

DISSERTATION

EXPERIENCES OF PERSISTENCE IN BUSINESS EDUCATION:

A RETROSPECTIVE

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

OF

AFRICAN AMERICAN ALUMNI

Submitted by

Aswad A. A. Allen

School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Fall 2014

Doctoral Committee:

Advisor: Linda Kuk

Nathalie Kees

Malcolm Scott

Sharon Anderson

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## ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of African American undergraduate business degree alumni from a predominantly White research institution located in the Rocky Mountain region. As national demographics continue to shift (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), developing diverse talent through business education will continue to be a workforce priority. Also with an increased number of business degrees being awarded, understanding the barriers and supports experienced by diverse business students are becoming more important. The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the influences and obstacles leading to business degree attainment and employment or graduate study.

This study, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, contained in-depth interviews from ten African American business degree alumni who graduated 2-8 years prior to being interviewed. The overarching question for this study, “What were the “lived experiences” of African American alumni from an undergraduate business degree program during their educational and subsequent education and employment pursuits,” was directed by the following four primary research questions: (1) What are the experiences of African American alumni which have led to graduation and employment? (2) What barriers did participants confront during their undergraduate and subsequent education and employment pursuits? (3) What were

the support systems that African American alumni experienced during their undergraduate and employment journey? and (4) How did the experiences of persistence inform participants' decisions and actions following graduation (as they pursued either graduate school or employment)?

Through data analysis, three major themes emerged: (1) meaningful connections, (2) building relationships, and (3) decisions to continue. Research findings from this study concluded the participant's ability to overcome social, academic, and cultural barriers was achieved by a series of "personal choices" focused on seeking out, engaging, and developing "relevant" personal and institutional supports.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reflecting on the conclusion of this doctoral journey, I realize my appreciation and thanks extends to all things - every experience, every opportunity, and each challenge along this path. Each encounter has tested my belief and proven to serve on behalf of personal growth.

First, I express special gratitude to my advisor, my coach, and mentor - Dr. Linda Kuk. Thank you for understanding “if there is no struggle, there is no progress” (Frederick Douglass, 1857). Your firm, yet compassionate approach to teaching and guiding students through the doctoral journey, particularly with me, will be an experience that continues to have a powerful, positive, rippling effect.

To my dissertation committee, I extend my most sincere appreciation for your willingness to share your expertise and support in my scholarly and professional development. Dr. Malcolm Scott, thank you for your willingness to lead through committee service, offer simple moments of encouragement, and share discerning insights in the construction of the topic were invaluable. Dr. Sharon Anderson, the principled and straight forward inquiry you provided during the proposal stage offered fundamental guidance which brought clarity and focus for this research to be pointed in the correct direction. Dr. Nathalie Kees, having known you over a series of years, and the passion you share for improving the human condition, inspired me to produce a quality study which effectively represents voices often over looked.

Thank you to each member of the “Sweet 16” College and University Leadership 2009 cohort. As we began this Ph.D. trek, side-by-side, it became clear to me your presence and partnership would bring out my best efforts. Our many opportunities to work together and fellowship allowed me to become sharper, more effective, and more efficient. It is a blessing to be able to have you as colleagues and friends.

Thank you to the many members of my family who have influenced my path over the years (my siblings - Kamilah, Nathifa, Ain, Malikia, Fatima, and Quinton; my parents Quinton and Maliaka). I thank my grandparents, James E. Young, Sr. and Gertrude B. Young for providing love and support early in my life and during some of the most critical cross-roads.

Some of the most important milestones and personal struggles along this journey were shared with my children - Shani, Solomon, and Josiah. Thanks to Shani for simply expecting me to finish, Solomon for informally holding me accountable, and Josiah for being my “study-buddy” throughout the process. Each of you sparked “unexplainable purpose”, continuously expecting the best from me, and propelling me forward at times when I could find no other reason.

There are no words which could possibly capture my thoughts of gratitude I have for my gracious wife, Kally. You have witnessed and shared in some of the most intense “diamond forming” moments with me over these past five years. You have supported me in so many ways, it would be remiss of me to attempt to list them all. I will, however, let you know your partnership in prayer and creating mental space to reach this goal has been invaluable. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the love of the Lord in all things.

