institution in helping or hindering student success (Tinto, 2012).

Tinto's sociological model provides an explanation of the experiences that account for retention, as there is no specific personality type associated with student departure (Tinto, 1993). It also explores what happens when college students' experiences are codified in society and are then integrated into African-American cultural socialization (i.e., history and Black pride) and gay cultural socialization (i.e., friendship, gay pride, stigma sensitivity). Tinto believes that colleges have not yet successfully translated access to educational opportunity to college completion (Tinto, 2012). He went on to add that after decades, institutions still continue to implement actions that are disconnected which does not validate success for underserved students, who sometimes find the campus environment unsupportive and inhospitable (Tinto, 2012). Other theories exist that account for college departure; however, Tinto argues that psychological theories emphasize the "shortcomings and weaknesses on the part of the individual to measure up to the demands of college life" (Tinto, 1993, p. 86). He added that environmental theories address educational attainment as part of the broader social success of individuals (e.g., social status, race, institutional prestige, and opportunity structure) (Tinto, 1993). In Tinto's view, the sociological model focuses on multiple interactions among members of an institution as a means to describe the process by which students leave college (Tinto, 1993). This interactive and longitudinal model involves a review of how students adjust to various difficulties and

feelings of isolation experienced on campus, as well as finances, learning, and external obligations, which can serve as reasons for departure (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's theory is comprised of three adjustment stages (*separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*), which are unique to each student and used to explain how individuals integrate into academic and social systems in college (Tinto, 1993). While there is not one pattern (e.g., time and place) by which these stages occur, during the *separation stage*, students dissociate themselves from past affiliations (e.g., communities of origin or family) to establish membership in their new community (i.e., college). According to Tinto, the *transition stage* takes place both during and after the *separation stage*, and is considered the period when students straddle between their old norms and full adaptation of their new environment (Tinto, 1993). When students undergo the aforementioned stages, they adapt new behavioral patterns and norms, which lead them to the final adjustment stage, *incorporation* (Tinto, 1993).

In his later work, *Completing College*, Tinto (2012) explained that his research is intended to lay the foundation for institutional action. Serving as a complement to the model established in his 1993 work, *Completing College* highlights the policies and actions educational institutions can introduce that could improve retention and completion rates, particularly among students, and within settings, where higher education is less desirable. "Not all students come to be incorporated into the life of the institution. Without external support, many will eventually leave the institution because they have been unable to set up satisfying intellectual and social memberships" (Tinto 1993, p. 99). The study under review suggests that institutional challenges (e.g., college dropout) for African-American gay men could be overcome by leveraging parts of Tinto's work to develop and implement improved retention programs.

Tinto (1993) Model of Academic Integration, Social Integration and Institutional Commitment

The degrees to which students integrate into the social and academic systems at their college or university significantly affect their likelihood to persist or drop out. This idea is central to Tinto's 1993 model. Commitment to an institution and the end goal of successful college completion is dependent on students' sense of inclusion within their college community. Tinto's model discusses the interaction process for individuals within an institution, which overtime (longitudinal) could account for dissociation (Tinto, 1993). This model argues that a student's departure from college stems from issues that hinder them (e.g., skills, finances, prior education, and members of the academic and social systems of the institution). According to Tinto (1993), the manner in which individuals navigate academic and social systems is directly related to how they integrate intellectually and how they adjust their commitment to staying enrolled.

Academic Integration

Students' perceived experiences and how they integrate academically (dimension), served as a guide for data collection and analysis for this study. A central part of Tinto's model is academic integration, which he explains as the connections, or lack thereof, that students establish with members in their academic communities (Tinto, 1993). An institution's primary academic concern is the formal education of its students. This includes classroom and laboratory activities led by faculty and staff (Tinto, 1993). During academic integration, students interact with instructors and feel a sense of academic and intellectual congruence. As part of that

integration, and to increase academic and social identity development, students may engage their faculty in both academic and non-academic matters.

Social Integration

Tinto's model also addresses how students socialize in order to be integrated into the institution. How students interact in informal, out-of-class activities with their peers, faculty, and staff will affect their feelings of belonging and strengthens or decreases their social and intellectual campus membership. According to Tinto (1993), the social bonds students develop in formal and informal systems of an institution serve to integrate those individuals into the college's social communities.

Goal and Institutional Commitment

The commitment individuals make to the institution helps them persist (Tinto 1993). Student commitment is defined by a willingness to invest time, energy, and other resources to meet the academic and social demands imposed an institution (Tinto, 1993). Individual commitment could stem from educational and occupational objectives (e.g., goal commitment) or the degree to which one works toward reaching set goals (i.e., institutional commitment). Irrespective of whether integration originates from an academic or the social domain, persistence is more likely when students commit to their goals (Tinto, 1993).

Given the prevalence of attrition within this population of students, and the lack of research supporting their retention, it would be useful to know why African-American gay men decide to stay in college. To date, researchers have not accounted for the academic and social experiences that lead African-American gay men to persist and succeed in college. Within Tinto's model, the interaction between student and institution leads to a commitment to remain persistent and successfully graduate. Tinto's theory entails how integration into the academic

and social domains affects how individuals adjust and commit to the institution (Tinto, 1993). This theoretical perspective accounts for increased persistence when students integrate into the various institutional communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

Tinto (1993) believed that individuals' unique experiences affect their college adjustment. He argued that the dissociation from past communities helps students transition to college. However, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) agreed that support from family members and peers are among the most central relationships for young adults and play an important role in academic outcomes. Whether institutional commitment or family support in part contributes to the overall college experience of African-American gay men, both are necessary for this study about the lived experiences that contribute to the persistence and college success.

Literature on African-American men in U.S higher education expands what is known about how campus climate, communities of origin, and identity development affect college success. Previous studies have created a framework to examine the lived experiences of African-American gay men. The current study focused on academic integration, social integration, maturity, and resilience strategies that African-American gay men utilize to remain persistent in college. This study intends to explore these mitigating factors in an effort to provide a better platform for developing and improving retention strategies.

Summary of Chapter

The experiences that affect college success and persistence for African-American gay men in U.S colleges are distinctly different from those of other groups of students. Given that African-American gay men face racial and sexual minority development issues, in addition to issues related to normal college adjustment, their ability to withstand racism, heterosexism, and

homophobia may contribute to their institutional integration. An examination of the experiences that promote the perseverance of African-American gay men is especially important for building the framework, better support, and retention strategies. This study aims to assess and determine the factors that effectively encourage African-American gay men to persist and be successful in their college education pursuits, as well as contribute to existing research and student affairs and counseling practices designed to improve student retention.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I explained the methodology used to carry out the research, which aimed to understand the influences that contributed to the persistence and college success of African-American gay men, who despite adversities, manage to persist in U.S institutions of higher education. A brief rationale for the phenomenological approach clarified the use of a qualitative design which was intended to explore the commonalities within experiences of African-American gay men (enrolled in the same institution of higher education). Phenomenology as a research method allowed me to explore commonalities among the subject group's experiences and to use that information as the basis for identifying reasons that affect academic persistence and college success rates for African-American gay men.

I employed a qualitative strategy because I wanted to assess the shared experiences (Creswell, 2007) of African-American gay men that enable them to remain focused on academic pursuits despite being subject to adversity. Through this process, I captured and explored answers to a series of questions designed to find out how experiences specific to college enrolled African-American gay men impact their academic persistence.

The intent of this study was to understand the experiences (inside and outside the classroom) that influenced African-American gay men about academic persistence and college graduation. A clear understanding of the factors that significantly affect African-American gay men and their ability to make it through to college graduation could help student affairs

practitioners to create retention programs designed to meet the specific needs of this student population.

I used the following question to guide the research process and explored the experiences of African-American gay men enrolled at a large research university in the Southeast region of the U.S.

Research Question:

What are the experiences on campus that assist, and the programs and services on campus that contribute to African-American gay men's persistence and success in college?

This chapter details the conceptual framework for the study and provides a description of qualitative paradigm and phenomenological approach. In addition, this chapter addresses social constructivism, which explained how reality and subjective interpretations and meanings of experiences were formed (Creswell, 2007) as well as the empirical proposal that provided an overview of the population studied, data collection methodology, and analysis methods. To ensure credibility, statements of trustworthiness, authenticity, and dependability were explained.

Overview of Qualitative Research

Among the many comprehensive definitions of qualitative research, the ones described herein are more closely aligned with this study. Van Maanen (1979) underscored that qualitative method is an umbrella term that covered an array of interpretive techniques, that seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. This description also aligned with that of Hays and Singh (2012) and Merriam (2009) who explained that this method studies a phenomenon, or researches something in a systematic manner. Other definitions of qualitative methods that were relevant to this study included Denzin and Lincoln's (2000)

interpretation, that “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consisted of a set of interpretative, material practices that made the world visible. These practices transform the world” (p.3). Schwandt’s (2007) description stated, “Qualitative inquiry illustrated aesthetics and explained how aspects of the experiences are perceived” (pp. 248-249) and how to extend knowledge in a particular field by bridging the gap between research and practice (Hays & Singh, 2012). The impetus for qualitative methodology in the present study sought to make sense of and to interpret phenomena about the meaning which the study’s participants made.

Qualitative inquiry, as an interconnected, interpretive approach, gave me a better understanding of the subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). After the study was completed, I understood how these African-American gay men made meanings of their lived experiences and related those meanings to persistence and college success.

Because qualitative inquiry occurs in real world settings without researcher manipulation, the phenomenon of interest unfolded naturally, in that I did not have any predetermined thoughts or expectations about the study. The conditions under which the interviews took place helped the participants to feel at ease they responded candidly to open-ended questions and behaved and acted within their context (Creswell, 2007). The sense of security that participants felt helped them to also develop a level of trust with me thus, they shared openly some of their most private experiences.

Qualitative research studies the sense that people make of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009). Although commonalities within participants’ perspectives on their lived experience emerged, there was a lack of theory to adequately explain the cause of this phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Tinto (2012) noted that clear institutional

expectations contribute to student academic success. He further added that statements and actions of members of the university community directly and indirectly shape these expectations (Tinto, 2012). Thus, understanding the students' sense of belonging was crucial to understanding how particular forms of social and academic experiences affected African-American gay men. Therefore, I used inductive research logic to provide a cogent flow of collected and analyzed data from the "ground up" without a theory or from any of my personal experiences and perspective.

Qualitative Methodology

I interviewed African-American gay men for this study in an effort to uncover and report on prominent aspects of participants' lived experiences from their perspectives (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Central to this inquiry was the theoretical framework used to gather data and to build concepts to account of lived experiences. Hays and Singh (2012) clarified that in inductive analysis, data drives a deeper understanding of an issue or phenomenon. Therefore, the descriptions of lived experiences garnered through participants' interviews revealed patterns, which explained the emerged themes (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenological Research

Moustakas (1994) contended that phenomenological research is an approach used to interpret and describe the meaning of individuals' experiences. The phenomenology process begins with developing an understanding of how participants experience their life-world, and then the investigator searches for commonalities across participants' interpretations to find out how lived experiences relate to a particular phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). This method of inquiry aims to elicit the participants' experiences and to reconstruct events to explain past happenings (Schwandt, 2007). As stated by Van Manen (1990), "Phenomenology tries to

uncover and describe structures, as well as the internal meaning of lived experiences, and the significance of those experiences in a fuller and deeper manner” (p. 10).

In this study, I gained valuable insight into how African-American gay men perceived and related to both negative and positive experiences in the overall campus. Those factors that contributed to the college persistence of African-American gay men are critical to understanding how the existence of an encouraging (or lack thereof) environment contributes to college success. Washington and Wall (2006), for example, found that African-American gay men who felt that their identities were affirmed and supported on campus were more likely to feel encouraged to continue their academic pursuit. Equally, higher education scholars recommend that student and faculty should engage in meaningful interactions to influence the academic and social domains that promote intellectual development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto 1987) and success. The data gathered were examined and grouped in a manner that explained how the persistence and overall college success of out African-American gay men were influenced by their experiences as ethnic and sexual minorities.

Rationale for Phenomenology

Although a plethora of information to delineate research paradigms exists for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Patton 2002), the approach for this study came about after careful review of several qualitative methodologies. Notwithstanding the notion that phenomenology underlies all qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), the philosophical lens of phenomenology research focuses on one’s experiences and how transformation occurs because of those experiences (Merriam, 2009). This study concentrated on the lived experiences of African-American gay men who were enrolled in a U.S. institution of higher education. The

study also examined the meaning and interpretation of these experiences, as perceived by this population of students.

Based on the information gathered from participants' interviews, I determined and revealed the meaning of their experiences and considered how these experiences affected college success for African-American gay men. Van Manen (1990) wrote clearly about research which focused on the lived experiences and asserted that the description or the meaning assigned to lived experiences is encapsulated in phenomenological research.

Phenomenological human science is the study of lived experiential meaning; it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness. In this focus upon meaning, phenomenology differs from some other social or human science which may focus not on meanings but on statistical relationships among variables, on the predominance of social opinions, or on the occurrence or frequency of certain behaviors etc...phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld. (p. 11)

This description of phenomenology also distinguishes the phenomenological paradigm from other social and human science approaches.

Using Phenomenological Strategy in the Present Study

Van Manen (1990) noted that phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experiences. This explanation was central to understanding how one positions him or herself in the experience to make sense of the experience. Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved (Moustakas, 1994). For example, a high academic achieving student may harbor feelings of depression related to his gay identity

(phenomenology), and as a result, sees his college tenure as a failure and consider withdrawing (interpretation). Themes garnered from the consciousness of lived experiences could be useful in improving counseling practice (Hays & Singh, 2012) and providing retention support for marginalized groups of students. As Van Manen (1990) stated, “Lived experience is the breathing of meaning” (p. 36) to relive and make sense of experiences.

Research Paradigms

Research paradigms influence the relationship between researcher and participant. Creswell (2009) and Hays and Singh (2012) stated that research paradigms are worldview guides that influence the research process. While many researchers agree that core philosophical paradigms are the foundation for understanding the nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009), there is a lack of consistency among researchers about how one should succinctly discuss the research philosophical perspectives (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative paradigm is thought to be a belief system that influences ideas about the research processes (Hays & Singh, 2012) and helped me to explain the research methodologies (Creswell, 2009).

Among the many philosophical positions noted by experts in social science research (Merriam, 2009), the social constructivism worldview emerged as one that is commonly used by researchers in human science studies (Creswell, 2009). The social constructivism viewpoint underscored that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and developed subjective meanings for their experiences (Creswell, 2009). Social constructivism paradigms in counseling could also aid practitioners in making judgments (subjective) in everyday practice and deriving meaning out of the interpersonal context (Cottone, 2007). Creswell (2009) offered, “The subjectivity of social constructivism paradigm holds varied and multiple meanings and

investigators search for complexity of views rather than narrow meanings” (p. 8). In addition, “Researchers make sense of the meaning others have about the world” (p. 8). According to Hays and Singh (2012), social constructivists argued that reality should never be labeled as objective because the voices of the researcher and the participants are biased and occupy different cultural experiences and identities.

Using Social Constructivism Paradigm in the Present Study

A review of the philosophical perspective about qualitative research paradigm suggests that researchers do not “find” knowledge; instead, they construct it (Creswell, 2007; Merriam 2009). Similarly, Creswell (2007) noted that:

These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meaning into a few categories or ideas....Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but formed through interaction with others. (p. 20-21)

Using this approach, I examined how participants constructed and interpreted the reality of their lived experiences. Patton (2002) also provided an explanation of social constructivism, stating, “To say that the socially constructed world of humans is not physically real like the sun doesn’t mean that it isn’t perceived and experienced as real by real people” (p. 96). Patton’s example makes the case for adapting the social constructivism premise for this study because participants’ realities, and how those realities are interpreted, can be used to steer how the study is conducted which finally leads to identifying causes that contribute (Creswell, 2007) to persistence and college success among this population.

Patton also highlighted the difference between constructivism and constructionism.

“Social constructionism refers to the process of forming knowledge about reality, not

constructing reality itself,” whereas social constructivism, “is the meaning–making activity itself” (p. 96-97). Based on this definition, the social constructivism approach used for this study describes the lived experiences of African-American gay men. Every unique experience forms the basis for how one understands the world.

In an effort to develop patterns of meaning about the participants’ lived experiences, I acknowledged my biases: I recognized and admitted how my background shapes how I interpret my environment and those of others. African-American gay men collected and examined data about their experiences, specifically those experiences on campus that helped them to remain persistent and succeed in college. Using data from upperclass students that they member checked for accuracy and clarity, I identified that researchers must recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation. Therefore, they must position themselves in the research to admit how their personal assumptions and interpretation of the phenomenon originate (and are shaped by) personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2009). Before I began the study and to minimize personal biases, I along with the research team, bracketed (Hays & Singh, 2012) our experiences and allowed patterns of meaning about the participants’ experiences to occur naturally.

The Researcher

In her identification of the role of a researcher, Merriam (2009) noted the first key part of understanding the nature of qualitative research is first, the meaning and understanding of how people make sense of their lives (using phenomenology in the study, as previously noted). Second is the process of gathering data without theory (that is, the data collection section of this chapter). Third, I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As stated by Creswell (2007), “The researcher collects data themselves through examining documents,

behavior observation, and interviewing participants, [and] is actually the person who gathers the information” (p. 38). The final product is the rich descriptions produced from qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2009). The researcher must understand the impact of researcher competence (Hays & Singh, 2012), especially about interacting with potentially vulnerable populations such as individuals who are out to some and not to others due to fear of rejection (Ford & Priest, 2004; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). The importance of strategic outness compartmentalizes those who are not told in order to protect and manage gay identity disclosure (Orne, 2011). The study’s participants trusted me with confidential aspects of their lives thus, as guardian it was important for me to uphold the highest level of care and integrity of this study.

As a gesture of appreciation for taking part in the study, each participant received a Visa gift card valued at \$25 (Appendices A, B, and C). Although Larson and Sachau (2009) said incentives could increase participation rates and response biases, I screened participants using specific criteria and provided verbal and written communication. Prior to the start of the interview, I informed each participant in both writing and verbally that they may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (Appendices C and D).

Subjectivity Statement

Consequently, my personal qualities may have affected how I interpreted the research phenomenon. Peshkin (1988) asserted that these qualities could filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and distort the outcome of the study. Subjectivity is defined as the researcher’s understanding of a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). Innately, how the study is represented could be slanted toward the researchers’ interest in obtaining a particular outcome and configure the study’s data (Hays & Singh, 2012; Peshkin, 1988). Hays and Singh (2012) also

suggested that researchers should be aware of the subjectivity process and monitor factors to either embrace or minimize, because subjectivity is inherently present in all aspects of life.

According to Hays and Singh (2012), researchers who seek to minimize their subjectivity do so as advocates who must accurately represent participants' stories and use only transcribed text as data. As a result, researchers grow closer to the study, and subjectivity becomes a vehicle through which to understand the data. In the proposed study, I expected that subjectivities would likely emerge because of my identity as a heterosexual African-American female ally for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students.

I held several diversity employment positions in higher education as a student affairs administrator and chaired an employment search committee to hire a coordinator for a university's LGBTQ resource center. In addition, I was among the first group of admission counselors to recruit prospective college students from the first LGBTQ designated high school in the Northeast. I credited my academic persistence to relationships formed inside and outside the classroom. Specifically, I credited the trajectory of my academic success to a mentoring program for ethnic minority, first generation, immigrant students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in which I took part as a mentee during college.

I have an expansive background in academic support services for marginalized students, which included being the co-founder of a mentoring program to expose disadvantaged middle school students to college life. In addition, as an outsider to the gay culture, my assumptive world (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009) included homophobic and negative messages toward nonheterosexuality, so I am interested in learning about gay students' issues which affect college success. These occurrences, in particular the latter, are relevant to my attitude and approach to

the study. In this study, I strived to remain cognizant of harmful stereotypes and sensitive issues and to be objective always.

According to Hays and Singh (2012), researchers who employ phenomenology as an approach to research must ignore or set aside prior explanations of phenomena in an effort to understand the experiences of the study's participants. Accounts of the participants' lived experiences served as a reminder of the study's purpose for me. In an effort to focus on the phenomenon of the participants' lived experiences, I bracketed (Hays & Singh, 2012) irrelevant judgments by setting assumptions aside. Ortlipp (2008) suggested that researchers could use reflexive journaling to create transparency to examine personal assumptions and goals. By keeping a reflective journal, I saw patterns within the research trail that could alter methodologies and reshape data analysis (Ortlipp, 2008). She proposed that data analysis visibility as a result of using a reflexive journal would give her readers an understanding behind her decisions, thinking, values, and experiences (Ortlipp, 2008).

For this study, I remained consistent and transparent and avoided misinterpretation of the participants' lived experiences. For example, I am an advisor to African-American students, some of whom identify as gay men, some of whom are strategically out. As such, the experiences of the study's participants mirrored those of my advisees. Instances occurred throughout the interviews where I expected to hear similarities in participants' stories to those of my advisees. I also refrained the urge to offer advice to participants. To avoid any biases and breach of confidentiality that could potentially harm the integrity of the study, I did not share any of the personal stories that I learned from other study participants. In addition, I listened to, transcribed, and analyzed all audio recordings consistent with the care that I showed each participant. My work and personal experiences shaped how I interacted with and learned about

the on-campus experiences of African-American gay men. Participants' willingness to share their stories confirmed that my subjectivity did not dissuade them nor modify what they shared.

Statement of Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Trustworthiness is considered the credibility of the research data. Similarly, data credibility was a major criterion to determine consistency at the conclusion of the study. The way in which participants recalled and interpreted their experiences affected the integrity of the study. This pattern became apparent once I began to address segments of the data. I analyzed the data by moving between different areas and then I compared one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). For example, all participants described their peer group support as a key element in their college success. To support this effort, I identified two research team members who confirmed the analyzed data. According to Hays and Singh (2012), using a research team in some level of the investigative process strengthens the overall design and increases others' confidence in the study. Both research team members understood qualitative research inquiry. Before their involvement, I met with the research team and discussed personal values in an effort to bracket biases and maintain transparency and the integrity of the study. In addition, the study's participants reviewed the written transcript of their taped interview for accuracy through the member checking process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Finally, an auditor examined the data for accuracy in how I interpreted the participants' stories.

Two graduate students from the Counseling and Student Personnel Services program served as research team members. They reviewed, confirmed, and when necessary, challenged the findings and conclusions of the study. Both individuals work in higher education and have many years of experience as student affairs practitioners providing services to marginalized groups of students. According to Hays and Singh (2012), research team members should share an

interest in the topic. The research teams' demonstrated interest in working with marginalized student populations contributed to their selection for this project.

In addition, a former doctoral student served as auditor to determine the extent to which I completed a comprehensive and rigorous study (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Because this auditor holds no interest in the outcome of the investigation, he independently authenticates the study's findings (Merriam, 2009). Authenticity in qualitative study is defined as the researcher's genuine understanding of participants' lived experiences. The fairness in which I presented the participants' perspectives was reviewed by members of the research team (noted above) and through a member check process. Through member check, participants reviewed transcripts (Hays and Singh, 2012) and confirmed that what they said in audiotaped sessions was transcribed with the same intent and meaning. Additionally, participants reviewed themes for accuracy and recognition of their experiences in the interpretation. Two participants made suggestions to more accurately reflect their perspectives. I asked the auditor to audit the research findings to ensure and uphold the study's trustworthiness and authenticity. He combed through the data for consistency and accuracy in participants' voices and that themes developed without biases.

Research Site

The site selected for the study is an institution in the Southeast region of the United States. This institution has over 20,000 enrolled undergraduate students in a small college town environment. Having been in existence for over 200 years, the study site is a high research activity (Carnegie Classification, 2010), land grant institution. It also offers residential and commuter options, full and part-time enrollment, over 200 majors and an excess of 600 recognized organizations. The site provides several student life units that are purposed to

support specific student interests. These programs are geared toward student life enrichment and designed to help students find their niche in communities of learners with like interests.

Sample population

The study's participants comprised of African-American gay men enrolled in a large research institution in the Southeastern U.S. Consequently, I chose a purposive and snowball sampling to yield the participants for the study. This sample of students identified as African-American gay men who were admitted into the university as freshmen, with continuous full-time enrollment each semester, and who have completed no less than 90 credit hours toward a bachelor degree. I used participants enrolled in either the junior and senior year of study because logically their lived experiences at the university would consist of rich in-depth history. Moreover, students who persist to the senior year are less likely to withdraw from an institution, although research suggested that students may leave at any given time while they are enrolled (Ishitani, 2006). In addition, underclass students and those who transferred from other institutions would not have the longevity or the historical context that added the range of experiences needed for this study. In an effort to gain access to African-American gay men within the mentioned criteria, Hays and Singh (2012) recommended the use of snowball sampling method.

Merriam (2009) noted that snowball, chain, or network sampling is among the most common form of purposeful sampling. Once participants were identified, they, in turn, referred others to take part in the study. Of the eight participants, one student heard about the study from his supervisor, three students responded to posted flyers, and prior participants told four others about the study. With this research project, each African-American gay man brought his individual lived experience to the investigation.

Criteria for Participant Selection

I recruited participants through the institutions' LGBT Resource Center, Office of Multicultural Services and Programs, Black Faculty and Staff listserv, GLOBES listserv and LGBT (Lambda Alliance) listserv (Appendix A), and announced the investigation through posted flyers (Appendix B). The campus' LGBT website publicized the study in the form of a flyer (Appendix B) and on bulletin boards in the LBGT Resource Center, the Office of Multicultural Services and Programs, and on other bulletin boards across the institution visited by large volume of students. All participants agreed to member check their transcribed interview for accuracy in representation of their voice. With the exception of one interview which lasted over two hours, each interview lasted between 60 minutes and one and one half hours.

I chose participants for the study after I confirmed their eligibility to participate (Appendix C) as defined by specific characteristics: (1) African-American, (2) gay man who is out on campus, (3) admitted to the college as a freshman with continuous full-time enrollment each semester and 4) completed 90 or more credit hours toward a bachelor degree. Prior to the interview, each participant and I spoke briefly by phone to determine their appropriateness for study participation (Appendix C). Each person who took part in the study received a \$ 25 Visa gift card as an incentive.

Participants

African-American gay men enrolled as undergraduates who have completed at least 90 credit hours toward a bachelor degree and who contributed thick descriptions (Hays & Singh, 2012) of their lived experiences took part in the study. On approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Georgia, I recruited and interviewed 8 participants. Interviews took place in my office on South campus of this institution. I explained the purpose of the study

and addressed questions about privacy before participants signed the informed consent. I also outlined the importance of confidentiality and reminded participants about their rights to withdraw from study without notice (Appendix D). I created a safe and respectful interviewing environment, I reserved a private meeting space and then confirmed with each participant that the room met their safety expectations. I developed and asked semi –structured questions (Appendix E) which included themes of academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1993). I modeled empathetic listening throughout each interview session. One interview session lasted over two hours because the participant had an emotional experience. He shared intimate details of his experiences and cried when he recalled some of the adversities he overcame. Two other participants interviewed for over approximately an hour and twenty minutes the rest kept their interview sessions to about an hour.

Data Collection

The meaning African-American gay men credit to their lived experiences which causes persistence in college formed the basis of this phenomenological study. I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in June of 2014 and began to collect data in September of the said year. Approval of the study and informed consent of the participants (Appendix D), ensured the investigation followed proper protocol to protect participants in the study from harm (Hays & Singh, 2012). I continued to collect data until late January of 2015. Data collected from interviews were analyzed to allow for interpretation of meaning from the African-American gay men who participated in the study. I chose to tape record the interview sessions with participants to accurately capture their stories.

Data collection and analysis in qualitative studies can occur simultaneously, in and outside the field (Merriam, 2009). As stated by Merriam (2009), “Data that has been analyzed

while being collected is both parsimonious and illuminating” (p. 171), and concurrent processes shape the final product. She prefers this process, as it allows the researcher to organize and refine research question, decrease repetition, and manage the volume of material (Merriam, 2009).

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Merriam (2009) also provided a framework for conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously. I conducted the first two interviews in early September 2014. While I waited for other prospective participants to contact me, I began the process of transcribing and analyzing this interview. As I listened to the first interview, I realized that I had to clarify one of the interview protocol questions which stated: As a student at UGA, tell me about what has been helpful to you, in your academic pursuit. The student repeated the question several times without answering until I re-worded the question to: tell me about what you found helpful to you, as a college student here at UGA? At that time, the participant responded with specific examples. For the subsequent interviews, I used the re-worded question instead of the original version to collect data.

In addition to data collection, I asked participants to member check data for accuracy, I analyzed, and asked the auditor to independently audit the data. Merriam (2009) suggested that an inventory of interviews, field notes, and other documents should be organized and labeled to suit the investigator’s work style. I kept all written documents in a password protected electronic file. I kept the audio recorder used in the study at my home in a locked safe.

Qualitative Data Collection Methodology

I audio recorded the conversations with participants as both physical evidence of collected data and as vital for reviewing, managing, and analyzing data (Hays & Singh, 2012). I also noticed that some participants appeared nervous about audio recording our conversation, but I explained the purpose of my study, I talked briefly about my student affairs background and

what I hoped to gain from their stories. Once I established trust, some of their anxiety reduced. Over time, the participants became at ease and shared their stories candidly.

Interviewing in My Study

Semi-structured interviews enabled me to pace the ordering of questions and gave the interviewees ample space and time to elaborate on their responses. Equally, this interview protocol allowed me to change and add interview questions (Hays & Singh, 2012) as needed.

I maintained confidentiality throughout the data collection (audio recordings and written data), in that I did not reveal the participants identity and did not disclose any information about the participants to anyone. I stored all data in a secured locked safe to further protect the identity of the participants. I conducted face-to-face, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, this helped to protect the participant's identity from disclosure. I presented my study to participants on the premises that information about them would be kept confidentially and safe. Each student chose a pseudonym as the preferred name used throughout the interview. During the first interview, I discovered that African-American gay men sometimes use pseudonyms in their friendship groups. As a result, I informed each participant that I would erase the self-selected pseudonym to further protect the identities of all participants. First, I assigned each participant a number and erased the initial pseudonym. Then I matched each of the numbers to the pseudonyms that I created. Last, I edited the transcribed data to remove the original pseudonyms and replaced them with the ones I created. Based on data storage principles outlined by Creswell (2007), I kept backup copies of files, I developed a master list of files, and I protected the identity and pseudonyms of participants. I reminded participants that all information shared in the context of the study should remain confidential, and that I am willing to not tolerate any reference to the study in public spaces and away from the confines of the study. Records of the participants

profile and interview transcripts were kept in a secure location and separate from the research site.

Interview Questions

I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2007) as a general guide for the study to help participants explore thoughts, feelings and experiences relevant to the research topic. I developed a list of questions (Appendix E) which served as starting points for dialogue with research participants. Because I wanted to learn about the lived experiences of African-American gay men which contribute to persistence in college, I developed questions which allowed participants the freedom to lead the conversation. These questions were grounded in Tinto's theory which stated when students integrate socially and intellectual into the community, they develop a commitment to the institution and are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). The questions allowed participants to voice their stories of what happens inside and outside the classrooms that influences their decision to stay enrolled in college.

Data Analysis

The transcribed narratives that detailed African-American gay men's lived experiences provided the data for analysis. After I transcribed the interview, I first checked the transcripts against the audio recordings for accuracy. Then I made a paper copy of each transcript and gave the document to the respective participants to member check for accurate representation of their lived experiences. After participants verified their stories and returned the transcripts, I edited and formatted the data into QDA Miner coding software. I bracketed my personal biases and experiences before I read and began to code the data. Next, I read the interviews, highlighted important and germane statements and annotated the data. Even though the interviews took place over the course of two semesters, I adhered to the same standard of care for all data. The

continuous data collection and analysis process continued from early September 2014 to late January 2015.

Once the data collection and member check ended, I coded the data that were similar to one another (Hays & Singh, 2012). Next, I coded and looked for patterns of similarity within the remainder of the data. For consistency, I used constant comparison to code and recoded data. I also used a codebook to organize predetermined codes. In the end, 114 codes emerged. Once I completed the initial cycle of coding (Saldana, 2009), I summarized and defined all codes. For example, when several participants mentioned that other people helped them to remain persistent in college, I defined that statement as support from others. I then identified non-repetitive codes that emerged as important and sorted them to ensure that I did not overlook any relevant information. For example, when a participant mentioned that he forgave his abusive parents, I recognized the statement as powerful and individualized. I then highlighted and placed the non-repetitive codes in a separate category. After I re-read the transcripts, I developed categories to fit the initial list of 114 codes. I used horizontalization (Patton, 2002) to carefully examine data which provided an understanding of each participant's experience.

Next, I did a second cycle of coding (Saldana, 2009) to further develop, and in some cases I reconfigured the initial codes. Once I completed the coding process, I grouped and reconfigured the codes into six categories. Before I discarded the codes that did not fit into the six categories, I revisited the transcripts to search for other relevant experiences I may have missed.

Before I began to identify themes, I revisited my subjectivity and suspended all knowledge and biases about the participants in an effort to focus solely on the students' experiences. To accurately reflect the experiences, I created a separate document using only the

data represented the six categories. I grouped and rearranged the categories to form four central themes to describe the participants' lived experiences. Although some of the participants' statements fit more than one category, I interpreted and analyzed each category to make sense of the data and address the research question. The extended interview timeframe allowed me to refine questions, look for early patterns in participants statements, and thoroughly examine the data. As a result, four themes emerged to represent participants' stories about their lived experiences which caused them to remain persistent and succeed in college.

Authenticity and Dependability in Data Analysis

Authenticity

For this study, I made a deliberate attempt to ensure that all voices were represented and balanced (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This notion of authenticity also supported the navigation between what African-American gay men have experienced and how they assigned meaning to those experiences. To account for multiple and diverse voices in the data, I interviewed people with different viewpoints of the phenomenon. Further, I used a research team to confirm analyzed data for accuracy, conducted member checks based on feedback from participants (Merriam, 2009), and used an auditor to examine the data for accuracy in how participants' voices were represented in the data analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative data analysis is concerned with the consistency and credibility of the study (Schwandt, 2007). In this study, I learned about students lived experiences from a thorough analysis of personal accounts (Merriam, 2009) of this group of students. Hays and Singh (2012) noted that in an attempt to uphold consistency and credibility, I conferred about findings with the research team to ensure that the study was dependable. To

further ensure credibility in my research study, an auditor reviewed the data and provided feedback . To this end, the overall research project presented consistent and credible evidence to authenticate the study's findings.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter described the methodology that I used to learn how experiences affected academic persistence among African-American gay men enrolled in United States institutions of higher education. A review of qualitative methods provided the reason for the use of phenomenology as the paradigmatic focus for this study. Social constructivism perspective outlined how I found complex meanings (Creswell, 2009) about the lived experiences of study's participants. Afterwards, I addressed the techniques the data collection techniques for a purposive sample population. Participant interviews, member checks, bracketing, research team analysis, and the independent data authentication from an auditor helped to ensure a credible, consistent, and trustworthy study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the contributing factors that affect persistence and college success among African-American gay men in U.S. institutions of higher education. This chapter presents key findings gathered from information shared by eight participants. I obtained tape-recorded interviews from African-American students who identified as gay men enrolled in their junior or senior year of college. After data analysis, the following four themes emerged as consistent representations of participants' voices: influential others who create a campus environment to support student success, using resilience strategies to remain positive and focused on academic pursuit, co-curricular activities that encourage student engagement and acceptance in peer groups, and identity development that helped to promote self-efficacy and academic persistence. This chapter provides readers an overview of the factors that contributed to the persistence and success experienced by the study's participants. The findings revealed that African-American gay men enrolled in this university experienced adversity that affected their academic pursuits, yet remained committed to earn a college degree.

Participant Profiles

The eight African-American students who participated in the study are self-identified gay men (Table 4.1). Participants created pseudonyms for identification purpose instead of their real names. During the first interview with Phil, I discovered that the pseudonym that he chose was used for other purposes. He shared that many in the African-American gay community used

pseudonyms to hide their identities from other African-American students and their families. They also used pseudonyms as codes of communication within the African-American LGBT community. Because of this information, and to ensure that they could not be identified, I reiterated the importance of anonymity, then I informed participants that I planned to assign each of them a new pseudonym.

Six seniors and two juniors in this study contributed rich details of their lived experiences as out African-American gay men. Participants had diverse experiences which included their coming out stories, how they dealt with homophobia, coping in a predominantly White institution (PWI), and finding and using support. The following quotes provide insight into each participant's overall experience and strategies that they used to remain resilient:

Al: "I am from a very small town and I struggled with my sexual orientation. When I got to the university, I came out of my shell and college became fun."

Andy: "It was an eye-opening experience coming to a predominantly White university. I struggled to find my place here, but as I tell students in my dance company, the show must go on. I don't focus on the past or on homophobia. I am going forward with my dreams."

Ben: "When I finally came out to my roommate my freshman year, things got so bad that I had to move out of my residence hall. I never dealt with the kind of homophobia where it wasn't just words anymore, where it actually impacted me in so many ways and I was really depressed....but I knew that I couldn't let that prevent me from working hard."

Dennis: "My family does not talk about my gay identity and that is so scary to me because I matter. The people in the fashion organization here and my friends are mainly my support."

Josh: "I feel like me being here [at the university] has taught me a lot about myself and how I am. I thought I would have gone crazy and be depressed all the time, but I was not."

Matt: “As a first generation college student who was extremely introverted and had low self-esteem, I benefitted from support from my friends and my professors are helping me to get through college, so far.”

Mike: “I feel like people put you down to deny your worth. Once I stopped the self-hate, I began to police my behavior less than I used to.”

Phil: “I enrolled in this university directly after high school. Before I became comfortable with who I am, I used to tell people that I was bisexual. I knew in middle school that I was different.”

Table 4.1

Participants Profile		
Name	Years of university enrollment	Academic Major
AL	Senior	Math
Andy	Senior	Fashion Merchandising
Ben	Junior	Psychology
Dennis	Senior	Fashion
Josh	Senior	Political Science
Matt	Senior	Psychology
Mike	Senior	Health Promotion Behavior
Phil	Junior	Advertising

Participants' Experiences

The experiences described in the personal statements above highlighted factors that contribute to the persistence and college success among African-American gay men. The following research question was used as a guide to develop the interview protocol about the experiences of the study's participants:

RQ: What are the experiences on campus that assist, and the programs and services on campus that contribute to African-American gay men's persistence and success in college?

Once initially identified, potential participants chosen for the study were confirmed to have met the research criteria. They identified themselves as African-American gay man, admitted to the institution as a freshman, with continuous full-time enrollment each semester and having completed 90 or more credit hours toward a bachelor degree. This identification and selection process continued for over five months and ended with rich data about the lived experiences that affect African-American gay men's college persistence and success. After the interview process, transcription of data, and member check, I began to categorize the data and identify patterns. Several categories emerged which included academics (e.g., faculty, majors, and grades), extended family involvement (e.g., peers, faculty, administrators, and supervisors), developing identity (e.g., African-American, gay, religion, and low socioeconomic background), overcoming obstacles by becoming resilient (e.g., racism, homophobia, isolation, heterosexism), participating in social and co-curricular activities (e.g., leadership opportunities, peer socialization, fraternities), and having a support network (e.g., faculty, peers, mentors, advisors). I sorted and reduced broad categories of data into significant statements and then I combined those statements into themes to represent participants lived experiences. Next, I identified similar patterns within the data set; I created groups and then described them into themes. For example, some codes from the extended family involvement and having support network categories were merged into a broader theme reflecting the influential individuals that create a campus environment that support student success. Ultimately, the following four themes emerged from condensed categories:

1. Influential individuals create a campus environment that supports student success
2. Using resilience strategies used to remain positive and focused on academic pursuits
3. Co-curricular activities that encourage student engagement and acceptance in peer groups

4. Identity development that helped to promote self-efficacy and academic persistence

These four themes represent answers to the research question. The research question, a brief description of experiences, and excerpts from participants' narratives represented the themes (see Table 4.2 below)

Table 4.2 Description and Excerpts of Experiences Affecting African-American Gay Men's College Persistence and Success

Theme	Description of Experiences	Excerpts from participants narratives
Influential others create a campus environment to support student success	Participants express the importance of unconditional peer support and specific faculty/staff involvement in student success.	<p>“I've remained close with my friends since freshmen year. And we're still always together, always hanging out, always...we're always supporting each other, because we all have very different dreams and hope to succeed in what we want to do.”</p> <p>“Like a lot of the professors that I've known, I talked to them more after I'm not in the class anymore. I keep seeing one of my psychology professors everywhere and like we have conversations and it's weird, but it's like wow, we're talking and this is cool. And at my job, one of my bosses has put me in contact with some grad students here in the PhD. program in clinical psychology, which I guess that's a good resource, by the way.”</p>
Using resilience strategies to remain positive and focused on academic pursuit	Participant describes examples of what he believes characterizes resiliency	<p>“And I figured by me being open and me like emptying out myself and showing people what it is like when you embrace yourself.”</p> <p>“I kind of stayed away from everyone else, I just took summer classes, saved up for school because I'm...I'm just trying to graduate and have a better life than what I have.”</p>

Co-curricular activities that encourage student engagement and acceptance in peer groups	Participant refers to influences of co-curricular involvement. (i.e., leadership, mentorship)	<p>“I help promote diversity awareness on campus and help students who live in housing find out about resources on campus that can benefit them, helping with classes and getting involved on campus.”</p> <p>“I think that being a BEST mentor, I think that those positions have put me in a place to where I can educate the youth. I can educate people who are freshmen and sophomores who are open to learning and being more accepting of other groups.”</p>
Identity development that helped to promote self-efficacy and academic persistence	<p>Participant shares dreams related to happiness, advocacy, and prosperity</p> <p>Participant describes feeling positive and whole in environments where his identities are kept intact</p> <p>Participant identified safe environments and programs that helped him to come out.</p>	<p>“I’m not going back to the hood. I... I’m sorry, I need to be living lavishly. I want to have a nice luxury car and a nice big house and be happy. So that’s what drives me academically.”</p> <p>“I have grown to the point where I no longer felt that kind of shame because I realized there was nothing to be ashamed of.”</p> <p>“People acknowledge and recognize that there are all these different [identities] about me, but that never am I limited to any aspect of all these different things.”</p> <p>“When I go to the LGBT programs, I am surrounded by people who want to see me grow and allow me room to grow...not break me up into these itty-bitty bits of who I am.”</p>

Theme 1: Influential others create a campus environment to support student success

Participants in the study expressed that the support they received from people at the university was key to their ability to remain focused on academic pursuits. Sub-themes in this section illustrate (in no particular order) how African-American gay men describe their experiences with a) faculty, b) peers, and c) administrators and staff of the university community.

Faculty. Participants consistently recounted that they had faculty who mentored them inside and outside the classroom. The effect of a small group of influential faculty transcended many of the traditional teacher-student experiences participants had with the majority of their professors. As noted, all participants stated that faculty were integral to their on-campus experiences. Participants also said that some of their faculty recognized their potential and took additional steps to help enhance their academic development. For instance, Andy, a fashion merchandizing major, discussed his gratitude and shared his appreciation for a White female professor who encouraged him and made him believe that he could accomplish his goals. He stated:

My professor has definitely committed to my success here. I get very self-motivated when I see that I am surrounded by success, as well as, I may just have a moment where she is just going on and on about a certain subject or about a how I should consider doing a fellowship.

Many participants expressed how faculty were careful to tend to their specific needs. Dennis, a senior fashion major said, “My professors are good at clarifying anything I need help with, sometimes, I think that my background[African-American and gay] makes them empathetic toward me.”

Other examples of this theme include a statement from Phil who spoke candidly about the support received from his professor. He noted:

I developed a personal relationship with some of my professors. They are just really great people. We've talked, I've gone to the office hours, and they've written me recommendations, and they identify with what I identify with, and I think that's great. I see them at student events. I see them in town, and they are just as nice as when they are in the classroom.

Andy also described his relationship with an African-American gay professor

This professor would attend student activities that I invite him to, he gave me advice about academics and life in general. As you can see, my face lit up when I started talking about him. I can't necessarily say that for a lot of my professors. He's definitely one of the most memorable.

Specifically, students highlighted faculty who contributed positively to their campus experience. The participants saw these faculty members as mentors who were empathetic and who created a favorable learning environment for them. Equally, African-American gay men saw their peers as having supportive characteristics as did their professors. In such situations, the peer group support became advantageous to the overall campus experience and success.

Peers. Throughout the discussions, participants noted that their peer groups provide much of the support needed for their overall college success. The range of friendship support for African-American gay men includes an academic circle, an intimate group of people that they trust with their most personal information, and an co-curricular circle. While friends transcended the three groups, participants in this study also identified the differences within each group. Phil

made a comment about how he interacted with peers and how he determined whom to confide in.

Phil stated:

I'm the kind of person that's friends with everyone, you know, but not everyone will know your business. You know, you can't trust everyone like that. And I feel like with the friends I have you can't tell the straight men about who you are intimate with. We only talk about school stuff. I stay up all night sometimes studying with them, but they have no idea that I am gay. It's none of their business anyway. And I can't tell the gay ones about my family drama that is driving me crazy and causing me to fail my classes because they have their own stuff that they are dealing with. Nobody has time for all the drama.

Josh added that his best friend is the only person that he confided in. He felt comfortable with his friend's family and often went to them for academic and career advice. He noted:

My best friend is in almost all my classes, we study together, we eat together most days, and I feel like I connected with her family more than my own. I have some African-American and White friends that I study with sometimes, but my best friend is always there for me. I am her best friend and she is mine.

Another example of peer support included a comment from Ben who said that his academic journey would have ended tragically if his friend had not intervened. Ben stated:

I was with my best friend. He is like my brother, we were at the gym, trying to get my mind off of things, here at this institution. And our gym there is like the top floor, and from the top floor, there's like this just descent to the first floor, it's like 30 feet down. And I was so sad, I was at the gym, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was like so messed up, like wanting to cry all the time and I was like standing on the edge, hanging

over, just looking at the floor. I was looking down at the ground and I zoned out, I knew where my mind was going... my [friend] brother snatched me away from it, like and he pulled me to the side. And he had tears in his eyes and seeing him cry, he was telling me something, you were just standing there and you weren't saying a single thing. But I saw in your eyes that you just considered jumping. And I never want to ever see you in that headspace again ... He was that's terrifying for me. He saved my life. It was at that moment when I realized where my head was.

Participants also discussed the importance of co-curricular activities and the support they received from peers in the various organizations to which they belonged. Matt, a senior psychology major, said he received encouragement and good advice necessary to enhance his career goals from friends in his social organizations. He recounted:

I began to like meet wonderful people, we would be friends for like a lifetime. With their support, I took on leadership roles and you know, I pledged a fraternity, well, two fraternities. And, again, that's more people that I can just build relationships with. So it has been very good for me to be around them.

Similarly, Andy spoke about his leadership development within his friendship circle. He stated:

I've had several like leadership positions and even something like my dance company where everyone may not be able to relate to me, ...I still engage everyone and grew to become friends with a lot of people. I like that feeling. I can communicate and reach out to students and help them out whenever I can. I even have opportunities to communicate with the Vice President of Student Affairs. Those leadership positions are good for me and helped me to feel connected to the university.

All participants identified the effect of peer group support as important to college success. While participants discussed candidly their different friendship groups, they also discussed the impact influences of different administrators and staff along their academic journey.

Administrators and staff. African-American gay men in the study shared their experiences with administrators and staff who they believed helped them succeed. Tinto (2002) stated that support is a condition that promotes student retention. He went on to say that availability of social support in the form of counseling, mentoring, and ethnic student centers provide much needed support and a safe haven for groups of students who might otherwise be out of place in a setting where they are a distinct minority (Tinto, 2002). Participants highlighted the importance of administrators and staff to offer them help. Ben said that he found administrators in Student Affairs, particularly in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center, to be supportive and understanding of his experiences:

I find myself in my element there. I feel like this is where I should have been a while ago. There is such a community there. The staff at the Center makes me feel so embraced, and I think that's what crazy. It is a very under-utilized place for gay men. The staff has taught me that people are allowed to identify themselves however they want. I can discuss anything with the staff there, and I know that it will be private. They understand what I am going through.

Ben believed the relationships with the LGBT Resource Center's staff helped him to remain focused on his academics. He identified similarities within his academic experiences to one of the center's staff whom he recognized as a mentor. Like Ben, Phil believed that he had a great relationship with his Student Affairs supervisor. Phil noted that his work environment allowed him to interact as a mentee with his supervisor. He expressed:

One of my supervisors is gay and I found that out at a meeting, because he's very open about being gay. So after, I went to him and talked to him and got to know him, we connected, and that's how we developed our relationship.

Participants of this study expressed that the support they received from academic advisors helped especially in instances where they needed academic guidance outside the classroom. Dennis described his first encounter with his academic advisor as an instant connection:

As soon as I went to see my advisor to change my major, she was like, you've come to the right place, you know. So why ... why is this college or why is this major better than any other. She told me about the family oriented environment of my major and what I should expect. Right away, I felt that my new major was a good decision. She told me that I will get to know the faculty, the staff, the people a lot more than I would in perhaps other majors. I felt that she was more hands-on and personable. I like that her door is always open.

All of the participants gave vivid accounts of the people who played integral roles in their experiences which helped them persist. Participants in this study believed that their outcome would have been less favorable without the influences of faculty, close friends, administrators, and staff mentors. In addition, the eight participants noted that they relied on their ability to remain resilient when faced with hardships.

Theme 2: Using resilience strategies to remain positive and focused on academic pursuit

In an effort to remain focused on academic success and college completion, African-American gay men confronted and rejected instances of microaggressions within the campus community. Participants noted that the coping skills they utilized helped them to remain enrolled in college. They described in no particular order how they (a) rejected and dealt with racism and

homophobia, (b) dealt with feelings of isolation as being alone rather than being lonely, (c) addressed and steered away from the shame and stigma associated with being gay, and (d) discussed when and how to disclose their gay identity.

Using resilience strategies to reject and handle racism and homophobia. African-American gay men believed that they could self-advocate to address issues of racism and homophobia. Many participants agreed that once they accepted their gay identity as important, they became more comfortable in how they dealt with racism and homophobia. Participants described a strong sense of awareness of self and pride in their African-American identity. Ben echoed the comments that support this theme. He shared that racism was prevalent at the university and expressed how he navigated racism and harsh environments:

It's a lot of racism here. I always say that people who are oppressed, when they're no longer the main person being oppressed, they often find themselves oppressing other people. And so for me, being Black and having that negative stigma attached to me, forces me to go out into the community and talk positively about Black-UGA. I can then begin to focus inward to heal and to make sure that everyone that I meet experience an encouraging and less marginalizing community.

Ben also felt that besides being assertive, he used humor as another resiliency strategy to reject discrimination. He chuckled when he described an encounter where a White student referred to him as chocolate:

I'm literally not composed of chocolate, like there's no part of my body that has chocolate in it. I promise you. I think I would probably like be doing like self-cannibalism if that was the case and it's not.

Another participant, Mike, felt that by limiting interaction with White peers he would avoid racial and offensive encounters:

I hang out with the Black community, because I was like well, you know how they feel about black, people already. So I'm just going to like ...and I projected that, it's like the whole black community, so I'm just going to stay away from you.

Participants also had limited interaction with peers in instances where they felt ridiculed for their sexual identity. Dennis expressed discomfort when he heard derogatory comments toward gay people from heterosexual students:

I don't feel comfortable in putting myself in situations where straight students use the 'f-word' I don't know how people will react, if they understand you're gay, you know. So even like when we go downtown or go to the bars, or anything like that, I'm always constantly thinking about how situations, could happen or I could get hurt, you know, like should I not go, should I ... I don't know. So I hang out with my gay friends, I feel safe around them.

Similarly, Matt avoided contact with homophobic environments. By doing so, he managed to maintain a positive outlook:

I just mind my business and keep quiet about my sexuality. Kind of like people here are so ignorant about gays and lesbians. Like I have adapted well to negativity, homophobia, and ignorance. I keep my mouth shut, I don't talk to them, I only share my business with my close friends. But I guess for me, if people can't accept me and that people can't really control who they are attracted to. So I just kind of keep a hush about it. I'm like well, you can think what you think, It's your opinion, but I'm still happy.

A number of participants spoke about avoiding unfavorable environments. Students avoided spaces known to be hostile toward sexual and ethnic minority individuals as a means to cope. Choosing to keep away from oppressive environments meant that some students needed to develop strategies to avoid isolation.

Using resiliency strategies to handle feelings of isolation. Masking ones' gay identity serves to protect African-American gay men from hurt feelings that relate to sexual orientation discrimination. One participant noted that whenever he felt overwhelmed in any situation, he secluded himself as a form of escape. Al said that isolation helped him to avoid dissonance especially when faced with hostility toward his sexual orientation. He managed to keep his gay identity a secret from others. The strategies utilized by African-American gay men to avoid group separation and feelings of loneliness illustrate the resilience in the lived experiences of these students. Whether on or off campus, the settings they patronize were spaces that helped them to navigate their gay identity. Mike commented about trying to fit in with his straight peers. Although he credited time spent with his friend in bars as part of the overall college experience, he filled the void created from his isolation from the gay community by conversing with heterosexual friends about members of the opposite sex:

I realized that my experience as a person was so fundamentally different from their experiences Where it's hey, do you want to go downtown or do you want to go to this bar? And my response range from well, I do, but I don't necessarily know if I can like get in, or like I don't know if I'm going to have fun, or like, just because so much of that community is focused around being guys trying to meet up with girls Even though I don't think that I could get them to go to a gay bar with me. I actually went to the

straight bar and had a good time. My friends were trying to hook up with girls. I played along and like talked about the cute girls.

While Mike's isolation from other gay men was a choice he made, Josh described his experience of loneliness as forced isolation from ethnic and sexual minority groups. He noted that many African-American students were involved in groups that promoted cliques. He identified feelings of disconnection among ethnic minority groups and LGBT groups and used his relationship with White female friends to remain resilient:

I just feel disconnected from everyone, you could be cool about people, but I felt like there were cliques inside of the university, we even call it BUGA. You want to connect with Black people, you want to like everybody in general. But we have our own subgroups and if you're not in the right group to make the right connections you're like an outcast. And it gets aggravating to the point that I just do my own thing. I have a few close girl friends who are White, they are the ones who I hang out with.

African-American gay men in this study chose to engage with a small group of people rather than to risk loneliness, isolation, and identity shame and stigma from the larger student body.

Using resiliency strategies to address and steer away from shame and stigma of being African-American and gay. The African-American men in this study experienced stigma because of their gay identity. They felt different from their peers even before they enrolled in high school, yet they ignored and, in some cases, they were afraid to explore those feelings. In part, most of what they had heard about the LGBT community was embedded in shame and other negative stigma. Josh's family was very religious and raised him in the church where he learned that homosexuality was "an abomination unto God." Both Matt and Al grew up in church as well and enjoyed talking about their religion to friends. Mike's African Methodist Episcopal

upbringing was clearly against homosexuality and sexual minority people. The church taught that sexual minority people choose to lead a sinful and disgraceful lifestyle.

African-American gay men cope with feelings of shame by relying on their friendship groups to effectively navigate the campus. In addition, participants also reported that once they began to embrace their gay identity in college, they experienced a sense of liberation. Most of the participants also described peers who exhibited microaggressions toward them; in those instances, they rely on friendship support to cope. During his first year of college, Mike's roommate would read his Bible aloud and became very expressive when he spoke about "fire and brimstone." Mike also noticed that his roommate made biblical references to him and to others students believed to be gay. Al's former work-study supervisor talked about the gay phase and that he would soon snap out of it. Al described feeling sad and invisible. Josh remembered that he felt ashamed of his African-American identity when he attended a Lambda Alliance event and none of the White gay men spoke to him. He also describes feeling invisible and emotionally broken.

All participants developed strategies that addressed past and current occurrences that elicited shame. These strategies provided a way for participants to remain resilient in college. Participants surrounded themselves with positive role models who helped them realize that they should take pride in who they are. Josh found a Unitarian church that he attends regularly with his mentor. Al sought mental health counseling to address concerns about the 'gay phase' label placed on him by others. Mike lived in a single room the following year, and later took the advice of his academic advisor to secure an apartment off-campus. Matt described his resiliency strategy as doing exactly what his mentor advises. He avoided any sexual identity discussions about himself in religious settings.

Although participants noted that they felt a lack of respect when negative labels described their sexual identity, they repeatedly noted that they used avoidance to cope and remain focused. Participants agreed that even though they heard derogatory remarks toward gay people, they ignored and in some cases internalized how they felt. More than half the participants recounted that they could ignore negative comments about their sexual orientation. They believed that the choice not to share one's gay identity was a coping strategy not to be confused with fear of identity disclosure.

Using resiliency strategies to discuss when and how to disclose gay identity. The study's participants discussed how they adapt their individuality to the university's cultural climate and expectations for gay men, and how they remain persistent toward academic success. From being openly gay to being out in selected environments, students shared the types of information they self-disclose, including conversations with members of the university community, notably other students and the African American community. Largely participants noted that even though they were openly gay, on occasion, environmental pressures forced them to remain silent about their gay identity. One participant, Josh, whose coming out process was highly selective until his sophomore year of college, explained how he felt a lack of sensitivity from others around the importance of fully embracing all aspects of one's identity:

I would make myself sick, you know, just thinking about the lie that I am living. Even with my family, I can't share anything with them. We were having a discussion in my sociology class, I was the only Black guy in the class, and we were discussing gender identity. I was just getting ready to open my mouth and say that I am gay. It's like something stopped me, then this girl said that she was not raised around LGB folks. She said that she is comfortable with other minority people but not gay people. I feel like,

what's the difference, I have adjust who I am, just because people aren't comfortable with who I am.

Further, Josh expounded upon his strategy to discuss his gay identity with his peers and shared how he felt about the possibility to present himself as a whole:

I am comfortable talking in the third person, so I get a good feeling about people around me before I begin to you know, talk about myself. I'll say something like, you know, I have a friend who is Asian and a lesbian, just to see if people are cool with a lesbian person. If people start acting weird, then I know you know that I can't come out to them.

Several participants shared that they felt that they had to manage their gay identity. One participant, Ben, expressed how he felt about his experiences with other African-American students as he built relationships with them. He explained:

I know how unforgiving Black people can be, you know, like I am one of them. I mean when I get something in my head, especially something negative, it is hard to let it go and I feel like the background that, Black people have in this country, help to perpetrate the unpleasant side of things...uumhh, they will gossip about your business, and that is why I don't discuss being gay with people in the Multicultural Services Office. That is one way to get everyone in your business. For people outside my friendship circle who knows that I am gay, I don't discuss my business with them and like if I have to talk to them about stuff like going to like Pride, well everybody goes, so it's not like I am outing myself. When I go to the LGBT Resource Center, I feel pretty comfortable there, but there was a time, when, like straight students would walk by, I used to kind of play it off, like I was just walking by, but I am ok with it now. So I feel like, I can be in there, I do not have to defend why I am there, like I don't have to tell even if you ask.

Further, Phil had difficulty with trust and believed that many men in the gay community were interested in one night stands. Furthermore, he asserted that many African–American men were on the Down-low (DL), in which they described themselves as heterosexual to primary female partners, yet they have sex with men. He expressed that he felt suspicious about dating and did not want to get involved in situations where he would get hurt. He reflected on his experience interacting with other gay men on campus:

Being an African-American gay male, it's very difficult. You come here freshman year, first semester, and you don't know who to trust. Everyone, especially in the Black community here, so everyone kind of knows everyone, knows your business. And it's difficult. You meet other gay men who are still in the closet or on the dl. We find out that a lot of gay men here aren't interested in finding a relationship and they're just interested in one-night stands because they are in the closet or they aren't comfortable with who they are. And it's hard to find other people who you can trust and identify with your struggle because people are in the closet. I think that if I were at another university my experience would be different. But I don't know exactly what it would be like to be gay at anywhere else.

Many participants understood the need to be cautious their coming out processes. They found safe spaces to influence when and how to discuss their gay identity.

Theme 3: Co-curricular activities that encourage student engagement and social integration

To address participants' perceptions of the intersection of their campus engagement and how they integrate socially within the university community, I organized in no particular order

the data to address statements related to level of involvement on campus and campus engagement to encourage social integration.

Level of on-campus involvement. Tinto's theory to address social integration laid the foundation for this theme as it drew attention to understanding how students perceive their activities and involvement on campus (Tinto, 2002). The data collection process revealed that African-American gay men who are heavily involved in activities on campus felt connected and aware of how to address issues and concerns specific to race and sexuality identity. During the interview, Phil, Andy, and Al spoke about the benefits of involvement with a fraternity and the access that they had to leadership development. They also learned how to advocate for their causes and how to make critical decisions. In his experience as a student leader and an executive board member of his predominantly African-American fraternity, Andy felt privy to how administrative decisions were made. He saw firsthand how social justice issues, inequities, and other concerns affected ethnic and sexual minority students. He believed that having a seat at the table allowed him to develop and use his voice:

Me being gay, I'm not going to have the same interests as straight students. I don't have as many heterosexual males as friends. I am in a fraternity, so I do have my brothers, and I've learned a lot from them as well. But it's kind of like my experience here has kind of made me put things into perspective for who I am. I am involved in meetings where we discuss things, we get involved in protests here and downtown. I always felt like if I was not involved as much, I would not know what is going on around campus, because it's such a big campus and you can get lost just focusing on one thing. When I volunteer for different causes, no one cares that I am gay, they just know that I am helping out and making a difference.

Phil also elaborated on his experiences as a member of a fraternity and other organizations, and how his involvement increased his awareness about Greek life, gave him a voice, and empowered him to assume more advocacy roles and address heterosexism in campus programs:

Many Black men here are indifferent toward it, like they don't feel uncomfortable or discriminated in that way. But one person, who is an African-American male who is also a part of a fraternity. And one of the NPHC fraternities, the National Pan-Hellenic Council, he was really uncomfortable with homosexuality. So at this meeting, I spoke up, I asked him if he would be uncomfortable with anyone of his frat brothers if they came out. And how do you handle people who want to be a part of your organization? Do you discriminate against them because they are homosexual or are comfortable with homosexuality? Do you not accept them on this basis? Do you feel like that's unethical or immoral to do that, considering that your organization should be accepting members based off brotherhood, scholarship and service and their intentions to fulfill those pillars that you stand for. How do you discern that with your constitution and what it stands for?

Another participant, Al, suggested that his involvement with the university's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) supported his understanding of injustice as well as his knowledge of how acts of oppression affected people on-campus and throughout the local community:

I'll say a year or so, I have been like doing programs and like having marches and vigils about the different issues that's going on in the country and in the community. I didn't really feel like it affected me. I was like well it's not happening to me, so, I don't have to

worry about it. Then more things started happening. I started to react to it and started to plan different things marches. I found myself being heavily involved and down for the cause, because I wanted to help make a difference.

For some participants in the study, the opportunity to serve and to connect with others gave them a sense of belonging. It was clear from the interviews that socializing as advocates for particular causes helped students to relate to members of the institution on a social level. The role of advocates, when they themselves are members of marginalized groups, gave them a platform to engage and participate fully as student activists and agents of change. Participants suggested that levels of connectedness developed from their campus involvement help them to feel accepted at the university.

Campus engagement to develop social integration. Tinto (2002) asserted that after matriculation into the institution, students who integrate academically and socially in their college experience through participation in co-curricular activities and interaction with faculty and other students develop commitment to achieving a college degree. The students who participated in this study noted the necessity for having a rewarding college experience as they developed their resumes for success during and beyond college. One participant, Phil, stated that the more involved he became the more people he met and the more he developed friendships.

I'm involved in several student organizations on campus. As these activities culminate, they help me with my academics, from meeting students, the same major as me to having study sessions and things of that nature. I am in a mentoring organization that helps African –American students with their academics. It's for freshmen to get them acclimated to being at this university, to kind of support that retention rate in African-American students.

Some participants echoed that they met their best friends through campus involvement and that some of those friendships will continue beyond graduation. Many participants discussed how relationships with friends were life changing. Ben, for example, noted how:

I have really good friends who ...they didn't really help me academically, but they definitely did not let me sink into myself. There was a time when I didn't want to get out of my bed. I didn't want to leave my room. I cried all the time. ... People from Lambda Alliance and the LGBT office who were not even close to me at the time understood what I was going through. All of the shameful stuff....they never judged me.

In addition, students addressed their prospects of meeting and building connections with administrators and faculty. Most of them described networking opportunities and developing relationships with people they met through various activities and involvements. For example, Matt felt like he connected instantly after meeting the staff in the LGBT Resource Center. He explained:

I felt connected, when last year, I went to the ... the LGBT Resource Center, for the first time. I ... I was nervous about going there, because I didn't know ... I was like, oh, it's going to be so different. And when I went there, they were just so welcoming, and so open to get to know me, and I was just like, oh, watch my heart. And so, at that point, that's when ... I think that's the most time I felt connected with people and getting to know them and I still talk to some of those people now, to this day.

Social integration was also enhanced by campus employment because students had opportunities to meet other students outside of the academic and typical social circles. In part, students working on campus learned how to interact with others in a work environment and also widened their friendship groups. Josh shared about how he

connected with people at his job and offered his perspective as an undergraduate working in a graduate sociology lab:

I am involved, it's not really an organizational thing, but I'm working in the sociology lab. So I get to work with graduate students on a major research project to kind of get a feel for research. I was also told, coming into college, you should try to make as many connections with people as you can. A lot of professional benefits that you could receive just because you have a friend in a certain field.

All eight participants interviewed participated in at least one co-curricular activity outside their close friendship group that encouraged their social integration in many of the same ways that friendships and work environment influenced social integration. For example, students reported that through participation with others they developed leadership skills and had opportunities to bolster their resume. From these experiences, students believed that leadership training sharpened their self- knowledge and their work habits in collaborative environments. Given the limited opportunity to integrate into the larger university community, participants' ability to adapt, engage, and lead helped them become active contributors. The impact of their leadership involvement allows them to feel connected and accepted, which in turn helps them to remain enrolled. For example, Matt spoke about his involvement with Service Ambassadors which provided the opportunity to gain leadership skills:

Becoming involved with Service Ambassadors, I had to commit one year to a contract under the Center for Leadership and Service here. I had to go through an interview process of what I feel should be brought the campus, to build the community, and campus. And so, it was a very strenuous interview, I did not know anybody there, so it was a lonely

experience. Out of 75 applicants, only 15 were chosen. I can add that to my resume, because I gained so much experience.

Co-curricular activities encouraged student engagement, and social integration influenced students' decisions to remain enrolled.

Theme 4: Identity development that helped to promote self-efficacy and academic persistence

Three types of experiences associated with identity development and social behaviors emerged from the data on the lived experiences of African-American gay men. Accepting and becoming comfortable with one's gay identity, the ability to seek out and use appropriate resources, and developing confidence toward achieving academic goals stood out as influencing participants' lived experiences. This study found in no particular order of importance, evidence that experiences converged and affected students' ability to persist.

Becoming comfortable with one's gay identity. Participants noted that after they came out as gay men and started to share their sexual orientation with others, they felt courageous and made more decisions that were positive. Additionally, they also described how freeing their interactions with others on campus became. In many instances, students recounted how good they felt after identity disclosure. This description of liberation supports Stevens' (2004) statement that by disclosing this [gay] identity to others, they developed further their freedom to be themselves and explored what that meant in the university setting. Participants noted that they felt free when they attended and supported LGBT events and when they expressed themselves as gay men. Many participants indicated shame, negative attitudes, and homophobia were barriers to liberation.

Although the interviewees referred to the concerns of many students of color (e.g., racism, having insufficient preparation for college level work, and tokenism), Mike addressed the experiences that led him to come out and live openly as a gay man:

Like ... you know, as very much just as I feel like I have to police myself so much more than other people feel like they have to. As a Black man, I feel like people put you down to deny your worth. Once I stopped the self-hate, I began to police my behavior less than I used to. I can only say this, like from my conversations I've had with other Black gay guys, but like that feeling of like, you know, not necessarily like being accepted by the gay community because you're black, like I've noticed that that's a pretty like common theme for Black gay guys, particularly in Athens and like ...and also that struggle, like I've noticed, because with my like White gay friends, some of them ...like those that have come out, you know, I think like all white gay people have like an easier time coming out. I like that they are so comfortable with who they are. That helped me to come out here. I did not like...like want to struggle and be uncomfortable like all the time.

Additionally, participants who typically came out only to selected individuals found they were more likely to harbor depressive feelings of isolation. Ben expressed how lonely and fearful he was:

I've noticed that people use these terms so lightly, like oh, you're just so depressed right now. Oh, you're so bipolar, but feeling that depression and how real that was, like I was so afraid... I didn't want to get out of my bed. Most people who are out completely, they have it easier. I guess the difference between us would be that they are out to their family. I know that it make sense, like I would not be lying to myself, but my family don't know. It's hard when you live off campus. It makes it harder. It's hard to just stand up and tell

like your family, like you are gay. I can do that here, no problem. But like at home that's another story.

Students who were comfortable disclosing their gay identity displayed confidence in their ability to be successful. Many participants shared their personal growth, academic journey, and positive career ambitions. Phil's comment explained this benefit:

I didn't grow up with a silver spoon, so I knew that education was the key to being successful. I've used our Career Center. I'm trying to think what other resources that I've used. I mean, I've used like ... places like Learning Center, and the Tutoring Center. We also have a writing center for English ... that I used. I use that a lot. But the main thing that I've ... I've used as a resource has been my professor's office hours. I'm a CA [C.L.A.S.S. Advocate assist African-American students to acclimate and address the needs of all students] for housing and what I feel since all the time is to go to professor's office hours, talk to them, ask questions, and ask questions in your lecture halls. So those are the things that have been benefitted me and been instrumental in my success as a student. I think that they have made me a stronger individual. I met a lot of students who look up to me and respect the résumé that I'm building as far as academics and involvement on campus. And it makes me feel like after they find out about my sexuality, then they don't look at me for just being gay, but for being an African-American male who is involved on campus, who is academically driven and being successful.

Identity disclosure that led to self-acceptance helped participants to make positive decisions about social engagement and academic choices. The personal growth assisted in building confidence needed to self-advocate, find, and use resources effectively.

Utilizing resources and opportunities. Academic success emerged as salient for students who participated in this study. Consistently throughout the interviews, participants made clear distinctions regarding how they had to be successful as a means to overcome some of the hardship that has plagued their lives. They noted that they craved privileges afforded to straight African-American men and successful White men, since both of those groups benefit from dominant male advantages. Participants distinguished how they intentionally utilized resources to connect their academic and social interests to their career path. Participants discussed how utilized opportunities and resources made their college experience unique. The most important part of the college experience was the utilization of necessary resources in order to achieve success. According to participants, academic guidance from faculty and staff was an important aspect for achieving success. Participants reported that they took advantage of professors' office hours regularly and more often than not made efforts to fully prepare and actively participate in class discussions. Josh described his approach to self-efficacy to remain persistent:

My first thing was always talking with professors. Coming here, I ... I knew that pretty soon I had to apply to law school, that I need to build a relationship with my professors. I was always told you need to introduce yourself. You need to sit in the front of the classroom, make yourself, you know, available to them, and show them that you're a hard worker. And once you build that relationship, they [professors] will want to know you more. So I felt ... I felt like classes that I was having trouble with, I needed to, you know, make sure that they knew where I stood on things. They knew who I was. So when they're reading my paper, they can say, okay, well, he knows the information, he just needs to connect it all the way.

Participants were cognizant of their college success and believed that if they developed confidence and self-advocated, they could achieve their goals.. Mike added:

I'm the kind of student where I am like ... I try to be more proactive with like my relationships with professors. And because like I said, it does go a long way, of just like making those connections and it's been great. Like I've never ... I've never really had like a bad, bad experience with a professor. So it's good. It's just ... it's also one of the ... it's just one of those things where like if they recognize in you that you're trying and like you're trying to reach this potential, and you're willing to put an effort, like they'll do the best they can to cultivate that, so, yeah. So like being around all these professors who saw me as like a person who was like doing the best that I could, and then some, was very like ... very uplifting.

At first, participants said that unfamiliarity with resources made it difficult for them to utilize services at the university. Al reported that interaction with his professors happened after he realized that his distractions interfered with his academic performance:

For a long time, I didn't use office hours. I think it was maybe like a pride thing. Yeah, I ... I did not use office hours either. I felt like I didn't need it. And that goes for like tutoring as well, I feel like I didn't need it, I was always the one that was doing the tutoring, instead of being tutored. So but once I like started to, I guess, hit like that roadblock, I started messing up, I tried ... I was like okay, you need to figure this out. Like you need to like suck up your pride, do whatever you got to do, these office hours are here for a reason. Utilize them so you can, you know, do what you got to do. I started meeting with my teachers, and TA's for extra help. I go to the writing center and my grades started to go up again.

Students reported that they interacted with African-American professors and administrators easier than any other ethnic groups. Andy noted that he felt comfortable and related with less difficulty to people who looked like him:

As you can see, my face lit up when I started talking about him [African-American gay professor]. I can't necessarily say that for a lot of my professors. He's definitely one of the most memorable. But it's great to have, and this is speaking as far as academics, and anything in general, or people that you can relate to. One thing that I feel like a lot of other African-American ... African-Americans, African-American gay people here on this campus can probably attest to, they really ... or we really have any type of ... any type of like professor, or even like staff that we can relate to.

He added:

I had this one professor, she is a white woman. She is very nice. She is very sweet. I still ... we actually still communicate sometimes. And it's a nice connection, but it's ... it's different because with her, it ... she felt more like a resource I can always have. She was very nice. She was very genuine. I really like her, she's very sweet. But it's like ... but I know there are certain things we just could never relate on or relate to ... yeah, relate on.

The influence of faculty helped African-American gay men to learn about opportunities to achieve their academic success. While the impact of faculty was previously stated in Theme 1, professors also served as academic resources for participants. Finally, participants recognize how the networking relationships that they develop with faculty positively affect their career aspirations.

Developing confidence toward achieving academic goals. The data implied that how students developed confidence in their ability to succeed was paramount for college completion. Because of the convergence of multiple marginalized identities, African-American gay men found themselves balancing and in some cases may choose to hide parts of their identity to remain resilient. The participants of this study noted that their lived experiences did not always promote academic achievement. They revealed that in many instances, they struggled to remain motivated. Phil shared:

In my mind, I just feel like, at the end of the day, no one is going through my struggle. Like I know what it's like to not have lights and hot water, so I'm not ... I have to ... I have to take myself out of that situation and say, okay, this is only temporary. So I'm not going to let how I am feeling at this moment affect the goals that I've set for myself, like at the end of the day, I still need to be happy. And not everyone is going to accept me for who I am.

Ben agreed that once he discarded his low self-esteem, he gained confidence in his ability to remain persistent and complete college. He noted:

I realized that I have to stop being afraid to talk to people. Even ... even if I don't like my appearance ... because and ... and that's the thing though, my self-esteem was so low. I had zero self-worth. I feel like I had to pick myself apart. ... like now...I am seen as this whole person ...and that people can acknowledge and recognize that there are all these different things about me, but that never am I limited to one aspect of my identity. I ... I feel valued when me being a combination of all these different things is respected.

Josh believed that he was doing well adjusting to college until he was outed by his roommate. He became distracted by the negative attention until he refocused on his goals. He said:

So I'm always doing something. And if it ... it keeps me, you know, I guess up on, like making sure I get my ... my assignments done and making sure I'm top of my studies. And But making sure I have time for my friends. Until I heard he [roommate] was talking about me behind my back and it ... it just hurt because he was just talking about my personal life. ... It got annoying. I just detached myself from everyone, I...I lost it. Since then, I have made sure I'm around people who want to be successful. People that push me forward towards my goals. I was like if I'm around people that are becoming successful, you know, and I'm motivated and I work hard, I'm going to get to that point, where I'm ... I'm going to be successful and it's keeping me in my books.

Finally, Mike initially felt ashamed of this gay identity. He described situations where he denied his gay identity to avoid hurt feelings. He noted that he developed confidence by reconciling his intersecting marginalized identities, recognizing the positive contributions of those who identified as a sexual minority, and remaining focused on his studies.

The students who participated in this study learned how to seek out and use appropriate resources to do well at the university. How they navigated the academic and social climate of the university also helped them to remain academically persistent. Equally, participants became better equipped to define for themselves their retention strategies.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter presented the findings that resulted from the interviews of participants' lived experiences. The findings revealed the experiences, programs, and services that affected African-American gay men's college persistence and success. The participants' success was supported by their ability to a) identify influential others who helped to create campus climates to support success, b) develop resiliency, c) take part in co-curricular activities that encourage student

engagement and peer group acceptance, and d) develop confidence in their ability to achieve academic success. In the next chapter, I discussed the results, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the contributing factors that affect persistence and college success among African-American gay men. The study explored the following research question: What are the experiences on campus that assist, and the programs and services on campus that contribute to African-American gay men's persistence and success in college? Analysis of the data resulted in the following four findings: (a) influential individuals created a campus environment that supports student success, (b) African-American gay men used resilience strategies to remain positive and focused on academic pursuits, (c) co-curricular activities encouraged student engagement and acceptance in peer groups, and (d) identity development helped to promote self-efficacy and academic persistence.

From this study, faculty and student affairs practitioners should gain a closer understanding of those circumstances that support African-American gay men's on-campus experiences. African-American gay men have opportunities to shape how they integrate into the institutions' community thereby maximizing their persistence and success rates as well as their college overall experiences. Scholars and practitioners however should take caution not to generalize the findings of the research, since only eight students who attended the same institution participated in this phenomenological study. Nevertheless, these findings represent critical pieces of students' voices on a line of progression to understand how they make decisions to persist through four years of university and successfully earn their university education.

While the literature reviewed provided significant evidence of negative aspects of university experiences for African-American men such as high dropout rates, low academic performance, and violence, I shifted this study away from the deficit model thinking to examine how students coped with adversities and considered some of the conditions needed for effective environments that facilitate successful academic and social transitions. Moving from the deficit model not only helped me to shift my research focus from the academic disparity lens often used to discuss African-American men in U.S higher education institutions, but also highlighted the meaning making and motivation behind how students used programs and services to support their college persistence.

Throughout this chapter, I interpreted and discussed findings that supported how students persisted to complete a bachelor's degree. The chapter begins with a discussion of the findings supported by the research question and related literature. I used Tinto's (1993) theory as the theoretical framework for this study, as this theory addressed academic and social integration processes that help students to form a commitment and eventually complete their university degree. The chapter ends with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings

The present study examined the lived experiences of eight African-American gay men that cause them to persist and succeed in a predominantly White institution (PWI). The study highlighted how they perceived and navigated both positive and challenging aspects of the campus environment. Tinto's theoretical model was chosen for this study to examine the strategic behavior of participants that lead to their academic and social integration. According to Tinto (1993), the likelihood that a student will form a commitment to the institution is greater if the student can integrate academically and socially. The findings of this study confirmed Tinto's

model on one hand that academic and social integration leads to student satisfaction. However, on the other hand, there was some variation in how participants in this study ordered the salience of their experiences. Tinto's model ranked faculty contact as having conceptual importance because of the academic authority of professors, yet participants noted that peer support also ranked highly. Further, the relationship with influential others also included staff and peers who appeared to have significant interactions with participants. It is quite likely that participants gave equal weight to environmental influences within the institution or even highlighted only the characteristics that strongly affect their persistence.

Accounts of the lived experiences of African-American gay men served as the foundation for this study. The central findings from the participants' stories included the following: influential individuals created a campus environment that supported student success, African-American gay men used resilience strategies to remain positive and focused on academic pursuits, selected co-curricular activities encouraged participants' engagement and acceptance in peer groups, and participants' identity development helped to promote self-efficacy and academic success. The themes addressed the research question from an antideficit viewpoint about the experiences on campus that assist African-American gay men and the programs and services that contributed to their integration and persistence.

Experiences on Campus that Assist African-American Gay Men to Integrate and Persist

The on-campus experiences of African-American gay men that help them to persist in the university involved support from others and an internal drive to overcome societal barriers. It stands to reason that some university's personnel are knowledgeable about the hostile campus environment that can cause harm to African-American gay men, and some are in positions to help African-American gay men address challenges. The breadth of participants' experiences on

campus was defined as the conflicting messages (e.g., hostile climate, homophobia, friendships and mentors) that they received from faculty, staff, and peers, particularly those associated with helping them to remain persistent. The reality of those diverse experiences led students to generate strategies to deal with the effects of adverse situations.

Washington and Wall (2010) discussed how African-American gay men have to think about new, unfamiliar ways to move through the social environment of the university. They noted, "Navigating a campus climate where race and sexual orientation politics are not aligned is often challenging for African-American gay men" (p. 142). The findings from this study suggested the participants' ability to identify safe spaces and steer away from homophobia, heterosexism, and racism at the university strengthened their resolve. The findings also reported on the relationship between participants and faculty, participants and staff, and participants and peers as valuable means through which African-American gay men accessed support. Patton (2011) in her work with African-American gay men at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) noted that peer support was a significant resource for African-American gay men. This statement further supported the sentiments of all the participants in this study that experiences within peer groups proved helpful whether to decrease isolation or to influence persistence.

The participants in this study noted that White females and other African -American gay men comprised most of their friendship circle. Thus, because peer support was relevant to the persistence, well-being, and success of the participants in this study, the question becomes how can institutions create a climate where all students can embrace and engage in the psychosocial development of racial and sexual minority students? The participants in this study found the

complexity of their identities often forced them to choose between and prioritize either their gay identity or African-American identity.

Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2008) agreed that African-American gay men who are enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWI) are likely to experience challenges that could complicate their success in college. The African-American gay men who participated in this study mirrored this sentiment. They not only chose to share their gay identity with a selected group of peers, faculty, and staff, in some situations, but they created barriers to cope and protect themselves from further marginalization. For example, participants would avoid specific services such as those offered at the LGBT Resources Center because of stereotypes and stigma associated with the patrons of the center until they became confident that they were in a safe place. The ramification of identity suppression or concealment could lead to student disengagement and withdrawal (Swank & Fahs, 2013). These negative consequences counter Tinto's argument of how students persist.

Tinto's (1993) model stated that the greater the degree to which students integrate academically and socially into the institutions' fabric, the greater the likelihood that they will commit and remain enrolled in the institution. This model continues to strongly influence research that pertains to campus climates. The views that students hold toward opportunities and constraints within the academic and social systems affect their levels of social and academic integration (Baird, 2000). While participants in this study may have membership in marginalized groups, they learned how to translate their experiences to behave and navigate the campus community socially and intellectually to get needed support. Similarly, Washington and Wall (2010) noted that African-American gay men who interact with mentors and role models to experience a positive environment on campus are more likely to remain persistent. Yet African-

American gay men negotiate their campus experiences in isolation if they fail to connect with mentors. This study aligns with Tinto's theoretical perspective of social and academic integration to form a pathway to lead to academic persistence and success. The study highlighted the complex nature of participants' integration processes and the individuals who emerged as central.

Support group impact. Participants discussed their disconnect from biological family (rejection) and the greater African-American university's community (isolation). These separations cause them to gravitate toward faculty and staff such as African-American professional gay men (mentors and work supervisors) employed by the university, instead of their peers. When they interact with other students, they either join predominantly African-American fraternities that are accepting of gay men or have White females and African-American gay friendships. They also develop skills to navigate between gay and African-American cultures. This ability to manage sets of skills enhanced how they negotiate the university's culture.

Tinto's (1993) conceptual model of persistence and attrition has been most widely used among scholars to support the importance of academic and social integration in higher education. Like peer group support, the connection formed with faculty and staff promotes a positive experience for students. Participants in this study may not have fully disclosed all of their experiences; however, their persistence experiences represented many aspects of the campus culture. Participants' stories highlighted the lifelong friendship and mentorship connections that included stories of advisors who intervened and advocated to influence how students integrated into the academic and social systems of the institution.

Tinto (1993) discussed how faculty and staff development are essential to increase student persistence. The findings of this study supported the influence of people in participants'

lives who built trusting relationships that were authentic and beneficial to the unique growth of each participant in this study. The participants found that relationships formed helped them not only to recognize the genuine care of their faculty and staff support network but also to recognize that members of the university's community took initiative to better understand students' needs. Several other researchers, however, discussed students' retention from a cultural lens they explored college persistence outcomes of ethnic minority students and noted the challenges that marginalized students face in forming relationships as they aspire to attain a college degree (Braxton & Lien, 2000; Tierney, 2000). The findings of this study indicate that although African-American gay men faced challenges, White faculty and White peers were among the groups of people identified as significant to their success.

Coping impact. One of this study's findings diverged from Tinto's (1993) argument and underscored that participants seemed to rely on resilience strategies to cope with adverse campus climate. For example, several participants noted that they wanted better lives and career opportunities than their families had; as such, they were prepared to adjust to the loneliness and complete college without any interventions. Some participants went as far as saying that they planned to use similar strategies in college to those that they used in high school to "fly under the radar" and "blend into backgrounds." Based on past homophobia and racism experiences, some African-American gay men in this study did not want to engage in any form of integration within the institution and were prepared to "go it alone."

Participants' ability to remain focused on academic pursuits in a non-gay-affirming environment was a central retention component. Some participants noted in their stories that once they embraced their gay identity, they felt more confident to address social ramifications of gay identity disclosure. However, in an institutional climate with anti-gay sentiments, many

African-American gay men may experience some level of stress and often used creative strategies to navigate their coming out processes . This finding is supported by both Cawthon and Guthrie's (2010) and Washington and Wall's, (2010) position on the psychological benefits of coming out as having a congruent public and private persona. The resilience strategies used by African-American gay men in hostile environments may have helped them to persist academically. They decided to remain enrolled even though they felt that they had fewer faculty and staff backing them than majority students and African-American students straight students had. They also believed the institution did not provide much in the way of a favorable climate. For example, one participant noted that he secludes himself to avoid dissonance especially when faced with hostility toward his sexual orientation. Cawthon and Guthrie's (2010) observation reflected that in unfavorable environments, social ostracism increases and the loss of social support increases. This statement affirmed the experiences of several participants in this study, since they believed that with the exception of their faculty and staff mentors and close friends, the continuing homophobic and racist behaviors of others kept them from fully integrating into the campus community.

Ability to adapt. Another finding in this study that deviated from Tinto's (1993) model of academic and social integration was how participants disciplined themselves and remained motivated. Participants understood that despite the harsh university conditions they have experienced, their behavior and conduct needed to remain ethical. Participants believed that if they remain judicious their actions would keep them driven on toward their academic goals. They understood that any deviation from their academic focus would disrupt and delay their career plans. This finding reflected the experiences of African-American gay men who struggle to build communities and who must remain focused on academic achievements and career goals.

Although institutional practices such as programs and services geared toward academic and social integration for minority groups were important in this study's findings, participants' internal motivation and meaning-making processes of lived experiences were also important to their overall on-campus experience. Participants' ability to remain focused on their career aspirations was most likely to have influenced their adjustment to college. African-American gay men in this study chose to eventually define their path to persistence and success rather than subscribing to patterns of integration, which adds this alternative self-defined path to Tonto's model of integration as the path to persistence. More than half of the participants believed the challenges that they faced were a result of their race or sexual orientation. Participants who argued that major barriers to academic persistence were issues of racism and homophobia had varying levels of campus involvement. These barriers affected the types of activities that they were involved with, affected how they engage with peers and institutional personnel, and even affected the academic majors that they chose. For example, the low rate of interaction between students and faculty was seen as a barrier to academic success for some major programs of study. Participants wanted opportunities to receive sufficient attention from their teachers. They also wanted to feel safe in the classrooms and believed that larger class structure did not provide those opportunities.

Participants who believed that these barriers existed in their major program of study were more likely to change their academic majors. They believed that certain academic programs were more friendly and accepting of their gay identity. Indeed, academic departments that affirm gay identity display safe space stickers and appear to be more welcoming of diverse students, making it easier for some African-American gay men to persist.

Even so, other participants who struggled to find a niche changed their programs of study several times, with students contemplating dropping out of university completely, and even a suicide attempt. African-American gay men in this study at one point or another felt trapped in a downward cycle. For example, to be outed by someone else appeared to cause depression for participants. Students believed that their membership in the larger university community was “conditional” on how they adapted and emerged from the pitfalls of adversity. Attending to environmental stressors within the institution adds burdens for participants. The literature outlined suggestions for institutions to implement to minimize ostracism of non-heterosexual students (Washington & Wall, 2010). However, participants noted that even in well-intended situations, they felt mistrust toward others and guarded themselves. Many participants admitted that they used a selective process to invite connections with others.

In short, this study found that participants experienced and overcame barriers and other challenges that threatened to derail their academic persistence. The experiences on campus that assisted African-American gay men to integrate and persist undoubtedly included their support systems, their engagement, the strategies that they used to remain resilient, and how they behaved in an effort to remain focused on academics. The internal motivation to earn a college degree helped participants of this study to intentionally identify and participate in programs and services offered by the institution.

Programs and Services that Contribute to Integration, Persistence, and College Success

University services and programs that are good fit for student development and overall involvement in the institution are more likely to produce satisfied students (Sideman, 2005). The study’s findings parallel Sideman’s statement and the research question that guided this study which asked, “What are the experiences on campus that assist, and the programs and services

on campus that contribute to African-American gay men's persistence and success in college?" Patton (2011) discussed ways in which student affairs educators could play a significant role in helping African-American gay men to deal with both negative and positive campus experiences. As participants in this study noted, their involvement in programs and the services offered by specific departments on campus helped them to deal with racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. Other research on students' persistence echoed that on-campus programs and services helped to maintain or improve academic persistence (Jacobi, 1991; Patton, Morelon, & Whitehead, 2006; Turner & Berry, 2000). Patton et al. (2006) outlined suggestions to support the notion that services and program processes improve persistence for underrepresented students.

Based on my work experiences in student affairs, specifically working with African-American gay men in higher education, I believe that how faculty and staff engage with this population of students makes a difference in not only how they develop confidence, but also how they integrate into the campus community. I felt positive about my role as a mentor and advisor when I invited African-American gay men to accompany me to a student organization meeting. That personal invitation made a difference in how these men were received by peers. Therefore, when participants of this study discussed at length that encouraging faculty and staff members outside the classroom were important to their overall college experience, Patton et al. (2006) reminded me that faculty and staff who counsel and mentor African-American gay men may help to lessen dropout rates of undergraduate students.

Purposeful programs and services. Participants described the types of programs and services that faculty and staff mentors steered them toward (e.g., gay friendly fraternities, advocacy groups, and other LGBTQ friendly organizations) which they felt would be welcoming

to African-American gay men. Indeed, participants believed faculty and staff who served as mentors and advisors developed empathy toward them. On-campus organizations that embrace multiculturalism scored highly in recruiting and retaining African-American gay men.

Participants also gravitated toward student groups that engaged in social justice and advocacy work (e.g., marches, protests, and parades) they believed would advance awareness against prejudices and biases. Participants' ability to serve in civic action roles within the campus and local community was reported as helpful to connect with other marginalized groups and to address issues.

Participants discussed the organizations to which they hold membership (e.g., fraternities, dance troupes, choral ensembles) and spaces that they believed were safe and supportive of their gay identity (LGBT Resources Center, Multicultural Programs Office, and welcoming faculty and staff offices). Having a small and safe community ranked high as a priority to protect participants' gay identity. Therefore, participants shied away from interacting with other student organizations which limited their opportunity to engage with prospective allies. For example, as African-American and gay college students, participants did not socialize much with their White peers during football and homecoming festivities so they could avoid racism and sexism during celebratory campus occasions. Graduating seniors who participated in this study discussed meeting and interacting with students in majority organizations who became friends and allies toward the end of their college careers. These participants described the safety they felt interacting only with their small groups of friends until a faculty or a program advisor encouraged them to attend events. Some participants discussed that in some settings, the interaction with other students began to feel natural. Consequently, they learned to develop friendships with straight peers around common interests.

Identity exploration. While this study's findings supported the claim that selected programs and services bode well for academic persistence and college success, Patton (2011) expressed that it is pressing for student affairs educators to create programs that strategically encourage multiple identity exploration among students. In fact, participants recounted feeling positive about themselves once they were able to express their identity. For example, one participant commented that when people across campus and in various settings recognized and acknowledged his multiple identities, he became unbounded and free to build connections.

Moreover, Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) argued that identity development brings race, class, gender, and sexual orientation to focus on a full range of questions relevant to student development, such as retention, student involvement, campus community, and equity. The findings of this study indicated that programs and services on campus that contribute to the integration, persistence and success of African-American gay men also benefit from participants' contributions. This finding asserts that perhaps there is an opportunity for African-American gay men to make significant contributions to the campus community through promoting awareness of diversity issues that affect everyone. Promoting social justice would help African-American gay men to build relationships and rapport across many areas of the campus. Since their lived experiences include marginalization, their messages may increase awareness of acts of oppression and knowledge of their intersecting identities.

African-American gay men in this study believed that programs and services geared toward students should not only help students interact with each other, but also to improve their knowledge and leadership skills. Participants discussed developing their voices in their chosen organizations. For example, participants in leadership positions in fraternities networked and

used their position of privilege to promote advocacy messages and to share different perspectives about issues that they faced.

While this study's findings support the assertion that services and programs on campus help students to persist and succeed in college, Washington and Wall (2010) highlighted that in order to increase success for African-American gay men, institutions should create spaces to explore the complexities of their identity development.

Relation to the Previous Research

The findings and conclusions of this study support previous work done in counseling and in higher education (Harper & Quaye, 2014; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita 2008; Washington and Wall, 2010). The experiences that affect African-American gay men which help them to remain persistent and to succeed in college provide insight for university personnel who seek to provide students with inclusive college experiences. Washington and Wall (2010) outlined some of the challenges the intersecting identities of African-American gay men pose for predominantly White institutions (PWI). In particular, they identified how faculty, staff, and peers could affirm students' gay identity and serve as allies to minimize oppression. My study mirrors the work of Washington and Wall in that participants of this study expressed the benefits they gained from having role models and friends who created safe space environments and invited them into inclusive academic and social settings.

This study's findings support the assertion that students perceived experiences inside and outside the classroom as contributing to their persistence. In Tinto's (1993) views, institutional action that aligns with the learning needs of students helped students succeed. He added that institutions would have to ascertain not only how likely different forms of action are to yield acceptable returns in student retention, but also which students are likely to benefit most from

those actions. Tinto went on to add that institutions must ask themselves, what works in retaining students? This study also supported Tinto's statement by sharing that important resources like the LGBT Resources Center and the Multicultural Services offices were instrumental in participants' decisions to remain enrolled. These spaces were visited often, thus students felt less socially isolated, and more important, they felt a sense of belonging.

Participants mentioned that they could confide in few faculty and administrators about personal matters. Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2008) suggested that faculty members could play a critical role in establishing a learning environment for all students to affect learning outcomes. In fact, Umbach and Kuh (2003) suggested that opportunities be created that allow for minority student interaction to present diverse perspectives in the classroom. This also includes other ways to communicate the value of diversity and support the academic and social needs of students from different backgrounds (Umbach & Kuh 2003). Likewise, students who participated in this study suggested the need to have campus climates that value openly the identities of those who are not members of the mainstream culture such as the case of African-American gay men enrolled in PWIs.

Finally, participants in this study discussed the importance of inner strength to cope with adversity. Participants reported hearing more remarks that are negative and experiencing more verbal assaults than did heterosexual peers; these included homophobic and other derogatory epithets. Research done by Patton (2011) and Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2008) support strategies that African-American gay men employed to remain resilient. Despite the negative experiences that perpetuate marginality and weaken commitment for African-American gay men in this study, Tinto (1993) and Siedman (2005) believed that these negative experiences would not deter some students who intend to complete a degree.

These findings suggest that more research is necessary with African-American gay men to delve into those experiences that cause them to remain persistent in universities. Students come to campus with expectations and individual perspectives about their academic journey. Thus, faculty and staff awareness of students' perceptions may affect services and programs rendered.

Implications for Practice

The ability to remain focused on academics and persist through university completion remain significant in the lived experiences of African- American gay men. In campus environments where groups of students can have positive experiences and interventions, students are more likely to reinforce persistence through heightening their individual intents and commitments (Seidman, 2005). By connecting to the university's faculty, administrators, and students, useful inferences about how African -American gay men integrate can be drawn. The data on significant others who played a critical role in participants' lives highlighted that persistence resulted from the perspective of having a network of people who build bridges to include others and those who can affect change for favorable results.

First, participants in this study discovered that through their interactions with faculty mentors in and outside the classroom and trustworthy peers, they coped despite the harsh campus climate. The findings suggested that faculty who help African-American gay men to navigate the institution's climate serve as a source of support. These faculty also provide a much needed service to the academy that includes engaging minority students with the hope of decreasing their attrition rates as they negotiate the academic and social communities of the institution. The findings also suggested that providing students with early and intentional peer-to-peer engagement might lead to community building and friendships.

Second, participants in this study formed campus meaningful campus connections. Those students who learned to navigate the campus climate may lose and attract friends much like the end of a student and faculty relationship at the end of the academic term. Many participants noted that they lost some of their heterosexual friends and some were uncomfortable around them because of their gay identity. This suggested that Tinto's (1993) interactionalist theory could provide the framework to understand the connecting factors that cause students to remain enrolled especially when others show unfavorable dispositions toward them. The theory stated that when students integrate socially they are more likely to form a commitment to the institution. In a roundabout way, using coping strategies to navigate the campus climate, African-American gay men integrated by developing meaningful relationships with significant others rather than by interacting with the larger institution. Although these relationships were salient to students in this study, they wished that they had more straight African-American men in their friendship groups. They also perceived that they were being discriminated against by African American student organizations based on their sexual identity and questioned the core values of African American fraternities. Participants in this study believed that the institution should review student organizations' policies that appear to be unethical or immoral. Participants agreed that discriminatory practices within any student groups should not be tolerated at the institution. It would be an interesting discovery to determine if having a larger friendship circle provides more or less in the way of forming a commitment to the institution. It would also be interesting to see what impact more students and faculty interaction would have on closing the isolation gap and decreasing the number of failed attempts and the emotional stressors that go with unsuccessful or abandoned affiliations.

Last, if the university hopes to recruit and admit a community of students with multiple intersecting identities, then the recruitment plan should ensure that the value added components of each entering class include sexual minority students, much the same as low socioeconomic students and racial minority students. Enrolled African-American gay men benefit from participating in all facets of the institution. Participants in this study agreed that the university should do more to include them. For example, one participant noted that he did not utilize all the resources that his straight peers used. His isolated lifestyle and his fear of being outed kept him from getting involved. Participants who experienced hurt because of their gay identity noted that the institution's statements and actions to condemn homophobia seemed more reactive. They believed that resource allocation should include campus-wide master classes to address diversity concerns and also account for the different groups of students that exist on the university's campus (e.g., race, gender, and states represented) to more accurately reflect the different student groups. Intentional resources allocation could help to create welcoming, supportive climates for all groups of students.

One participant noted that he met the first African-American gay man toward the end of his junior year at a social event on campus. For both of these men, keeping their gay identity hidden meant avoiding the LGBT Resources Center. Therefore, having other spaces on campus and creating a culture of inclusion would help students like these men socialize at a pace that seemed appropriate for them. Having intentional student meet and greet activities throughout the year similar to those at the start of the school year could serve to build connections among students in a more natural way and to allow students to experience a comfortable coming out process. In addition, having more safe spaces could help students to test the water without losing what they have (M.Evans, personal communication, November, 2, 2015). While participants in

this study believed that they hold privileged and oppressed identities, the unique nuances of having an African-American and gay identity highlighted the tensions of their oppressed identities.

Often African-American gay men in this study maintain separate identities, especially in environment where they believe that they could encounter acts of oppression. In addition, although the institution has in place a diversity and inclusion space specifically to address the unique needs of the campus community, many LGBTQ students avoid utilizing the space because of negative historical experience. The lived experiences of queer students are layered and complex, thus African-American gay men should be allowed to use pseudonyms if they choose, be given the freedom to be the experts on their own lives, and have access to spaces to have experiences (Z. Johnson, personal communication, November 2, 2015). Pseudonyms allow students to not only be strategically out, but also to negotiate the preferred identity within specific context and processes. African- American gay men believed that code switching provided the safety needed to navigate hostile environments. In fact, students who frequent the LGBT Resources Center are encouraged to try on many different identities. Queer students of color practice using different pronouns and appear to be more comfortable figuring out the styles of dressing than their White counterparts (M. Evans, personal communication, November, 2, 2015).

Retention

Although this study explored the perceived on-campus experiences of African-American gay men that contributed to their academic persistence and success, it generally explored the meaning that participants attributed to specific campus experiences. Furthermore, the insight provided by this study showed that more research about the experiences of African-American

gay men could broaden the understanding of the individual factors that contribute to persistence and success of African-American gay men enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education.

For example, participants in this study noted that they valued their involvement in academic and social communities within the institution. Participants also communicated that they appreciated the depth of their overall involvement and institutional experiences. These statements held different meanings for participants in this study. In one instance, a participant noted that he chose a major program of study that would allow him to do advocacy work much the same as his involvement with his fraternity. In another instance, the participant identified that he gained depth from working side by side with his professor on a research project. While both examples showed participants' passion toward their on-campus experiences, their emphases differ. Current literature supports the importance of initiatives that focus on academic and social integration factors that influence student retention (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita 2008; Tinto, 1993; Washington & Wall, 2010). Yet, for some participants in this study, the LGBT Resources Center had been a safe haven and for others, visiting the center could mean that they could be labeled and stigmatized. Although individual students may have many beliefs about the LGBT Resources Center, research shows that having offices and centers like the LGBT Resources Center helps to attract and retain students, given the campus climate and the needs of students (Berger, Blanco Ramirez, & Lyon, 2012). Nevertheless, the individual aspects within campus environment that may increase African-American gay men's decision to remain enrolled have not been thoroughly explored to determine if they are effective in helping the retention of this population of students. It was evident from this study the LGBT Resources Center was a focal point for some LGBTQ students' socialization. Other spaces that provide

similar engagement should be explored, as positive hubs are contributing factors in retaining African-American gay men.

Finally, participants identified peers, faculty, and administrators as catalysts in terms of having a pivotal role in preventing them from departing the institution. Interestingly, participants who had combined faculty and administrator mentorship felt more confident when compared to those with support from just one of those groups. In part, those participants with both a faculty and a staff mentor believed that they were supported across the spectrum of academic and social life at the university. One participant who identified as only having a faculty mentor noted that he regrets not developing relationships with staff. He recognized academic satisfaction and also noted the gaps in co-curricular activities when compared to students who felt well rounded as a result of having mentors who were faculty and staff. Furthermore, participants indicated that they felt safer to participate in academic and social campus activities knowing that they had the backing of professionals within the campus community. The aforementioned point of interest warrants further study to illuminate sound resources for student-campus environment fit.

Advocacy

This study proposes several implications for institutions and practitioners to improve upon services and programs that helped African-American gay men to adjust to institutional life. The participants noted that they appreciated having advocates and allies. Advocates who serve to increase understanding around privilege and how oppression affects marginalized groups utilize opportunities to affect change and advance a social justice agenda.

Institutional practices that emphasize inclusiveness and advocacy competencies may best integrate students into the academic and the social fabric of the campus community. Siedman (2005) believed that when students have positive interventions, they are more apt to persist. For

participants in this study, only a small group of faculty, administrators, and peers intervened on their behalf. As noted before, programs and professional development training opportunities that are focused around social justice tenets and a framework such as the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010) that specifies how practitioners might work to give voice to marginalized people may best inform institutional practice for racial and sexual minority allies. These competencies could provide a conceptual framework to address issues of oppression.

Findings of this study also suggested that African-American gay men believed that after they reconciled their identities, they felt able to advocate for others. For example, participants explained that they were empowered to participate in marches and gay pride events to bring awareness to injustices and advocate for changes within the campus community. Thus, the fostering of opportunities to address challenges encourages advocacy within the African-American gay men's community as well as membership within the greater institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many possible directions could inform future studies around African-American gay men's lived experiences in college and be replicated with other marginalized groups of students. Research in the area of marginalized students' lived experiences that support university persistence could also be done in both qualitative and quantitative research traditions or using mixed methods. Useful quantitative instruments to understand the lived experiences of African-American gay men in U.S. higher education institutions could be developed to further this current study. In addition to contributing to the literature, additional research in this area would represent the experiences of a larger group of African-American gay men who may share similar narratives about their experiences across the country. This study provided more information

about the phenomenon of the lived experiences of African-American gay men. Another research study could include a larger sample population from other institutions, such as African-American gay men enrolled in universities regionally or nationally. A quantitative approach of this size could explore trends in participant and peer relationships, participants and faculty relationships, or participants' involvement in on-campus activities. Further research may also explore the perceived effects that institutional types such as size, public, private, or community college have on the persistence of African-American gay men.

The length of time it took to identify and select eight participants for this study continued for over five months. Initially, participants were reluctant to be out. Even those students who frequented the LGBT Resources Center needed to connect with me and build trust before they agreed to participate. Researchers who proposed quantitative studies with African-American gay men could consider anonymous online surveys to protect the identity of all participants. Researchers should also be prepared to expect a lengthened data collection timeframe regardless of choice of instrument since this population of students are often hesitant to share their experiences. The goal of this study was to understand those experiences that affect African-American gay men and cause them to remain enrolled, persist, and succeed in a US higher education institution. Qualitative interviews provided rich narrative descriptions about participants' on-campus experiences. This study did not account for those experiences that students have outside the university setting that continue to be central in their on-campus lives. Positive home environment could be a variable that affects a student's confidence. Likewise, those students who experienced adverse home environments may carry those sentiments to the institution. A study that includes questions that specify the experiences from outside the institution that also affect on-campus experiences may provide more insight into some of the

factors that could either derail persistence or motivate students to persist. These questions would shed more light on how students integrate into the social communities.

Participants in this study spoke about the importance of having faculty and administrators' support. Several of them noted that these institutional personnel helped them to navigate the harsh campus climate and provided a safe haven for them. Washington and Wall (2010) underscored the need for a strong role model and mentor network for African-American gay men. Participants believed that they had positive African-American and White mentors who helped them to remain focused on academics. Washington and Wall (2010) noted that African-American men in institutional positions of leadership take on the role of being everything to everyone, thus they might feel unwilling to mentor an African-American gay man, especially if the potential mentor is gay and is not willing to take the risk to be outed. Further study is needed to discover the effects that having an African-American mentor have on undergraduate African-American student retention and persistence rates. Addressing this topic from both the mentor and student perspective in a future study would provide more clarity about what is needed in mentor training programs and how to improve the role model and mentee relationship for African-American gay men.

Last, this study and future research in this area could add to the sparse literature and be used to better advocate for African-American gay men enrolled in colleges and universities (Harris, 2003; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita 2008; Washington & Wall, 2010). Faculty and administrators may use this body of work to attract students who may need support. The lived experiences of African-American gay men could stand to benefit from positive faculty, administrators, and peer interactions. In environments where African-American gay men feel isolated, people in advocacy roles might maintain open door policies and work to create

inclusive safe spaces. Studies in this area confirmed that African-American gay men need more support in the form of positive campus climates (Harris, 2003; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita 2008; Washington & Wall, 2010). Institutions could improve understanding around shame, isolation, and loneliness that African-American gay men experience. Advocacy efforts in this area might also help students to become empowered and better able to cope and to self-advocate.

Conclusion

The perceived lived experience of African-American gay men provides an understanding of the needs of this population of students. This study examined the strategies that participants used to integrate academically and socially into the university's community that eventually led to their commitment to remain enrolled. Institutions that develop and impose programs designed to educate the greater community on issues of racism, homophobia, sexism, and the diversity of cultural traditions have given added weight to the importance of inclusive communities (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita 2008; Washington & Wall, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Bean (2005) noted that although the bureaucracy in campus activities could cause some students to feel powerless and alienated, efficient programming could lead to greater social integration. This study found that only a small number of African-American gay men choose to self-identify. Thus, creating purposeful on-campus programs could encourage positive peer interaction and conditions for students to persist.

Tinto (1993) said the conditions on campus that cause success must be woven into the mainstream of the institution's academic, social and administrative life. In support, the data analysis from this study showed there is much to be gained from participants' experiences, since their campus involvement teeters on the margin of the institution. The implication and

recommendations that surfaced from this study are compelling and could help institutional personnel to redirect programmatic goals and implement mainstream programs to include marginalized people. It is important for institutions to identify ways to keep African-American gay men invested in their own college experiences. Institutions could create more visible and welcoming spaces for students with multiple intersecting identities. Institutions could also lead with stronger messages against hate and support the formation of more cohesive friendship groups. These are opportunities for all students to become more knowledgeable about diverse cultures and to improve students' perceptions about African-American gay men.

In addition, there is room for more advocacy for African-American gay students. For instance, institutions could collaborate with advocacy organizations like the Human Rights Campaign to help address issues of homophobia, heterosexism, and other oppressive actions perpetrated towards sexual minority students. When the core values of African-American gay men and other sexual and racial minority students are respected, the shape of their narratives changes. Therefore, it is imperative that universities create space for African-American gay men so that they may negotiate, embrace, and re-author their individual stories as whole and unique members of the campus community.

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APPENDIX A

Invitation to Participate Email

Hello, my name is Vivian Hill-Silcott and I am a graduate student in the Counseling and Human Development Services department at the University of Georgia. I am doing a research study under the direction of Dr. Laura A. Dean on the experiences that affect African-American gay men and their persistence in college. Because I am studying experiences over time, I would like to converse with African-American gay men who have completed 90 or more credit hours toward a bachelor degree.

I hope to share the findings from my study with university administrators in an effort to identify and create retention programs geared specifically toward ethnic and sexual minority students. You provided me your name and contact information in [the email that you submit on (date)/your phone call on (date)]. Your stories will help me to learn key elements that eventually result in students remaining in college, even in the face of hardship. Your involvement in this process would require that you take part in an audiotaped individual interview session. You will receive a \$25 Visa gift card for taking part in the study.

If you qualify for this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with me, discussing your experience as an African-American gay man who is enrolled as a full-time college student. The interview will last about 1 hour, although I may need to contact you for more information. The interview questions will be straightforward, so I can get an understanding of your experiences as an African-American gay man who has persisted in college both socially and academically.

You may choose to withdraw from participation from the study at any point and without warning. The results will be made public at the end of the study; however, your identity will remain anonymous. If for any reason you become unable to complete the study, you will still receive the \$25 Visa gift card.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (607) 275-6361 or vhsilcot@uga.edu. I look forward to your reply. Also, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, for The University of Georgia at 706-542-3199.

Sincerely,

Vivian Hill-Silcott

Principal Investigator: Laura A. Dean, Ph. D.

ladean@uga.edu

[illegible]

APPENDIX C

Thank You for Agreeing to Participate

Hello [Prospective participant]. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study. As soon as possible, I would like to schedule a time for a phone call to discuss your eligibility to take part in the study. Our conversation should take no more than 10 minutes of your time. Also, please note that you do not have to provide a response to any questions you choose not to answer. Your participation in this process is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from participation at any time and without penalty.

Once your qualification for the study is determined, I will work with you to schedule a time and place to meet. After the interview phase of the research is complete, I will review the audiotapes from our conversation(s) and may contact you for additional follow up based on your responses to the questions asked in our interview(s). The entire process including interviews and any sessions required to clarify captured more data should require no more than two to three hours. All information shared will be kept in confidence, and you will be assigned a pseudonym to further protect your identity. If you are ineligible to take part or decide to withdraw from participation, all of your information will be destroyed immediately.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 607-275-6361 or vhsilcot@uga.edu. I look forward to your reply. Also, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, for The University of Georgia at 706-542-3199.

Sincerely,

Vivia Hill-Silcott

Principal Investigator: Laura A. Dean, Ph. D.

ladean@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

Initial Telephone Screening
Please respond to the following
Vivia Hill-Silcott
vhsilcot@uga.edu

Before I begin to ask you questions to determine your eligibility to participate in this study, I would like to obtain your verbal consent. Do I have your permission to proceed with gathering the necessary information?

Name:

Email address:

Telephone:

Did you enroll at UGA directly after high school?

Are you currently enrolled as (full-time/part-time)?

Have you completed 90 or more credits toward a bachelor degree?

How do you self-identify in terms of your ethnicity?

How do you self-identify in terms of your sexuality?

Thank you for your interest in this study, and for your candid response to the questions.

For qualified candidates: I am pleased to tell you that you have met all the criteria to take part in the study. Would you be available to meet for about an hour on any of the following dates [dates]?

For candidates who are not eligible: I am sorry that you did not meet the criteria for this study. I will destroy immediately all the information that you shared with me.

APPENDIX C

Post Qualification Screening Communication

Follow up email -qualified

Dear [student Name]:

Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to answer the study participation eligibility questions. As we have discussed, we will meet at [location] on [date] at [time] to discuss your experiences on campus.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 607-275-6361 or vhsilcot@uga.edu.

Also, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, for The University of Georgia at 706-542-3199.

Sincerely,

Vivia Hill-Silcott

Principal Investigator: Laura A. Dean, Ph.D.

ladean@uga.edu

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I _____ agree to take part in a research study titled “Experiences affecting African-American gay men’s college persistence and success” which is being conducted by Vivia Hill-Silcott (607-275-6361) from the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. The research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Laura A. Dean, Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, University of Georgia (706 -542-6551).

My participation in this study is voluntary. I do not have to take part in this study and I can withdraw my participation without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can choose to have all of my information returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences that contribute to the persistence and college success of African-American gay men.

My participation in this study may advance the available literature that will allow institutions of higher education to provide better service to African-American gay men and improve the college climate around issues that affect African-American gay men.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I agree to do the following:

1. I will read and sign this consent form by [DATE]
2. I agree to meet with the researcher to take part in a one-on-one interview session.
3. During the interview session, I agree to discuss my involvement in and out of classroom experiences.
4. I understand the entire interview session will be audiotaped.
5. I understand that I will review the transcript for accuracy, and will clarify any misinterpretation of the interview.
6. I request that all information be kept confidential; my name, or any information that could possibly identify me as participant will not be placed anywhere in the data.
7. I request that all audiotapes and written transcripts be destroyed at the end of the research process.
8. I understand that I will receive a \$25 Visa gift card for my involvement in the study, regardless of whether I complete the study or not.

No discomfort or harm will come to me because of my participation in this study. No risks are expected to any participant. Any information that is obtained about this study and can be identified to me will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with my permission or as required by the law.

I will answer all questions and address all concerns about the research study, at any point and throughout the study. I can be reached by telephone at 607 -275- 6361.

By placing my signature below, I agree that the researcher answered all of my questions to my satisfaction, and that I consent voluntarily for this project. I will be given a copy of this form.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu

Dr. Laura Dean

Name of Principal Investigator
Telephone: (706) 542-6551

Signature
Email: ladean@uga.edu

Date

Vivia Hill-Silcott

Name of Co-Investigator
Telephone: (607) 275- 6361

Signature
Email: vhsilcot@uga.edu

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one, and return one to the researcher.

More questions or problems about your rights as a research participant should be addressed to:
The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies
Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address
IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol

The researcher provides a review of the study, discusses issues of confidentiality, and answers any questions. Participants then will sign an informed consent before the interview begins. Noted below are the researcher's statement, the purpose of the research study, research question, and the interview protocol.

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to participate in a research study. Before you agree to take part in the study, it is important for you to understand why this research is being conducted and what it will entail.

Please read the following information carefully and address any concerns, and questions with me prior to the start of the interview. Please ask the researcher to clarify and provide more information if necessary. When all of your questions are addressed and answered, you may decide and consent to participate in this study. A copy of your signed informed consent will be given to you.

Purpose of Research Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the influences that contribute to persistence and college success among African-American gay men. This research project is a phenomenological study which is intended to examine how experiences affect African-American gay men's college persistence and success. African-American men are among the least retained group (second only to Native American students) in U.S. higher education (Harper, 2010). According to Harper and Harris (2012), only 33% of African-American men earn college

degrees within six years of college enrollment, a rate of 17% below the overall student population. You have been invited to participate because, in contrast to these statistics, you are successful in college. The study will focus on participants' on campus experiences that assist them to integrate into the campus, remain enrolled, and be successful.

Participants Interview Protocol

As you know, I'm conducting a study to try to understand why some African American gay men persist and succeed in college while others don't. Specifically, I'm interested in exploring your experiences at UGA, including any programs and services that may have helped you stay in school and be successful.

- 1) For the first part of the interview, I'd like to learn about your experiences as a student.

Tell me about yourself in terms of academics.

- a. What major are you in?
 - b. What has it been like to have a major in that department?
 - c. How did you choose your major? What was the process of choosing a major like?
 - d. As a student at UGA, tell me about what has been helpful to you, in your academic pursuit.
 - e. What academic support and services have you used? What co-curricular services have you used? Which have helped most, and how have those provided you with support?
- 2) Now I'd like you to think more broadly about your experiences on campus. What has it been like for you to be at UGA?

- a. Think of a time when you felt supported on campus, I would like for you to tell me about that in as much details as possible.
 - b. Describe your involvement on campus. How do you make decisions about what to get involved with?
 - c. What was the process of becoming involved in these activities like for you?
 - d. How have these experiences affected your time at UGA?
 - e. Can you recall a time when you felt isolated on campus? Explain to me what that felt like? How did you get through those feelings?
 - f. Describe experiences where you felt connected on campus. How did that experience feel? Who else was involved?
- 3) This study focuses specifically on how individuals' experiences are affected by their identities, so I'd like to focus next on how you see yourself and how that may relate to your experiences.
- a. How do you self-identify in terms of your race, sexual orientation, and sex or gender? When did you begin to identify yourself as _____?
 - b. I would like to hear your thoughts on what it is like to be an African-American gay man (or gay African-American man) at UGA. Do you think that your experiences are typical? If not, why?
 - c. What is it like when heterosexism and homophobia happen? Do you believe that you have a voice on campus?
 - d. What is it like to develop relationships with others as a student at UGA?

- 4) Finally, as I've told you previously, I'm trying to understand the experiences and campus resources that help students like you persist and succeed in college.
 - a. Did you ever consider dropping out, taking time off, or transferring? If so, what led to that, and why did you decide to stay?
 - b. What campus programs and services have you used? Which have helped most, and how have those provided you with support?
 - c. What kind of strategies have you used to help you to remain enrolled in college? How often and in what circumstances do you use them?
- 5) Finish the sentence: I feel that I am a valued member of the campus community when _____
- 6) Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences on campus – particularly those that supported your success?

Thank you for answering my research questions. If I decide to do a follow-up focus group with some of the study participants, would you be willing to participate?