Examining How Participation in a Youth Development Program Prepared African American Men for College

Shaniece McGill
Concordia University - Portland

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College of Education

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Examining How Participation in a Youth Development Program Prepared African American Men for College

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Concordia University–Portland
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in
Higher Education

Candis Best, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee
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Concordia University–Portland

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Abstract

African American male retention and graduation rates in higher education are drastically lower than men of other races. In response to this, institutions are focused on diversity and creating programs and services in an attempt to increase African American male’s feelings of inclusion and belonging on campus. To explore the challenges related to the African American male experience in higher education, this study examined how participation in a youth development program prepared African American males for college. This qualitative descriptive study explores the experiences of youth who participated in a youth development program while attending high school. The study reflects data collected from a sample of 13 participants in semi-structured interviews. Through the lenses of college bound and college attending program alumni, this study examined how the youth development program taught personal development and technical skills in preparation for college. To offer a well-rounded perspective on how the program prepared participants for college, the study also incorporated feedback from internal and external stakeholders of the program. Six themes emerged from the study: the importance of networking and building relationships, soft skill development, opportunities, college preparation, mentorship and brotherhood, and entrepreneurship. The results of this study support current literature indicating that validation and mentorship are essential to African American achievement in higher education.

Keywords: African American male, youth development, college preparation, mentorship, personal development, technical skill development
Dedication

This doctoral research study is dedicated to my daughter, Camryn McGill-Russell, and the memory of my aunt, Carla Goodman and my Berkeley mom Antoinette Whittle-Ciprazo who taught me patience and how to live in the moment. I hope I have made you proud.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge my daughter, Camryn McGill-Russell. Camryn, you are my greatest blessing and my biggest motivation for everything I do. Thank you for being so supportive, mature and understanding over the years. You have been by my side every step of the way pushing and encouraging me to see this through till the end. I love you. To parents – Anita and Michael McGill – thank you for instilling in me the importance of education and encouraging me to pursue my dreams. It is because of you that I am a go getter and I know that if I put my mind to it, I will get it done. To my sisters, Chauntal and Makia McGill, I cannot thank you enough for being there for me in every way and stepping up when I needed you most. I am forever grateful for our sisterhood and I am proud to be your big sister. To my grandparents, Lillian and Willie McGill, thank you for loving me and reminding me to keep my eyes on the prize. To my aunt, April Hart, thank you for always being my sounding board and pushing me to keep going, even when I doubt myself.

To my best friends, Brandon Butler and Monica Johnson thank you for your love and loyalty over the years. I could not have done this without you. Thank you to my childhood friends turned siblings, Kimberly Sanders and Lawrence Jackson. We have known each other since we were five years old and your support means the world to me. Kimberly, thank you for challenging me at a young age to excel academically. I cherish our sisterhood. Lawrence, you are my inspiration for studying African American male achievement in higher education. You are a great example of a man who is dedicated to his community, pays it forward and strives to make a positive impact for our youth. I would also like to thank Larry Britton Jr., Danielle Grays, Aleisha Lander, Crystal Ishihara, Crystal Davis, Auriel Bossett, Michael Fitz, and Angela Anderson for your unwavering support.
To my mentors Dr. Loren Hill, Dr. Anissa Jones and Jennifer Stripe Portillo thank you for shaping me into the professional I am today. I appreciate your words of wisdom, encouragement and reminding me to look at the tree – not the forest. To my colleagues, Daniel Esquivel and Michelle Levy thank you for introducing me to the field of higher education and encouraging me to pursue a master’s degree and helping to shape my career. I would also like to thank Dr. Kelley Deetz for planting the seed that I should pursue a doctorate degree. Thank you for always being so positive and supportive. To my classmates, Latriace Wicks-Williams and Gary Damon Jr. thank you for everything! I am grateful for our bond.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, universities have dedicated time, energy, and financial resources to support diversity, yet African American male retention and graduation rates continue to lag behind those of other races (Harper, 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that African American men account for 36% of the bachelor’s degrees awarded among Black men and women during the 2013–2014 school year (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). By comparison, White men account for 44% of the bachelor’s degrees awarded among White men and women during the same time period (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Issues related to access, affordability, racial tension, and lack of academic and social preparation contribute to the low graduation rates for Black men (Harper, 2014; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009).

The first year college experience is critical to student persistence, as the student’s academic performance and retention to the second year are often indicators of graduation rates (Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1993). As Jobe, Spencer, Hinkle, and Kaplan (2016) argue, retention is the responsibility of the university, therefore; universities must identify the issues inhibiting African American male student success and work collaboratively to address them (Harper, 2014). The approach to addressing the retention issues African American men encounter requires commitment from all stakeholders on campus.

Background of the Study

With increased interest in obtaining a more educated workforce in order for the United States to remain a competitive force in the global economy, much attention has been placed on increasing graduation rates of underrepresented student populations. The degree attainment gaps between Black students and their non-Black counterparts lead to income and social inequalities
Disparities in housing, healthcare, and employment systems contribute to the income and social disparities in African American male degree attainment, as African American men are likely to grow up in low-income households and as a result are less likely to attend college.

A U.S. Census (2017) study reports the median income for Black families in 2017 was just $40,258 in comparison to $65,573 for White families, $81,331 for Asian families, and $50,486 for Hispanic families (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018). Further, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reports that "82% of high-income students attended college, compared to only 53% of low-income students" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012 as cited in Naylor et al., 2015). Despite the number of Blacks growing up in low-income households, the National Center for Education Statistics’ (2016) study indicates during the period of 1990 to 2013 the number of Black students enrolling in higher education increased by 5%. However, this increase did not close the enrollment gap between Black and White students. In order to address the enrollment and attainment gaps between Black men and other groups institutions must identify the obstacles and work collaboratively to address them.

Statement of the Problem

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created specifically for the purpose of educating African Americans (Gasman, 2013). Most HBCUs were established after the Civil War when the country’s education system was segregated; therefore, HBCUs were the only way African Americans could receive a formal education. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the legislative push for desegregation of the nation’s primary and secondary schools also included colleges and universities. This gave African Americans the option to attend Predominantly White Colleges (PWIs) from which they were previously
excluded (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). Black students who attended PWIs during this period often experienced racial tensions on campus, lacked a sense of belonging, and as a result often departed college without obtaining a college degree (Haywood & Sewell, 2016).

Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure suggests if a student successfully integrates academically and socially into the university environment it will increase the student’s commitment to the university, thereby increasing retention and ultimately graduation rates. Rendon (1994) and Harper (2016) suggest that Tinto’s (1993) theory is not applicable to African American students as their transition to college is complex in comparison to the traditional student (Harper, 2016; Rendon, 1994). There are numerous factors that must be taken into consideration when identifying reasons Black men depart college early.

Although Tinto’s (1993) theory is not inclusive of factors impacting African American student retention, it is accurate that the first year of college is indicative of how a student will persist in college. Upon entering college all students experience academic and social adjustments, which may impact a student’s decision to persist in college (Harper, 2016; Rendon, 1994). Improving the first year retention and graduation rates of African American men is important as higher education struggles to maintain a diverse student body. Diversity is essential to higher education as it exposes students to different perspectives, challenges their worldview, and helps bridge income inequality gaps (Naylor et al., 2015).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of African American men who participated in a youth development program and how it prepared them for college. Youth development programs were created in the 1960s with the original intent of providing youth with structured after school activities to prevent youth from engaging in negative behaviors (Roth &
Brooks-Gunn, 2016). During the 1980s the focus of youth development programs shifted from preventing negative behaviors to setting youth up for a positive future (Pittman, 1991 as cited in Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) suggest that youth development programs exist to “provide youth with enriching experiences that broaden their perspectives, improve their socialization, and enhance their skills” (p. 70). Youth development programs are a vital part of the college preparation experience for African American males. It is important to understand the role these types of organizations play in preparing students for the first year of college where they are met with unfamiliar academic and social conditions. The academic and social transition to college for African American men is often a challenge, as students find themselves struggling to find their place on campus (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Strayhorn, Lo, Travers, & Tillman-Kelly, 2015). This study will document the first year college experiences of African American males who participated in a youth leadership and mentorship program.

**Research Question**

This study will examine the following question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college?

**Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Proposed Study**

Although there are numerous studies on African American male achievement in higher education (Baber, 2014; Brooms, 2016; Brooms & Davis, 2015; Harper 2016), there are no studies dedicated to understanding the role of youth development programs in preparing African American males for college. Previous studies concluded that African American males in higher education have different transition experiences than other males entering higher education, yet little is known about the social and academic preparation of African American males as they
prepare for college. This study sought to identify key components of the program that alumni as well as internal and external stakeholders found most impactful in the college preparation process. The intention of this study is identify best practices for youth development programs specifically designed for African American males and contribute to the literature on African American male achievement.

**Limitations**

There are five limitations to this study. The first limitation of the study is it will be difficult to generalize the findings of the study as it only focused on the college preparation experiences of African American men attending various types of colleges throughout the U.S. Research on student retention concludes that the first year college experience is the most impactful in determining student retention and persistence (Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1993). Study participants will be able to provide valuable insight and perspective into their lived experiences with the development program and how those experiences prepared them for college, thereby influencing their retention. The second limitation to consider is the lived experiences of participants may vary due to the location and type of institution they attend. The third limitation is the small sample size, which is attributed to the age of the development program. Fourth, participation in the study is limited to program alumni who are college bound or attended college right after high school, thus eliminating alumni who may have taken a gap year or attended college at a later time. The final limitation of the study is participants will not have an opportunity to expand on or clarify responses as the researcher is conducting a secondary analysis of interview transcripts.
Scope and Delimitations

The findings of this study are based on the responses of youth development program alumni as well as feedback from internal and external program stakeholders who responded to the organization’s invitation to participate in a research study to inform program development. The scope of this study is limited to feedback on how the youth development program prepared students for college and does not take into account external influences that may have played a role in students’ college preparation experiences. Program alumni provided feedback based on the participant experience, while internal and external stakeholder responses provided feedback as program staff or relatives of program alumni. The findings of this study are applicable to the organization for this study.

Definition of Key Terms

The following is a list of key terms and definitions that will be used in this study.
Table 1

**Key Terms and Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Transition</td>
<td>This term is defined as the process of adapting to the academic rigor and expectations of the college environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American or Black</td>
<td>This term is defined as “A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td>Attrition occurs when student fails to maintain consecutive enrollment in college (Burrus et al., 2013).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Preparation Program</td>
<td>Academic, social, and/or leadership programs designed to prepare students to succeed in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historically Black College or University</td>
<td>This term is used to define “any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>This term is defined as “An intentional process between two or more people in which the mentor can serve as the guide, the reality checker, and introduce the mentee to the new environment in which the person is about to enter” (Shandley, 1989, as cited in LaVant, Anderson, &amp; Tigges, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional Students</td>
<td>This term refers to students who identify as one or more of the following: are over the age of 25; identify as African American or Black, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, American Indian, and Asian; first-generation college students; have a low socioeconomic background; are disabled; or identify within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender umbrella (Rendon, 1994).</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Predominantly White Institution</td>
<td>This term is defined as institutions where the majority of the students enrolled identify as White (Bourke, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention</td>
<td>This term is defined as continuous enrollment in college (Tinto, 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Transition</td>
<td>For the purpose of this study the term is defined as the process of adapting to the social environment in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
<td>This term is defined as the way in which institutions engage students academically and socially in the college environment.</td>
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Summary

Youth development programs are essential in providing students with the experiences and skills necessary to prepare for adulthood. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2016) clarify setting youth up for a positive future consists of providing youth with an avenue to establish relationships with “caring adults, exposure to challenging experiences, and skill building opportunities” (p. 189). Youth development programs are impactful, especially amongst African American males, as they fulfill social and academic voids that students do not typically get from school. Understanding how participation in youth development programs during high school will assist colleges and universities with developing programs and services that support a seamless transition from high school to college. Support during this transition period is helpful for African American male students as they work to adjustment to the academic rigor of college as well as the social adjustment that comes with their newfound adulthood. Institutional investment in identifying ways to bridge the gaps between African American males and their universities will assist with recruitment and retention of this group and as a result increase graduation rates.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to examine how youth development programs prepare African American males for higher education. This chapter will review recent literature on the history of African Americans in higher education and factors impacting African American male persistence and retention in the college environment.

Articles reviewed for this study were collected from ProQuest Central, PsycArticles, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online and Sage Journals Online databases. The following search terms were used to collect articles for the study: African American male achievement, first-year experience, retention models, student development theories, Rendon’s Theory of Validation, Black male initiative, sense of belonging, intrusive advising, student engagement, mentoring, summer bridge, transition programs, African American access, history of African Americans in higher education, African American male persistence.

The literature review begins with a discussion of the history of African American men in higher education, graduation rates, the role institutions play in providing support, and the importance of increasing African American male degree attainment to creating a diverse workforce. The literature review then highlights common themes in the current body of literature which impact African American male college retention and the impacts of first-year experience programs. Finally, the chapter will explain the importance of first-year experience programs to support African American male degree attainment at Predominantly White Institutions.

Conceptual Framework

Historically, higher education served as a gateway for upward socioeconomic mobility but over time this perception has shifted due to inequality of access and affordability for low income and students of color (Naylor et al., 2015). Prior to Brown v. Board of Education (1954)
and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Historically Black College and Universities educated the majority of Black students in higher education (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). Pressures from Congress to desegregate education systems opened the door for Black students to attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), ushering in a new student population at these institutions. While legislation pushed for integration and inclusion PWIs were not prepared to address the academic and social needs of the changing student demographics (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). Black students attending PWIs found themselves subject to hostile campus environments and exclusion from campus life, leading to protests and demonstrations on campus (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). PWIs did not provide adequate psychosocial support for the incoming African American students causing alienation and dissatisfaction on campus. As a result of these challenges, attrition rates for African American students attending PWIs rose, contributing to the achievement gap between African American students and other student populations.

The achievement gap between Black men and their non-Black counterparts is significant (Bir & Myrick, 2015). The United States Census (2013) reports that Black men age 25 years and older account for just 12.9% of undergraduate degrees in comparison to 22.3% for White men in the same age bracket (as cited in Bir & Myrick, 2015). The achievement gap between Black men and women is also significant. According to Bir and Myrick (2015) during the 1991–2006 timeframe, the graduation rate for Black men increased from 28% to 35% in comparison to Black women who increased from 34% to 46% (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Black male and White male graduation rates are of particular concern because White men earn degrees at a much faster rate than Black men (Haywood & Sewell, 2016).
In order to address the issue of the achievement gap between Black men and other student groups, Harper (2014) suggests that institutions take a collaborative approach to identifying and resolving issues related to access, engagement, and academic achievement. The efforts must be strategic and bring together stakeholders from various areas of campus—academic, student affairs, administrators, faculty, and students—to develop ways to address issues Black men face on campus. With that, strategies should include developing in and out of class interventions and programs to support students and be flexible to the needs of students throughout college. Harper (2014) notes there is diversity within the collective the group of Black men which should be taken into consideration when developing programs. For example, the needs of Black men who identify within the lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual umbrella will have a unique set of psychosocial needs than other Black male students on campus. Further, institutions should create assessments and evaluations to measure and document the outcomes of these efforts (Harper, 2014).

During the collaboration process, Harper (2014) urges collaborators to use a positive anti-deficit framework to identify ways to close the achievement gap. Harper (2014) contends much of the current research on Black male achievement is riddled with language that amplifies the fact that Black men are not graduating college at rates comparable to other races. Playing up the deficits feeds into the negative narrative on Black male achievement in higher education. Instead, Harper (2014) urges educators and policymakers to look at the positive outcomes in Black male achievement and use these as the driving force to improve graduation rates for Black men.

**Theoretical Framework**

Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1987, 1993) is arguably one of the most widely tested theories on why students leave college early (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013).
Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory argues that students who are not successful academically and socially integrated into the campus community will leave college early. Tinto’s theory (1987, 1993) hinges on the interaction between students and faculty suggesting that means engaging interaction with faculty and staff outside of the classroom supports student retention (Burrus et al., 2013). A student who has successfully integrated into the campus environment is likely to have a strong sense of belonging, thus are actively involved in campus life. By contrast, those who do not successfully integrate lack a sense of belonging and are not likely to be involved in campus life activities, increasing the likelihood of early departure.

While there is evidence to support these claims, Berger and Milem (1999) counter this argument, implying that Tinto’s model relies solely on socialization processes within the institution and does not take into account that many students do not have meaningful interaction with faculty outside of the classroom. Further, Tinto’s theory (1993) largely applies to the traditional learner and does not consider current and pre-college factors—norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors—which influence a student’s decision to depart college early. There are numerous factors influencing retention for men of color, so other factors must be considered to gain a holistic understanding of Black male retention in higher education.

Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) emphasizes the importance of the university in validating nontraditional students as a means of assisting them with the academic and social transition to college. The Theory of Validation came about as result of Rendon’s involvement in the Transition to College Project, which was designed to “determine how student learning was affected by student involvement in academic and non-academic experiences in college” (Rendon, 1994, p. 5). The study consists of qualitative data collected from 132 students attending a variety of colleges: a predominantly minority community college, a predominantly white liberal arts
college, a predominantly Black state university, and a large predominantly White research university. Students were selected for the study based on their identification as one or more of the following characteristics provided on the admission application: female, male, commuter student, African American, and/or Hispanic. Interviews for the study were conducted on the student’s respective campuses with 3–6 students in each focus group using open-ended questions. The questioned focused on why student decided to attend college, their expectations of what they believed college would be like, how did their expectations align with their actual experiences, key people and events as they transitioned to college, and the overall effects of college on them (Rendon, 1994).

Through the data collected from the Transition to College Project, Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) was developed. Rendon’s theory identifies students of color as nontraditional students who enter higher education as vulnerable and demand additional support to persist (Rendon, 1994; Carter et al., 2013). The additional support comes in the form of validating students’ experiences and prior knowledge that they bring with them to college. Nontraditional students are validated by being told that they are worthy and capable of academic achievement as a means to support their academic and interpersonal growth while in college. In a sense, students are nurtured and enabled to believe that they can achieve their goals. Conversely, Tinto’s theory (1993) suggests that students assimilate, abandoning their precollege beliefs to adopt those of the institution, Rendon’s theory finds value in students retaining their prior beliefs. Rendon’s theory is rooted in diversity and what diversity means to the learning environment (Carter et al., 2013; Rendon, 1994).
Six Elements of Validation

There are six elements of Rendon’s Theory of Validation. The first places the responsibility for initiating contact on the university, rather than the students. Traditional structure dictates that support is available to students, however; students must make initial contact to request assistance. The concern with the traditional structure is that students of color, notably Black men, often experience feelings of exclusion and lack a sense of belonging at Predominantly White Institutions, which may deter them from seeking assistance during times of need (Bauer, 2014; Harper, 2015; Harper & Newman, 2016; Haywood & Sewell, 2016). The feelings of exclusion and lack of sense of belonging for Black men are not new to higher education, as these issues date back to the 1960s when students expressed these feelings by protesting and advocating for inclusion on campus (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). Oftentimes students may not recognize that they are struggling until the last minute, therefore shifting the responsibility to make initial contact to the university serves as a bridge for students.

Second, Rendon notes when students receive validation they have a better sense of self-worth. Third, students are more likely to engage in campus life when they are validated for who they are and what they bring to the institution. Fourth, validation is not limited to the classroom. As co-curricular programming increases, it is important to consider validating students in these environments as well. Fifth, validation should be considered an ongoing process, it does not stop with the first encounter. Nontraditional students require support throughout their college careers, so university faculty and staff must be aware of these needs and understand that students will need their support on an ongoing basis. Rendon (1994) concludes that validation is especially important to retention in the first year of college, specifically the first few weeks as students are transitioning to their new academic environment.
There are two forms of validation—academic and interpersonal—that universities can foster to support retention of nontraditional students. Academic validation charges faculty with empowering and motivating students to achieve academically (Rendon, 1994). Learning is an innate ability that everyone possesses and empowering students in this manner boosts their confidence. Interpersonal validation occurs when faculty and staff engage students outside of the classroom to support their social transition to college.

Over the decades Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) has served as the theoretical foundation for exploring the importance of validation as it relates to student engagement, graduation, and retention studies on Black male students (Bauer, 2014; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000; Xiong & Wood, 2016; Zhang & Ozuna, 2015). Holmes et al. (2000) emphasize the importance of institutions doing more to support African American students’ transition to college to fulfill the mission of creating well-rounded citizens who are able to positively contribute to the greater good. Diversity is critical to the college environment as it helps students see the world beyond themselves and forces them to reflect on the ideals they embrace and how those ideals benefit or hinder advancement in society. Using Rendon’s (1994) Theory of Validation, Holmes et al. (2000) propose ways in which universities can be inclusive of African American student needs beginning with the recruitment process.

**Six Elements of Validation**

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<td>Engage in campus life</td>
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<td>Validation goes beyond the classroom</td>
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*Figure 1. Six elements of validation.*
Early Validation

During the college recruitment process, recruiters should take care to validate African American students by fostering an environment, which encourages them to ask questions without feeling judged (Holmes et al., 2000). The university staff should also take time to learn the student and help identify the student’s needs. In doing so, the recruiter will be able to match the student’s academic and social needs with those offered by the institution demonstrating that the student’s success matters. Also, the recruiter should take time to highlight campus activities, programs, and services that cater to African American students to make them feel welcome from the beginning. Another key component of validating students during recruitment is using other African American students to help in the recruitment process to share personal experiences of student life on campus.

Second, Holmes et al. (2000) focus on the importance of validating students at orientation once they have committed to the university. For many students, their experience at orientation sets the tone for the first year because it is one of the first university-sponsored activities they attend (Holmes et al., 2000). With that, the institution should shy away from traditional orientations focusing on the do’s and don’ts of college life, but focus on helping alleviate learning by trial and error as this can be discouraging for students. Instead, they suggest schools focus on ways to make Black students feel included by introducing African American faculty and staff members and support resources students will need throughout their academic career to be successful. Lastly, Holmes et al. (2000) recommend that school conduct exit interviews with African American students collect qualitative and quantitative feedback on their academic and social experiences for future improvement.
Out of Class Validating Agents

Xiong and Wood (2016) use Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) to explore the role of community college counselors in validating Black male students. The study surveyed 13 community college counselors throughout California and found that counselors play a critical role in validating Black male students. Key findings from the study indicate that counselors served as out of class validating agents by affirming student’s ability to succeed in their courses, providing a platform for student’s voices to be heard, affirming students as equal partners in their academic careers, and celebrating student’s successes. Xiong and Wood (2016) also found that counselors provided interpersonal validation for students by treating them as individuals, establishing meaningful relationships with students, and finally connecting students with other validating agents who were able to contribute to student’s success.

Faculty-Student Engagement

Similarly, Zhang and Ozuna (2015) use the Theory of Validation to identify ways to best support engineering students who transfer from community colleges to traditional universities. Using a phenomenological research design, Zhang and Ozuna (2015) study consisted of 21 students at a public institution in the South. The study concluded that engineering transfer students received academic and interpersonal validation while attending the community college. Academic validation consisted of faculty support for students as they decided which path of engineering they would study. Participants expressed appreciation for faculty who explained various career paths within the field of engineering as well as being a sounding board for ideas. Students also shared their reasons for attending community college and the safety it provided for them to explore majors and careers. Ultimately, the study concluded that the validation engineering students received while in community college helped them to achieve academic
success. Faculty member’s validation and recognizing the achievement of students and their ability to succeed helped students to overcome academic challenges. Additionally, family support was equally valuable in helping students handle personal challenges in pursuit of their goals.

Bauer’s (2014) study seeks to determine if there is a difference in faculty-student engagement based on the student’s enrollment status. Bauer’s (2014) used data from the national Community College Survey and narrowed the sample down to 289 Black men from community colleges throughout the country. Understanding the importance of validation to the Black male student experience, the findings concluded that a student’s enrollment status was not a factor in determining whether they were likely to engage with faculty members. Students who attended school full time were just as likely to engage with faculty as students who attended part-time; however, validation from faculty influenced their engagement (Bauer, 2014). Students who experience high or medium levels of validation—being affirmed by faculty that they could "complete college-level coursework” (Bauer, 2014, p. 163) and encouragement of belonging, yielded higher levels of engagement than those who reported low levels of validation (Bauer, 2014). Receiving validation from faculty elevated student’s confidence and faculty-student engagement.

The Validation Theory (Rendon, 1994) is key to understanding the transition to college for students of color, as they often struggle to integrate academically and socially on college campuses (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Carter et al., 2013; Flowers III, Scott, Riley, & Palmer, 2015; Gibson, 2014). While institutions have programs and services in place to assist all students, students of color need to experience validation from in and out of class agents thus boosting their confidence to utilize campus resources to achieve their academic goals. Rendon (1994) argues that at every stage of transition nontraditional students experience feelings of self-doubt and
questioning about their ability to continue with coursework, but with the support of the institution as well as in and out of class agents, they are able to successfully tackle these doubts to succeed. For these reasons, Rendon’s (1994) Theory of Validation is used as the theoretical framework for this study.

**Transition to College**

Upon entering higher education Black male students are often surprised to find that their academic and social college experience is not what they imagined (Harper, 2016). Black men attending PWIs are often faced with being the only Black man in their classes, racial stereotyping, isolation, rigorous academic standards, and the social transition of being in a new environment that they did not anticipate. Using Louis’ (1980) surprise and sensemaking framework, Harper (2016) explores what happens when Black male students’ college experience does not align with their expectations. Harper’s (2016) surprise and sensemaking framework provide insight to understand how students transition to college when they have unrealistic or unmet expectations of what their experience will be. Harper’s (2016) study explored the experiences of students who had a rough transition to college in comparison to those who had a seamless transition.

Harper (2016) notes one of the biggest obstacles Black male students faced entering college was the lack of academic preparation in high school. The issue of students entering college feeling underprepared for the academic expectations of college is not new to higher education. Harper et al. (2009) attribute the lack of academic preparation in high school to the increase in state college admissions requirements, which outpaced those of the K–12 school system to adequately prepare incoming students. Study participants noted that they were unsure of the expectations of college rigor, which negatively impacted their first-year experience.
Further, participants found that the effort they put forth in their school work did not match their grades, which for some students was rather discouraging (Harper, 2016). Students attempted to use the same study habits from high school in the college environment and quickly learned that college work required more time and a different type of effort. Students who experienced a rough transition to college were humbled by having to seek tutoring, achieving lower grades than expected, not receiving praise for their work, and learning that it was acceptable to not the best at everything (Harper, 2016).