Finally, this study is based on the life experiences of 10 “phenomenal” alumni. My experience with each of you has been one of the “richest” and substance filled interactions I will ever have. I have a great degree of respect, admiration, and appreciation for the way each of you have chosen to affirmatively respond to life. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this very important research and entrusting me to honor your experiences righteously.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Women, people of color and ethnic minorities represent over 50% of all new entrants to the US workforce (U.S. Department Labor, 2012). An increasingly diverse labor force, the demonstrated positive benefits associated with a diverse workforce, and the heightened awareness of the importance of developing diverse talent has increased the focus on diversity for organizational leaders (Hall & Parker, 1993; McKay & Davis, 2008; Thomas, 1990). In addition, the pressure from global partners and competitors has forced many organizations to rethink organizational recruitment processes, selection characteristics, and business model effectiveness (Avery & McKay, 2006).

Historically, African Americans attaining a college degree meant hope for economic equality (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Malveaux, 2003; Zander, 2008). Regardless of the type of institution of higher learning, acquiring transferable skills, having the ability pay off debt, and be in position to achieve higher incomes than were possible by the parents and grandparents of African American students were critical factors in degree choice (Black admissions are lagging, 2006). Today, business management has become by far the most popular college degree awarded, accounting for 25.3% of all bachelor's degrees earned by blacks (A large racial unemployment gap, 2010).

Although African Americans interest in undergraduate business education has increased, translating degree attainment into successful employment has proven to be somewhat elusive. Disproportionate levels of unemployment among African Americans, as compared to all other ethnic groups, continue to be steadfast (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). A plethora of theories and models have attempted to explain the process of college persistence (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Hernandez, 2000; Tinto, 2001; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989, but understanding African

American persistence, and the specific characteristics and behaviors which translate to success after graduation has been limited (McCuiston, Wooldridge, & Pierce, 2004). Given these facts, the U.S. educational system is in an unprecedented position to advance its understanding of population specific success characteristics (LaHaye, 2010).

### **Shifts in College Student Demographics**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2011a) reported that undergraduate enrollment rose 39% between 1999 and 2009. Reflected in this increase was a rise in females (5% more than males) and a 16 % greater increase for students 25 years and older. Over the past 40 years the percentage of college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Black has also significantly increased. From 1976 to 2009, the percentage of Hispanic students rose from 3% to 12%, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2% to 7%, and the percentage of Black students rose from 9% to 14%. In contrast, the percent of white students fell from 83% to 62% during his same period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a, 2011b).

America's large state universities educate three fourths of all African-American college students in the United States (A large racial unemployment gap, 2010). Because most flagship institutions put forth concerted efforts to attract high-achieving black students from other states, an accurate assessment of black students' success in graduating from a college in a given state may be misleading. The influx of talented black students at selective flagship universities from out of state tends to inflate the overall black student graduation rate (A large racial unemployment gap, 2010). Although the 2007-09 period showed black student graduation rates having improved 3 percentage points to 42%, it still lags significantly behind the 62% graduation rate of white students nationwide (A large racial unemployment gap, 2010).

### **Contrast in Degree Attainment**

During the early years of the new Millennium the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reported more than half of U.S. students who go to college were not graduating within six years (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Although now more than 57% of all enrolled students earn degrees within six years, the graduation rates for different groups of students are tremendously different (Engel & Theokas, 2010). Of all students nationally who start college, 60% of the majority white students, 49% of Latinos, and 40% of African-Americans hold bachelor's degrees six years later (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

In 2012 for the first time in history 30% of the U.S. population over 25 years old held a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2011a). The Census Bureau reported Latinos with bachelor degrees grew from 11% in 2001 to 14% in 2011. African Americans experienced an upward trend also, from approximately 16% to nearly 20%. However, the National Center for Education Statistics also reported degree attainment by White students continued to accelerate even faster, moving up from 29% in 2001 to 34% in 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

### **Access & Academic Disparities**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a congressionally mandated project of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that has, for more than a quarter of a century, continually collected and reported information on what American students know and can do. It is the nation's only ongoing, comparable, and representative assessment of student achievement. Its assessments are based on a national probability sample of public and nonpublic school students enrolled in grades 4, 8, or 12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). A special analysis of this longitudinal data by the NCES showed that African American and Latino students trailed their white peers by an average of more than 20 test-score points on the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading assessments at 4th and 8th grades, a difference of about two grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). These gaps persisted even though the score differentials between African American and white students narrowed between 1992 and 2007. Also the analysis revealed both white and Asian American students were at least twice as likely to take classes considered academically rigorous in those particular subjects compared to African American and Latino students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Most minority degree attainment studies include the Asian-American population data. With over 50% of all Asian Americans attaining at least a bachelor's degree, and nearly 20% holding graduate degrees, it has been determined Asian Americans do not statistically qualify as an underrepresented group any longer (Lee, 2008). The literature suggests there may be a "data masking" effect within comprehensive educational studies and reports due to including Asian American data. Academic disparities and talent resource tensions, as reflected in corporate talent pool studies (Guzman, 2001; Kraft, 2006; Sparks 2011), suggest the nation is entering an era of uncharted territory regarding the development and graduation of highly qualified ethnically diverse graduates.

### **Earnings by Degree**

In addition to degree completion a significant part of the college value proposition and idea of educational investment has to do with employability (Hernandez, 2000; Karemera, Rueben, & Silah, 2003). In 2010, 90% of college graduates from 2008-2010 were employed while only 64% of peers not attending college had jobs. Although there is little consensus about the value, quality, mission and payoff of college, a large majority of American families, as well as state and institutional policymakers, believe citizens should obtain some form of

postsecondary education and training (Fry, 2011). While numerous studies clearly demonstrate that increased levels of postsecondary education lead to higher salaries, longer working lives, more career mobility, and an increased quality of life (Bowen, 1977; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), this data supports reason for concern regarding a serious degree attainment gap among American ethnic groups.

In terms of examining overall average starting salary information, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2013) went beyond their traditional large company pool responses (2013). The NACE combed through data surveyed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau, and a master set of data developed by a compensation measurement company called Job Search Intelligence. The largest top three NACE reported overall average starting salaries were Engineering at \$64,000, Computer Science at \$64,400 and Business at \$57,300. Education, Humanities and Social Sciences were ranked at the bottom end of the rankings. On average the starting earnings gap between the two most popular degree categories earned by Blacks (Business and Social Sciences) was approximately \$20,000 (NACE, 2013).

Overall, the literature suggest the combination of unfamiliar demographic challenges, the wide disparity in the value and payoff of a college degree, particularly for Black students, and limited pre-college academic rigor present a unique set of persistence related dynamics. Several theories have advanced the understanding of student persistence, with the most common, built upon the Student Integration Model (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 2005). This concept, derived from Tinto's interactionist theory (Tinto, 1993), suggests that students enter college with certain types of experiences of preparedness, pre-existing relationships, and particular ideas about learning. Tinto also proposed that increased levels of academic and social integration would lead to greater commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation

(Tinto, 2005). Most scholars have focused on student persistence and satisfaction as a function of the learning environment, student academic performance, or a combination of both.

Surprisingly, insufficient research on undergraduate business student persistence has been conducted. Research explaining what influences persistence with ethnic minority business students, particularly with a focus on alumni-reported attitudes contributing to persistence and post degree success, offers an invaluable opportunity to add insight, and possibly a critical missing piece, in the discipline specific “retention puzzle” (Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine African American undergraduate business degree alumni from a predominantly White institution that have contributed to attitudes and behaviors leading to degree attainment and employment or graduate study.

### **Research Questions**

In this study I will inquire about the following overarching research question:

- What were the “lived experiences” of African American alumni from an undergraduate business degree program during their educational and subsequent education and employment pursuits?

The research questions are as follows:

- What are the experiences of African American alumni which have led to graduation and employment?
- What barriers did participants confront during their undergraduate and subsequent education and employment pursuits?
- What were the support systems that African American alumni experienced during their undergraduate and employment journey?



- How did the experiences of persistence inform participants' decisions and actions following graduation (as they pursued either graduate school or employment)?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Persistence** – experience of education continuation through degree attainment

**Contextual Supports and Barriers** – Contextual supports and barriers refer to the “environmental supports (facilitative influences / opportunities) and barriers (obstacles) that people anticipate will accompany their goal pursuit” (Lent & Brown, 2006, p. 19)

**Success** – degree attainment and employed full-time or graduate education

### **Delimitations**

This study will examine 10-15 African American alumni from a predominantly white research institution located in the western U.S. Rocky Mountain region. The participants will be “graduated” undergraduate business students who were successful in attaining a business degree. The participants will have graduated 2-8 years ago from the study institution and are now either in a graduate program, or working in industry full-time.

### **Limitations**

The restrictions imposed by the scope of this study include sole focus on African American Alumni from a single undergraduate business school program at a 4-year University located in the Rocky Mountain Region. The number of participants, the type of institution selected for the study, the time period which the participants were in attendance, and societal issues and trends during the study participants' attendance all place parameters on the study results. This is a sample of convenience by which the researcher is using an institution that they are familiar with. Although this approach provides access to contact information for the alumni participants, the sample set is not generalizable to the larger business school alumni population.

### **Statement of Significance**

The literature suggests, by understanding the self-appraised experiences of business students' desire to earn a degree, it may be possible to improve the overall experiences of students (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Braxton et al., 1997; Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009; Karemera et al., 2003; Tinto, 2005). By identifying specific themes contributing to the persistence, degree attainment and the employment of African American business student alumni, it is hoped that issues supporting the development of a more relevant and supportive learning environment may be identified. Additionally, investigating perceived experiences related to student persistence within minority business student education will add to the understanding of retention and persistence for African American students (Hecker, 2004; Khurana, 2007).

### **Researcher's Perspective**

My perceptions of business schools located on Predominantly White Institution campuses have been influenced and informed by both personal and professional experiences. From 1989 to present my higher education experience has included a variety of student affairs and academic affairs roles at six institutions in the western United States. During the mid to late 1980s my undergraduate experience involved short lived exposure to business education as a business student at the selected institution. My strong interest in the persistence and career success of ethnic minority business students, particularly African Americans at this particular institution originated out of these influences.

An in-depth interest in the attitudes and behaviors which inform specific student groups to persist in business education and establish viable career paths, despite known and unknown obstacles, further inspire me to pursue this research. The insufficient literature available on

alumni-reported attitudes and behaviors associated with the academic and career progression of African American business degree graduates from predominantly white institutions (Lewis & Collins, 2001) omits the psychologically and environmentally supportive conditions which may lead to improved persistence, graduation, and employment rates of African American students in business (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). In addition, specific experiences working with underrepresented populations within a business school at a predominantly White research-1 public university has fueled my passion and motivation for this study.

As researcher, it is important to note my previous interactions with many of the potential participants. Ideally, having had the opportunity to work in the business school at the PWI in which these students completed their degree, offers a unique vantage point to establish trust, understand and interpret the participants' mental and emotional experiences, and facilitate rich self-disclosed statements. Also it is hoped that this topic and inquiry will encourage further study for those interested in diverse business talent development and business education persistence.

## **CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The aim of this chapter is to identify, review, and highlight important literature relevant to African American undergraduate business degree alumni from a predominantly White institution that have contributed to attitudes and behaviors leading to degree attainment and employment or graduate study. This review will include a brief description of business education from a historical context, contemporary demographic changes, relevant legislation, information on the value of diversity in education, hidden learning structures and their implication in learning, a brief review of appropriate transformative theories, the convergence of learning reform themes, key concepts that promote student success and connectedness, and select prior studies on African American persistence and retention. A brief introduction of factors influencing educational equality and major theoretical perspectives on minority student persistence, with a special focus on studies related to Vincent Tinto's concepts of Student Departure, will be included.

### **Business & Education: A Historical Context**

In its earliest manifestation as "trade," understanding business (as a profession) has become central in navigating the various world economies (Kadlec, 2012; LaHaye, 2010). Historically, communities have understood that by trading goods they had in abundance, the quality of life for everyone involved could be enriched. Simple bartering was eventually superseded by buying and selling with coin, then by mercantilism, then in the Renaissance by corporations and finance.

For a very long time, the process for acquiring the knowledge of trade consisted only of learning from one's parents and elders. The fundamental principles of "business education", how to appraise the value of trade goods or how to buy and sell wisely in the marketplace, were

limited to a persons' whom had a strong orientation to families involved (LaHaye, 2010). Formal education specifically related to trade knowledge emerged out of property owners desire to transfer their business operations to the male children (Allen, 1987).

The first school for business management in the United States, the Wharton School, was established in Philadelphia in 1881 and today is affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania. Dartmouth and the University of Wisconsin added business-administration departments in 1891, as did Harvard in 1908 (Van Fleet & Wren, 2005). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, members of an emerging managerial elite seeking social status to match the wealth and power they had accrued, began working with major universities to establish graduate business education programs. In addition, university-based business schools are described as being founded to train a professional class of managers in the mold of doctors and lawyers (Khurana, 2007).

Colleges quickly adopted the idea of teaching business management as a public service to society; Queen's University in Kingston, ON, started a School of Commerce in 1919; New York University began the practice of training business teachers in 1926; and 120 business programs were in operation by 1939 (Wolverton & Penley, 2004 ). Today over 21.5% of all degrees conferred are in the fields of business at 1,839 university-level institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Such topics as accounting, administration, economics, entrepreneurship, finance, information systems, marketing, organizational behavior, public relations, strategy, human resource management, and quantitative methods are taught.

Typically, the business case study approach is used to present actual business firm products, markets, competition, financial structures, sales volumes, management, employees and other factors affecting the firm's success, in order for students to learn contemporary solutions. Although Business schools have gravitated toward including ethics and social responsibility as

topics within business curriculum, there has not been systematic integration of these concepts in a culturally responsive context (Kadlec, 2012; Karemera et al., 2003; Khurana, 2007). