

IMPROVING STUDENT SUCCESS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES:
EXAMINING STUDENTS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE
ACCESS AND RETENTION INITIATIVES

by

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(Under the Direction of Erik Ness)

ABSTRACT

In recent years, researchers have examined how to effectively improve student success outcomes for African American males and sustain this effort. The U.S. Department of Education's TRIO programs provide resources for institutions to increase college access, retention, and graduation. I examine the importance and benefits of programs like the Student Support Services Program which focuses on improving the student success outcomes for students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds before they enter college and ushers them to graduation. Programs such as this compliment other student support initiatives for African American males. I use Critical Race Theory to examine campus climate and student and administrator perceptions of student service effectiveness.

This qualitative study provides data from university administrators and students on college access and retention best practices used to engage and retain students, along with their institutional impact. In my single-case approach, I searched for a single institution that is a minority serving institution, is considered a major research university, and has a record of innovative student success initiatives. These criteria led me to Georgia State University. Some key findings from this study include: 1) an institution has to be financially invested and authentic

if exploring ways to improve academic achievement for African American males, 2) an inclusive campus climate increases the retention of Black male students, and 3) alignment between student need and an institution's initiative is required to properly implement a student support services program. I present several recommendations on how to improve students success for Black males, a few of them include: 1) institute a mentoring program that involves students, faculty, and staff; and 2) create a financial assistance program that prevents dropout.

INDEX WORDS: African American, Black male, student success, college access, college retention, student support services

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of those who have encouraged me along the way to strive for excellence. First and foremost, I would like to give thanks to my Lord and Savior that sits on high and looks low, and who impressed upon me the need to reach back and inspire. Secondly, I thank the Lord for the support and patience of my loving wife. I greatly appreciate all that you do. To the best parents in the world, you have instilled in me many key elements (spirituality, balance, love, focus, persistence) that have allowed me to be successful in life. To my family and future generations, this achievement is possible with a smidge of preparation, dedication, and a commitment to your dissertation topic. Thanks to you all!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are few jobs for young adults in the present-day workplace that can provide family-sustaining employment without some post-secondary education or training. Despite recent progress, many students, in particular low-income and students of color, fail to finish their high school education or graduate in numbers that consistently increase graduation rates. This thereby limits their future education and employment options. Furthermore, since the nation's high school dropouts are concentrated in a sub-set of communities and neighborhoods, these localities are in danger of being continually engulfed in a cycle of poverty, low educational outcomes, poor health, and lack of employment (Holzman, 2012).

The educational horizon of opportunity for African American male students in both secondary and postsecondary institutions has seen modest improvements with few significantly upward trends in access, equity, and engagement over the past decade. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that the adjusted cohort graduation rate for African American high school students was 69% in 2011-12, which was below the national average of 80% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014c). This figure represented the lowest percentage of high school graduates among all races in the United States.

Elevated high school dropout rates can have longstanding effects that make it difficult to identify a viable solution. In 2010, the Black male high school status dropout rate¹ was 9.5

¹ “The *status dropout rate* represents the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate)” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, p.1).

percent, which is more than one-third as many students when compared to white males at 5.9 percent during that time. As of 2012, the high school status dropout rate decreased to 8.1 percent for Black males² (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Additionally, according to a report by the Center for Labor Market Studies (2009) found that one in 10 male high school dropouts is incarcerated or in detention. For young Black male dropouts, that number is one in four. This detractor further exacerbates the persistent high school dropout dilemma with this particular group.

In an effort to provide a broader context, the White House released a fact sheet to highlight key challenges, and the need for this national initiative. The White House (2012) report mentions a few key trends: that high school dropout rates as high as 50% were found in some predominately minority high school districts; that among youth ages 10 to 24, homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males; and that Black males were 6 times more likely to be imprisoned than White males in 2012 (pp. 5-6). These statistics have prompted many federal agencies, schools and colleges, and communities to take action and attempt to reverse the unfortunate circumstances that have befallen young men of color.

In 2012, the Schott Foundation reported that in the 2009-2010 school year 52 percent of Black males enrolled in 9th grade in the United States graduated within four years from high school. This startling statistic leads to another alarming fact as Holzman (2012) adds that with the Black/White male graduation gap only decreasing by 3 percentage points over last decade, that there is much work to do to not only strengthen the pipeline to college, but to “put the pipe together” in secondary education. Holzman (2012) reports that Georgia’s graduation rate for Black males is 49%, which places it in the bottom tier among states with more than 10,000 Black

² I use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably.

males enrolled. The graduation rate for the white male cohort during the same time period was 65%, presenting a graduation gap of 17% between black and white male high schools students. As the literature explains the gap further, Holzman's report highlights various reasons why Black male students are not transitioning to college. Most importantly, many researchers agree (Harper, Harris, & Institute for Higher Education, 2012; Holzman, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2014b) that they face disproportionate rates of out-of-school suspensions and are not consistently receiving sufficient learning time, and their communities lack the proper resources from their respective states.

By allocating better resources to alleviate the mentioned constructs, states may see a reduction in the dropout rates, an increase in graduation rates, and an increased flow of student enrolling in college. The aforementioned insightful research indicates how urgent the call is to target effective solutions to reverse the current and future adverse reactions to neglecting the Black male education gap. Furthermore, it serves as a prelude to the need for a study that examines the experiences of Black male college students that have successfully navigated their way to college, despite overwhelming odds. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) made it clear in its most recent report that the federal educational opportunity programs provided by TRIO were making strides in promoting college readiness, access, and success for youth that come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first program, Education Talent Search (ETS), starts as early as middle school with preparing students for and promoting college. The second, TRIO's Upward Bound (UB) Program, provides college preparation for first-generation, low-income students in high school, provides financial assistance for college, and assists with their transition into college. The third program, Student Support Services (SSS), focuses on promoting college access and retention for those students who are most at need. Its services are geared toward first-

generation, low-income, and disabled students. Given my interest in student support services on college campuses, I identified the SSS program as the most appropriate TRIO program study among the three programs to examine college access and retention among black male college students. This program is most relevant to this study due to its specific focus to: 1) increase retention and graduation rates for its eligible students; 2) increase transfer rates from two-year to four-year institutions; and most importantly 3) foster an institutional climate supportive of success for low-income and first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities. SSS promotes access and retention, and this study focuses on examining access and retention through its black male participants.

The success of TRIO's programs juxtapose to a conscientious effort to reduce these established services, warrants a critical look into how racial inequities can hinder student success for Black male college students. Derrick Bell's (1992) Critical Race Theory (CRT) presents a framework to examine the perspectives and experiences of Black male students and discuss the impact of race on institutional climate. I selected this theory due to its ability to explain the experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color and how racism impacts these students, particularly in a higher education environment. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) mentions that "understanding and analyzing the collegiate racial climate is an important part of examining college access, retention, persistence, graduation, and transfer to and through graduate and professional school for African American students" (p. 62). Colleges that generate sustainable and positive campus communities commonly use the following four elements to foster a supportive institutional climate: a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; c) programs to support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of students of color; and

d) college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze and assess the experiences of Black male college students participating in TRIO Student Support Services' Freshman Institute on their college success and retention. Examining participants' shared experiences and differences accounts for a range of initiatives and campus contexts that promote greater preparation, access, and retention. The same can be said for understanding administrator's perceptions of SSS. Administrators of SSS regularly report the progress of this program to their institutional leaders and the federal government. By examining both administrators and students, my study highlights what services are perceived to be most beneficial for Black male students, promote best practices, and identify innovative techniques of engagement.

Statement of the Problem

Specifically tailored student support services are vital to helping Black male students enter and persist through college. However, there is limited work connecting these strands of research, especially the alignment between campus initiatives and students' perceptions of their influence on their success. Laudable progress has been made to promote a collective impact approach to addressing national concerns of few educational and career opportunities for African American boys and young men. Although some progress has been made, solutions for this longstanding issue have been nominal. Which student support services (mentoring, tutoring, etc.) do Black male college students find most effective at promoting college success and retention? Identifying the most critical student support services needed early in a Black male student's

college career can provide insight into how stakeholders can better prepare these students for success in postsecondary educational attainment.

This prevalent and persistent inequity in educational opportunity extends further into higher education. Researchers (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) explain that higher education research addresses concerns about recruiting, retaining, and graduating increasing numbers of underrepresented African Americans, but does very little to address these areas specifically on Black men. Furthermore, there are few works that separate men and women, and focus on their divergent issues, their different needs, and the growing disparity in their demographic representation among the US College and University population (Cuyjet, 2006).

It is vital to provide minority students with continued student support services, particularly those in high poverty communities, from high school through college graduation. There are educational programs that infuse innovation in student services, creating positive outcomes in college access and retention. The TRIO Programs are known for establishing this type of innovation, and examining college access and retention through the lenses of both students and administrators. By examining students' experiences in these programs, I may uncover viable solutions for educational opportunity.

Historically and presently, low college completion rates have stifled the socioeconomic progress of African American men in the United States. Limited research strategies make it even more difficult to develop a strategy in real-time to assist these disenfranchised students to enter college, excel academically, and persist through graduation. As a result, there is a need to determine if examining students' perspectives of services received can improve educational

opportunity for this population. Additionally, there is a need to know that race plays an integral role on students' college success and on institutions' climate.

Few studies link the perspectives of Black male students with the perspectives of administrators on college access and retention initiatives in existing educational programs (Harper, 2012; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ruppert, 2003). However, there are many Black male studies that address the impact of developmental educational programs, culturally responsive teaching, male engagement (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Harris, 2010; Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). This study attempts to fill the gap in the literature regarding the effects of how examining both students' and administrators' perspectives can lead to new initiatives for college access and retention for Black males in higher education.

I employed a qualitative approach in this study to examine understanding how CRT and TRIO programs explain Black students' college experiences and perceptions. Research questions were developed based on principles derived from the CRT. I examine these questions in a single case study of Georgia State University.

The research questions that guided my study are:

1. How does an institution foster a climate supportive of success for low-income and first-generation Black male college students? To what extent do Black male students perceive this climate as supportive?
2. How does critical race theory inform the college experience for Black males?
3. To what extent do Black male students' perceptions and their administrators' perceptions of SSS's program effectiveness align?

Significance of Study

This study is purposefully meant to be both conceptual and practical. It is conceptual based on my testing of CRT in a university setting and practical due to my extension of the research base that examines student support programs' effect on Black men in college. This may also provide insights on how TRIO, SSS, and other college-wide programs influence college access and retention.

In this first chapter, I have introduced historical and persisting issues that are encountered by Black male youth before they get to college, the purpose and problem for this study, and how I examined the Black male college experience. In Chapter 2, I discuss what current research states about the impediments to educational success for African American males, present efforts being made to reverse these roadblocks, and highlight frameworks that are currently being used by higher education researchers and practitioners to shed light on this persistent issue. In Chapter 3, I explain the design and method for my research, and how I plan to examine themes around college access and retention initiatives with my participants. Chapter 4 examines student and administrator perceptions of which experiences and initiatives significantly garner student success for Black male college students at Georgia State University. I analyze participants' responses to identify critical factors from current and planned activities. In the final chapter, I identify commonalities and differences between various student support programs across the institution. In addition, I present a student support services usage matrix for consideration by multiple institutional types that have a Black male student population, as defined by the study's findings.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter offers a discussion of the literature in a way that provides a deeper understanding of my study, presents early warning signs of trouble that can derail Black boys and young men, and acknowledges a national effort to subvert such warning signs called “My Brother’s Keeper.” Furthermore, this chapter provides a review of the federal program TRIO’s Student Support Services (SSS), and empirical research relative to SSS. Lastly, I discuss Critical Race Theory and its relevance to the phenomena that impede African American men from obtaining a postsecondary degree.

Background Context

Identifying Early Warning Signs

A national effort by the Obama Administration was enacted in 2010 to reduce the national dropout rate of high school students overall. Since 2010, there has been another national call to action by this administration to address the question of “How can we strengthen educational and career opportunities for young boys and men of color?” by community leaders, government officials, and educational leaders from kindergarten through higher education. These entities have combined resources to take immediate action to reverse this trajectory in a strategic manner. This call has led to an initiative called “My Brother’s Keeper” (MBK) which was launched in February 2014.

During President Barak Obama’s tenure in office, he noticed the dire need for federal intervention to address the plight of men of color’s progress in society and the classroom. On

February 27, 2014, President Obama took action constructing a strategy to mitigate this issue through the creation of a Task Force. The President submitted a Presidential Memorandum (PM) giving this Task Force “a number of responsibilities, including: (1) assessing the impact of Federal policies of general applicability to develop proposals that enhance positive outcomes and eliminate or reduce negative ones; (2) developing a plan for an Administration-wide website and portal to make available data relevant to the broader community about successful programs and practices, and relevant contextual and outcome statistics; and (3) developing outreach strategies and coordinating with other stakeholders to highlight opportunities and challenges” (White House, 2014, p. 14). President Obama decided to build upon his broader agenda for economic growth and opportunity for all by initiating MBK to uplift and transform the daily lives of boys and young men of color. The aforementioned broader agenda has made three positive strides for boys and young men of color by increasing high school graduation rates nationally, reductions in dropout rates, a surge in college enrollment overall, and the opportunity to learn and thrive.

Educators and researchers report that persistent challenges have continued to derail boys and young men of color in America, creating roadblocks to success. Riegle-Crumb and Grodsky (2010) discuss such issues with math achievement in secondary education. Lareau (2000); Lucas (2001); Thomas and Bell (2008); and Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins (2013) examine these concerns from the viewpoint of social class, and Harper (2012) addresses these challenges in the higher education context. The White House (2014) has identified several of these complex issues that take time to reverse and resolve such as boys and young men of color are more likely than their peers to be born into low-income families and live in concentrated poverty, attend poor performing schools, have more negative encounters with the police and be victimized by violent crime, and have a lack of role models and strong network of informed adults. The PM required

the creation of two deliverables to be presented within the 90-day report to the president. These deliverables consisted of a set of critical indicators of life outcomes, a list of relevant programs and data-driven assessments from different agencies that could prove helpful to the public, and were consolidated in the form of a web portal. The Task Force discovered six primary outcomes that were deemed as vital or life milestones to success.

These six milestones represent a cradle-to-college-and-career approach, beginning at early childhood and proceeds through career. They serve as a guide for the Task Force to conduct research “ensuring youth are 1) entering school ready to learn, 2) reading at grade level by third grade; 3) graduating from high school prepared for college and their future career; 4) completing postsecondary education or training; 5) successfully entering the workforce; and 6) reducing violence and providing a second chance” (White House, 2014, p. 15). These milestones have provided a benchmark for the Task Force, and serve as a safeguard for accountability. Further development of these milestones includes the creation of the MBK Community Challenge.

MBK Today

After receiving the 90-day report, President Obama challenged communities across the country to reverse the present and future fate of men of color, which became known as the MBK Community Challenge in September 2014. The focus of this challenge is to learn from what organizations, institutions, researchers, and communities are doing to reduce and prevent men of color from dropping out of high school, promote educational opportunities for this group, increase access to college, and share the findings and successes on a national platform. The next phase of MBK shared the information that has been gathered on organizations throughout America with the broader American audience. MBK researchers discovered that through the

analysis of their clearinghouses and listening sessions conducted across America, decision-makers and practitioners do not have the proper resources or the time to produce evidence-based solutions without gaps. Additionally, they found that “many studies lacked conclusive finds about the impacts of specific populations” (White House, 2014, p. 17).

MBK has increasingly impacted higher education policy at the national, state, and regional levels, particularly in the areas of early learning, college preparation, access, completion, entry into the workforce, and reducing violence. On August, 5, 2014, Georgetown University hosted a Data Jam session to promote a decision-thinking model among various stakeholders within and outside of the local community in Washington, D.C. This event was also supported by the U.S. Department of Education. After the event concluded, solutions were shared with the Obama Administration for further consideration. In other events, The Texas Consortium for Males Students of Color (TCMSC) highlighted a report in which they involved called “Advancing the Success of Boys and Men of Color in Education.”

This report is comprised of a joint statement from seven university-based research centers that place a research focus on young men of color in education. The list of university research centers consist of Project MALES (University of Texas at Austin), the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education (University of Pennsylvania), the Minority Male Community College Collaborative (San Diego State University), Morehouse Research Institute (Morehouse College), Wisconsin’s Equity and Inclusion Laboratory (University of Wisconsin-Madison), UCLA Black Male Institute (University of California, Los Angeles), and Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center of the African American Male (The Ohio State University) (TCMSC, 2014). The events and efforts mentioned represent the level of national participation that is taking place to support the MBK initiative and improve life outcomes for young men of color.

“The foundations supporting this call to action have already made extensive investments, which include \$150 million in current spending that they have already approved or awarded” (White House, 2014, p. 1). Building on this, these foundations plan to provide \$200 million over the next five years to advance the efforts and create opportunity immediately for boys and young men of color (White House, 2014). Next, I highlight the development of an organization that provides students with educational opportunity, and focuses on college access and retention through graduation.

TRIO’s Student Support Services

Historically, as the needs of disadvantage students became more apparent, the federal government responded by providing educational opportunity programs for these students. The Higher Education Act of 1965 progressively provided amendments for the creation of two needed programs; the Talent Search Program, and the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students Program. In 1968, the Higher Education Amendments created the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, with a focus on assisting students entering college through graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The name of the program was later changed to Student Support Services (SSS).

The SSS program continues to surpass governmental expectations in providing an array of services that promote access and retention, and gained reauthorization through the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The services mentioned include increasing college retention and graduation rates for eligible students, increasing the transfer rate of eligible students from two-year to four-year institutions, and fostering an institutional climate supportive of student success for first-generation and low-income college students and individuals with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of

Education (2010), “two-thirds of the students served by an SSS project must be low-income (defined as at or below 150 percent of the poverty level) and first-generation college students or students with disabilities, the other third must be low-income or first-generation college students, and one-third of the disabled students also must be low income” (p. xi).

This program’s longstanding presence and notoriety has served as a benchmark for other programs. Additionally, SSS provides great latitude in how services are rendered to its student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). These services include but are not limited to: peer tutoring (e.g., math, English, science) and mentoring, professional counseling, advising services to detect early signs of poor performance, professional tutoring (e.g., English, math, science, general tutoring), services specifically for students with disabilities (e.g., note takers, counseling), cultural events (e.g., concerts, museums, lectures), workshops (e.g., orientation to college, career guidance), and special instructional courses limited to SSS students (e.g., study skills, writing, developmental math). Research suggests that students participating in this program are more likely to remain enrolled in higher education, accrue more college credits, and earn higher grade point averages than their peers who are not program participants (Flores, 2014; Pell Institute, 2009). Harper et al. (2012) examines the role of mentoring programs, many of which are funded through TRIO SSS, on student outcomes. In the next section, I illustrate how conceptual frameworks can provide a deeper understanding of how to cultivate student services for African American male students.

Review of Empirical Literature on SSS

College Access and Choice

If you speak with a high school senior or graduate about his/her decision to enroll in a particular college, they may provide you with a plethora of reasons as to why that college is a good fit. Perna (2006) points out Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three phase model as a way to explain an applicant's college choice process. College choice in this context refers to all phases of the college selection process, which are predisposition, search, and choice. The three phases are explained as follows in their respective order: 1) the predisposition phase describes how students become interested in college as they develop educational and occupational aspirations; 2) the search phase consists of students search for useful college-related information; and 3) the choice phase is where students decide to enroll in a college or university (Perna, 2006). The timing of these phases can be persnickety for little information is known about the timing of these phases for nontraditional students, but there is sufficient information on timing for traditional students. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggest that predisposition generally occurs between the 7th and 10th grades, search during the 10th through 12th grades, and choice during the 11th and 12th.

Student financial aid programs also play a significant role in influencing a student's decision to enroll in college. Perna (2006) highlights that "despite substantial investment in student financial aid, not only by the federal government but also by the state governments, colleges and universities, and other entities, college access and choice remained stratified by socioeconomic status (SES), and race/ethnicity" (p. 101). When student financial aid is scarce, individuals from low-income families, those whose parents have not attended college, African-

Americans, and Hispanics are less likely to enroll in college (Kim, 2004; Perna, 2006). Research shows (Harper, 2012; Harper et al., 2012; Perna, 2006; Wood, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2013) that these same individuals are marginalized and tend to enroll in lower priced public two-year and less selective four-year colleges and universities.

Moreover, Perna points out that changes in tuition rates by institutions and adjustments in state grant expenditures tend to affect African Americans and other minority students more than White students' decision to enroll in college. Perna (2006) also highlights research on how many students view a college degree as an "expected return." Perna (2006) mentions that students expect a monetary return upon the completion of a college degree, and that it is one of the primary reasons students attend college. Additionally, there is limited research on how this "expected return" might influence a student's decision to pursue a college degree, also known as college choice.

There are various factors that impact a student's decision to select an institution and decide to enroll. Moreover, there is recent research that focuses on understanding the college choice process for particular minority groups. Perna (2006) provides a conceptual model to integrate the aspects of economic and sociological approaches to understanding student college choice across different groups. Her college choice model contends that an individual's assessment of benefits and costs to invest in college is shaped by four elements. The first layer, the individual's habitus, is defined by an individual's internalized perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs that influence the individual's thoughts on college (McDonough, 1997). The second layer, the school and community context, is comprised of the environment that the individual is nurtured in prior to pursuing a postsecondary education. This element includes the availability of resources, types of resources, and structural supports and barriers (Perna, 2006). The third layer,

the higher education context, consists of how an institution markets to students, the location of the institution, its organizational characteristics, and how these influences impact college choice (Perna, 2006). The fourth layer, the social, economic, and cultural context, introduces how demographic, economic, and public policy characteristics impact a student's decision to attend an institution (Perna, 2006).

This college choice model incorporates various aspects of the human capital model. Perna (2006) also informs that "college enrollment rates are lower for African-Americans and Hispanics than for Whites because they possess less of the types of economic, human, cultural, and social capital that are valued in the college enrollment process, and because of the low levels of resources that are available at the school attended to promote college enrollment" (p. 137).

The aforementioned missing resources can create a skewed perception of how a student views the pathway to college and college choice. Many colleges have built educational research centers to examine some of the roadblocks that hinder the path toward a postsecondary degree, particularly for men of color. Perna (2006) explains that socio-cultural models and human capital approaches alone are not adequate to explain the differences across groups in student college choice. Manski (1993) advises researchers to consider including economic approaches and models to develop a better understanding of students' decision-making. Furthermore, Manski provides a caveat for this framework cautioning that it is limited due to its inability to examine the nature of information that is available to student decision makers.

A plethora of scholars and researchers have examined the topic of college access and choice from an economic and socio-cultural perspective. Earlier research by scholars such as Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) and Paulsen (1990) focuses on a quantitative approach to examining college access and choice with an economic and sociological perspective.

Fifteen years after their contribution, it appears that research drifts toward both a qualitative and quantitative approach for addressing college access and choice among specific groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income and first-generation students highlighting social and cultural capital. A montage of programs known as TRIO has proven to be successful at addressing inequities in college access and retention among first-generation and low-income students, most who are students of color. In particular, Engle, Tinto, and Pell Institute (2008) mention that the Upward Bound Program (UB) “offers pre-college services that focus on increasing college awareness and preparation among middle- and high-school students in the form of two programs: 1) Upward Bound which offers a more intensive program that includes supplemental academic instruction in key college-preparatory courses after school and on Saturdays throughout the school year and during a summer program usually held on a college campus; and 2) Upward Bound Math/Science which helps high school students recognize and develop their potential to excel in math and science and encourages them to pursue postsecondary degrees and careers in these fields” (p. 7).

Furthermore, Engle et al. (2008) state that “both programs offer counseling, tutoring, mentoring, and workshops to provide students with information about the college admissions process as well as to provide assistance with obtaining financial aid (e.g. help with filling out the FAFSA) and preparing for college entrance exams” (p. 7). In Engle et al.’s evaluation of the UB program, findings show that the program is the largest and oldest of its kind, that it targets first-generation and low-income students, and provides direct services to them.

In terms of promoting college access, major flagship institutions that desire a selective approach to admissions and charge high tuition tend to overlook students that come from first-generation, low-income background similar to TRIO high school graduates. The mentioned

impediment to access can have a disparate impact on students that exclude higher cost institutions because they feel they cannot afford them (Hossler, 2000). A report by Haycock, Lynn, Engle, and the Education Trust (2010) titled *Opportunity Adrift: Our Flagship Universities Are Straying From Their Public Mission* posits that the impact of not investing in college access by major flagship institutions can have a damaging effect on promoting student success. Specifically, Haycock et al. (2010) highlights three findings on public flagships and other research institutions: 1) they spend hundreds of millions of dollars on students who have no financial need (p. 5), 2) even though low-income students receive more grant aid on average, flagships spend grant aid similarly on students from the top two quintiles of family income as they do on student from the bottom two quintiles of family income (p. 11), and 3) some flagships are successfully increasing access and success for low-income and minority students (p. 16–22).

Research suggests that issues of racial disparity prevents some major flagship institutions from recruiting, retaining, and graduating students more effectively (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2012; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Patton et al., 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2010). An examination of progress can be observed through studies that focus on those major public institutions that promote college access for low-income, first-generation black male high school graduates. Such major public institutions have been successful at recruiting, developing, and graduating these students.

Bowen, Chingos, McPherson, and Tobin (2009) put this concept into context by explaining the difference between “undermatching” (instances where a student may not be academically qualified to attend an institution) and “overmatching” (a student that attends the most rigorous/selective institution that will accept him/her). The researchers also report that one of their significant findings is where a student chooses to attend college heavily influences the

student's chances of successfully graduating. In contrast, students who undermatch can be successful in college, but have a harder time graduating within six years due to a lack of financial and academic support, and rigorous academics at a less selective institution (Bowen et al., 2009). Additionally, Bowen et al. (2009) informs that family income and parental education level strongly correlate to college choice, and that students from families with lower household incomes and lower parental experience with higher education have higher levels of undermatching. Research suggests that these findings are relative to graduation rates for black male college students.

Specifically, Black male students who are not as academically prepared as their peers receive more support and graduate at higher rates at more selective and major institutions (Bowen et al., 2009). Engle, O'Brian, and Pell Institute (2007) contend that TRIO high school graduates entering college as freshmen may be disadvantaged yet they gain acceptance into some of the best colleges in the nation. Moreover, research shows that TRIO programs are effective at increasing college enrollment and graduation (Engle et al., 2007; Flores, 2014), and that elite public universities are recruiting more first-generation, low-income students (TRIO high school graduates) and strengthening institutional resources (e.g. outreach, mentoring, counseling, need-based funding) for these students (Dickert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007; Flores, 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). There are a plethora of major public universities that have benefited from the successful outcomes of recruiting TRIO high school graduates and implementing TRIO at their respective institutions.

These institutions operate differently from the major flagships institutions mentioned earlier, and are reflective of other quality public institutions across the nation and include

colleges such as the University of California at Riverside (UCR), University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC), and the University of South Florida (USF) (Flores, 2014). Some of the successes reported by these institutions and many others can be deemed commendable at the least. The multi-campus systems that encompass the universities mentioned all have one common thread, they heavily invest (financially) in their students of color who are first-generation, low-income students and focus their state grants and scholarships, and undergraduate student tuition revenues on these students. In the light of federal and state budget cuts, Flores (2014) mentions that these public institutions were still able to achieve the unimaginable in terms of increased enrollment, graduation rates, and decreased graduation gaps. Research suggests that a minimum investment of need-based grant aid is required to at least cover student direct costs (tuition and fees, room and board, books) (Flores, 2014; Karp & Logue, 2002; Upcraft et al., 2005). Studies also highlight (Engle, 2007; Flores, 2014; Harper, 2012; Kuh et al., 2005; Upcraft et al., 2005) other methods in which institutions strive to increase access and choice such as establishing pre-college or college preparatory programs to prepare high school graduates for college and influence college choice, leveraging social media for marketing purposes, and creating an in-house tuition assistance grant to cover a student's unmet need.

Recent research further examines findings that highlight inequities in college access and choice that has existed in the past and continue to be a stigma for students of color in the present. Kim (2004) informs that “throughout the history of U.S. higher education, people of color have been less represented at more selective and reputable 4-year colleges and universities but highly represented at 2-year colleges, which typically have the fewest resources” (p. 43). Furthermore, Kim mentions that data highlights the persistent racial differences in participation by institution sector. Specifically, from 1982 to the early 2000s the “enrollment rate for African American

students at Research I institutions remained lower than that of Asian and Latino students” (Kim, 2004, p. 43). This historical narrative presents an opportunity for researchers to focus more on improving college access and choice for people of color, particularly African American males.

As mentioned earlier, financial aid’s purpose is to promote educational opportunity for all students. It is important to clarify “whether financial aid promotes educational opportunity, not just measured in terms of access (getting students into college) but in terms of choice (which college students want to attend the most)” (Kim, 2004, p. 44). Equal educational opportunity in terms of college choice can be achieved through the availability of financial aid. However, studies show (Kim, 2004; St. John, 1999) that students of color respond differently Whites on the type of aid, and tend to avoid loans as a primary method to finance education. Additional studies (Hossler, 2000; Kim, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2012) inform that institutions that offer campus-based financial aid to students of color have noticed the positive effect it can have on influencing college choice and access among this population.

Innovative Research on Black Men

There are many research efforts that deserve recognition for “making one large step for mankind” in terms of developing transferrable and innovative initiatives, publishing their informative and transparent findings so that student success outcomes can improve for Black male students. First, I highlight Shaun Harper’s anti-deficit framework which illustrates the positive aspects of African American achievement. Next, I examine enhanced student services that prove valuable to Black male students. Third, I transition to the impact of diversity on learning and how different perspectives in pedagogy matters. Lastly, I provide insight on the challenges that Black men face in community colleges. The Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania is a leader among many of the existing

centers that aims to publish innovative research on education policy and practice. The center also seeks to influence educational outcomes for all minorities, particularly men of color.

One of its signature studies by Shawn Harper (2012) conducted the most comprehensive qualitative study of African American undergraduate men called the National Black Male College Achievement Study. Harper's (2012) research outlined and emphasized how the failures of some black male students should be counterbalanced by those who were able to navigate the path towards a postsecondary degree, despite the odds against them.

Harper created the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to examine this population's pre-college readiness, college achievement, and post-college success in a positive context. This framework is based on three decades of literature on Black men in education and society from various social sciences. Harper's (2012) technique involves "inverting questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition" (p. 5) in order to better understand Black male student success in college. In relation to these questions, he highlights several key elements which include the importance of "three pipeline points (pre-college, socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post college success) and eight researchable dimensions of achievement (familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness)" (Harper, 2012, p. 5). Other pillars of Harper's framework, points out research by Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) on how peers and faculty strongly influence college student development and success, and should be incorporated in research that examines Black male achievers. I adapted this framework to create thought-provoking questions for the participants in my study.

Enhanced Student Services

Student services can be enhanced through establishing a genuine relationship with the student, and by taking time to understand the circumstances that hinder student success. Two aspects of promoting persistence and college completion with Black college men are forming a genuine connection with the student, nurturing or encouraging them, and supporting them throughout their college career (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Cuyjet defined specific areas of mentoring that have had profound effects on student development. He explained that student support services, such as the moral support and advisement by a seasoned professional on navigating the political aspects of an agency or institution can positively shape the behavior of protégés in the areas of educational and social issues (Cuyjet, 2006). In addition, the author mentioned that African American adolescents who participated in community mentoring programs experienced greater knowledge and appreciation for their culture than those who did not (Cuyjet, 2006).

According to many recent studies (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper et al., 2012; White House, 2014) it is critical that disenfranchised Black male students receive support from both the community and school environment during their high school years to their freshman year in college, and continuous support throughout their college career. The proper structuring of academic advising also plays a major role in the development of Black men in higher education, and is the primary structured activity on campus where all students can actively engage one-on-one with a concerned representative of the institution (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper et al., 2012).

Moreover, Harper and Harris (2010) contend that effective academic advisors provide assistance mediating the difference between student expectations and the realities of the educational journey.

The Impact of Diversity on Learning

Some researchers (Ginsburg & Wlodkowski, 2009; University System of Georgia, 2002; Valverde & Castenell, 1998) highlight the nuance of diversity on classroom learning, and suggest that you can maximize the learning potential of minority males within a diverse classroom. Diversity within the classroom provides a better learning environment where various diverse perspectives on a topic can be shared and learning can be maximized. They also illustrate the larger disparity of having an absence of a diverse student body and faculty. There are fewer traditionally underrepresented groups of students, faculty, and staff at four year public universities than in community colleges, and even fewer in major research universities (Ginsburg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Valverde & Castenell, 1998). Moreover, authors such as Harper, Quaye, and Cuyjet reference the same lack of diversity in faculty and student enrollment in their more current research. Researchers also attest that we can better engage young men of color outside of the classroom to leverage persistence through graduation (Harris, Bensimon, & Bishop, 2010; Noguera, 2003).

Cuyjet (2006) touches on what is considered “cool” for African American men, and how some Black men do not seek help when struggling in their academics due to them feeling like they would be rejected from the “cool pose.” The term “cool pose” characterized the way that African American males express their masculinity and respond to environmental oppression. For example, in order to maintaining his “cool” image, a Black male student may not request needed assistance with a difficult assignment due to the fear of being viewed as having less intelligence than his peers. In this way, the student thinks that he is preserving his relationship with the “cool pose.” Some aspects can be linked to pride and self-respect, but it also involves dropping out of school, giving in to negative peer pressure, and getting into trouble (Cuyjet, 2006).

Many of these students are from low-income backgrounds. This requires teaching in ways that engages all stakeholders in both secondary and postsecondary education that represent a multicultural society (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Patton et al., 2007). Institutions need to realize the benefits that diverse perspectives have on the institution and society, how they enrich the lives of our students, and prepare them for the world at large (Guild, 2001; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Noguera, 2003).

The literature indicates that there are persistent hindrances to college access and retention for Black male students that have existed for decades (Bennett & Bean, 1984; Harper, 2012; Noguera, 2003). Additionally, there were limited models presented that promote college access and retention for Black male students. Further research needs to be conducted to determine how effective models of engagement could possibly level the playing field to promote college access and retention. Collaborations across federal, state, and community organizations need to be forged with experts in the education field in order to interpret the current knowledge, discover new findings, and to truly begin to bridge the Black male educational opportunity gap from a national level. In the next section, I review research on Black males' persistence in community colleges.

Conceptual Framework

In an effort to critically examine Black male students, I am grounding my study in critical race theory. This framework has been used by experts in the field to understand the progression of males in higher education and what factors negatively impact persistence.

Critical Race Theory

Patton et al. (2007) stressed the importance of viewing the minority male identity through the lens of critical race perspective. Derrick Bell was a pioneer and the founder of the Critical

Race Theory (CRT) which recognizes that racism is a normal and common aspect that shapes society (Patton et al., 2007). The research of Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado laid the groundwork for the development of CRT (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). CRT allows for a way to discuss issues of race, promotes racial justice, and examines other theories from a race-based perspective. In Bell's earlier works, Ladson-Billings (2005) shares how he protested against the injustices that people of color faced during his time. Bell also argued that if *Brown v. Board of Education* were to be heard today that it would be important to not only have social scientists weigh in, but to include educators in the conversation (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Research by Harper et al. (2009), provides a timeline of the evolution of educational disparities and how they have impacted African Americans in terms of access and equity at PWIs, specifically:

The Civil Rights Movement and later court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* emerged and legislation was passed (e.g., Title VI), requiring states to expand access to previously excluded groups. Although these mandates allowed African American students to attend PWIs in larger numbers, the doors to these institutions were neither instantly nor easily opened, confirming that African Americans were not welcomed or perceived as worthy of being educated. Race was used to indicate intellectual inferiority, promote their exclusion from white institutions, and ultimately keep African Americans from disturbing the white status quo in higher education. Even when legislative mandates were passed and policies were enacted, the decisions were largely race-based and geared toward promoting white interests as opposed to eliminating inequities. Although race has and continues to be central to the problems concerning African American college access and equity, its presence and consequences are hardly recognizable without performing a critical examination to uncover it. This type of examination easily leads to one conclusion: racism is real and unlikely to be eradicated despite incremental changes. (p. 404)

During the 1980's and 1990's, Bell highlights that Black American progress in the U.S. was hinged on the economic needs of powerful Whites versus through genuine means to improve the lives of Blacks (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2005). Progress has been made since those times, and current researchers intend to continue improving the plight of Black men

in higher education. Cooper and Hawkins (2014) mention that there are three underlying principles of CRT: “1) Race is a major factor in perpetuation of the inequity in the U.S., 2) Property rights are the foundation of U.S. society, and 3) The intersection between race and property forms a critical perspective to understand social inequity” (p. 83). Current CRT theorists added to the principles mentioned by “establishing five CRT tenets: 1) (counter) storytelling, 2) the permanence of racism, 3) the Whiteness as property norm, 4) interest convergence, and 5) the critique of liberalism” (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014, p. 84). Of the five tenets, (counter) storytelling and interest convergence plays a vital role in capturing Black male students’ experiences and perspectives on college access and retention. Cooper and Hawkins (2014) mention that “counter deficit storytelling” empowers marginalized voices and provides “valuable insight into understanding the impact of various institutional factors” (p. 84). The authors also emphasize the importance of interest convergence on marginalized groups. They argue that progress for a marginalized group only occurs if a benefit is being rendered to the dominant group (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014).

These tenets form a dialog that can be used to describe verbal and non-verbal racial encounters experienced by Black males at predominately white institutions (PWI). Interestingly, many educators believe that Black males too often experience situations where they are provided with few supports such as a mentor (Solórzano et al., 2000), engaging advisors (Smith et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2010), and leadership (Strayhorn, 2010) opportunities at these institutions when compared to the dominant group. Cooper and Hawkins (2014) also mentions that at PWIs, the fact that Whites fulfill a majority of the leadership positions on campus reflects the Whiteness as property norm as they determine the policies and subsequent enforcement as to which students have access to certain opportunities and resources” (p. 84). Furthermore, Harper et al. (2009)

inform that over a decade of policy efforts have been undermined through the steady underrepresentation, reports of racism, and negative student experiences of African Americans at PWIs.

Patton et al. (2007) further discuss how CRT can be applied to inequities in higher education in an essay that synthesizes research on how CRT is relevant to student affairs. The CRT theory provides a formal, common language for student affairs professionals to communicate about student experiences and address specific realities that exist on college campuses (Patton et al., 2007). The authors argue that CRT is also helpful in unmasking and exposing racism in its various versions in student affairs, and that higher education professionals should be aware of how their own racial identities influence student engagement. It moves beyond the individualistic focus, is respectful of the socio-political realities of marginalized groups, and does not reinforce the power structures in society (Patton et al., 2007). In their chapter, they provide recommendations on how to use CRT to identify instances of inequities in educational opportunity that impacts students of color and overall student affairs. For example, they discuss the social benefits associated with property and how professors have ownership over the curriculum, but can adjust the curriculum to be non-inclusive to a minority group.

Furthermore, infusing CRT into student interventions can assist with explaining the convergence of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and hidden forms of social oppression (Patton et al., 2007). The arguments proposed by the author highlight the relevance to student affairs, which also includes student support services.

Additionally, Patton et al. (2007) claim that race continues to be “undertheorized” and underused as a mode for understanding educational inequality. Early theorist such as Erickson and Chickering were reluctant to directly discuss race and racism in their theories and their influence on identity development; all of which is vital to addressing issues of inequity or exclusion in education against Black male students (Patton et al., 2007). Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) provide an overview of Erickson and Chickering’s work on identity development and mentions further how race was not considered. Eric Erickson’s research on identity development expanded on Freud’s notion of the development of ego identity in the field of psychology (Torres et al., 2009). Using a lifespan approach, Erickson “identified eight stages in which individuals address crises to arrive at more or less healthy resolutions to major developmental tasks” (Torres et al., 2009, p. 3). Erickson’s eight stages include: 1) Trust vs. mistrust; 2) Autonomy vs. shame; 3) Initiative vs. guilt; 4) Industry vs. inferiority; 5) Ego identity vs. role confusion; 6) Intimacy vs. isolation; 7) Generativity vs. stagnation; and 8) Ego integrity vs. despair.

Torres et al. (2009) also highlight that Arthur Chickering’s student development research on identity development focused on adolescents in college, and that he translated the idea of identity development into seven vectors within Erickson’s stage of identity crisis to explain student behavior. These seven vectors included: 1) developing competence; 2) managing emotions; 3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence; 4) developing mature interpersonal relationships; 5) establishing identity; 6) developing purpose; and 7) developing integrity. Patton et al. further explains how race plays a role in student development and Black male engagement.

Patton et al. (2007) emphasizes the responsibility that predominately white institutions (PWIs) have to eliminate oppression and become more inclusive. They mention that one major

reason Black males might leave these institutions prematurely is because of feelings of being marginalized and victimized in a racially oppressive environment (Strayhorn, 2010). Typically, student affairs and student services professionals are responsible for fostering an atmosphere for student development and learning, inclusiveness, and retaining a diverse college student population. The PWIs across America overall are still overwhelmingly less inclusive, but some traction has occurred to seek a solution nationally. The reality is that college students, administrators, and faculty make discriminatory statements, engage in racially oppressive actions, and maintain exclusive memberships (Smith et al., 2007).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The method for conducting research consisted of a qualitative approach, using a single case study technique to gather the data. The topics that are covered in this chapter include the design of the study, the sample selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and researcher bias and assumptions. As mentioned in Chapter One, the purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of Black male college students participating in TRIO's Student Support Services Program (SSS) on their college access and retention. The research questions from Chapter One below served as a guide as to how the population identified was engaged.

Research questions explored:

1. How does an institution foster a climate supportive of success for low-income and first-generation Black male college students? To what extent do Black male students perceive this climate as supportive?
2. How does critical race theory inform the college experience for Black males?
3. To what extent do Black male students' perceptions and their administrators' perceptions of SSS's program effectiveness align?

Design of the Study

The design and method for this study consisted of a qualitative case study to determine how SSS initiatives promoted college access and retention among their Black male student population, and how do Black male college students perceive these student supports. The case study method is an in-depth description and analysis of a particular person, family, group or system (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, Merriam (2009) states that this type of case study is used

to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes. When deciding on the case design, I selected a single case design. Yin (2008) recommends using a single case design to confirm or challenge a theory or to represent a unique or extreme case (Merriam, 2009). My study is a unique case based on GSU's performance related to improvements for college access, retention, and overall student success, especially for Black males.

The underlying philosophy for this study is derived from the theoretical framework known as Critical Race Theory. By utilizing this framework, I hoped to foster discussions with my participants that encouraged them to discuss impediments and other issues experienced on their path toward a college degree.

Case Selection

As referenced earlier, my target population consisted of African American males attending institutions of higher education. I chose to conduct my research in the State of Georgia due to the state's recent record of having one of the lowest Black male high school graduation rates in the nation at 49% for the 2010-11 cohort (Holzman, 2012), and one of the highest unemployment for African-Americans currently at 7.2% in November 2014 (Georgia Department of Labor, 2014).

I selected the institution based on three criteria. One, I chose a minority serving institution (MSI) to examine the college experience for Black males at such an institution. Second, I had a preference for a major research university that invested financially in student success. Third, the institution had to have a record of innovative student success initiatives and programs geared toward bringing these initiatives into fruition. These criteria led to Georgia State University (GSU) based on its expanding mission (due to merger with Georgia Perimeter

College, which was previously a state college that awarded primarily associate's degrees), its robust attention to student success (Mandatory Advisement, Major Exploration Program, and the Graduation Progression System (GPS)), and its range of SSS programs – Classic and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), and the Freshman Institute. I proceed with providing some background information on this institution.

Founded in 1913, GSU is a four-year minority serving institution (MSI) nestled in urban Atlanta, Georgia. GSU was selected instead of another similar MSI, because of its high enrollment of African American male students and its unique student success programs, which were strategically crafted using in-house historical data over the past decade. These unique institutional programs and GSU's national acclaim made GSU a prime case for research. Also, GSU leads the nation in graduating African American students with undergraduate degrees (GSU, 2014). It is also one of four research universities in the University System of Georgia. Highlighting GSU's mission, Georgia State University is an enterprising urban public research university, and is a national leader in graduating students from widely diverse backgrounds (U.S. News & World Report, 2014, p. 1).

GSU's total undergraduate student enrollment for Fall 2014 was 24,865, with males representing 42% of the undergraduate enrollment. African Americans males represented 40% of the total male enrollment. Interestingly, this institution had a host of programs and services to support their large minority student community. The 2014-2015 tuition and fees for undergraduate students at GSU was \$10,240 (in-state) and \$28,450 (out-of-state). Additionally, in 2013 the six-year graduation rate for all students was 47%; for African American students, the six-year graduation rate was 56% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Based on the prior

statistics and a retention rate of 82% in the Fall of 2014, this institution appeared to be making strides in increasing college access and retention.

I decided to focus on the Black male student population at GSU due to its wide array of programs and services (e.g. Office of Black Student Achievement, the Tighter Grip Program, and the Freshman Institute) that target this population. GSU's Hispanic undergraduate population (8% = total population; 3% = males only) was also considered for this study based on similarly reported outcomes in research, when compared to African American undergraduates (39% = total population; 13% = males only) at GSU in Fall 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In addition, these two groups of students were examined to determine if the two male populations were comparable. Due to the vast difference in enrollment, comparisons between these two groups proved to be problematic. Upon review of GSU's student support programs and its large Black male student participation in these programs, I decided that a focused study was required for this population. In addition, one of the Freshman Institute administrators reported that the male participants in the program were predominantly African American (13 of 20 or 65%) (personal communication, September 10, 2015).

Data Collection

I collected data from three main sources: documents, interviews (administrators), and focus groups (students). Using multiple sources can add depth and breadth to the perspectives shared by my participants, and can further develop the context of the study. Purposeful and criterion sampling was used to select participants (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This method assisted with selecting participants that could best address my research questions. I used criterion sampling to examine the experiences of a smaller subset of the larger population to the phenomena (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014; Merriam, 2009). The population examined was

freshman and sophomore Black males participating in TRIO SSS Freshman Institute program at a public higher education institution in Georgia. Additionally, I utilized purposeful sampling to identify administrators to interview in order to compare their perceptions of SSS initiatives to student perceptions. In the subsequent sections, I explain how I collected data from the sources mentioned.

Documents

Documents and field notes are a valuable resource to qualitative researchers. They allow the researcher to perform data mining without being intrusive. Documents such as public records, personal records, and popular culture documents all provide the researcher with a deeper understanding and level of investigation (Merriam, 2009). I utilized SSS program documents (i.e., pamphlets, flyers, guides, etc.), other student publications, federal publications, online media, documents related to broader GSU student success initiatives, and field notes to supplement interviews and gain additional insight on the participants, programs, and college resources at GSU. I conducted document analysis before the interviews so that I was more familiar with the SSS programs and campus context.

Interviews and Focus Groups

I collected data from both interviews with administrators and focus groups with students. Each participant was required to complete a consent form and their identities were redacted to maintain confidentiality. The protocols for each of the two groups can be found in Appendix A. The interview is considered to be a “process by which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 87). There are several ways to conduct interviews and ask questions. The different types of interviews include highly structured with predetermined questions, to semi-structured with a mix of structured and

non-structured questions, and unstructured with open-ended questions that mirror a conversation (Merriam, 2009). Forms of interviews include, but are not limited to, the use of surveys, opinion polling, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and focus groups. For the purpose of this study, I used semi-structured interviews with administrators and used structured technique with the student focus groups to cover certain topics. Interviews were utilized for administrators to alleviate issues with scheduling, and work around the availability of each administrator.

I chose to use a focus group instead of the interview to gather responses from the students in an effort to leverage group participation through peer engagement, and obtain authentic responses from the participants. Focus groups generate greater peer interaction and can lead to deeper discussion of shared experiences, which seems relevant based on CRT. This environment allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to sharing. Merriam (2009) describes how focus groups work best for topics that may be deemed too controversial to discuss with others in everyday life. I was able to garner dialog from those participants who generally do not openly provide their perspective on topics such as race and equity in higher education. Before I began my study and to ensure that I received good data, I piloted my questions for participants to discover which questions are confusing or need rewording. After I completed gathering data, I analyzed the responses of the students and administrators for a comparison of perceptions.

My recruiting strategy for obtaining both student and administrator participants consisted of communicating with the director or primary administrator for the program to assist with creating the focus group. For example, I contacted the Director of SSS at GSU in advance to inform him or her of my study, and requested a list of Black male SSS participants and SSS Freshman Institute participants to form my focus groups. Once I received the lists of students from the administrator, I selected students from each list based on class standing (freshmen and

sophomores), those with a first-generation, low-income background, and who use student support services to form my groups. Also, I provided incentives such as pizza, soft drinks, and a gift card to assist with recruiting the student participants in the focus group.

The student participants selected for each focus group consisted of the following: 1) six Freshman Institute students, 2) four SSS-Classic students, 3) five non-TRIO students (either recommended by friends or perhaps suggested by other GSU administrators) who were freshman and sophomore Black males. I selected the Freshman Institute, SSS, and non-TRIO students using three student lists provided by administrators. The three groups mentioned represented those that were engaged versus those who were not engaged in TRIO activities. This allowed me to examine the effects of engagement on retention. Additionally, each group session lasted approximately an hour and a half, and a brief questionnaire was provided for students to complete after each focus group. Focus group questions for the students gauged, but were not limited to: why did they pick their college type, was their college atmosphere proactive with providing educational student supports, what pre-college student supports (tutoring, mentoring, etc.) were available to them, describe any situations of racial disparities or discrimination experienced during your journey to and while in college, and what factors motivated them to pursue college?

The administrators for the SSS program consisted of those that had direct interactions with the students, assisted with implementing SSS program initiatives, and were selected by me. In addition, administrators were chosen from similar programs that served Black male students and focus on access and retention. Interview schedules with each administrator lasted 45-60 minutes. There were 5 administrators selected to participate in this study from both the SSS program and similar programs at GSU. The setting for all encounters took place in private

meetings to promote confidentiality and mitigate interruptions. Both student and administrator sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. In order to protect identities and ensure confidentiality, I concealed the identities of the administrators and student participants through the use of a pseudonym (such as, Georgia college student/administrator) in this study, and provided a consent form to participants for completion. In terms of risk, if a participant felt uncomfortable with the focus group/interview, she/he was allowed to skip to another question, or discontinue the focus group/interview.

Data Analysis

The data consisted of transcribed interviews and focus groups, field notes, and documents. My coding framework included key elements of my research questions. I used both deductive (a priori themes) and inductive (open coding, emerging themes) data analysis strategies. Miles and Huberman (1994) share other deductive approaches such as content analysis, which directs data collection toward sources that are effective at addressing the research questions. I developed an analytic tool based on the core construct of the CRT framework to help reveal emerging themes in the data related to my research questions.

I identified codes in advance, and drew on three themes a priori: engaging classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences. To support the aforementioned codes, four tenets of CRT theory were used in this study: 1) interest convergence, 2) the permanence of racism, 3) the Whiteness as property norm, and 4) (counter) storytelling. As described by Miles and Huberman (1994), my analysis also involved an internal analysis to identify themes within each participant group, and a cross-comparison between the participant groups to reveal commonalities and variations among these themes.

I also used the inductive approach to identify emerging themes and analyze data. Open coding provides the researcher with an additional method to capture data in an unstructured way, similar to jotting notes, words, you hear, or something that you remember from the literature down on your interview transcripts (Merriam, 2009). These words are interesting, relevant, and important to your study. Axial coding is conducted through interpretation and reflection on the meaning of the data. The mentioned methods support the formation of a classification system and allowed data to be sorted into categories for further analysis. In order to track data appropriately, the constant comparative method was employed to form categories that in turn assisted with the formulation of a substantive theory. This involved comparing a segment of data with another, discovering similarities and differences, grouping the similarities together to form a pattern, and then creating a category for that pattern. This process allowed me to perform a thorough data analysis, and identify emerging themes. Using this method to assess themes incorporates facets of inductive content analysis (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014). Together, my deductive, a priori analytic framework comprised of CRT served as a powerful tool in mapping a pattern within the data.

Validity and Reliability

To promote internal validity, trustworthiness was maximized by using triangulation and adequate engagement in data collection to combat internal validity in the form of multiple data sources. Multiple data sources were utilized to cross-check and compare data that was collected through the process, and to ensure data quality. Data was collected to the extent where similar themes started to emerge, no new data surfaced, and emerging findings felt saturated (Merriam, 2009). In terms of external validity, Merriam (2009) states that generalizability cannot be determined from a statistical sense through this qualitative study, but the researcher can provide

“sufficient descriptive data” (p. 225) to make transferability possible. A significant amount of data was collected to ensure a sufficient description was provided.

The efforts mentioned above related closely to what Merriam emphasizes as trustworthiness strategies to increase validity and reliability. In addition, the author recommends strategies such as using an audit trail (detailed account of methods and procedures), researcher’s position or reflexivity (critical self-reflection of the study), and maximum variation (purposeful seeking of diversity in sample selection) to ensure validity and reliability, all of which I incorporated in my study.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

I possessed a similar background to the student population that I researched, being a first-generation, African American student myself. I viewed this association as fuel for my passion to seek out more in depth answers to my questions posed, which allowed me to obtain authentic responses from the participants with whom I shared this background connection. My identity may suggest some implicit bias, but I sought to minimize this potential bias through a peer debriefer with a different background. The goal of this dissertation was to describe the study in such a comprehensive manner as to enable the reader to feel as if he or she had been an active participant in the research and can determine whether or not the study findings could be applied to his or her own situation. I described the context within which the phenomenon is occurring as well as the phenomenon itself.

CHAPTER 4

KEY FINDINGS

Georgia State University's students and administrators exhibited a sense of pride in their institution. The institution is currently undergoing a merger with Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) and is identifying ways to expand existing student support services to accommodate this new population. The University System of Georgia implemented the merger of the two institutions in 2015 due to GSU's impressive record in improving student success (access, retention, graduation) for current first-generation, low-income students at GSU. GPC is considered an access institution with most of its students requiring academic support.

All of the participants provided candid responses and were comfortable sharing their perception of student support services. I examined these perceptions and wrote the findings in this chapter. Each of the sections are organized into informative subsections that address both students' and administrators' perspectives on access and retention. This chapter summarizes the data I collected and the major themes that surfaced during the analysis. The introductory section, Overview GSU Context and Black Male Initiatives, provides context on GSU and details initiatives that served its Black male student population. My analysis is presented in three subsections: Office of Black Student Achievement (BSA), FI, and Tighter Grip program. The second section, Student Themes, consists of themes that emerged from my study. The first theme, Journey to College, discusses several of the most critical factors affecting college access as extracted from the data collected during the focus group and interviews with SSS students and administrators. The second theme, Elements of External Support, explores the support structures outside of college that allowed SSS students to experience success in their first year of college.

The third theme, Challenges in College, depicts the situations that disrupted SSS Black male students' focus in college and how they coped with such challenges. The fourth theme, Realities of Racism and Discrimination, uses elements of CRT and the anti-deficit framework to examine situations of racial inequities and discrimination experienced by SSS students during their journey to college and while in college. In the final student theme of this chapter, Student Support Services and Persistence, I illustrate the student support services that students stated were most beneficial in their success and persistence in college.

The next section Administrator Themes presents salient factors deemed most beneficial and effective in promoting persistence and retention, as ascertained during interviews with administrators, along with institutional challenges and opportunities. Administrators also shared their experiences on barriers to implementing and expanding student success initiatives for Black males. In the final section in this chapter, Case Summary, I present innovative initiatives and an overview of the main points and analysis of GSU efforts in the concluding case summary.

Overview of GSU Context and Black Male Initiatives

As mentioned earlier, GSU is seen as a leader in student success. GSU administered various student support services and programs to promote student persistence and retention through graduation. Moreover, GSU is rated number one in Georgia in the number of undergraduate and graduate degrees conferred to students of color (GSU, 2015a). It has established a strong portfolio of student support services and programs, particularly for first-year students, which support student success outcomes. These student support services and programs helped propel students from admission through graduation and were proudly supported by GSU's senior administration.

The institution's most vital programs for generating student success for all students included the following:

1. TRIO Student Support Services—consisted of academic services and service learning projects that ensured persistence through graduation for students who were first generation or low income, or who had disabilities.
2. Freshman Institute (FI)—focused on improving student success for male students.
3. Academic Coaching Experience—a voluntary program designed to offer academic support services to students on academic warning who had fewer than 42 credit hours.
4. Success Academy—an invite-only extended learning community that helped students successfully transition into college life.
5. Freshman Learning Communities—created a mini-cohort of first-year students that took five courses (four of which were core courses) that equipped students with survival skills for academic success.
6. Early Alert—provided support to students experiencing academic issues (e.g., excessive tardiness or absences, lack of engagement, drop in grades) within the first 6 weeks.
7. Panther Excellence Program—provided individualized programs (e.g., individualized study skills, learning assessments, supplemental instruction) that strengthened college success.
8. First-Year Book—used a book review to engage first-year students and promoted critical thinking and a sense of community through discourse.
9. Gen1: First-Generation Success Programs—assisted first-generation students with the transition into college and provided leadership development.

10. Latino Outreach—focused on recruiting Latino students and provided them with a host of services (e.g., advising, mentoring, academic support) to persist through graduation.
11. Keep HOPE Alive—provided financial assistance to help students remain in college after their grade point average fell below the HOPE scholarship requirement. The program also provided mandatory academic coaching, advising, and student success workshops.
12. Financial Resources—provided resources such as financial aid, financial literacy, and scholarships that assisted students with paying for college.
13. Academic Resources—provided services that promoted academic success, such as a writing studio, tutoring, campus-wide computer labs, and computer training (GSU, 2015b).

Pivotal programs such as Early Alert and Keep HOPE Alive ensured that at-risk students were identified early in their college career and were provided with financial assistance if they lost their state-funded HOPE scholarship, which was essential to promoting persistence and high graduation rates. Table 1 below lists selected GSU student success initiatives that have contributed to increased college access and retention and provides further detail on the programs, including the number of student participants in each program for academic year 2013–2014.

Dynamic programs and a commitment to access and retention enabled GSU to become the nation's top nonprofit institution in awarding bachelor's degrees to African Americans in 2012 (Diverse, 2015). Between 2012 and 2015, GSU steadily maintained a number three ranking among nonprofit colleges and universities in the United States for producing the most undergraduate degrees for African American students (Diverse, 2015). In 2015, there was case

study conducted on GSU by a national consulting firm called Ithaka S+R. Kurzweil and Wu (2015) studied GSU initiatives and found that “no single initiative is responsible for the dramatic gains at GSU; the university’s improvement represents the accumulated impact of a dozen or more relatively modest programs” (p. 3). Findings showed that the institution had backing from both senior administrators and the university senate to nurture the development of innovative pilot programs that addressed barriers to student success, to test the efficacy of those programs, and to scale the programs up quickly if they were proven effective (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015). In addition, the institution was able to systematically use its internal student data warehouse to resolve barriers to student progression and graduation and to shift various critical function areas (financial aid, academic support and advising, student accounts, admissions, and the registrar) under one provost (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015).

Their study also included several success factors and presented evidence of impact. Kurzweil & Wu (2015) mentioned the following success factors: a systematic problem-solving approach, a comprehensive data warehouse, a cross-functional organization structure, a commitment to the success of underserved students, and dedicated support from university leadership. The evidence of impact of these success factors is marked by “a dramatic increase in its six-year graduation rate, from 32 percent in 2003 to 54 percent in 2014” (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015, p. 10). Moreover, GSU met its goal to increase access for its traditionally underserved population through increased enrollments. Specifically, the institution made significant gains: “the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants had almost doubled since 2003, the percentage of non-white students has increased from 40 percent ten years ago to more than 60 percent today, and the average SAT scores of incoming students have declined by an average of 20 points over

the past four years” (Kurzweil & Wu, 2005, pgs. 10-11). The BSA office was also in sync with the institution’s goal to increase retention Black males.

Table 1

Selected GSU Student Success Initiatives

Initiative	Year started	Summary	Scale
Freshman Learning Communities	1999	First-year students are sorted into cohorts of 25 based on meta-major; they take all courses together in a block schedule.	95% of first-year students in 2013–2014
Supplemental Instruction	2005	Students who are most successful in courses are hired as peer tutors for other students in the course; many tutors are eligible for work-study.	9,700 students in 2013–2014
Mathematics Interactive Learning Environment	2006	Introductory math courses (algebra, statistics, and precalculus) are redesigned using a hybrid, emporium model of face-to-face and machine-guided instruction.	7,500 students in 2013–2014
Keep HOPE Alive Scholarship	2008	Small grants are given to students who lose eligibility for Georgia’s HOPE merit scholarship, combined with academic and financial counseling.	377 students since 2009
Panther Retention Grants	2011	Small grants (combined with academic and financial counseling) are given to juniors and seniors who are on-track academically, but are required by a state of Georgia rule to be dropped from classes because they have small outstanding balances on tuition or fees.	4,200 students since 2011
Graduation and Progression System	2012	Provides a sophisticated dashboard for advisers that displays real-time analyses of student academic progress and raises alerts calling for intervention; also consolidates undergraduate advising and more than doubles the number of advisers.	Prompted 43,000 student-adviser meetings in 2013–2014
Summer Success Academy	2012	Opportunity for the most academically at-risk 10% of incoming freshmen to take 7 credit hours and receive intensive academic advising and financial literacy training during the summer before their first year.	320 students in Summer 2014

Note. Adapted from *Building a Pathway to Student Success at Georgia State University*, by M. Kurzweil and D. Wu, 2015, retrieved from http://www.sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SR_Case_Study_Building_Pathway_Student_Success_042315_0.pdf.

Office of Black Student Achievement

The BSA was a relatively new office that had made progress with the Black male population at GSU. Specifically, this office served as the liaison within the division of student affairs and academic departments, and collaborated with these areas on topics related to African American students, faculty, and staff. The office provided university-wide services and support programming in areas such as cultural enrichment, racial awareness, and ethnicity, diversity, leadership, training, organizational development, and other resources. In order to better engage its Black male student population, BSA has created an internal program called Tighter Grip, which was geared toward GSU Black males and focused on issues that are important to them, including providing life skills, mentoring, and leadership and identity development. Additionally, BSA offers another 10 leadership development organizations (Be You!, Black Graduate Student Association, Black Sophomore Society, Black Student Alliance, Conscious Collective, Greatest Minds Society, Infinite Appeal Modeling Association, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Black Students Association, Peerless Perfection) to encourage leadership development for its participants. In terms of academic support, BSA offered several targeted services for all African American students such as free tutoring, computer labs for free printing and studying, and graduate school entrance exam preparation (e.g., GRE, LSAT, MCAT).

An assistant vice president highlighted the high demand for this office and the services it provided Black male students. In particular, academic support, tutoring and social engagement activities were some of the needs identified:

What we spent time doing last year was creating, and I'll use as an example the Office of Black Student Achievement. So, what we're focusing on in that area are academic support and social engagement right now. We offer free tutoring in that area, which is needed for Black students. Black male students need tutoring, but we haven't advertised it as well as we would like for these students. It's like a hidden secret to some students, right?

The administrator further explained some newer services that had been beneficial to students, particularly in the areas of identity development, self-awareness, and graduate school preparation. The university paid for graduate research assistants and tutors in the social sciences to help students in the STEM fields. They found that many of their students struggle in some of their subjects. In addition, BSA provided preparation courses for graduate entrance exams. Most Black students at GSU did not have money to pay for these expensive services, and BSA mitigated the cost through the use of internal funds.

We [also provide] graduate prep courses, and [we] just hired a guy. Prior, we could only do the GRE and the GMAT [and] prepared them for that. But we just hired a guy who can also do the LSAT and the MAT. Because Black students here [do not always] have [the funds] all the time, particularly Black male students, to pay \$700 for a graduate testing. So, we have that.

In addition, the administrator commented further on services that targets Black male students with disabilities and the increasing need for assistance from this group:

[In terms of] disability services ... they actually have an endowment in that office, so we have scholarships for that. But we've got to do a better job of identifying Black male students that may have a disability. Typically now, [we're] increasingly noticing more learning and social cognitive disabilities among this population. And I don't think these [difficulties] are always identified in Black men as readily, because when they are in K-12 nobody says, "Oh, this kid probably is autistic." They say, "Oh, that boy is bad."

The administrator mentioned the importance of being aware of students' culture and developing students' identities. The Multicultural Center was mentioned as being vital in this effort to explore identity from a historical perspective.

[As] the Multicultural Center, we've got to figure out how we reteach them [Black male students] some of the things that historically we have built our tenets on, right? So, I was

talking to the graduate research assistant in the Office of Black Students Achievement, he was saying ... he introduced his lesson and he was talking [about] W. E. B. Du Bois, and it was W. E. B. Du Bois's book on Ethiopia, I think, or something like that. And he's like, "And they just looked at me crazy, like they didn't know who I was ..." Then I said, "You all know W. E. B. Du Bois," I said and I told them, hell no, they don't know who W. E. B. Du Bois is!

Furthermore, an administrator mentioned how to educate the students and an initiative that required faculty involvement and interactions.

I said, they don't know who he is and that's just what you've got to do is you've got to introduce, discuss, then teach them, right? ... so what they [BSA] do [is provide] a lot of book lectures and faculty lectures. I'm doing a book talk in a few weeks and they actually look for Black faculty to come and talk about their research ... And so then the students can see somebody that looks like them, so they'll know.

Many of the mentioned initiatives created an environment that was conducive to student success for Black males. The Freshman Institute also produced student success outcomes for a select population of males.

Freshman Institute

Students and administrators alike praised the FI and the vast array of services that proved to be instrumental in promoting college access and retention for Black males. Housed in TRIO's SSS office, this was a selective program for about 25 students to participate in which included many services that promoted access, learning and development, and persistence. In addition the program provided specialized support services that addressed common issues surrounding the freshman experience, fostered an environment of community, and a sense of brotherhood. This experience allowed students to successfully transition into college and propelled them forward in their college career towards graduation. Students selected for this exclusive program can be male freshman students of any ethnicity identified as being either first-generation, low-income, or possessing a disability. Some examples FI activities included: individualized and group tutoring;

peer mentoring, academic, career, financial, and/or personal advisement; cultural events and activities; field trips; and supplemental grant aid, provided all programs requirements were met. An administrator provided a brief history of the program and its successes with producing high retention and graduation rates. Although FI was open to all races, the participants were primarily Black.

Specifically, I work for the TRIO [SSS] program that focuses on first-generation and low-income students, but the population here at Georgia State has a significant presence of African American students. And there's a special program, the Freshman Institute, which deals solely with African American males. So what the Freshman Institute is geared towards is addressing the graduation and retention rates of those males by addressing and trying to foresee the different issues and concerns that this population may have on campus. So that's [what we are] doing well ... It's coming along fairly well.

The SSS program had experienced success since its inception in 2007. They tracked data on program cohorts for the entire time they were enrolled at GSU. An administrator explained how they gauged their progression until graduation, and their internal process for tracking students.

We track our students via cohorts, [which] started back in 2007. And the cohorts are made of 25 students. [For] the program that I work for, we have a total maximum of 334 students ... that we can serve each year. And then we take 25% out of that. So the GPAs and in addition to that we compare the students' progress to the other students that aren't in the programs. And then we track those students as far as how many hours they've earned each semester, their GPA, and also did they graduate and the graduation rate...4- and 6-year rates. So, and then around this time every year is when we're purging the graduates and updating the status and we are replacing the graduates and other students that may have transferred or may have dropped out for whatever reason.

The FI program provided more specialized services that encouraged academic achievement. As one administrator indicated,

Our staff members supplement their regular advisors that they would have in the university advisement setting ... In addition to that we have the previous Freshman Institute cohort serves as a mentor for the incoming class. So, now they not only have me, who graduated 14 years ago, they have a more fresh and relevant experience that they can pull on and especially as remain to the environment of Georgia State University. In addition to that, we have break-out study groups, use social media, and we collaborate with the counseling center. Also, we have tutoring resources for our students, and everything that we do with our department is free. There's no out-of-pocket expense.

In addition, FI and SSS students mentioned the significance of SSS and FI and how beneficial they were:

They serve as a helping tool because the simple fact is, college is expensive Student support services definitely helps with that. If we need to pay for textbooks or anything like that, they have requirements that we must do, and a lot of the workshops are beneficial to us.

SSS and FI has built a reputation at GSU for providing a supportive climate and strengthening the broader campus climate.

All participants identified several programs as beneficial at GSU, but FI received the most comments for its authentic and skill-building approach to provide academic and social development for first-generation, low-income students. This program was also known for leveraging technology in new ways to reach participants and utilize cutting-edge analytic tools. The result of this effort was increased engagement, academic achievement, and higher graduation rates. The successes of this program were highlighted in the subsequent sections. Two students described how FI administrators went out of their way to develop students academically and socially. One student stated,

It also helped by giving me a job as student assistant. So I was able to get income and they also helped me with my tutorial services, helped me fill out certain applications, and just making sure my resumes are up to date.

Another student similarly shared his experience,

Like another student said about FI, they're always there anytime we need them. We can come to them about pretty much anything if we need help finding a job, or if we have any situation and they don't have the answer, they'll definitely send us to someone who does have the answer. I feel in that aspect they're very helpful.

Tighter Grip Program

Recognized as one of the oldest initiatives for African American males at GSU, Tighter Grip (TG) focused on promoting engagement outside of the classroom between students and faculty. This non-selective program was the state of Georgia's African American Male Initiative

(AAMI) for GSU, and its membership included 40-80 African American male students. In addition, participants underwent a mentoring certification program to effectively engage, encourage, and challenge middle and high school students. In the University System of Georgia (USG), four-year state institutions were provided a grant to implement such an initiative on its campus for the purposes of enrolling, retaining, and graduating African American males. This was the USG's attempt to improve postsecondary outcomes for Black males. The mission of the program was to provide students with a Tighter Grip in academic studies, interpersonal relationships, career focus and self-identity via group discussions, team building, and lectures (GSU, 2015b). Students received academic coaching, networking opportunities, cultural enrichment, civic engagement, and volunteer work experience. In particular, it fostered an environment where Black male students can engage with Black male faculty. The anti-deficit framework describes these types of services as enriching education experiences that had a positive impact on Black male students. Administrators described its value to the institution as well as to the Black male student population. One participant concurred with the program's legacy and stated that,

The oldest and best known is called Tighter Grip. With Tighter Grip [there] is a great deal of faculty and staff infusion, and their efforts in Tighter Grip strengthen the African American male organization.

Through this process, students had significantly improved their academic and social achievement and research experience in the STEM disciplines. The mentoring techniques implemented by this program had produced positive outcomes for Black male students throughout their academic career. The shared perspectives of the participants who engaged in the program are presented in the subsequent paragraphs.

Student Themes

Several themes emerged from the student groups' comments and are categorized into six thematic sections. These themes covered the journey to college, external support received by the students before and while in college, challenges experienced in college, racial experiences and its impact on the college experience, the impact of student support services, and students' desires for additional programs and services. The anti-deficit achievement framework attributed some of the greatest student supports before college to familial factors, K-12 school forces, and out-of-school college prep resources. We examine these dimensions in the subsequent sections.

Journey to College

In this section I present the perceptions of SSS students and administrators on college access, including the barriers students encountered during their journey. The students' descriptions of their transition from high school to college were a testament to the level of determination they possessed and the trials and tribulations they had to overcome. The goal of a supportive campus climate was assessed throughout this theme to identify any barriers to fostering such a climate. The student perspectives also varied ranging from culture shock, leaving home, and finding new peer groups. One student reported experiencing racism and how it impacted his college transition to college:

Well, when I came to college, I came from a small town, so coming to the big city, it was like a culture shock for me ... Where I was from, it was mainly White or Black. Nothing else. You stay on your side, [the] other person stay[s] on their side. But when we got up here, it was like a big melting pot, everybody mixed and they mingled. I was just trying to figure out what group was best for me and trying to figure out, how can I advance my education and just have a great and successful career.

Beside experiences of racism, some students reported how they had to manage family issues.

Family support was also addressed in terms of it being a motivational factor. One student had familial factors that influenced the transition to college. As one student mentioned,

Being able to transition and not be around my mom, who I'm just very close with—it was a different experience. It was interesting. She wasn't on my back, trying to do this, or she wasn't reminding me to do that. So it was a different experience, but I definitely feel like it helped me grow and transition and learn different lessons that I needed to know, because you can't be under your parents all your life... But we definitely made it work with family, being able to use that and be able to grow into being a man and to be able to take that step of growing up. I would say that my biggest conflict with the transition was the effect of the bird leaving the nest, pretty much.

Just as family was considered a motivating factor, going away for college can separate students from prior strife. One student described college as a means to a better life and to get away from the wrong influences. He stated,

My barrier would be more of an internal barrier, more like, this is somewhere new where I can be somewhere different. That transition from high school to college is kind of weird because they don't really prepare you. It was more like, in high school, I hung out with the quote unquote "wrong crowd," so this is time for me to pick my crowd correctly, because after college that's usually who you stick with.

There were two students who had a difficult time adapting to the college life because they came from a loving family environment, but did not have the proper high school and community support services to encourage college readiness. The first student commented,

My biggest thing coming to college was time management because I'm an ex-athlete and I'm used to going outside and playing football all the time and being able to come and do easy work and it's over. With homework and prepar[ing] for tests that were easy, and I knew that I could pass when I go to school. But now the hard thing is actually going to study, actually sitting down and doing my homework, actually taking the time out to get a tutor and such here at SSS or go to the library when my mom or my dad isn't telling me to.

Another student shared similar challenges,

I guess the biggest problem I dealt with since I've been here in college was the fact that I'm the first generation to actually come to college. I had nobody before me to actually sit here and explain what goes down the road or actually tell me what it is that I need to do. Everything that I'm doing now is a whole new experience. I'm basically paving down my own path without, really, too much guidelines, except for the fact that SSS helped me create some of those guidelines, so that's my biggest transition, being the first generation to come to college.

Furthermore, one student explained how TRIO impacted his life prior to attending college and assisted him with gaining access to college.

When I was a [high school] freshman I joined TRIO Upward Bound, and that helped me learn about college and prepare me to a certain extent. My senior year before I graduated, my high school counselor told me about student support services, he said sign up. If you find it at Georgia State sign up. So when I came to actually merge leaders and went to the retreat, I actually met Kevin Chapman there, and he was telling me about student support services, how it's beneficial, how it can help you throughout college and it's like TRIO Upward Bound and I was like, oh it's like Upward Bound and I definitely want to try it.

The experiences mentioned allowed these students to develop a college-going mindset. There were also external elements of support that contributed to their success once in college.

Elements of External Support

There were many students who praised several external supports outside the confines of college that were beneficial and allowed them to experience success in their first year of college. Many of these elements of support included “encouragers” who were college graduates, current college students, mentors, family members, or friends. GSU attempted to replicate external supports on campus to make students feel as if they had an advocate in their pursuit of a college degree. This form of replication influenced students’ perceptions and made the students feel like GSU was fostering a climate supportive of Black male student success. Students also made comments on different support factors that motivated them and helped propel them forward in college. One student mentioned that he had friends in college who stressed the importance of time management and provided techniques to be productive. Others students reported their mothers, brothers, and even YouTube. For those that were not as outgoing as their peers, family members reassured the student before going to college stated, “You’ve got to break out of that barrier, because eventually once you go to college, you have to be social so you actually can network.” There were various types of support which allowed students to develop a college-going mentality, some in the home and some outside of the home. One student focused on his

mother as being his “rock” and another student mentioned his friend that was already in college as a support. One student also mentioned how specific family members contributed to his persistence in college,

My external [element of support] factor outside of Georgia State would have to be my mother. She’s my rock. She’s always been there to help me out through everything I’ve been through. In my family—my mother, my father, my sister—they always keep me straight.

Another student commented on using a non-traditional source of support to recall lessons learned in class and to study,

I can say, my family and YouTube. In classes, everything I ever did was get on YouTube [and] look it up. What I’m saying [is] outside influences are my family and YouTube. In my family—my mother, my father, my sister—they always keep me straight.

As one student stated, family members who graduated from college and those who made bad decisions in life, had served as motivators and elements of external support. He described the significance of such people:

It would be my family and some of my homeboys [or friends]. My dad, he was one of those people. He was like, “Hey. You either got college or military. You just got to go ahead and do it ’cause you ain’t coming [back home]”... My mom, she had been through college [attended, but did not finish] and my brother also had been through college, and he had graduated right from Georgia State. So he was like, “If I can do it, you can do it.” Everything was given to me, and unlike some of my homeboys, I didn’t get—how can I put it? I didn’t get sent up the road [to prison] like they did. So when they call me, and they be like “Bro, I’m proud of you,” I’m doing this type of stuff. It helps me to stay motivated and keep going on.

Challenges in College

The SSS students encountered many challenges while in college, which they faced with tenacity, employing various coping strategies in order to persist. Many of the students were highly involved in various organizations in order to grow as student leaders. They used several student support services to ensure that their transition through college was nothing like their transition from high school to college. These services are required to create a supportive campus

climate that parallels the broader campus climate. One student shared his experience of being a part of a Black male fraternity and bouncing back from having too much fun and being distracted. His experience with partying and less studying brought him to the realization that doing good in school and having fun requires a fine balance. He stated as his challenges,

Girls, plus I'm in a frat [fraternity] ... We always trying to be the life of the party. You've got to find that balance. You've got to be like, OK, I'm going to party this day, but I've still gotta get my scholarship or I still got to study. Now, if you haven't studied for your test, you find yourself failing. Then you're repeating to replace that class.

Students indicated that fraternities required an excessive amount of time at GSU mainly due to the sense of commitment to social activities provided by the organization. Two other students shared how students feel bombarded with multiple responsibilities and the importance of time management,

In college, they always say you're broke. So you're always trying to work. As another participant said, you're always trying to be sociable. So you've got to be sociable. You're working, you're studying, you're going to class, you take a test. There's all those type of things that you're just trying to do in one. It takes time management, it takes you knowing your limit. Like, I can't go out today if I can't get up the next morning.

Another student who agreed stated,

I guess I'm piggybacking off what everybody's saying. The thing that everybody has agreed on is basically time management.

Three FI group members shared their process to detract from overcommitting to multiple organization, working a job, and dealing with family issues. Having multiple factors impact the college experience provides a higher level of stress, can induce fatigue, and lead to burnout and dropout. Providing a climate support of student success is essential for these students.

My biggest [challenges were] definitely ... my first semester. I definitely committed to a lot. I was part of maybe five, six organizations. I was trying to work, and then after I worked one job I was trying to transit to another job that was paying more, so it was just trying to know that you can't over-commit yourself. I had a lot of family issues... you've got to be able to keep that faith and keep that focus of what you've got going on.

Working can sometime take the focus off of other priorities, but it was necessary for these students to have money to cover unexpected college expenses. Overcommitting to work can eventually lead to failing grades and reduction in attendance. One student mentioned how overcommitting to many organizations can negatively impact grades and attendance.

This is my first year, and I'm very committed in a lot of different organizations. And you don't want to overcommit yourself because I know [if] you don't commit yourself, you might slow down. You might not do good on tests or classes because you're falling asleep or you're missing classes.

Cultivating good time management skills assisted students with managing the demands of college and required that students draw the line in terms of creating balance and prioritizing. There are some distractions that students were not be able to plan for such as racism and discrimination.

Realities of Racism and Discrimination

Students corroborated several stories on how racism and discrimination impacted their college experience. These experiences incorporated many tenants of CRT. Students talked about situations in which they were undervalued, underestimated, and marginalized. At times, they encountered both verbal and nonverbal forms of oppression inside and outside of the classroom. Cuyjet (2006), Harper (2012), and Strayhorn (2008) found that faculty and classroom diversity and an inclusive institutional climate has a positive impact on Black male students' college experience. Many of the students mentioned situations that occurred during their journey to college and while in college, including stereotypes of Black men and a random act of blatant racism just to name a few. Their comments included instances of the CRT tenant "the permanence of racism" which helped to understand their experiences. According to one student:

In my senior year of high school, I definitely dealt with a lot of racial discrimination because I come from a small town that's basically Blacks, Whites, and a little bit of Asian. But seeing an intelligent Black man, coming where I'm from, that's not something that they like to see. They'll try to do anything they can to put you in jail.

Another student described his experience with racism and how he viewed the incident,

I've also had personal experiences where I was just driving down the street, and this dude, he just drove up and he literally started cussing me and my momma out. I was just in the car. And me and my mom literally just started laughing. And he just got so upset, he was like, [N-word] this, and "F" y'all that, and you shouldn't be here. And we just started laughing. So with me, I really look at it as immaturity.

One student encountered a hate group on his path to college. Encountering this group at an earlier age made the student keenly aware of what discrimination looks like and how to ignore its effects. The CRT tenant, permanence of racism, can also be examined in the comment provided.

One participant discussed continued discrimination before arriving in college,

I've experienced it in a whole lot of ways from [the] time as I grew up, being younger. But the main way I remember experiencing it [was] when I was in tenth grade, I've seen the Klan face to face. I come from a small town, like I say it's White or Black, Seminole County. It's this program we have, it's called the Harvest Festival. It's a lot of Black people—they always show up to the Harvest Festival. So the Klan decided to make a stand that day at the courthouse. The police were there and they wouldn't do anything about it. We thought it was wrong, but when you have a bunch of 15, 16-year-old boys that didn't care, we kind of went looking for trouble. Good thing our parents, they was like, "They not bothering y'all. Y'all don't bother them." So we let them do their thing, [and] we did our own thing. But we wanted to spark something that day.

Students cited instances in which they had to learn how to navigate college life and to cope with racism, which was still prevalent today. The students commented that in a place where the populous was diverse, they could not believe that racism still existed, which related to the CRT tenant, the permanence of racism. One student reflected,

So coming here to Georgia State, with everybody being so ... This being such a culturally diverse school, you figure that here, because you have, what? Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Caribbean people. We have all of them. You figure it wouldn't exist in such a culturally diverse place. But it's still prevalent, depending on what you're trying to do and who you're rolling with.

Many students experienced the culture shock of being in a diverse environment which still encapsulated racism and discrimination, particularly in the year 2015. Another student described an encounter with the police where a student of a different race was provided a pass for an illegal

act because he was White. He stated a hypothetical situation of how discrimination could occur to him,

Because we were put in certain situations where, with us being Black, we were kind of “thrown up under the bus” [were investigated], and with them being White, they kind of skated by [were not questioned] ... I’ve seen numerous situations, like one time we rode in a car and I could have been in the car with a White guy, and the police say, “Just say it’s his and you’ll be all right.”

Even in high school, there were instances of inequities in educational opportunities, forms of academic discrimination, and barriers to college access. A participant shared his experiences with Black male stereotypes and similar microaggressions shared by other participants. Also, there were instances of structural racism where an administrative interviewee mentioned limited funding for some Black student initiatives, and students mentioned the permanence of institutional racism. These comments were divergent yet shared the same sentiment of inequality which represented the CRT tenant, the Whiteness as property norm,

Then when I came to Georgia State, [I] thought it was going to be a little different ... a lot of people was like, “How did you make it to college? You’re not supposed to be here.” I had a real strong Southern accent. I wore a gold grill on my mouth. I had long dreads down my back.

So when I got up here, a lot of folks were like, “I didn’t even think you were smart. I was wondering how you was sitting in class.” I [saw] it from looks that I got from teachers.

I would even go forward to say when I was at high school it was kind of even, Black and White. But as far as scholarship opportunities, [in] my senior year, we have advisors, and we sit down and talk to the advisor. But not once did they ever tell us African American students about the different scholarships they offer in high school.

There were other instances of inequalities which impacted access. One instance of social inequity evolved around social capital for a participant. This student’s experience of inequity persisted even in college, which represented the CRT tenant, the Whiteness as property norm.

You see that all these White people are getting these scholarships because their dad donates a certain percentage to the school, or their mom is a big-time lawyer in the city. We don’t really hear about [the scholarships]. I feel like in that way, racism isn’t really as

open as it was probably 20, 50 years ago, but it's still prevalent under the scenes ... I would go even further to say in college right now.

In addition, there were several microaggressions experienced that distracted a student's focus and drive a student toward isolation.

We are stereotyped as loud and ignorant and ghetto and things like that in the classrooms. A lot of us aren't like that. A lot of us are chill, mellow, calm. We're not going to jump on you for anything like that. A lot of times people don't really want to associate themselves with us because they feel like, "OK, no. Because if I say one thing then they're just going to jump down my throat: 'You're playing the race card on me.'" They love to say that, "I like Black people. I have Black friends." Just because you say that, that doesn't mean that underneath all that you're not a little prejudiced or racist in any type of way. I feel like a lot of people are trying to throw out that card: "I have Black friends."

Students presented several issues of social capital when they referred to the lack of scholarship, college searches, and other services which high school counselors were responsible for advising students on. In addition, microaggressions (e.g. ignorant, loud, ghetto, "I have Black friends") were also an issue that impacted the college experience.

The college experience is a fragile space in which at any moment one chaotic experience can change the course of a student's life. Racism and discrimination are an example of this type of experience (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014; Patton et al., 2007). The participants in this study identified various ways to mitigate the influence of racism and discrimination. Some students stayed on the alert and felt that they needed to watch their back and be on the lookout for aggressive police profiling. Police brutality was a heightened concern for most participants. Two students mention their experience with the permanence of racism,

You never know who can be racist. I've met Black people that really hate our own race and prefer to be White. I'm just skeptical because there's a lot of police around. At the same time, I shouldn't be [skeptical] because this is all so diverse. But I definitely watch my back.

Picking back off of what he just said, I would definitely say that what's going on everywhere, it blows my mind because every time I hear about ... The only time you hear about it is if it's a young Black man, because the other ones get shot.

One student used his encounters of racism as motivation to strive toward excellence. His comments aligned with tenets of CRT such as the permanence of racism and counter storytelling in describing his experience.

With me, I used to always be the type of guy that wanted to take action into my own hands. Call the police? Nah, I'll do it myself before I call them. But now I see it as this: It makes me go hard. It makes me strive harder as getting my education, because I know my education, the type of education I'm trying to get is going to help me get more money at the end of the day. If you got the money, then you can help generations up under you.

Many students shared their perceptions of how their institution handles issues of discrimination. Some students felt that if students do not bring issues of racism and discrimination into the limelight, then GSU will not do anything to correct such issues. Others felt that the university had too many fires to control in terms of addressing issues of discrimination, and that they had to determine which issues were more pertinent.

I think one of the real biggest reasons why Georgia State really isn't getting involved is because every week there's something different. Like [another participant] was saying, one week it might be police brutality. Another week it might be discrimination amongst the sexes. Another week it might be gay rights or something like that. I feel like because we have different arguments going on ... it's really hard for Georgia State or people as a whole just to come together and say, "OK, this is what we're fighting for and this is what we want to change."

Some students provided recommendations on handling discrimination issues. They recommend that GSU invested in more events that brought people together. Whether it's in housing, for commuters, seminars, or panels, they felt these solutions fostered change within the campus community. Another participant mentioned that the issues on campus were more psychological. He contended,

I really think it's the heat of the topic that gets to people. I think the heat of the topic when they get into a debate, it leads to more anger, more emotion rising. It leads to something similar to racial discrimination, but it's not racial discrimination. It's more like a topical discrimination because they feel like that person is wrong for what they believe in or what their belief is on the topic.

In the support of the recommendations for discrimination, there were several student support services that addressed these sensitive issues.

Student Support Services and Persistence

Student support services have fundamentally changed how students, particularly Black male students, are retained in college. Research (Harper, 2012; Perna, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010) shows how TRIO's levels of service provide educational opportunities for students at every pivotal point in education (junior high, high school, and college). At GSU, SSS stands tall among the various programs offered and complements most of the other student support services. Participants were adamant about sharing the services that were most beneficial to them, recommendations for improving services, and perspectives on adding or removing services.

In terms of most beneficial student support services, some promoted college access and retention better than others. Of the 15 students who participated in focus groups, the SSS group mentioned classic SSS as the most beneficial. The FI group mentioned that FI encouraged them to persist and experience success in their college careers. The non-SSS group quoted several student support services (supplemental instruction, tutoring, computer labs) as being pivotal to their academic excellence. Many students shared their perceptions about which services were most beneficial to their persistence and retention. Some of the services frequently mentioned include tutoring services, SSS, mentoring, computer labs, and FI.

One student shared how his mentor and mentoring groups within SSS contributed to his successful college transition and persistence, and if they were not available, he would have stopped attending college. Another student shared how the Emerging Leaders program and FI had helped to develop his leadership and communication skills. In addition, there were desired

programs that students thought would be beneficial to African Americans, and particularly Black males. The student participants perceived that the campus climate at GSU has worked to their benefit and helped to mold them into productive citizens. Also, the SSS and FI students contended that students with their backgrounds (first-generation and low-income) appreciate the efforts made to build community, and how GSU's programs stressed the importance of a supportive climate in the form of mentoring and career preparation services. There were an overwhelming number of comments on the effectiveness of FI and SSS from the student participants, and less of a response on non-SSS programs.

One student stated, "Wonderful resources. Wonderful people. The FI program has helped me out a lot!" This indicated that FI treated its students with respect and went above and beyond the call of duty. Another student stated, "SSS, tremendous program. [It has] helped me through a lot, and helped me continue past my freshman year." This student's comment highlighted how SSS improved retention for Black male students. Additionally, a student stated, [SSS] "helped me to pretty much...build my resume and just helped me on my future endeavors to map out my way to becoming [a] medical student." This comment illustrated how SSS encourages its students to consider futhering their education beyond undergrad and attend graduate school. Some participants focused on the power of mentorship and being able to reach back and help others.

One student stated how he was able to reciprocate the guidance he received from the FI program for other freshman and serve as a mentor.

One of the FI administrators helped me build my resume by becoming a mentor throughout school. He has been my mentor also as I was mentoring other freshmen coming in.

An administrator expressed a personal investment in the FI program and how he went above and beyond to ensure a student's retention through graduation. This level of commitment echoes the grand comments mentioned by FI's student participants. This comment is a testament to how the supportive campus climate was maintained at GSU.

[In terms of students,] we're your first level and we're your partner in success. So if there are any concerns that you have, come to us and we'll use our working relationships and so on and so forth to also help you.

Some students compared other student services, but referred back to SSS as paramount to their success and showed an appreciation for their SSS benefits. This example of out-of-class engagement paralleled the anti-deficit framework on college achievement.

Most of the time in the public library you've got to pay for printing and other things such as that. Here [at SSS] they allow us to print a certain number of copies [at no cost].

So coming to here, because this is my first year, freshman, I definitely signed up for SSS and all the things they help us with is very significant... We have a computer lab, only based for student support services to use, not anybody else. We have study rooms where we can go and study, we have our lounge where we can relax between studying and doing what we want to do, and [they] even help us with text books. [Also,] they give us grant aids if we are eligible for it so we can have more money in our pocket to pay off tuition.

Creating a culture supportive of success was evident based on the students and administrators responses. Early in the student's college career, FI and SSS prepared students for success after college. This effort aligned with the anti-deficit framework's dimension of career readiness and was viewed as an experience that allowed students to compete successfully in their field of study. Students mentioned desired services that can be added to the exhaustive list of student support services and programs at GSU.

Desired Additional Services and Programs

Participants described what they perceived as needed services and programs that could help make life easier for their peers. The desired services mentioned by students were additions

for the already supportive campus climate. One student recalled seeing female students on campus in dire need of child care assistance and felt that this service would be beneficial. Another student mentioned providing additional funds to student-run organizations, lockers for commuters on campus, and a parking deck for only commuters as services that would compliment other student support services.

According to one student, a similar program to SSS that is currently missing is the McNair program. He stated that,

The McNair program is basically for underprivileged youth or for [students from] poverty-stricken backgrounds like SSS. It's to help them advance themselves through college, through their college career. They also give fee waivers for when you're trying to go into graduate programs and graduate schools, because those application fees for all those graduate schools that you're trying to apply to, the costs could add up and it can get real expensive. And the McNair program helps with that kind of stuff. They also give all sorts of grant aid.

GSU was one of the original institutions that launched the federal TRIO program called McNair Scholars Program in 1989 (funded by the U.S. Department of Education), and it continues to this day to encourage students from first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented backgrounds to participate and earn a PhD (GSU, 2015c). The desired additional services can fill gaps in GSU's student support services repertoire not already considered by administrators. Based on the comments from students, there seemed to be an affinity or focus on assisting students from disadvantaged backgrounds with these services. The aforementioned plausible recommendations can be implemented in a relatively short period of time if the proper investment is made. In addition, these student support services can be integrated with the other initiatives that provide a supportive campus climate. There were no recommendations made to remove any of the pre-existing student support services. The few student responses to add additional services indicated that GSU provided a supportive campus climate, but could use some improvements.

Administrator Themes, Challenges, and Opportunities

Interviews with GSU administrators revealed their concerns and commitment to creating an atmosphere that was conducive to student learning, safe, and inclusive, and that improved success for all students. Solórzano et al. (2000) highlighted the significance of understanding and analyzing the collegiate racial climate as being an integral part of evaluating the life cycle of African American students. Harper (2012) and Strayhorn (2008) stated that it is critical to understand the college experience of Black males. One assistant vice president shared his thoughts about creating a supportive climate for these students and how the institution assesses the institutional climate, particularly in the classroom:

I think we can probably provide better efforts for how we are building a sense of unity among the Black male students. It's a large, public, majority White institution, and I think in regards to the academic classroom, there might be some senses of isolation there. I think socially our students find people that they can connect with, but we've got to do a little bit more work [can be done] in terms of how we connect them once they kind of disperse in their class, where they may go from majority to minority.

The CRT tenant "Whiteness is property norm" assisted with describing the administrator's comments on students reporting that they experienced a sense of isolation in the classroom and were marginalized. One director mentioned other initiatives such as TRIO's SSS, BSA, and the Multicultural Center helped to create a supportive climate for Black males:

I think with Georgia State there are a lot of initiatives. So we have our TRIO program which offers a lot of your supplementary instruction, tutoring, support services. We also have within the Division of Student Affairs our Multicultural Center, and Black Student Achievement. We look at how our services are reaching out to these under-represented populations.

An administrator also highlighted an activity called program hours which connects student, faculty, and staff to the outside campus community, built relationships among its participants, and allowed a space for mentoring.

One of the things we're doing, which is actually taking place right now, is we offer community hours. This is an opportunity where we try to bring students from these

various communities together, at least once or twice a month, to have time to meet other people within that community, meet faculty, staff, and graduate students from that community, build relationships.

This grassroots initiative also provided an avenue to bridge multiple generations and encourage dialog and ideas about issues in society that can be discussed further in the classroom. According to an administrator,

This would be sort of a grassroots effort towards an intergenerational mentoring initiative where they're free to talk about anything but also talk about how they can positively approach challenges that they're facing like persistence and graduation at Georgia State University. At the same time, they'll be able to see individuals from the community that they can use, in addition to issues or services or resources that they might be in need of.

Other administrators mentioned GSU services that directly impacted African American males and caught them before they reached academic distress. The institution used a system called Graduation Progression System (GPS) to identify these students erratic academic behavior. With the use of data analytics, the institution was able to adequately predict student behavior and the use of advising triggers allowed for a very intrusive mandatory advising cycle. An administrator added that they didn't simply alert the student to a concern, but they required the student to come in. According to one administrator,

We have many programs that are designed to enhance student success, which also work for the benefit of African American males. We have a very robust data analytics program that is linked to academic advising, where we go through and get lots of feedback on lots of metrics that we know are significant for student success. And it's everything from grade reports from the instructors to missing classes to taking courses out of sequence to taking courses that contribute to progress in the major, etc., and various red flags that we generate through the data analytics program.

The institution's hands-on approach seemed to be a hallmark of their intrusive services. The administrator also mentioned that the majority of the student population had financial need, with a number of the students requiring federal aid funds in order to attend college.

We also know that we are an extremely broad institution in terms of the socioeconomic background of our students. We are over 60% Pell, which is incredibly unusual for a

research university. We have the highest RPG rate of any institution in the country with so high a Pell-eligible student body.

More information was provided on the various student organizations at GSU that support the development of African American culture, as well as a supportive environment and safe space. According to one administrator,

There are over 400 recognized student organizations at Georgia State. Many of them have an Afrocentric sort of focus in terms of student culture and affiliation. But there are some which were really developed to be academically supportive, and all of those groups help create a social network and culture which is, I think, supportive of the student experience as well.

In light of the campus's large population of first-generation, low-income Black male students, the administrators shared how the university has changed the way it does business to better assist these students. The institution has extended hours for the counseling center and student health due to the fact that it's primarily a commuter campus and most students take mass transit to the university. "About 35% of our students that come to class every day [that] come by mass transit. They ride subways and buses and stuff."

Based on another administrator's comment, GSU is assessing ways to improve student success, particularly for Black male students from low-income families. The plan involves a 2-3 year timeline (2015-2018).

Today, we went to our state of the university. [The] president talked about his 5-year plan, a strategic plan. And so there was basically an update given in regards to students' success. He wants us, in the next 5 to 10 years really, to do a lot more on that front particularly for those students in low-income. A lot of those students are leaving school because they can't afford it financially. So I think the plan is to really tap on that aggressively in the next 2 to 3 years and then just continue to make those improvements as we can.

They have changed their organization to streamline services and cut out duplicate efforts. The institution has moved away from silos to operating in a more collaborative environment, which includes the implementation of a central data system. One administrator informed that some of

the changes have occurred within the last couple of years and more specifically this year. Moreover, The University has realigned its offices within Student Affairs so that BSA now falls under Student Success, and co-existing with offices such as Undergraduate Studies, and Supplemental Instruction. Here, an administrator spoke on competing information and the need for consolidation,

So, the importance of it and what you will see here is that going from a sense of operation in silos and more of a collaboration in having a central data place where we can go, and see what one office may have advised a student to make sure that we're looking at things in a comprehensive manner and that we're not providing competing information. But we have the student's whole story in front of us and the circumstances they're trying to overcome and cope with, and that we're providing them with an accurate level of advisement that's not competing.

The administrators highlighted several challenges and opportunities, and proceeded to provide timelines for some the institution's goals.

Timeline for Achieving Institutional Goals

Several of the administrators were mindful of the university president's time line for fostering a climate of student success, particularly for African American males, and the GSU's progress toward it. For the FI program, an administrator shared that their timeline and goals are set by both the institution and the SSS program, and that the SSS program reported annually to the TRIO office of the U.S. Department of Education. Each year the FI program was evaluated and they had to meet certain assurances as far as retention and graduation rates. They also had an annual follow-up and checkpoint for these efforts with the U.S. Department of Education. Outside of the FI and SSS programs, the Multicultural Center and BSA adhered to GSU's 5-year strategic plan for promoting student success and diversity. As it relates to African American male initiatives, there was a two to three year plan in place.

Improving Student Success for Disadvantaged Black Males With a GPA Above 3.0

Next, administrators expressed their views on how GSU produced a culture of Black men who earned GPAs above 3.0 in a diverse array of majors. Many came from academically underprepared, first-generation backgrounds. This feat was a challenge for many institutions across the United States, but GSU seems to be experiencing success. According to a vice president, BSA and the Multicultural Center played a crucial role in assisting Black male students with bringing up their grades above a 3.0 GPA. In addition, if a student went to GSU academically underprepared, the institution used these programs to track these students, responded to academic alerts and ensured that services are rendered to the student to keep him on track toward graduation.

Another administrator highlighted that providing leadership opportunities like the Student Government Association (SGA) motivated students to stay on track and keep their grades up due to the GPA requirements for SGA and similar student-run organizations. One administrator stated that the direct connection established through intrusive advising promoted success, in addition to the involvement in student organizations, and motivation and support from their peers. Moreover, a director contributed academic excellence above the 3.0 threshold for Black males [is due] to a myriad of factors. Specifically,

So, there are scholarships that the university offers for first-generation students. We're talking a little bit about academic support from the TRIO program. Black Student Achievement also offers tutoring. They [also have] graduate [school] preparation. Then, of course, there's your student organizations. I know Black Student Achievement advises many of the Black student organizations, but we also offer opportunities for organizational development, leadership development, through our office as well through our multicultural organizations. We also offer welcome receptions [at] the beginning of each semester. So students from minority and ethnic minority and religious minority backgrounds can come together and meet faculty and staff and other students across campus and build relationships.

Other administrators commented that on many services and programs that helped to improve GPAs and get students back on track toward success, with the most valuable services being in SSS. GSU 10-10 was named as a connector for students to peers and faculty. SSS was deemed effective at providing peer mentors that host study groups, skill-building workshops, and also refer struggling students to GSU's Path to Excellence and Success Academy. All of the mentioned student support services were reported to improve student success for Black males.

Programs That Foster Persistence

The administrators mentioned the need for financial assistance as a top priority for students. One even referenced Professor Shaun Harper, stating that covering students' financial need is vital. Another administrator commented that there is a disproportionately large number of African American students living on campus. African American students are about a third of the undergraduate student body, but they comprise more than 50% of the resident student body. In particular, most administrators seemed to recognize the in-house services of SSS, along with living-learning communities and strong university-wide academic advisement services, as the most beneficial services. One administrator provided advice for crafting effective student support services.

There has to be a level of trust to even discuss that so they can get the help they may need and the resources that they may need. So we're intentional with creating an environment where students feel a warm welcome and they have that trust that whatever they discuss here with their advisor, you know, it's in a nonjudgmental way and it's going to be the partner for their success.

Also, administrators shared numerous ideas for engaging Black male students, particularly in the classroom.

Administrators universally concurred about specific services that garner engagement and positive outcomes for Black male students. Specifically, administrators stated that Black males

were best engaged through the use of resident assistants, participation in SGA, through involvement in leadership opportunities, and skill building workshops. The central theme of these services was face-to-face interaction with the students. In terms of best instructional practices, administrators mentioned the GSU 10-10 program and Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) as a great way to engage freshman inside and outside of the classroom.

There were various policies and programs that administrators viewed as being supportive of the institution's college access and retention initiatives. The administrators explained several details of these policies and programs. GSU had access to a large number of scholarships and grants that were supportive at keeping students in school. This included providing grants to students who needed additional funds to meet financial obligations. Additional services and programs highlighted as most effective included: Keep Hope Alive, FLCs, the Early Warning System, and Mid-semester Review. One administrator described a new financial advising service available for all students, which will be especially helpful to African American male students,

Another program, which we are rolling out now, is one which has not launched but is on the cusp of launching, which I think will be a benefit too. I know your focus is African American males, but this will be a benefit to that community, too ... a financial advising effort in which we're going to have a fiscal advising center for students. And we're going to work with students on making good financial decisions because a lot of our students miss the boat because of financial pressures.

In addition to programs that fostered persistence, innovative initiatives were shared by administrators.

Innovative Initiatives

The administrators mentioned innovative initiatives that seemed reasonable and could be politically negotiated with senior administrators. One administrator stated that students who usually drop out and leave school are about seven times more likely to leave for financial reasons versus academic reasons. Therefore, he wanted to provide scholarships to meet students'

financial need and loans for homeless students to obtain housing. Another initiative that the administrators mentioned was a recently established effort called the Pack 3 initiative. This initiative focused on developing a more culturally competent campus and is a partnership with the office of the dean of students and the housing office. The term “Pack 3” represents the students, faculty, and staff involved in the collaborative effort. It involved combining a robust training program with the RAs and with other student leaders on campus to develop more culturally competent student leaders on campus. Additionally, the participant mentioned that this initiative was recognized at the last Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Some of the more technical initiatives that the administrators mentioned were the use of Desire to Learn Bright Space (DLBS) and MailChimp. The learning management tool DLBS was used to track individual program requirements and offers a daily calendar of volunteer events for freshmen to view online. It also captured cultural immersion experiences and trips, and provided study skills tools. In addition, it was used as a platform for mentors and mentees to communicate. The second data analysis tool, MailChimp, was an online platform that students subscribed to. Students changed their subscription level and signed up for specific career items and/or the study skills newsletter. Students also customized their interactions with the tool, which syncs to the different social media accounts for institutional programs. This tool also tracked student behavior in terms of sites visited and provided a higher level of student engagement.

Challenges

Many of the challenges faced by the institution were addressed in the university’s strategic plan and diversity plan. One challenge mentioned was how to train administrators to use

popular social media outlets such as Snapchat, Tumblr, and Instagram for engagement. Another challenge was institutional racism. GSU is very diverse, but there were some instances in which Black administrators had encountered barriers from White administrators to obtaining funds to create Black male initiatives that are successful and self-sustaining. One administrator stated that they “have to be able to help White administrators understand why this is supporting their institutional message, mission, retention and graduation rates.” The CRT tenant, interest convergence, helped to understand the points being made by the administrator on White administrators not providing support for an initiative that promoted equity unless there was a benefit in it for them. This tenant was indicative of how an institution detracted a climate supportive of students’ success.

Opportunities

There were many ideas that had the potential to create future gains at GSU. Administrators mentioned several efforts that were in the works and required a minor investment by the university. For example, one administrator was interested in developing a learning community where he could mesh the curricular and co-curricular experiences focusing on Black masculinity and having some co-curricular experiences outside of class. In essence, this would provide mentoring to connect Black males with Black male alumni, faculty, and staff. Other examples included increasing diversity in the classroom, ensuring homeless students had housing by providing emergency housing grants, strengthening the early alert system, improving career development for Black males, and starting a My Brother’s Keeper program on campus.

Case Summary

GSU prides itself on its mission of strengthening diversity and inclusion, and enhancing student success. In Chapter 5, I discuss the differences and commonalities of perceptions

between administrators and students. GSU administrators were constantly looking for ways to improve the plethora of services and programs offered. The support from senior administrators provides clarity and a sense of direction for other administrators and faculty during the implementation of such student support services.

In summary, many of the programs and services provided for Black male students at GSU were in high demand. They appear to be strategically placed to promote access and retention. SSS has set the tone for students of FI, and the administrators agreed with the program's efforts to adequately serve first-generation, low-income Black male students. The administrators seemed knowledgeable of the other departments and programs that improved Black male student success. Many of the administrators knew each other and were collaboratively exploring new ways of engaging the school's Black male population. Both students and administrators mentioned racism and discrimination. This reinforced Derrick Bell's use of the CRT to understand these nuances in the university setting. Tenets such as Whiteness as a property norm, counter storytelling, and the permanence of racism was present in their responses.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, GSU has undergone many efforts to improve student success for Black males. My analysis of the findings in this study allowed me to cultivate an informative summary for the conclusion. I initially discerned that FI and SSS students who have access to more services seemed to be more aware of GSU services. In contrast, non-SSS students were not only unable to use FI and SSS services, but were also less aware of broader GSU resources. The mentioned implication helped me frame how students perceived student support services and initiatives. In the first section of this chapter, the students' responses are compared across all three student focus groups. Next, the perceptions of FI students and administrators are compared to determine commonalities and differences. The findings highlight how the perceptions of FI administrators and students align in terms of the effectiveness of SSS. For purposes of comparison, the groups are identified as follows to depict the differences in student participants' responses from the responses of their respective focus groups: FI, SSS, and non-SSS. In the second part of this chapter, I recommend strategies and solutions to improve student success for African American males. In the third section of this chapter, I present the implications for future research on how to improve student success for this population. Lastly, I conclude with my thoughts on the overall theme of the research, suggestions for administrators, and words of wisdom provided by a several student participants when asked for their thoughts for future freshmen.

College Access Initiatives Comparison

Commonalities

Participants from the FI, SSS, and non-SSS student groups provided congruent responses on their perception of services influencing college access. In particular, students from each group reported that after high school graduation an extreme change occurred that created stress and anxiety. They went to orientation, paid tuition and fees for courses, and decided whether they were academically prepared for the college environment. Most of the students experienced fears of venturing out on their own, being away from home, and learned who they are as individuals. In addition, several students reported having to learn how to make connections with new people, especially faculty. Some were able to achieve this by taking on a mentor, by joining a mentor or leadership program, by becoming a member of a student organization, or by electing to participate in TRIO's SSS.

Overall, most students felt that student support services implemented at GSU helped to foster a climate supportive of student success for Black males. However, students also reported that there were distinct undertones of racism expressed that overshadowed this success. Prior to attending GSU and while attending GSU, there were several comments on experiences of institutional racism, whether at the student's high school, in his or her local community, on GSU's campus, or in the city of Atlanta. Patton et al. (2007) stressed the importance of viewing the identity of college minority males through the lens of the critical race perspective. Patton et al. reiterated that racism is a normal and common aspect that shapes society. Based on this reality, CRT allowed me to examine how institutional racism impacted the lives of these students and helped me to understand how these students amass strategies to overcome and protest institutional racism.

Furthermore, students mentioned instances of discrimination from professors and other students based simply on their outer appearance. Others mentioned common stories about situations of being judged by the way they spoke and not by the content of their character or intelligence. Too often this is the common story expressed by many African American male students across the United States. Harper (2012) and Strayhorn (2008) reported on negative situations in which students were underestimated and marginalized. These researchers also celebrated the successes of institutions that understood the importance of demonstrating equitable, respectful, and authentic strategies that better engage Black males.

The responses of administrators and FI students were identical with respect to which student support services proved to be most beneficial to college access. Both administrators and student highlighted the benefits of the FI due to its robust services; its marketing of the program to first-generation, low-income students; and its mentoring and graduation outcomes. Another common perspective shared between these two groups was the effectiveness of a students support services such as mentoring programs, computer labs, SSS, and FI. Additionally, both groups emphasized the positive effect that FLCs had on their first year of college in terms of peer support.

Differences

As far as the differences between FI students and administrators, administrators believed that the Success Academy program was effective in promoting college access for African American males at GSU. However, none of the FI student participants mentioned this program during the focus group when asked about programs and services that improved college access. Another college access initiative called GSU 10-10 was given praise by administrators, but none of the students described this particular program. GSU 10-10 was a course that informed students

of the academic demands of the University, its policies, and the keys to academic success. In addition, non-SSS student participants were not as well versed as FI and SSS student participants on services provided across campus. SSS and FI seemed to educate its students on the various forms of academic assistance throughout the campus to its students, and connected them to resources that they were not aware of. Also, the students' perceptions from SSS and FI appeared to have a greater awareness of non-SSS services which indicated that SSS and FI students received more comprehensive advising services when compared to that of non-SSS students. The aforementioned highlights the importance of offering an SSS and FI program for students with similar backgrounds. Students from the SSS and FI program also reported that they were aware of several non-SSS services, but informed that SSS and FI services were overall more impactful than non-SSS services.

College Retention Initiatives Comparison

Commonalities

Participants in FI, SSS, and non-SSS shared common experiences of the student support services that were the most beneficial in promoting college retention. The programs and service initiatives that were most commonly mentioned were Keep HOPE Alive (financial assistance and academic coaching), Early Alert (support for students experiencing academic issues), the Office of Black Student Achievement, and the Multicultural Center—all of which are available to all GSU students. SSS and FI students highlighted GSU's TRIO programs (Upward Bound and SSS) as being significant to their progress from before their freshman year. Participants of these groups recall their experience of being recruited by an administrator from the SSS program, and how they were surprised at the number of free services provided by the program which was only for students with their backgrounds (first-generation, low-income, disabled). As mentioned in

Chapter 4, students identified that SSS and FI relieves financial burden and is the most beneficial program based on their experiences.

Administrators' and the three student groups' responses were also similar regarding which student support services proved to be most beneficial to college retention. Both administrators and students highlighted the benefits of student support services such as the Office of Black Student Achievement, Emerging Leaders (leadership development), Student Support Services (academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, career preparedness, and life skills), Supplemental Instruction (peer-to-peer tutoring), Keep HOPE Alive, Early Alert, and MAPS. Additionally, housing was a concern for students who are already competing for the limited housing provided by the institution. GSU is currently working to address this ongoing concern.

Differences

Although it might seem like there would be several differences between the FI, SSS, and non-SSS groups, there was only one perception of the best student support service that differed between two of the groups, non-SSS and SSS (FI is an SSS initiative). Naturally, the non-SSS group was not as aware of FI and its abundant services, which are available only to its participants, whereas SSS and FI participants were aware. Overall, administrators' and the three student groups' responses paralleled one another, and there was no mention of GSU's college retention initiatives not being effective amongst the administrators and non-SSS. However, aforementioned in Chapter 4, SSS and FI students were concerned about the campus climate being fully supportive of Black males' success in college, which can potentially impact retention in the future if not improved.

Recommended Strategies to Improve Student Success for Black Men

GSU, a public institution with a population of nearly 33,000 undergraduates, served as a model institution to obtain authentic experiences from both administrators and students. Based on the data collected from focus groups and interviews on college access and retention initiatives, I outline several strategies that institutions can implement by focusing on changing the narrative on college access and retention for African American males. Even though the recommended actions are not indicative of every student at Georgia State, they present a new road map and the institution's dedication to becoming a leader in improving student success for Black males.

The recommendations from the study I conducted highlight the main factors that produce effective college access and retention initiatives and ultimately generate student success. I discuss my strategies further in the succeeding paragraphs.

Institute Mentoring Programs

Instituting a peer-to-peer mentoring program for freshman and sophomores can produce positive results for increasing academic achievement for Black males. Various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of such programs. Researchers such as Engle et al. (2008) and Strayhorn (2008) have found that mentoring programs create a sense of belonging and affect a student's decision to remain in college. Similarly, starting a mentoring program that includes Black students, faculty, and staff also engenders persistence, retention, and higher graduation rates (Harper, 2012). In a familiar space with people that the students can identify with, issues of racism and discrimination can be explored along with ways to understand these issues using CRT. This recommendation is presented based on the participants' responses to the effectiveness

of these programs and its alignment with the anti-deficit achievement framework, particularly around promoting persistence and retention.

Explore the Benefits of Having TRIO SSS on Your Campus

The TRIO programs are research driven and have produced results over a decade. An institution has to submit a proposal for funding, and the application process is competitive. If selected by the U.S. Department of Education, grant aid will be provided to the institution to start the TRIO program(s) in which it applied to. In addition, these programs address college readiness, access, and retention. Institutions can benefit from such a program due to the matching funds provided by the federal government for bringing the programs to their campuses. The TRIO program SSS has a proven track record of increasing retention and graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This program can be helpful with addressing low student success outcomes among Black male students at major public institutions. As mentioned with the SSS program at GSU, administrators commonly refer students to similar student support services programs across campus which creates a supportive campus climate.

Create a Financial Assistance Program That Prevents Dropout

Research suggests that most students drop out of college due to financial reasons. This is especially true for first-generation and low-income students. GSU has a financial assistance program for students that provide small grants to them when they are short a payment for tuition and have over a 3.0 GPA to help them remain in school. Financial assistance programs improve retention rates and encourage persistence. Students at GSU repeatedly referenced how financial assistance helped with their retention and allowed them to progress. Without this type of program, many of these students would have dropped out of college.

Create Early Alert and Intrusive Advising Systems

Institutions can save money and resources by researching, creating, and implementing early alert and intrusive advising systems. These systems can be used to track students' progress and alert advisors when to reach out to a student to provide one-on-one counseling. Because there is usually some form of advisor duplication on college campuses, a review of existing resources is necessary to consolidate academic advising into one functional unit. Taking this step requires buy in from students, faculty, and administrators. Administrators at GSU recently started on this path and reported marked improvements in advising services, particularly with Black male students.

Leveraging New and Existing Technologies to Strengthen Engagement/Marketing

The social media landscape has changed so drastically that as soon as an institution implements one solution, a newly created technology takes the spotlight. Institutions must pay attention to how students communicate with one another and monitor national social trends to avoid using antiquated methods to engage students. New technologies such as Snapchat (a multimedia messaging application), Tumblr (microblogging platform and social networking website), MailChimp (an online e-mail marketing solution and data analysis tool), and Brightspace (an engagement and retention tool) are examples of tools that are being used by institutions across the country. Administrators reported that different forms of engaging technology had a profound effect on reaching Black male students with a high response rate. Being able to reach a predominately commuter campus population at the touch of a button proved to be beneficial to both the students and administrators.

Future Research

This study covers various aspects of research on student success, with a focus on college access and retention. In addition, this study focused on one particular school in one region of the country. African American males were the primary focus of this study in order to obtain the authentic experiences of this specific population. Improvements could be made to student service areas to prepare for the wave of increasing numbers of first-generation, low-income students from the Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) and GSU merger. Carter (2013) and Keen (2013) discuss how community colleges like GPC possess large enrollments of Black and Latino students, yet battle with issues of retaining and graduating these students. I do not anticipate the GSU-GPC merger adversely impacting GSU's mission since it focuses on providing educational opportunities to traditional and non-traditional students, with the goal of providing access to quality education for a diverse group of students (GSU, 2014). In addition, GSU has solid predictive analytics and proactive advising mechanisms to catch students before they drift to the point of dropout. Moreover, there has been discussion among GSU administrators on plans to expand student support services to address the needs of incoming non-traditional and disadvantaged students.

Future research may examine the effects of the GPC-GSU merger on student support services and racial climate at the newly reorganized GSU. As mentioned earlier, GSU has some remnants of institutional racism that have not been eliminated and are currently working on improving its student support services for Black males. With the students of color enrollment on the rise, research can focus on how this merger impacts the campus' racial climate and support services for first-generation, low-income students.

As a second recommendation, future research could address a larger group of Black males across various institutions in order to increase the scale of the study and to determine if the findings are similar across multiple institutions. Participants in such a case study are best selected through the purposeful selection method, which was the method used in my study.

As a third recommendation, a mixed methods case study incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data could assist with quantifying the results and strengthening the study. An example of this type of study would consider multiple student groups (e.g. Black, Latino, and Native American) for comparing access and retention outcomes at the same institution, and gauging how the findings may impact institutions in the future. There would need to be equally robust programs for each student group at the institution. The results from the two studies mentioned could provide insight into strengthening initiatives to improve student success and build a supportive campus climate.

Conclusion

The data collection, analysis, and reporting in this study were an inspired effort to add depth and breadth to the moderate research on improving student success factors for African American males. An institution's leader, senior staff, and program directors all have to be on the same page in terms of supporting initiatives for Black males and must commit financially in order to be successful. From conducting weekly administrator meetings to obtaining buy-in from students, institutions must be willing to perform the necessary research on best practices and strategic planning to reap the benefits of increased access and high graduation rates.

I asked student participants if they have any "words of wisdom" that were essential for incoming or new freshman to consider during their first year in college. Several of the students participated and provided candid responses on how to adjust and persist in the first year of

college. Their experience helped to shape and mold what the first-year experience is like for a Black male, and provides insight into how GSU can further develop a climate supportive of student success. Here are the responses of those who decided to share their thoughts,

“My words of wisdom for incoming freshman: Make sure you know how to time manage.”

“First thing is, don’t let anybody tell you what you can and cannot do. [poem] If you’re up against some trouble, meet it squarely face to face. Lift your chin and set your shoulders, plant your feet and take a brace. When it’s vain to try to dodge it, do the best that you can do. Running from it will not save you, see it through. Even hope may seem but futile, when with trouble you’re beset. But remember you are facing just what other men have met. You may fail, but fall still fighting, don’t give up, whatever you do. Eyes front, head high, to the finish, see it through.”

“Nobody can tell you what to do. The sky’s the limit. You just got to put it in your heart and into your mind and take the next series of actions to accomplish.”

“Wise words that I could tell for upcoming freshman is just to stay focused. Always remember why you do what you do. Don’t let nobody tell you ... Nobody should have to tell you, ‘You have to get up for this eight o’clock class,’ No, you should have it in your mind, ‘I need to get up for this eight o’clock class because I’m thinking long term. I’m trying to graduate. I’m trying to be successful for my family.’”

“One thing I ... If I had a word of wisdom, it would be [to] be yourself. Being yourself is what got you out of high school, and being yourself is what gets you out of college. Don’t change who you are just because you feel like you’ll be the quote unquote ‘in crowd,’ or you can be in this type or organization because you trying to be who they are. While you’re being yourself, more people will come towards you, and the people who do not come towards you do not need to be in your life.”

“I would just have to say live through your passion. I think that when people know their passion, and they will do anything for their passion, that’s what makes people successful.”

“I have this saying where I say, ‘Don’t fly with birds, fly with eagles.’ Don’t hang out with peasants, be royal. Be a step above. It’s OK to help people, be there for people, but never be the smartest person in your group. Because then you’re not learning, you’re just giving. There’s nothing wrong with giving, but you also have to learn. Have your passion thrive you, have your passion push you. Love what you do so that you can be successful.”

“You will only succeed if it’s bad enough as you want to breathe. Then you’ll be successful.”

The words of wisdom not only provided insight for incoming students, but key elements such as time management can be included as a topic in a future student workshop or student support service program.

In closing, there are four take aways that resonate with me after performing this study. Overall, the participants' comments suggest that GSU is providing a somewhat supportive climate for Black males. I received several comments that suggested that changes need to be made before these students fully commit to the idea that GSU provides a highly supportive climate for Black males. All participants agreed on an increase in financial support for African American male organizations and initiatives to demonstrate inclusivity and equity, along with institutionalizing all Black male initiatives to promote this effort. Remedying nuances such as low engagement by non-minority faculty with Black males, and all administrators not being congruent on the level of support required to push Black male initiatives forward, can also assist in driving change.

Second, students and administrators agreed on the student support services that are needed for Black males at GSU, but differ in the terms of the level of progress that has been made on improving race relations on campus. The student participants recognize that some progress has been made, that a stronger commitment is warranted, and that an expedited timeline may be required. For instance, one student described his experience with structural racism and stated that his fraternity is constantly treated with hostility whereas other social groups are treated fairly and with respect. In comparison, the administrators overwhelmingly believe that GSU is making great strides in terms of meeting institutional initiatives in a timely manner, but this same group also commented on issues of structural racism where student funding was unequally provided for Black male programs. Also, there was one administrator who differed in

opinion and stated that the campus has little to no issues of racism on campus. These are only a few examples where this institution can improve its campus climate.

Third, racism overall proved to have a negative impact on the students' college experiences. Through my use of the CRT lens, I noticed that students were able to shed light on issues that posed as challenges, both before and during college. Overall, GSU administrators seemed to recognize the impact that racism has on its Black male students through the many interactions and encounters made with them on a daily basis. Administrators also displayed their concern and dedication to eliminating this issue in the campus climate. Currently, the institution is working improving the campus climate through its diversity strategic plan.

Effectively addressing racism in the campus climate has become a serious topic amid recent racial incidents that have occurred on campuses across America. At the University of Missouri in 2015, African American students were repeatedly harassed and called racial slurs to the point where protests erupted, there was a faculty walk-out by minority faculty members, the football team boycotted to play, and a president ended up being ousted. This is only one of many college racial incidents in 2015 that exemplified the importance of handling reports of racism swiftly as a number one priority, and the need for a "no tolerance" policy. Among the stories that gained national attention, there were similar racial incidents that occurred at Yale University and Ithaca College.

Fourth, students perceived SSS as highly effective and impactful at promoting access and retention by its participants' and administrators' supportive comments. Black males from disadvantaged backgrounds require student support services that are authentic and genuinely crafted to engage them throughout the student life cycle. Similarly, the needs of students from FI

and SSS are different from those students who fall in the non-SSS group. The student's need and the institutional initiative to meet that need must align in order to experience success.

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APPENDIX A
RESEARCH PROTOCOL

Field Research Questions

Questions for students:

1. Describe your journey to college?
 - a. What barriers did you encounter?
2. What external elements of support were available to allow you to experience success in your first year of college?
 - a. Tell me more about these elements of support and their significance to you.
3. What challenges do you currently face that disrupt your focus in college?
 - a. How do you cope or deal with these challenges?
4. Describe any situations of racial inequities or discrimination during your journey to college and while in college?
 - a. How do you handle situations where you are stereotyped, undervalued, underestimated, or marginalized (inside or outside of the classroom, verbal and non-verbal)?
 - b. How does this/these situation(s) impact your college experience?
 - c. How does GSU handle issues of discrimination or racism?
 - d. What are your recommendations for GSU to handle issues of racism or discrimination?
 - e. Do you have any suggestions for improving race relations on campus?
5. Which student support services have been most beneficial to you that allow you to be successful and persist in college?
 - a. Which student support services need improvement? What recommendations do you have for improving these services?
 - b. Which student support services would you remove or add? Why?

Questions for administrators:

1. Can you say a bit about GSU's efforts or approach to foster a climate supportive of success for low-income and first-generation Black male college students?
 - a. What is GSU's timeline for achieving such an effort?
 - b. What is GSU's progress with this effort as of today?

2. How does this supportive institutional climate improve student success for low-income and first-generation Black male college students?
 - a. How do Black undergraduate men earn GPA's above 3.0 in majors for which they are academically underprepared?
3. From your perspective, which student support services do students find to be most beneficial to their persistence in college?
 - a. What compels Black men to take advantage of such campus resources and engagement opportunities?
 - b. What instructional practices best engage Black male collegians?
4. Which of your policies or programs do you think have been most effective in supporting your institution's college access and retention initiatives?
 - a. Can you provide more details on these policies/programs?
5. Can you describe some of your innovative initiatives that promote any of the following: college access, retention, or persistence?
 - a. What are some challenges that still persist despite these initiatives?