Black male students also struggled with the social adjustment to college life, as many students experienced feelings of culture shock and anxiety of being in an environment with very few Black students (Harper, 2016). Alternatively, Black men who entered Historically Black Colleges and Universities also experienced culture shock as they adjusted to being in a homogenous environment, as some students had not previously attended schools with large populations of Black men (Harper, 2016). In response to this culture shock, students either isolated themselves or extended themselves to become socially engaged in campus life. Getting involved in student life helped students to connect with other Black students on campus and find ways to create a sense of belonging and safe space on campus (Harper, 2016; Strayhorn et al., 2015; Wolf, Perkins, Butler-Barnes, & Walker Jr., 2017).

By comparison, students who experienced a seamless transition to the college environment attended academically rigorous high schools who prepared them for the college workload and expectations (Harper, 2016). Students with a seamless experience also had prior experiences dealing with a lack of diversity, so being in a homogenous environment did not yield the same culture shock as those who had not. As a result, they were prepared to deal with racial stereotypes inside and outside of the classroom. Harper (2016) found that students also attended
summer transition programs where students were introduced to college courses and various academic and social supports. Harper (2016) concluded, “Retaining and graduating Black undergraduate men at higher rates necessarily entails identifying what works in improving their classroom experiences and academic outcomes” (p. 20).

Jobe et al. (2016) argue that the issue of retention in higher education is the responsibility of the institution. Increasingly, institutions are being charged with developing policies and programs to support student retention throughout their academic career. The model of higher education has shifted so that students are now consumers of higher education and as such institutions must adapt to serve these needs (Jobe et al., 2016). In alignment with this perspective, Raisman (2013) conducted a multi-campus study to identify reasons why students departed school during the first year. While there are external factors that influenced student’s decisions for departure, the study found that an overwhelming number of students who dropped out during the first year of college left based on unsatisfactory institutional experiences. Students expressed that they felt a lack of concern for their achievement or felt as though they did not fit in on campus.

**Mentoring and the Faculty-Student Relationship**

The faculty-student mentor relationship is critical to the success of African American men in higher education. Gibson (2014) defines mentoring as “an intentional process between two or more people in which the mentor can serve as the guide, the reality checker and introduce the mentee to the new environment in which the person is about to enter (Shandley, 1989, as cited in LaVant et al. 1997). Mentoring programs have become a popular retention tool across universities and can take on many forms (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Gibson, 2014) depending on the needs of the student population as well as those of the faculty.
Mentoring can take place face to face, via internet video conferencing, telephone, chat, or email communication (Gibson, 2014).

Meaningful interaction between students and faculty outside of the learning environment helped African American students with the academic and social transition to college (Brooks et al., 2013; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Gibson, 2014; Wood, 2014). These outside of class interactions are meaningful to African American men across institution types as faculty help promote a sense of belonging and provide mentorship for Black male students. The out of class interaction is especially important for Black men attending PWIs where they may lack a sense of belonging. Tinto’s model of student departure suggests that in order for students to persist they must integrate into the university environment (Brooks et al., 2013; Gibson, 2014).

The study conducted by Brooks et al. (2013) found that Black male students can be successful with the help of structured mentoring programs. In order for such programs to benefit students, they must go beyond simply pairing students and faculty to finding ways to actively engage students (Brooks et al., 2013; Gibson, 2014). There should be consistent contact between mentors and mentees to help hold them accountable to their goals and guide their development. Additionally, the programs should have dedicated staff members to oversee the programs documenting outcomes to improve practices along the way and prove effectiveness. Brooms and Davis (2017) and Gibson (2014) agree that while it is important to have dedicated personnel to run the programs it is equally important to increase Black faculty and staff representation on campuses to create an inclusive environment. Further, the representation of Blacks on campus helps combat issues related to campus racial climate (Gibson, 2014; Harper, 2015).
Othermothering

Faculty-student engagement is important to the academic and social integration of students on college campuses, which is especially true for Black students who attend PWIs. HBCUs have been known to cultivate more supportive and nurturing environments to foster student success by engaging in a practice known as othermothering (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Njoku, Butler, & Beatty, 2017). Unlike the traditional faculty-student mentor relationship, othermothering exceeds the call of duty by providing students with holistic support—beyond academic and psychosocial support—to assure student’s academic success (Flowers III et al., 2015). Othermothering or community othermothering is an old practice with roots in West African culture that is used to transmit cultural and educational values to the next generation (Njoku et al., 2017). There is a conscious amongst Black faculty and staff that it is their responsibility to groom the next generation by stepping into a parental role to make sure students’ needs are met. Thus, they understand the social expectation of using their experience and knowledge to pay it forward in the hopes of helping students avoid some of the pitfalls they encountered in life. Equally, it is important to note that othermothering is not limited to Black women in higher education. Male faculty, staff, and administrators engage in this practice to support students as well. Faculty and staff engaged in othermothering by supporting students’ academic and personal development by engaging in frequency out of class interactions. This additional support encouraged students to persist through challenges to achieve their goals. Flowers III et al.’s (2015) study participants shared that faculty and staff acted as parental figures, checking on them when they missed classes or appointments and even providing care when they were ill. Furthermore, HBCU alumni noted that faculty and staff at their schools showed a personal
investment in student’s success after college by maintaining contact and being a resource for networking and other opportunities. Flowers III et al. (2015) concluded that HBCUs have a solid framework for nurturing students to support student retention and achievement. To that end, choosing the right college is vital to the success of Black men in college (Hilton & Bonner, 2017).

**Black Male Initiatives**

Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs were created as an intervention to support Black male retention and in turn increase graduation rates in higher education (Brooms, 2018). In 2014 President Obama created the My Brother’s Keeper Initiative to address issues related to men of color achievement in the K12 pipeline to increase the enrollment at universities. With increased attention on Black male retention and graduation rates, many PWIs created the Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs to support these efforts. The initiatives or programs vary in scope depending on the campus and the needs of the Black male student population. Some of the BMIs include the Black Male Institute at the University of California Los Angeles, the Black Male Initiative at the City University of New York, the Black Male Initiative at California State University Northridge, Black Male Initiative at the University of Illinois Springfield. The Student African American Brotherhood or Brother to Brother is a national Black male achievement program with more than 20 chapters in 39 states throughout the U.S. (Brooms 2018; Student African American Brotherhood, n.d.).

The overarching goal of these programs is to provide academic, social, and personal development support for Black men, especially those attending PWIs where students face more challenges with adjusting to the environment. Each program is catered to the needs of each campus to best suit their student demographics’ unique set of needs, but most include
faculty/student mentor, academic support, and peer interaction components (Brooms, 2016; Harper, 2014).

Brooms’ (2016) qualitative study of 40 Black male students enrolled in a BMI at two PWI campuses found BMIs to be effective in promoting success. Through this study, Brooms (2016) examines how student involvement in BMI impacts the student experience. To best understand how the program affected the student experience, Brooms (2016) used a sociocultural framework. Social and cultural capital is defined as "the social networks and connections that one possesses while cultural capital refers to an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities" (Brooms, 2016, p. 143). Study participants shared that being involved in the BMI provided them with a safe space to share frustrations with academics, connect with other Black male students, and learn how to navigate the complexities of campus life. Specifically, students expressed feelings of comradery and feeling at home during their monthly meetings. The study concluded that the BMI effectively promoted success for participants addressing sociocultural needs of Black male students. More programs of this nature are needed to support the retention and graduation rates of Black male students, particularly those who attend PWIs.

Brooms’ (2018) qualitative study of 63 Black men dove further into the experiences of BMI participants at PWIs. Similar to the findings of Brooms (2016), students in this study also shared the importance of the program in accessing sociocultural capital and how that enhanced the student experience. Four themes emerged from the study—accessing sociocultural capital, holistic support, the Black male identity and Black male persistence (Brooms, 2018).

As with Brooms (2016), this study shows students expressing the value of having access to sociocultural capital early on in their college careers. Specifically, one student shared how joining a BMI helped with the transition from high school to college. The program allowed
participants to move into campus housing two days ahead of the regular move-in date, and attend a targeted orientation with Black upperclassmen, faculty, and staff to discuss campus resources and explore majors. The quality time with faculty and upperclassmen gave students exposure to the possibilities of campus life and what it can yield in addition to modeling institutional norms for students.

The second theme of the study involved BMIs giving students holistic support. That is, students received academic and personal development assistance throughout their time in the program. In addition to identifying on and off campus resources to promote student development, students found it refreshing to be able to easily engage in and out of class agents about their coursework (Brooms, 2018). Staff from the BMI were very welcoming to students, which made them feel comfortable to open up about their experiences.

The third theme, of Black male identity, speaks to how involvement in the program helped students to develop a "strong sense of self, as well as a sense of group consciousness, and collective identity" (Brooms, 2018, p. 66). Students shared that participating in forums, discussions, panels, and conferences related to self-identity helped them feel that their individual needs were being considered. The programming helped to create a welcoming environment on campus and sought to address many of the social issues Black men face in higher education.

While Wood, Reid Jr., Harris III, and Xiong (2016) acknowledge the benefits of Black Male Initiative programs to students, they argue that there are no formal assessments to document the outcomes of these programs. Wood et al. (2016) and Harper (2014) agree that Black Male Initiative could be more effective in the way they support students, but the efforts are often disjointed due to lack of clear outcomes and measures to assess them. With that, Wood et al. (2016) developed the Male Program Assessment for College Excellence (M-PACE) “designed
to assess and improve the effectiveness of programs and initiatives serving men of color in the community college” (p. 802). The assessment was generated to measure the common affective and performance program outcomes of Minority Male Initiatives. Affective outcomes include student’s resilience, student’s ability to advocate for themselves, etc., while program outcomes measure faculty-student engagement, retention and use of service (Wood et al., 2016). Results of the study indicate that M-PACE shows "strong content validity" (p. 804), therefore is an effective tool for measuring program effectiveness and can be altered to assess program-specific outcomes. By creating a standard to document outcomes it lays the framework to formally document effectiveness and can assist in program reviews to advance the work of the initiative.

**Sense of Belonging**

During the transition to college, Black males face unique academic and social challenges, which create obstacles in their transition (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Strayhorn et al.’s (2015) study examines the intricate relationship between Black men’s sense of belonging, wellbeing, and confidence as it relates to the transition from high school to college. A student’s sense of belonging is characterized by how students identify, connect with, and feel accepted within the college environment and well-being was measured by the quality of sleep, loneliness, and stress (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Black men who reported being confident in their transition also reported a high sense of belonging in the college environment. Alternatively, Black men who reported having a lack of confidence also reported not having a strong sense of belonging to the university. Students who received words of affirmation—being told that they can succeed and were shown positive examples of other successful Black men within and outside of the university—showed increased confidence. The findings from this study indicate that building Black male’s confidence during the first year of college is essential to increasing their sense of
belonging, which impacts their retention (Strayhorn et al., 2015). These findings support Rendon’s (1994) Theory of Validation that student’s confidence and receiving validation from an internal agent boost student’s confidence, thus increasing their sense of belonging.

While Strayhorn et al.’s (2015) study shows a positive relationship to a sense of belonging and retention Wolf et al. (2017) counter this argument by suggesting that a social sense of belonging does not improve retention rates, but rather grade point averages. Tinto’s Model of Student Departure (1987, 1993) and Astin’s Student Involvement Theory (1984) conclude that in order for students to persist, they must establish a sense of academic and social belonging on campus, thus helping them with the transition to college, which is especially true for students of color. To test these findings on retention, the authors conducted an intervention with study participants in the fall semester, showing them a short video of students discussing their transition to college validating their fears as normal and offering positive encouragement. The messaging honed in on the fact that the students were not alone—other students share the same concerns about making new friends and succeeding in their course work (Wolf et al., 2017). The video was followed by a ten-minute discussion where students were asked to share their thoughts on the video and openly discuss their experience in transitioning to college. Wolf et al. (2017) concluded that there is an indirect relationship to a social sense of belonging and retention and further suggest there is a stronger correlation between social sense of belonging and increases in grade point average. The authors compared the fall semester grade point averages from students who participated in the intervention to the comparison group and did not find a significant difference in the grade point averages. By comparison, when the spring grade point averages of the two groups are compared students who participated in the intervention showed an increase in grade point average to the comparison group. The findings from this study propose that social...
belonging interventions alone do not increase retention, but when used in conjunction with campus retention programs it can lead to increases in retention numbers.

Further, Hausmann, Ward, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that the university plays a critical role in fostering a student’s sense of belonging. The authors concluded that students who had a sense of belonging persisted through the first year of college with the help of intervention programs. Hausmann et al.’s (2007) study split participants into three groups: two control groups and one enhanced group. The enhanced group received communications from high ranking university administrators reiterating that they were valued members of the campus community to encourage their participation in the study. These students also received university branded gifts to incentivize their participation in the survey aimed at improving campus life (Hausmann et al., 2007). The participants in the remaining control groups received targeted communications from a professor in the University Psychology Department, with no mention of their importance to the university environment. Results of the study found that social interactions contributed to the sense of belonging in the first year of college. Students who reported contact with peers and faculty showed a higher level of belonging than those who did not. Hilton and Bonner (2017) also found that a sense of social belonging was important to Black male achievement in higher education.

Hilton and Bonner (2017) suggest that HBCUs are supportive environments for Black students because they provide the necessary academic and social support to successfully support retention that PWIs lack. HBCUs better support retention because the faculty and staff at these universities are invested in the success of their students and students are encouraged to seek leadership roles on campus. Having the right academic and social supports on campus has a critical impact on Black male retention and ultimately graduation rates.
Grit

There is a positive correlation between grit and high-grade point averages for Black men attending PWIs (Strayhorn, 2013). Strayhorn (2013) defines grit as "the tendency to pursue long-term-challenging goals with perseverance and passion" (p. 6). Strayhorn (2013) surveyed 140 Black men attending a PWI in the Southeast to determine what role grit plays in their achievement. Students who exhibit grit are resilient and determined to succeed. The positive psychology term is used to characterize students who possess ambition and resilience to achieve their goals despite unforeseen circumstances and is often used to predict student success. In spite of challenges, students face with adjusting to college, dealing with campus racial tensions, adjusting to the academic rigor of college and finances these students are able to rise above their circumstances and maintain sight of their goals. The support of faculty, staff, and family are often helpful in challenging times, yet they were able to achieve short and long-term goals with hard work. Grit centers on the belief that a student’s ability to succeed is the responsibility of the individual, thus there are external factors which can make this approach challenging for developing student resources.

By contrast, Wilson-Strydom (2017) urges readers to consider resilience over grit as a predictor of student success. Wilson-Strydom (2017) argues that grit alone is not sufficient in predicting success as there are many external factors, which contribute to an individuals’ will and drive to achieve goals. Unlike grit, resilience takes into account for the "the complexities of individuals’ lives, individual agency and the ways in which agency and social structures intersect (Wilson-Strydom, 2017, p. 387). Wilson-Strydom’s (2017) study of 40 undergraduates in South Africa found that educational resilience is characterized by the role of in and out class agents, thus expanding the scope of understanding as it relates to success.
Campus Racial Climate

Campus racial climate directly impacts Black male achievement at PWIs (Harper, 2015). Black male students are often confronted with many racial stereotypes on campus, which distract them from their studies. Harper’s (2015) qualitative study sought to understand how Black male students dealt with racial stereotyping at PWIs. Many participants expressed feelings of tokenism, exclusion from peer study groups because White students felt that they were not able to positively contribute to the conversation and being forced to validate their mere existence on campus. Stereotyping negatively impacts a student’s sense of belonging on campus and diminishes student’s confidence in their ability to achieve academically (Harper, 2015). Harper (2015) found that even Black male students who performed well academically were not exempt from dealing with racial stereotypes on campus. Some students in the study noted many of their White peers assumed they were athletes, insinuating they could only gain admission through athletics, instead of academic merit or affirmative action programs. Although Black male students shared many examples of dealing with racial stereotyping on campus they were able to find support in minority male initiatives on campus. Here they had examples of upperclassmen who served as positive role models, encouraged them to seek leadership opportunities and provide positive reinforcement, which in turn boosted their confidence to tackle racial microaggressions head on.

The narrative around campus racial climate issues must shift the burden of addressing these areas of concern from students to the institution (Harper, 2014). Black male students are taught to survive to stereotype and ignore racially motivated comments by working hard to achieve academically to dispel the stereotypes, however; institutions must examine their practices to ensure they are properly aligned to create a supportive learning environment, where
campus racial climate is not a source of contention. Faculty must be trained to recognize how
they perpetuate racial stereotyping in class and how it negatively impacts the learning
environment, especially for Black men (Harper, 2014). Furthermore, addressing campus racial
climate issues should not be done in silos, but should be the focus of the institution. Harper
(2014) asserts that identifying and resolving the issues impacting Black male achievement should
not be limited to Student Affairs and campus community center personnel, but should be a
collaborative effort. The faculty-student relationship is a key factor in the retention and success
of Black men in higher education, therefore faculty must embrace their role and work to engage
these students. Another coping or adjustment strategy that Black men use in the transition to
college is forming peer groups or subcultures as a means of support.

**Subculture**

As noted previously, the transition from high school to college comes with many
obstacles for Black male students, especially those attending PWIs (Brooks, Jones & Burt, 2013;
Brooms & Davis, 2017; Gibson, 2014; Wood, 2014). In response to segregation and feelings of
isolation Black men experience, they form peer groups and subcultures for social and academic
supports (Brooms & Davis, 2017). The peer groups serve as communal support for other Black
students who have the same or similar experiences on campus. These groups and subcultures
help Black students carve out their identity on campus as well as serve as a mechanism for peer
bonding. For Black male students, their sense of belonging on college campuses is related to
their relationships with other Black students, so forming subcultures gives them a safe space on
campus (Brooks & Davis, 2017; Brooms, 2018).
Research on College Preparation Programs

The Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) was signed into law on November 8, 1965, by President Lyndon B. Johnson to provide financial support for low and middle-class individuals to gain access to higher education to acquire the skills to be able to solve major problems in the country (McCants, 2003). The HEA was brought about as a result of the Truman Commission’s report in 1947 encouraging the federal government to take a stance on improving access to higher education by leveling the playing field for all students (Gilbert & Heller, 2016). In addition to providing financial support for students, HEA also called for funding to provide colleges with resources to improve access for underrepresented student populations (Gilbert & Heller, 2016). Programs such as Upward Bound, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), collectively known as TRIO programs, were created to increase enrollment of underrepresented student populations and are funded through the HEA (Sondergeld, Fischer, Samel, & Knaggs, 2013). Increasing the number of underrepresented students who earn a college degree is important to society because college graduates tend to have a higher quality of life: potential earned income, access to health care, and other employer benefits compared to non-college graduates (Sondergeld et al., 2013). College preparation programs have played a significant role in increasing the number of underrepresented students on college campuses.

Research on College Preparation Programs and Support During the Transition

Baber’s (2014) qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences of Black men who transitioned to college that participated in a college preparation program in high school. Specifically, Baber (2014) sought to understand "What are the challenges facing African American males with postsecondary aspirations?" and "What sources of support are most
valuable as African American males make decisions about postsecondary attendance?” (p. 1098). The study consisted of 17 college participants from various community colleges and found that in order to successfully transition to college, African American men need multiple forms of support (Baber, 2014). Consistent with Carter, Locks & Winkle-Wagner, 2013 and Rendon (1994), Baber (2014) found that validation from friends, family, and teachers at an early age was important to build the confidence in African American men that could be successful in college. Participants noted that participating in a college preparation program helped them navigate accessing college. For instance, some students expressed concerns that they were not academically prepared for college and felt this would be an obstacle for them. To address these concerns the preparation program offered students developmental courses in high school to help them prepare for the academic rigor of college learning. The college and career readiness program also prepared students for the social transition to college by placing them on college campuses. As a result of participating in the program, students were able to successfully navigate the college system.

**Summer Bridge**

Summer bridge programs are intensive residential programs designed to prepare incoming freshmen for the academic and social transition to college life through a combination of course work and intentional social activities (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, Dixon, 2015; Sablan, 2014). Effective summer bridge programs are structured and comprehensive, exposing students to campus support resources and academic rigor through college courses taken for credit. Slade et al. (2015) argue that balance is important to make sure students are able to fully benefit from such programs. The summer bridge program at North Carolina A and T State University learned that rather than filling student’s schedules with
workshops and seminars geared towards soft skill development, they needed to scale back on the number of offerings to allow students the opportunity to put soft skills to use. This manifested itself through students attending faculty office hours, forming study groups, and discussing class material in their downtime (Slade et al. 2015).

Bir and Myrick’s (2015) study of a single HBCU’s summer bridge program, explores the impacts of summer bridge on student success by comparing the outcomes of Black male and female students. The results showed that summer bridge was effective in increasing GPAs, retention, and graduation rates for students overall. The program utilized intrusive academic and social supports to aid students with the academic and social transition from high school to college. The authors concluded that Black female students showed the highest gains across all areas and noted there are numerous factors impacting Black male success. Bir and Myrick (2015) contend that Black men often lack a sense of belonging at institutions and see the success of other Black men who didn’t pursue higher education, therefore it is difficult to shift their perception on sticking it out through the first year. Despite institutional and external factors that influence Black male persistence, those who attend summer bridge programs have higher retention rates than those who do not (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

Although summer bridge programs claim success in first year retention, GPA, and graduation rates (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, Dixon, 2015), Sablan (2014) argues there is a lack of consistency in program scope and structure across institutions to determine the overall effectiveness of summer bridge programs. Summer bridge programs are omnipresent in higher education, however; each program operates under a different framework to best suit the needs of the incoming student population and the university. For example, program participation varies by the academic institution based on the mission of the program. Students are
selected to attend summer bridge based on a variety of factors: first-generation, being a part of an underrepresented group, low income, low incoming GPA, and declared major (Sablan, 2014). Some students are mandated to attend summer bridge programs while others are not. Typically, students who have low incoming GPAs or who are on the cusp of meeting admissions criteria are required to successfully complete a summer bridge program—pass all college courses with a grade of C or higher—to enroll for the fall term.

Sablan (2014) further suggests differences in funding models, curriculum, and program administration make it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs and document best practices. Funding for summer bridge programs comes from institutional funds, federal and state funds, as well as foundations and grants (Sablan, 2014), which leads to inconsistency in how program scope and limits the number of students the program is able to support. Slade, Eatmon, Staley, and Dixon (2015) examined the summer bridge program at North Carolina A and T State University and concluded that students who participate in the summer bridge program have higher retention rates, engagement with the university, and take on student leadership roles in higher numbers when compared with other students who did not attend summer bridge. While the outcomes of the program are promising, the program is limited in the number of students it can service due to limited funding. With that, the university is looking at how it can replicate some components of the summer bridge program in the larger set to expand its reach. Furthermore, it is important to document the effectiveness of summer bridge programs, as they are often the first budgets impacted during times of financial hardship (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013).
Review of Methodological Issues

Majority of the studies aimed at documenting the effectiveness and outcomes of college student’s experiences are quantitative, thus research participants are limited in the type and quality of feedback they are able to provide researchers. Qualitative studies are useful to capture holistic responses for reasons why student depart college early (Harper, 2016). Quantitative methods studies limit the responses of participants and do not allow participants an opportunity to qualify their responses to give insight into their first-year college experience. DeAngelo’s (2014) qualitative national study yielded surprising feedback that service learning and learning communities did not positively impact student retention. The survey data for this study was qualitative, leaving out why these efforts were not effective in retaining student from the first to second year. This finding was especially surprising since there has been increased attention on active learning and getting students engaged in campus life. Quantitative studies provide feedback on what happened and qualitative studies explain why, when, and where an event occurred but leaves out the supporting narrative.

Studies on Black male achievement are often single-institution studies, which makes it difficult to apply the findings in the larger scope of higher education (Harper, 2015; Harper & Newman, 2016). Harper (2015, 2016) urges researchers to conduct more national studies with various types of institutions: public, private, and parochial to paint a better well-rounded narrative on factors that influence Black male achievement. Bir and Myrick (2015) also suggest more studies multi-institutional studies across HBCUs to identify the best retention and student success practices for Black men.
Synthesis of Findings

Black male students are capable of college degree attainment with the proper institutional and familial support systems in place (Harper, 2014; Wood, 2014). Unlike their counterparts of other racial identities, Black men in higher education must contend with the adjusting to the academic rigor of college as well as the social transition (Harper, 2015; Harper, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2015). While all students experience these transitions, they are more complicated for Black men as they have to contend with racial stereotyping and other issues that others do not have to endure. The mass incarceration of African American men has had a profound impact on African American communities. Roberts (2004) and Western and Wildeman (2009) argue that the 1990s War on Drugs greatly contributed to the growing number of African American men in prison systems. The War on Drugs ushered in aggressive policing in African American communities and when coupled with harsh mandatory sentencing guidelines for drug-related crimes the incarceration rates for Black men swelled (Roberts, 2004; Western & Wildeman, 2009). The impacts of incarceration are felt within individual families as well as the communities in which these men reside prior to incarceration. Mass incarceration hinders the social capital as "Social capital flourishes most in broad networks that include ‘weak ties’ that enable people to interact with numerous other networks in simple ways" (Roberts, 2004). Realizing that there are external factors that institutions are not able to control there are steps colleges can take to make the transition from high school to college easier for Black men.

Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1990) states that students are more likely to depart college during the first year if they are not engaged academically and socially on campus. In complement to Tinto’s (1990) approach, the Theory of Validation (Rendon, 1994) suggests that students should be validated and encouraged to achieve their academic and interpersonal goals.
Rendon’s (1994) Theory of Validation is utilized to some capacity at HBCUs through othermothering and strong faculty-student mentor relationships (Flowers III et al., 2015). Frequent and quality faculty-student interactions outside of the classroom support Black male retention (Brooms, 2015; Brooms & Davis, 2017).

While there is a breadth of information on First Year Experience programs and how students benefit from them, little is known about how Black male students benefit from these programs. Aside from the research on summer bridge programs, there is a gap in what is known about other FYEs and if Black men benefit from them. Summer bridge is the introduction to the campus community through intrusive advising, introduction to campus resources, and college coursework. Structured freshmen seminars also help students acquire transferrable soft skills that they are able to carry with them beyond their college career, but what does this look like for Black men? FYEs are essential to student success and researchers must investigate the impacts on retention and persistence, specifically for Black men. The current body of literature on FYEs focuses on students in general but does not separate the data to show the effectiveness of Black male retention and persistence. Investigating the impacts on Black men will help further explain and close the achievement gaps between Black men and women.

Critique of Previous Research

The previous research on the Black male transition to higher education is limited in scope. Harper and Newman’s (2016) study presents a very limited student perspective on the transition experiences of Black men, as the criteria for participation was very limited and strict. The data presented in this article focused only on Black male students with a GPA of 3.0 or higher, who graduated college, and were socially engaged on their campuses. This limits the perspective presented to the reader as it does not include the experiences of Black male students
who graduated and were socially active on campus, but may not have been popular among the administrators who nominated students for the study. Although the study only considers the perspective of a limited number of students the strength lies in the fact that it shares the experiences of students who had a rough transition to college and how they turned their experience around and those who transitioned with no problems. This helps the reader to make generalizations about both groups’ experiences and identifies best practices that can be applied across a broad range of colleges. The arguments are well supported with perspectives from the group of students who had a smooth transition to college in comparison to who struggled to adjust, allowing the reader to get a balanced perspective on the transition.

Previous research also dictates the need for structure when creating first year experience programs, summer bridge transition programs, mentorship programs and Black Male Initiative programs (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Harper & Newman, 2016). The findings of previous studies show that Black male students benefit from having structured mentor relationships with faculty. Flowers III, Scott, Riley and Palmer’s (2015) and Harper’s (2016) studies found that Black men benefit from having mentor relationships with Black faculty. Brooms and Davis’ (2015) study presents a strong argument for the need to increase the number of Black faculty on campus. Black males have a lot to contend with upon entry to college - the academic and social transition - along with racist stereotypes makes the transition difficult for some. The presence of Black faculty members helps to ease this transition and gives students a safe place to share their experiences, making them feel supported. Gibson’s (2014) study presents a strong argument for the importance of schools establishing structured mentoring programs. Gibson (2014) takes care to note the differences between structured programs versus unstructured programs and why
institutions should invest in them. Structured mentoring programs are vital to assisting Black male students with the academic and social adjustment to college.

In short, the research establishes the need for Black men to have a strong sense of belonging on campus to improve retention rates. Bir and Myrick (2015) make a solid argument for the need for early intervention programs to help underprepared students foster a sense of belonging to the college. In line with Tinto’s model of student departure, colleges and universities know that students must establish an academic and social connection to the university at the very beginning of the academic journey, thus the importance of the summer bridge programs. Similar to Strayhorn (2013) and Rendon (1994) Bir and Myrick (2015) found that students from underrepresented populations benefit from receiving encouragement from faculty and staff. This student population specifically feeds off support and thrives when they have examples of role models in the college environment. For Black men, personal development is just as important as academic development to the college experience.

Summary

The current body of literature suggests there are programs and initiatives which support Black male retention and ultimately graduation. Increasing Black male graduation rates will take collaborative effort across key departments on campus as well as an institutional commitment to the effort (Harper, 2015). The goal of higher education is to create well-rounded citizens who are able to apply what they learn to solve real-world problems (Sutton, 2016). If this is to occur, institutions must examine how programs and campus resources can achieve this goal of developing a diverse workforce who are capable of solving problems. In sum, investigating the impacts of first-year experience programs on Black male achievement will help close the achievement gap between Black men and White men as well as Black men and Black women.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences of African American men who participated in a youth development program and how it prepared them for college. The organization in this study provides participants with a 15-month immersive STEM program where students learn mobile phone and computer software development and take courses on topics such as leadership, life skills, and entrepreneurship. Each year the program accepts a cohort of approximately 25 students who attend local high schools in grades 9 through 11. Participants begin the program with a summer intensive program followed by programming throughout the school year that reinforces what participants learned during the summer. During the summer intensive program students take courses related to computer and software development, writing computer codes, leadership, college preparation courses and attend weekly field trips to tech companies. The college preparation courses vary in content and are specific to the grade levels of the students. The program space is intentionally designed to resemble that of a startup company with comfortable furniture, video games, and a sound system that plays a variety of music that appeals to the youth. The space promotes collaboration, scholarship, and examples of positive relationships among African American men all while providing a safe space for students to connect with program staff to form organic mentor relationships and receive homework assistance. The program is designed to keep program alumni connected with the organization by inviting them to teach individual workshops and the summer immersive program. Chapter 3 will discuss the study design, research question, description of the data set and how the data set will be analyzed.
Research Question

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of African American men who participated in a youth development program while attending high school. This study was guided by the following research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college?

Purpose and Design of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of African American male students who participated in a youth development program and how it prepared them for college. This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze stories from African American men who participated in a youth development program to understand how their participation in the program prepared them for college. A qualitative descriptive research design focuses on providing “a clear description of a specific phenomenon or experience from the perspective” of the experiencing party (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009, p. 299). Further, this method allowed the researcher to identify significant themes and meanings that emerged from the data.

The information collected from the study gave insight into the academic and personal development experiences of African American men who participated in a youth development program who are college bound or are currently attending college. Study participants currently attend a variety of colleges: community colleges, HBCUs, and PWIs each offering a different perspective on their college preparation experience. College bound study participants also attend a variety of schools in Northern California: public, public charter, and private schools each offering a different perspective on the college preparation process. This study is intended to contribute to the body of literature on youth development programs and their impact on college preparation and personal development for African American male students.
Research Population and Sampling Method

The sample \((n = 13)\) for this study consists of African American male alumni and stakeholders from a non-profit organization based in Northern California. The non-profit organization is dedicated to providing young African American males with academic skills and immersive experiences in preparation for careers in technology and other STEM-related fields. Youth become involved in the organization through word of mouth as the program does not advertise due to its limited capacity. The organization does not have an academic requirement for acceptance; however, if accepted participants are expected to fully commit to the 15-month immersive program. The program boasts a 98% retention rate with approximately 110 alumni of which 95% are currently attending college. Data for this study was collected in 2019.

Instrumentation

Data for this study was collected through semistructured interviews by the principal researcher. Peters (2015) notes that semistructured interviews “can produce powerful data that provide insights into the participant’s experiences, perceptions or opinions” (p. 6). Both program alumni and stakeholders participated one round of semistructured interviews to gain insight into their experiences with the program overall and how the program prepared students for college.

Data Collection

The data analyzed in this study was collected as part of a commissioned research project by the non-profit organization to inform program development and activity. The original research focused on collecting data to assist the program with developing a formal alumni program for participants after completion of the 15-month immersive program. Currently, the organization does not have a formal avenue for maintaining relationships with program alumni, so the goal of the alumni program would be to continue providing support and resources to students regardless
of whether they pursue higher education or entrepreneurship after high school. The principal researcher conducted semistructured interviews with each of the study participants lasting an average of 30 to 60 minutes. The study participants consisted of a combination of program alumni as well internal and external program stakeholders. The researcher used audio recordings to transcribe the interview for analysis in this study. This dissertation reflects a secondary analysis of stakeholder interview transcripts, focusing on questions and responses that specifically relate to college preparation and personal development.

**Identification of Attributes**

The attributes of this study were non-traditional students, universities initiating contact with students, student’s developing a better sense of self, engaging in campus life, validating students beyond the classroom, validating students on an ongoing basis, and the importance of validation to the first year of college. Each of the attributes listed below positively contribute to creating an inclusive campus environment for African American male students attending college.

**Nontraditional students.** A nontraditional student is defined as any student of color who enters higher education and require additional support and resources to persist to graduation (Carter, Locks & Winkle-Wagner, 2013; Rendon, 1994). African American males are considered nontraditional students among other groups.

**Initiating contact with students.** Rendon (1994) encourages universities to take the lead on reaching out to students to offer academic resources and co-curricular programming, especially during the first year of college when students are most likely to attrit.

**Developing a better sense of self.** Students who receive academic and personal validation develop a better sense of self while in college (Rendon, 1994).
**Engaging in campus life.** Student should be validated for who they are as individuals and what they bring to campus life (Rendon, 1994). Tinto (1993) also suggests that students who are actively involved in campus life are more likely to persist to graduation.

**Validation beyond the classroom.** Students should receive validation inside and outside of the classroom while in college (Rendon, 1994). Validation may come from mentors, family, friends, faculty, and school staff (Zhang & Ozuna, 2015).

**Ongoing validation.** Students should receive validation on an ongoing basis from various agents to set students up for academic success (Rendon, 1994).

**Validation is important to first year retention.** The first year college experience is critical for nontraditional students, as it will help students with the transition to college life. African American males have a unique transition experience than their peers, so receiving validation during the first year of college will assist them with the academic and social transition to the college environment.

**Data Analysis**

All interview transcripts were organized and coded using NVivo software. NVivo allowed the researcher to upload audio files for transcription, editing, and analysis. The software cites the ease of use with a 90% transcription accuracy and allows the researcher to organize data by theme for analysis (NVivo, n.d.). The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts to construct a synthesis of the material to create a narrative of the findings.

**Limitations of the Research Design**

The first limitation of this study is the focus on the college preparation and personal development of African American males who participated in a specific youth development program, which makes generalizing the findings difficult. Second, the size of the sample
population is small due to the age of the non-profit organization. Third, the researcher only analyzed data from program alumni who attended college immediately after high school or those who are college bound and will not capture the experiences of students who opted to attend college at a later time. Lastly, since the researcher is conducting a secondary analysis of interview transcripts there is no opportunity to ask study participants follow up questions to clarify responses.

**Validation**

The goal of this study is to provide reliable information about the study through the use of an existing data set. Heaton (2004) explains, “Secondary analysis is best known as a methodology for doing research using pre-existing statistical data” (p. 16) for the purpose of exploring new ideas and themes that can emerge from the data. This data set for this study was acquired through informal data sharing. Informal data sharing occurs when “researchers share their data with other researchers” (Heaton, 1998, p. 509) directly. In reviewing the data for the original project, one research question arose related to the student’s experience in the program that was not explored, resulting the in the research question for this study.

**Credibility**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the data set provided by the principal researcher to conduct a supplementary analysis of the data set. Supplementary analysis in using archived qualitative data, consists of doing an “in depth analysis of an issue, or aspect of the data, that was not addressed or partly covered in the original research” (Heaton, 1998 p. 510). Utilizing archived data allowed the researcher to explore emerging topics that were not considered in the principal researcher’s study. Further, archived qualitative data can be used for
the purpose of research to provide rich thick descriptions of an experience (Corti & Thompson, 2004 as cited in Heaton, 2008).

To ensure credibility of this study data triangulation was conducted. Data triangulation was achieved by reviewing the audio files and interview transcripts from each stakeholder group and identifying consistent themes across all three groups. Guion (2002) explains that “The weight of evidence suggests that if every stakeholder, who is looking at the issue from different points of view, sees an outcome then it is more than likely to be a true outcome” (p. 1). Incorporating the viewpoint of each stakeholder group was helpful identifying key themes and supporting the findings of this study.

**Dependability**

The findings of this study are specific to the program’s alumni, internal and external stakeholder groups who participated in the original study, thus the findings cannot be generalized. Due to the small sample size and specificity of the original study, the findings cannot be generalized to fit all youth development organizations. Instead, Tong and Dew (2016) suggest that findings of the study may be applicable to similar organizations. Tong and Dew (2016) offer insight on transferability of results stating that, “transferability is the extent to which the concepts and theories are relevant to other settings” (p. 711). By providing rich, thick descriptions of the stakeholder’s responses, description of the program and description of the sample population, the researcher allows the reader to interpret the findings of the study based on their own interpretation and context.

**Expected Findings**

Findings from this study are expected to indicate that students who participated in the youth development program will not experience academic difficulties during college; however,
they may experience some challenges adjusting to their new environment of college. Strayhorn (2015) notes that students who had formal experiences—mentoring, internships, hands-on classes—were more prepared and confident as they transitioned to college. Findings from this study will help higher education professionals and policymakers better understand the experiences of African American male’s transition from high school to college to inform program and policy development. This chapter provides an overview of the methodology, research design, population, instrumentation, validity, assumptions, and limitations of the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest associated with this study. The researcher has no affiliation with the non-profit organization, study participants, or the universities the students currently attend which reduced the opportunity for researcher bias.

Researcher’s Position

The primary researcher informed participants of the purpose of the study, intentions for the use of information collected, obtain their consent to participate in the study, and reminded them that participation in the study is voluntary (Hatch, 2002). To protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants the researcher used pseudonyms when referring to student’s names, cities, name of companies, names of programs, names of organizations and the institutions they currently attend.

Ethical Assurances

The data collected for this study complied with federal regulations for conducting research with human subjects and ensured the privacy of all participants. Each participant signed informed consent prior to participating in the study, which is on file with the non-profit organization.
Summary

In summary, this study examined a data set from the organization’s recent program development research project. Chapter 3 outlined the study’s research design, data analysis procedures, and measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data to understand the experiences of African American men who participated in a youth development program during high school. Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the interview transcripts.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis & Results

This chapter provides an overview of the study, a description of the sample, the research methodology and analysis used to analyze the data, a summary of the findings, a presentation of the data and results, and concludes with a summary of the chapter. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American males who participated in a youth development program and how their experiences prepared them for college. The primary objective of the study was to answer the research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college?

The data for this study was collected in 2019 as part of a commissioned research project to inform future program development for the organization. The researcher conducted a secondary analysis of the interview transcripts and questionnaires to generate themes that emerged from the data. The role of the researcher involved identifying how participation in the program prepared students for college.

The declining African American male enrollment and persistence rates in higher education are alarming. As the numbers continue to decline universities and college preparation programs must examine what programs and services will assist in increasing enrollment and graduation rates for African American males. The researcher’s interest in the study stems from her interest in college preparation and first year college experience programs as a means of improving African American male achievement in higher education.

Description of the Sample

The sample for this study consists of program alumni and organization stakeholders. The program alumni consist of six students who are attending college or are college bound in the near future. The alumni range in age from the mid-teens to early twenties and are scattered
geographically throughout the United States. The program alumni attending colleges represent various types of colleges as some are attending community colleges, HBCUs, or PWIs. Organization stakeholders in this study consist of seven stakeholders who are employed by the organization, formerly employed by the organization, have a son or grandson who is an alum, have an existing community partnership with the organization or are volunteering with the organization to advance its goals. The study also incorporated data from seven organization stakeholders as they offered a unique perspective on the success of the program and how participation in the program impacted students. In order to protect the identify of participants, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Table 2

*Alumni Pseudonyms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alum 1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alum 2</td>
<td>Derrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alum 3</td>
<td>Kendrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alum 4</td>
<td>Liam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alum 5</td>
<td>Eric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alum 6</td>
<td>Richard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Stakeholder Pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder 1</td>
<td>Christine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder 2</td>
<td>Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder 3</td>
<td>Lauren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder 4</td>
<td>Lance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stakeholder 6</td>
<td>Larry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder 7</td>
<td>Mary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Methodology and Analysis

To understand how participation in the youth development program prepared students for college, this study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design of the alumni and stakeholder interview transcripts. The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis as this method allowed the researcher to “to identify and interpret key, but not necessarily all, features of the data guided by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297).

Upon receipt of the redacted interview transcripts and audio files from the organization each transcript was reviewed and initial coding began. Each audio file was played while reading along with the interview transcript to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions for manual coding. Once all of the interviews were manually coded and reviewed for accuracy they were uploaded into NVivo Qualitative Analysis software for formal coding and to identify themes across the data. See Figure 2 for the coding and theme identification process.
Figure 2. Coding process.

Summary of the Findings

This study addressed the research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American men for college. The data for this study was collected using semistructured interviews with program alumni as well as internal stakeholders for the program, family members of program alumni and community partners. Program alumni answered 6 questions related to their experience in the program prepared them for college. Internal and external program stakeholders replied to 4 questions centered around the program’s effectiveness and how it prepares participants for college.

The sentiment amongst program alumni was that participation in the program was life changing for them in a number of ways. While in the program they learned technical skills on
developing software applications and were exposed to different jobs within the technology world through immersive field trips and internships. In each of the interviews, the alumni shared the value of being able to take field trips to technology companies to learn various aspects of working in the technology field, the need for diversity in the field, and the value of having access to high profile individuals within the field. Many students shared how participation in the program helped them determine a career path and set them up for success.

Program alumni and stakeholders alike shared the impact of the soft skills development and the importance of soft skills. The soft skill development came in the form of students practicing pitching their business ideas to investors, leadership skill development through teaching and community work, giving speeches, and delivering an elevator pitch among other things. The soft skills that the students developed in the program proved useful to students when tasked with presenting in the classroom settings and at internship sites. Furthermore, the program helped boost student’s confidence and acquire skills that are transferable to the technology field and their personal lives.

Although most students entered the program expecting to gain technical skills, the most impactful component of the program is the mentorship component. In fact, program alumni expressed feelings of appreciation to the program staff for helping them manage difficult school and family life situations that arose during their time in the program. Many of the alumni shared personal examples of how the program staff worked to create a supportive environment that fostered collectivism, brotherhood, and comradery amongst them. Likewise, stakeholders expressed similar thoughts, attributing the program’s all African American male staff and the individual relationships they built with students, as key factors to the overall success of the
As a result, 6 themes emerged from the data in support of the research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college?

**Presentation of the Data and Results**

A qualitative descriptive research design was selected to understand how participation in the youth development program prepared students for college. The principal researcher used a semi structured interview method with program alumni and stakeholders to gain insight into the program and its success. Program alumni were asked the following questions:

- **Q1.** How did you first learn about the program?
- **Q2.** What did you think you would get out of the program when you first started?
- **Q3.** How has your thinking about the future changed since being in the program?
- **Q4.** Are you the first in your family to attend college?
- **Q5.** Tell me about a time when the program was most helpful to you.
- **Q6.** What are some of the things that you wished they could help you or alum with?

Program stakeholders were asked the following questions:

- **Q1.** How did you first learn about the organization?
- **Q2.** What are the strengths of the organization?
- **Q3.** What would you like to see the program do to advance its mission?
- **Q4.** What do you think will be the greatest need for alumni over time?

The interviews for program alumni and stakeholders were conducted via conference call and recorded for reference. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts and the following six themes emerged: Importance of Networking and Building Relationships; Soft Skill Development; Opportunities; College Preparation; Mentorship and Brotherhood; and Entrepreneurship.
The results of the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts are presented in the narratives of the participant’s interviews. To protect the identity of participants all names, cities, program and organization names were changed. The transcripts are presented as transcribed and were not corrected for grammar.

**Theme 1: Importance of Networking and Building Relationships**

Program alumni across the board shared that being in the program taught them the importance of building relationships and networking to their success. Students were constantly encouraged to network with people at technology companies during field trips. In speaking to how the organization secures funding for its work, the executive director underscored the importance of relationship building, which program leadership pass on to students. Bryce shared:

I mean there’s grant writing, but to be really, you know, get funding to really connect with foundations, what have you, it’s still a people driven piece. It’s still relationship piece. You know, even though we’d love to be at about for it to be about the pros and sometimes even the data, it’s really still about, um, you know, folks trusting, trusting that you can, uh, you know, get the job done.

One alum echoed the importance of networking and how it helped him secure a coveted internship at a national recognized medical organization.

From the stakeholder perspective, it is very clear that program leadership are very well connected and use their connections to advance their work. Bryce shared that the networking piece is critical to the success of its students and the program itself:

That’s what makes this program the most, you know, dangerous, so to speak is the, the, the network piece. Then being able to learn from each other and be together. Um, and, and then, then you, you know, you’re trying to give them a safe space and opportunity.
For Bryce making connections and collaborating with others in the community is the basis for serving the needs of the organization’s students and meeting the needs of the other entity as well. Collaboration is viewed as a two-way street: both organizations meeting their goals by sharing resources to empower Black male youth.

Additionally, the program helped students in college by putting them in contact with other organizations based on their academic interests as a means of getting involved in campus life. Program alumni discussed after they completed the immersive program, program staffed referred them to other programs on or around their campuses for them to continue developing their technical and soft skills. While participating in the other programs expanded their networks and gained more skills.

**Theme 2: Soft Skill Development**

Program alumni and stakeholders alike shared sentiments of how the program helped students to develop soft and personal skills that will continue to prove useful for them in many aspects of their lives. The soft skills took on the form of leadership skills, public speaking, teaching and learning how to articulate their passion to others and developing confidence. Donovan recalled how being a youth educator helped strengthen his presentation skills. Donovan shared:

I had to learn how to present code and try to teach classes—computer science classes—to 20 kids at a time and that really helped my presentation skills and organize my thoughts more to make more sense because the topics I teach—aren’t really easy topics to teach and learn so it really helped me with things of that nature.

Along with Donovan, Richard—another alum—shared that being in the program helped develop his public speaking skills that they carried into the college learning environment. The
organization has connections with various entities in Northern California and will often invite students to attend events. Richard discussed his experience with having to prepare and deliver a speech in front of city officials with little notice and how it challenged him. Richard stated:

Bryce told me to write down a speech and he told me like an hour before we got there and they gave me experience with speaking in public in front of the mayor of City 7 and all these judges and lawyers people who are like upper echelon of our society and I met a lot of people and made a lot of connections talking to the head lawyer of a ride sharing company and that was an example of when it really showed me how important connections are and how what’s your comfortable talking to somebody it can grow the person.

One of the goals of the program is to promote and support student’s personal growth and development by offering leadership opportunities. The program strengthens student’s leadership skills by allowing them to teach in community settings and inviting them back into the immersive program youth instructors for the newest cohort. Eric shared his experience as a youth instructor for the organization and how it afforded him an opportunity to teach and be hands on. Eric discussed:

First thing is that usually during the summer I do a Coding Event. I got to teach a class in HTML along with another alumni of the Organization and basically that was pretty cool because I was like it got me to be more hands-on with kids that were there because their parents brought them but it was like teaching them HTML.

The program not only embraces its alumni by allowing them to participate as youth instructors for new students, but also involves them in community service. The sense of connection the alumni feel and the need to give back to the community is strong. Kendrick, an
alumni attending college, shared that he currently teaches courses to children at Northern California and how rewarding of an experience it is for him to give back to the community. According to Kendrick:

Well, the big part is that we get to give back all the information that Organization gave to use and reciprocity and keeping things going in a good direction. Being a part of that gives me a really good feeling you know and also Working with kids, you know, kids are fun and you know how kids be. For the most part it is a rewarding experience, I enjoy it, and I appreciate it.

In the same vein, Liam shared that his experience as a youth instructor teaching coding to younger students was a transformative experience for him. Liam elaborated:

I think the biggest thing that I took away from that was that no matter who I met even if there were kind of disruptive to the class or even if they weren’t interested whenever one of my students says something they had this kind of spark to them the certain enthusiasm to what they were thinking of and what they were saying. Even if they weren’t interested in the class they had to send me her to them that shows you that they were ready to do something great or how smart—that was the eighth graders. But when I went to teach the preschoolers and the fourth graders they were insanely smart and solving problems without me even teaching them what to do and it made me really excited to see that the next generation of programmers is here and they’re ready to take on the world.

Here, program alumni directly share how their lived experiences equipped them with soft skills that helped them to grow and become confident.

Organization stakeholders agree that the program does an excellent job of equipping students with soft skills and transformative experiences that result in personal growth. When
Christine, whose son is a student in the program, was asked how she would like to see the program advance its mission; she suggested the organization open a school to afford more students an opportunity to experience the same type of learning and personal growth she has noticed with her son. Christine discussed the importance of role models for young Black men and leading by example:

After getting to know these gentlemen for all these years, I would say if you could duplicate them and put them in a school itself, it would be an amazing experience for a lot young Black men to have. It’s so hard to explain who they are and how much they have changed and help supported, not only my son’s education, but his mental growth and his ability to see Black men succeeding and giving back at the same time. Especially with elders who believe in the next generation, have been through the public education system, been through the foster care system understand that there are different ways to connect with you Black men. Bryce’s tag line is “To see the Organization within you” and that’s exactly what they do.

Similarly, Mary, who has a community partnership with the organization shared her thoughts on the program and how they create opportunities allowing students to learn and grow and see the world beyond themselves:

Yeah, I think that they are just—I mean an amazing group of men [the program staff] who are dedicated to our youth who are so much need of this kind of—not just yeah we are supporting you, yeah we are talking you out, but we are teaching you skills on how to improve your life and not only that, but how you bring it back to the community. This is like, I love it, I completely love what they are doing. I really do.
In conclusion, the organization’s alum and stakeholders both agree that the organization does an excellent job of providing experiences and opportunities for students to develop soft skills that they can use in various aspects of their lives. The work of the organization has a profound impact on the youth and their development. Further, while students are in the program they develop the confidence to tackle challenges they may encounter while in college. Through the immersive experiences students not only gain confidence but develop a sense of self advocacy to reach out and ask for assistance when needed.

**Theme 3: Opportunities**

Each of the program alumni shared their experiences of visiting different technology companies, obtaining competitive internships with notable organizations, having access to high ranking executives from technology companies and the ability to learn different aspects of working in the field. In reflecting on the weekly field trips, Donovan discussed how it felt to visit different companies and how he realized that he experienced things his friends were not able to:

> It’s amazing the opportunities that I’ve had and the experiences that I’ve had it’s really lucrative and it’s a good experience for me I tell my friends all the time I’ve been to Tech Company 1 I’ve been to Tech Company 4 and they’re all like jealous they’re like it’s cool that I get to do all these types of things.

Participating in the program helped alumni highly sought after secure internships with leading companies and determine their career path. When asked how the program prepared him for an internship, Derrick replied:

> And I would say now after the program I feel like it prepared me for a lot of things in my internship and just in college is as far as because while we were in the program we would
take trips and do tours into the different tech companies, so I feel I was well prepared for the internships that I’ve taken.

In a similar fashion, Kendrick reflected that being in the program helped him determine his career path quicker than others because of the exposure and experiences he had during and after the program.

Additionally, students expressed concerns about the lack of diversity in technology and the desire to see more people who look like them in the field. Derrick shared how being involved in the program opened his eyes to a career in the field of technology and the possibilities for himself and his friends:

Umm, I would say really just as far as making more change or more diversity inside the technology sector because when I participated in internships that I have had, you don’t see a lot of people of color within these tech companies, so I feel like that really changed my mindset about trying to get more people—whether it be my friends or just people of color and general more involved in technology or offering them something that interests them or giving them an opportunity business route that they can take. Because before the Organization—I mean just me growing up with the different influences I didn’t really—I didn’t really see technology as an option it was more of things I would see on TV whether it be sports or music or something of that nature.

Derrick’s example speaks to the organization’s desire to give students exposure and career and networking opportunities so they are able to create the lives they wish to lead.

Throughout its existence, the program has established a solid reputation in the technology industry and students realize the influence of the organization. When the program was initially founded, all of the men who worked with the youth did so in a volunteer capacity, which the
program founders deemed to be unsustainable for their vision to grow the program and opportunities it provided to participants. At that point the founders made a very conscious decision to provide dedicated time and staff resources to growing the program, the executive director specifically focused on building collaborations and partnerships with other organizations to meet the needs of both programs. He had the foresight that in order for the program to fully serve the needs of students and create access that collaboration, partnership and building relationships within the community would be essential to the long term success of the program and its students. Donovan discussed an experience where the influence of the organization backing an internship candidate resulted in the individual securing the internship placement. Donovan said:

They have tons of connections with tech companies and if they give the good word you are essentially in or get through the door which is good enough. I know my friend who is not a student they provided him with an internship and all he had to do was get his resume in and it was pretty much a done deal at that point. He is currently working at Technology Interactive.

This example shows the commitment of the organization in advancing Black males in technology as a whole by sharing opportunities with other young Black men outside of the organization.

Program leadership keep alumni connected by offering them other opportunities to continue learning and growing in the field of technology and business. Alumni have attended shows and conventions to represent Black men in technology and as well as participated in events on college campuses using their skills to help others. Most notably, Kendrick shared his experience traveling with the program citing an experience where he went to:
Know Your Rights camp with John Smith and we did an activity where we taught college students how to navigate the neighborhood with an app—it wasn’t really [an] app, but a website we made that taught them their police districts—basically to be safer in their neighborhood by knowing their districts and stuff like that.

In addition to creating mobile applications to improve the lives of college students, program alumni also traveled to different cities to teach classes on technology related topics. Further, the program connects alumni with other leadership, technology, and academic programs and experiential opportunities to further their knowledge and skills in the field.

In sum, alumni shared an overwhelming appreciation for the program and the opportunities they have been afforded a result of being in the program. This sentiment is perfectly summed up by Kendrick’s thoughts:

[I can] only summarize it like this—my life has drastically different because I was a part of the Organization. Like it would have been a lot worse if I had not been a part of the Organization. Pretty much—the majority of the opportunities that I’ve gotten, a lot of the good experiences that I’ve had have been because I was a part of the Organization. I really appreciate them for that and I don’t know where I would be without it and I’m happy to see where we go from here, as far as the alumni.

Being a part of the organization provided alumni with valuable experiential learning and opened doors for future career opportunities in the technology industry. As a result of being in the program, alumni are equipped with a combination of hands on and technical learning that is valued in college. Increasingly, universities are incorporating experiential and service learning opportunities to help students make the connection between the classroom and practice, so
program alumni get the first-hand experience at an early age, making them highly qualified interns.

**Theme 4: College Preparation**

The organization prepares students for college in a variety of ways. Alumni attending college expressed how the program prepared them for majors in computer science and related fields through its 15-month immersive program. During the immersive program students take courses related to writing codes, computer programming and application development and learn the business side of the technology sector, which influenced their majors in college. Derrick shared how participation in the program influenced his college major:

> Umm, yeah it had an influence on my major because I started out—I was still interested in business and also wanted to have an option in like dealing with computers and I feel like the major I have now is a happy medium.

Similarly, Richard shared how participating in the program helped him realize how he could pursue his interest in technology and law, without choosing one over the other:

> Well I was never really sure, since I was a child I wanted to be either a lawyer or engineer and so in high school I am a part of the engineering academy at my school so I do a lot of programming a lot of mechanical engineering I do all of it at school as well. At the same time, I like the read court cases and all that and after The Organization I went to visit Tech Company 1 and Tech Company 4 I saw the environment above the law side and the engineering side and The Organization helped me to discover that I wanted to be on the law side. I am going to State University 4 this year for college and I am a business major. The Organization help me decide because I was 50–50 on it.

Participation in the program helped solidify student’s interests and career plans after college.
The organization provided students with hands on exposure in coding and application development, but it also set students up to succeed in their college courses by learning how to be resourceful and access information. Derrick shared:

They taught us just as far as where to get technology news from. I feel like that was important as far as taking these classes and being up-to-date on the news in technology especially as it relates to cyber information security, because you have to always be up-to-date.

Knowing where to get information to stay current on industry trends reduced the learning curve and helped Derrick stay on top of industry trends.

In addition to the academic preparation it provided students, the organization also prepared students for college by identifying a strong community resource to provide students with assistance related to college access. The program developed a partnership with State University 3 Center for Educational Partnership to provide students with college access support in the form of college essay writing support, understanding the different college systems in California, standardized test preparation and financial aid. The curriculum for the summer program is tailored to the needs of students by high school grade level to ensure the information is relevant to where the students are in the college preparation pipeline. Mary, the center’s director, worked with Bryce and other staff in the program to create a curriculum that was not only informative, but interactive to get students engaged in the material. To learn financial skills, the students play a game called Adulting which challenged students to think about budgeting and balance finances through role play. Mary explained:

each student gets this random scenario where they could be like a dental hygienist with 2 kids or could have been a lawyer with no kids, so all of these different scenarios and what
their income is and we had these different stations and they have to go station to station to by car insurance, communication, they had to pay student loans so they went to every station to determine if they should buy a house or rent a house, pay for childcare and at the end they had to see what they had left and if they were in the negative they had to go find another job, you know what I mean? And it’s not online, it was a physical game so they had to walk around and weed through the stuff to figure it out.

As a result of this role play, students gained experience managing competing financial priorities, thus planting the seed for financial literacy skills at an early age.

**Theme 5: Mentorship and Brotherhood**

The Executive Director of the program, Bryce, shed light on the program’s mission by stressing that students are admitted to the program based on their potential and their level of commitment to showing up and putting in the work to learn and grow, rather than focusing on grades and other academic indicators of success. With that, the organization embraces the individual and works very closely with students to mentor and groom them into the budding tech professionals they become during and after the program. Brotherhood and sense of a second family were very common themes in the data. In thinking back to a time when the organization was most helpful to him, Liam recalled a time when he experienced a significant family change and how the organization wrapped around him to support him during this trying time:

My demeanor was really change for a while and I had a lot to think about and throughout the whole time they supported me. They acted like a second family to me they were there for every step of the way offering as much help as a physically could. I will always be thankful for that and it really shows me that they are beyond kind of an educational opportunity they also fostered a familial aspect to it that they are always there for you and
that was one of the greatest times. The other time it was in setting up a lunch for me for the internship. I was nervous at the time because it was very senior year and I was trying to go through a little existential crisis and I was questioning myself and what I would be able to accomplish and throughout that time I’ll be nice to me they were talking to the person I was talking to at Tech Company 3 and setting up lunch for me so I can meet the CEO of the company and they help me to get to where I am right now. Those are two moments that deeply impacted me and just it has made my time there even more memorable.

All of the program staff act as mentors to students in the program. It is important to note that like the students, all of the program staff, are African American men and as such they are able to relate to the students and they are valuable role models to the students. Currently, institutions are seeing an increase in the number of Black Male Initiatives aimed at providing students with mentors to support students in their psychosocial development and the program alumni are able to form these mentor relationships before they begin college. Mentorship is a huge component of the program and alumni and stakeholders both cite program leadership as key to the success of the program.

The program also instills in its students a sense of brotherhood. After the program Eric realized that the program was more than coding and learning technology:

I think, I believe that the technology aspect is a big part of the Organization program and I feel that a really big intangible part that they have is that sense of community that they have within and promote throughout the program because I know my cohort was done with The Organization officially 2 years ago but we still talk—we started a group chat and we are still connected. As well as they make an effort to stick with their alumni they often invite
alumni back to events in to help around the program during the summer. They always try to keep that same group and keep us all together essentially.

Mary, an organization stakeholder, also admired the sense of brotherhood that the organization fosters for its students.

Also, alumni noted that they often consulted with their mentors when they were looking to make life decisions. When Kendrick was in his senior year and was not able to attend a state university due to financial aid issues, he talked through his options with an organization mentor who provided another perspective:

So what happened was I was planning on going straight to a university after high school but a bunch of issues with finances and application fees—it got really stressful and for a minute I felt like the plan was getting derailed and everything but Organization. Actually, like I was talking to one of my mentors about it and they gave me the reassurance that community college was not a bad route. I’ll save a bunch of money and I’ll still get the education I need and that still gives me time to work on my personal projects and not having all of my time go to school and having enough of it going to my good grades. And I also get to build—work on my creative projects and other projects with other students.

Through Kendrick’s close relationship with his mentor he trusted the guidance and reassurance he provided that community college was a viable option for him. The program accepts students from a variety of backgrounds and works diligently to meet students where they are to get them to where they need to be through role modeling, mentorship, fostering a sense of brotherhood and working with students through their challenges. Consequently, the program has been successful in empowering its alumni to be successful.
Theme 6: Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is another vital component of the program and at the beginning of each cohort’s program they are taught how to start a business. Kendrick reflected:

Yeah so one of the key points of the program is entrepreneurship so that is something we definitely focused on. Like from day one they pretty much taught us how to start our own business from scratch. Starting with the elevator pitch, doing {inaudible} sketches, all the way up to doing actual pictures to them and investors and stuff like that and getting real-world practice that some experience with doing that and also building a map and my own website that I had to present and getting experience with that—pretty much all of those experiences have given me the confidence that I can do it in the future once I figure out what I want to do.

The culminating project of the immersive program requires students to develop an application, website, or business and pitch it to a group of potential investors. Some of the alumni expressed an interest in entrepreneurship prior to joining the organization and for some being in the organizations solidified their plans for entrepreneurship in the future. Through this process alumni shared that they become more confident and it prepared them for the future by giving them first-hand exposure to high resource adults and having to be able to articulate their passion.

Program stakeholders also expressed an interest in helping the alumni to further their aspirations of entrepreneurship with the support of the program. Christine noted that the program should create a separate space, dedicated to alumni, where they can work on their business ideas and learn how to monetize their ideas. Michael, who is a Student Coordinator with the organization, shared the same sentiment as Christine: the program and its connections can serve
as a bridge to assist students with achieving their goals. Christine also asserted that in the future this space would be useful for all alum, especially those who opt not to attend college right away or at all. Similarly, other stakeholders urged the organization to continue working with students to motivate those who may not be self-starters to help get their business ideas off the ground.

Summary

This chapter presented the sample population and data analysis results of this study. The goal of the research was to explore the research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college? The researcher used a thematic analysis of archived data to satisfy the research question. The information is this section established how the program provided students with academic and soft skills to be successful in college. Through the firsthand accounts of program alumni and stakeholders, it is evident that mentorship is essential to the success of young Black men in higher education and the program meets this need for all of its students. The relationships that students form with the program staff laid the foundation for them to be successful in the program and beyond. As a result of participating in the program students acquired soft skills: code switching, confidence, leadership and communication skills and personal growth. Furthermore, alumni noted that being in the program was life changing and provided a lot of exposure and opportunities to be in closed circles and gain early exposure to the technology field.

Chapter 5 will present a discussion of the findings of this study and a discussion in its implications. Lastly, the chapter will address the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college? The researcher conducted a secondary analysis of interview transcripts employing thematic analysis to understand how participation in the program prepared program alumni for college. Through thematic analysis the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Importance of Networking and Building Relationships
Theme 2: Soft Skill Development
Theme 3: Opportunities
Theme 4: College Preparation
Theme 5: Mentorship and Brotherhood
Theme 6: Entrepreneurship

Chapter 5 includes a summary of the results, discussion of the results, discussion of the results in relation to the literature, limitations of the study, implications of the results, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion.

Summary of the Results

This study found that the organization was successful in equipping students with the technical and soft skills that they need to be successful in college. This study showed that soft skill development was one of the biggest skills that alumni gained through participation in the program. Numerous alumni noted sentiments of how being in the program changed their lives by providing them with access to the technology field, helping them to acquire and hone their technological skills set, encouraging them to become entrepreneurs, building their confidence, and providing an environment that cultivates and embraces brotherhood. Many of the alumni and
stakeholders shared that the program was life changing for students and exposed them to career paths and hands on learning opportunities that they may not have otherwise been able to experience.

After students completed the 15-month immersive program they applied for internships in information technology departments at well-known companies while they were still in high school. These internships helped students to further their technical and soft skills as they worked alongside adults and learned how to handle being in corporate environments. The organization’s stakeholders believed that the internships the students secured during high school gave the students valuable experience at a young age. The alumni believed the internships helped them better determine which sector of technology they were interested in and helped identify areas gaps in the field that they could fill.

During the interviews several alumni shared that they noticed a lack of diversity in the technology companies and expressed a desire to add to the diversity. One of the ways students sought to add to the diversity in the technology field is by teaching coding and technology courses to younger children in their communities in hopes that it would spawn their interest to keep learning and eventually start a career in the field. Some of the program alumni shared their teaching experiences with different age groups and how impactful it was to pass on knowledge and help the younger generations. This is an ode to the organization’s goal to help students view themselves as part of a larger ecosystem in their community. Additionally, it helped to build a sense of connection to the communities they live in a connectedness that they were only able to gain by being immersed in the community.

In addition to helping participants develop soft skills, the program also provided students with mentors that went above and beyond to assist students in their individual journeys. Program
alumni discussed the importance of the mentor component of the program as it relates to helping them determine their career paths, the program staff being supportive in talking them through their college options, as well as catering the program to meet the needs of its students. The students and stakeholders both agree that this component of the program is what sets it apart from similar youth programs. The program is not based on the academic merits of the students, but rather their potential and how the organization can help students to further develop that potential into something that the students themselves can be proud of. Overall, the program boosted students’ technology skills, confidence to be a trailblazer in the field, and desire to give back to their community through volunteer work.

**Discussion of the Results**

This study was designed to answer the research question: How did participation in a youth development program prepare African American males for college? To address this question a literature review was conducted to understand the African American male transition to college, the support systems in place to support their transition, and the obstacles they may face along the way. Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) served as the theoretical framework for the study to understand the importance of validation to the African American male experience.

Program alumni believed that participation in the program prepared them for college by giving them hands on experience in learning technical skills, which proved useful in their computer science related course work. The former students also strongly believed that being in the program helped solidify their careers paths in the technology, law, and business industries. Through the weekly immersive field trips to major technology companies, students experienced many facets of the booming tech industry. Alumni shared that they learned about other careers in
the technology field outside of the technical jobs related to computer science, but identified other key roles and players in these companies.

Furthermore, involvement in the program prepared students for college in a manner that many did not expect upon entering the program. While in the program students developed soft skills which are transferable to many areas of their lives. The soft skills include public speaking, building participant’s confidence, teamwork and collaboration, and brotherhood. The soft skills are useful for participants as it helped them to become well-rounded young men as they left the program and took on internships and entered college. The notion of brotherhood and collectivism resonated with alumni as many of them went on to teach for the organization’s younger cohorts during the summer, taught computer programming and application development to elementary age children, and participated in community service activities.

External program stakeholders shared the positive impact of students being involved in the program. Some of the stakeholders are parents or grandparents of students who are currently attending the program and some who have students who graduated the program. Overall, the external stakeholders agree that the program sets students up for success after high school by equipping them with both soft and the technical skills needed to excel in the rapidly growing technology field. This group of stakeholders also believe the program prepared students for college by working with them during the summer to create specialized college preparation curriculum for the students.

Internal stakeholders believed participation in the program helped students in a number of ways. The first being that, the program’s strongest component is the mentor piece of the program. The stakeholders shared that this alone is the largest component that distinguished their program from similar programs geared towards African American male youth. It is powerful for
African American males to participate in programs with African American men who can relate to the students based on shared values and lived experiences. Another unique aspect of the program internal stakeholders shared is the importance of having holistic eligibility requirements for the program, allowing them to accept students who may otherwise not have an opportunity to be involved in a program of this nature due to grades or behavior.

In sum, all stakeholder groups echoed the sentiment that the program’s mission is powerful has the potential to change the lives of many African American males in underserved communities. A number of the external stakeholders shared their desire for the organization to expand its work by building a school for the students and potentially expanding to other communities in an effort to serve more African American males in urban communities. The results of the study support current literature related to Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994), the transition to college, mentorship, Black Male Initiatives, sense of belonging, research on college preparation programs, and college preparation programs and support during the transition to college.

**Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature**

Although Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) specifically relates to colleges and how they can support underrepresented students in college, the six elements of validation are applicable to the findings of this study and how the youth development program supports students. Rendon’s Theory (1994) consists of six elements: schools being responsible for making initial contact with students, students who receive validation have a better sense of self-worth, students are more willing to engage in campus life when they are validated for who they are and what they bring to the institution, validation is not restricted to the classroom, validation as an ongoing process, and the importance of validation during the first year of college.
The organization embraces each of these six elements as they are in constant contact with students through the 15-month immersive program and beyond. Throughout a student’s time in the program they form close relationships with program staff and as a result, program staff are well informed on how students are progressing in their coursework and do not wait for students to reach out for support. As Bauer (2014), Harper (2015), and Harper and Newman (2016) note, African American males may experience feelings of exclusion at PWIs, impacting their sense of belonging and prevent them for reaching out for support. Understanding this, the program staff are in frequent contact with students to check on program alum to make sure their needs are being met and offer support and resources.

The program also serves to validate student’s sense of self-worth by building their confidence throughout their time in the program. During the interviews program alumni shared how impactful the program was in helping them to develop confidence in the technology field and also on a personal level through the program’s experiential learning approach. The weekly field trips, internships, impromptu meetings and overall exposure increased students’ sense of worth to be in those coveted spaces. Additionally, as Rendon’s Theory (1994) suggests, program alum who are attending college are engaged in campus life by participating in other programs in support of their academic and career goals. Alumni shared experiences of participating in other programs as a result of their time with the youth development program and how the program helped them to connect with other organizations to continue their academic and personal growth.

While classroom validation is important, Rendon (1994) stressed academic and personal validation as important factors in student retention in higher education. Program alumni received validation from staff that they were capable of achieving their goals, which is demonstrated through the program’s commitment to exposing students to the community and showing them the
power of building relationships and the importance of one’s reputation. During the interviews several alums shared experiences of meeting high profile individuals and attending events because of their affiliation with the program. Lastly, Rendon’s Theory (1994) argues that academic and interpersonal validation are especially important during the first year of college when students are more likely to depart college early. The program alum who are currently attending college shared how the program staff are there to assist them with homework and will visit them in college to check on them. These additional steps of checking on alum, even once they are in college lends to the organization’s executive director’s moto of once a student, always a student. As Rendon’s Theory (1994) suggests, the program truly embraces students and goes above and beyond to support their academic and personal growth.

Brooks et al.’s (2013) study found that structured mentor programs help African American men to be successful in higher education. In reflecting on the beginning stages of the program’s development, the executive director discussed the importance of hiring dedicated program staff to run the program on a day to day basis and the positive impact that had on growing the program and solidifying their relationships with students. Since the program is not connected to a specific school or federal funding they are able to deliver their mission unapologetically and see the program flourish (Brooms & Gibson, 2017; Gibson, 2017). Through participation in the program students gain experience with building meaningful relationships with their instructors and staff in preparation for college. The program faculty and staff built meaningful relationships with students that extended beyond the academic components of the program, thus helping to provide holistic support for students. In building these relationships program staff came to know the students and their families well to provide support when needed. Further, the program helps promote a sense of belonging for African American male youth.
Strayhorn et al.’s (2015) study concluded that it is important to build African American male’s confidence and sense of belonging during the first year of college to positively impact retention. The youth development program fosters a sense of belonging for students in the community it serves and the technology industry. The program builds student’s confidence in their fields of study in college, their ability to articulate their passion, and technology. As a result of being in the program alumni cited increased feelings of confidence and their ability to build their own businesses with the skills they acquired while in the program.

The study also found a strong correlation between the youth development program and Black Male Initiatives at colleges. Black Male Initiative Programs were created to support Black male retention in higher education (Brooms, 2013); however, the youth development program’s goals are similar to those of BMIs. BMIs were created to provide holistic academic, social and personal development for students in college and the youth program is doing the same for students while they are in high school. Both programs offer students a sense of belonging and community in spaces where they do not often see themselves or those that look like them represented. Brooms 2018 argues that African American male students need holistic support to succeed in higher education and the program does that for both its high school student populations.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The first limitation is the study consists of program alumni attending a variety of colleges—community colleges, PWIs, and HBCUs—and high schools—charter, traditional public and private, thus making generalizing the findings difficult. Students enter the program at any point during their freshmen and junior year in high school, thus alumni may be either still enrolled in high school and are college bound or are
currently attending college. In order to capture a well-rounded understanding of how the organization prepared students for college, the researcher incorporated interviews from students who were college bound and those attending college. The data set provided by the organization also included interviews from stakeholders who were able to offer a different outlook on how the program prepared students for college, which was also incorporated into the study. The feedback from organization alumni and stakeholders provided a complete picture of how the program supported students throughout their academic journey from high school through college.

Another limitation of this study is the small sample size of the alumni population. The size of the population was limited due to the age of the organization, the size of its cohorts and the research question’s focus on college attending or college bound students limited the size of sample. Further, the study population does not include students who may have elected to take a gap year or students who are entrepreneurs that opted out of college.

The final limitation is the use of the organization’s archived data for this study. The study was conducted secondary analysis of archived data; the researcher was bound to responses that were provided in the interview transcripts. The researcher did not have contact with any of the study participants and was not able to ask follow up questions to add to the depth and richness of the responses.

**Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy and Theory**

The Higher Education Act of 1965 established TRIO programs to provide support for low and middle class families to have access to higher education (McCants, 2003). TRIO programs such as AVID and Upward Bound were created to increase the number of underrepresented student populations and while they have been successful, they are restricted in their approach to
college preparation. The focus of these programs is solely academic in nature and does not take into account the personal development of the students.

The success of the organization in this study hinges on the fact that the program leverages its connections and access to resources to support African American high school males with technical and personal skill development that sets them up to be successful in college or in an entrepreneurial endeavor. Students in the program learn the technical aspects of writing computer application codes and development, but they also learn the soft skills that prepare them for life after high school. Sullivan and Larson (2002) note the benefits of youth having frequent interactions with adults as a means to bridge social capital. Youth need interaction with adults who can “help them navigate systems of education, employment, housing, health care, and so forth” (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002, p. 49 as cited in Sullivan & Larson, 2002). During these interactions, students gain an understanding of unspoken norms and learn how to navigate different circles. The program alumni in the study had frequent interaction with not only program staff, but high resource adults at large technology companies.

The findings of this study also suggest that youth development programs should take a holistic approach to supporting African American males to best set them up for success. Holistic support takes on the form of technical or academic skills, mentorship, social and soft skill development (Brooms, 2018). Youth development and college retention programs should be run by faculty and staff who look like the target student populations to help students form connections with the university. Mentorship is also another vital component of program; which other programs should consider when creating similar programs. Moreover, if increasing the representation of African American males in higher education is a priority, universities must take the time to address the needs of this student population. The creation of retention programs, such
as Black Male Initiative programs, will benefit students by providing a safe space and built-in community to support their academic and social development. As such, the programs and supports in place require dedicated funding for the programs to flourish and document the effectiveness of the efforts (Wood et al., 2016).

Rendon’s (1994) Six Elements of Validation suggests that nontraditional students require additional support as they embark on the college experience and receiving validation in multiple forms on an ongoing basis helps students with the transition from high school to college. Similar to Tinto’s (1993) theory on student departure, students must make a strong connection with the university they attending order for them to persist from the first year to the second year and ultimately graduation. In order for future youth development programs to be successful they should take a holistic approach to developing the student: focusing on the psychosocial and academic development.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In analyzing the data, the researcher learned a lot about how the program prepared students academically and personally for college. In thinking of recommendations for future research, the researcher recommends conducting a similar study of other youth development organizations to identify more best practices of how other organizations prepare students for college. During the interviews the researcher learned that the organization studied does not rely on academic indicators when admitting students to the program, but the students’ and family’s commitment to the program. A future study could explore how this inclusive approach is beneficial to increasing the number of African American males entering college.

In the future a longitudinal study exploring the college experiences of African American male youth who participated in youth development programs will contribute to the existing
literature on African American experience in higher education as well as the impacts of youth
development programs on the future its alumni. The object of youth development programs is to
prepare students for the future, yet the research on the long term impacts of these programs for
African American males is unknown. The study can capture data from students at the conclusion
of the youth development program before students enter college, at the end of the first year of
college and conclude at the senior year. The study should aim to understand if the students
applied any of the skills they acquired in the youth development program to their college
experience. In doing so, the research will provide a comprehensive perspective on the
experiences of African American males that participated in these types of programs.

Another future study could examine the motivation for students to join a youth
development program in general. Many of the participants in this study were made aware of the
organization by an adult in their lives or a friend who was already in the program, so examining
what motivates students to join these types of programs can provide areas for programs to
consider in the future. As Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) noted, youth development programs
focus on providing participants with skills and experiences that will prepare them for their future.
With that, it is essential for the programs to be run by adults who have a genuine interest in
shaping the lives and futures of students. To that end, the study should largely focus on the how
student’s relationships with positive adults impacted their decision to be involved with a youth
development program.

The organization in this study prides itself on the motto “Once a student, always a
student” and identifying the needs of the alumni will help the program stay connected with them
in an intentional way and support their long term success. One future study for the organization
in this study could examine the experiences of students from the organization who decided
against attending college and pursued entrepreneurship straight out of high school. Entrepreneurship is one of the main components of the program and many of the alum have gone on to start businesses and develop applications, so understanding why alumni chose entrepreneurship would shed light on the impact of the program on alumni. The study could identify why students decided not to pursue college, identify the types of business they start, how the businesses are doing, and how the program can support their efforts in pursuit of success. Gathering this information will assist the organization with internal program evaluations and identify motivational factors of its target student demographic.

A second study for the organization in this study could delve into the experiences of alumni who took a gap year between high school and enrolling in college. The study could highlight why students opted out of attending college directly out of high school and what they did with their time. The trend of students taking a gap year between high school and college enrollment is growing and learning the reasons why students chose this option can also help the organization develop the appropriate support systems and resources to help students develop a plan to make the best use of their time and help them stay on track with long term education and personal goals.

**Conclusion**

Strayhorn et al.’s (2015) study underscores the fact that African American males experience a different transition experience in higher education therefore institutions and youth development programs must take these differences into consideration to set this group of men up for long term success. Rendon’s Theory of Validation (1994) suggests that college preparation programs and colleges alike can do more to be inclusive of students, their experiences, and the diversity they bring to the environments. The organization in this study has been successful in
preparing students for college because they focus on two factors—academic and personal development—with a strong emphasis on the latter. Students in the program are validated and receive positive reinforcement from the beginning of the program for as long as the student maintains contact with the program staff. The program is inclusive and relies on the potential of a student, rather than their academic merits to create diverse cohorts and meet students where they are. The mentorship and field trips served as tools for grooming students into the profession and modeling behavior for the students. Stakeholders noted it was impactful for the students to have African American male mentors running the organization that they had access to. The focus on building relationships and knowing that they had a space to discuss their wins and challenges motivated students to keep pushing toward their goals.

Similarly, Black Male Initiatives in higher education have helped to strengthen the connection between African American males and their institutions. They provide a safe space for African American male students to learn how to navigate college life and provide life lessons as well as mentorship. Mentorship is the common thread between the youth development organization and Black Male Initiatives, demonstrating the importance of mentorship to African American male success. In light of this, universities should allocate the appropriate funding and staff resources to make Black Male Initiative programs thrive. In embracing the individual and their potential, colleges and universities can equip students with confidence and personal skills that can be utilized in numerous aspects of their lives. Furthermore, carving out a safe space for African American males to feel included and supported are imperative to increasing enrollment and graduation rates in higher education.
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Appendix A: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.
Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Digital Signature

Shaniece McGill

Name (Typed)

December 26, 2019

Date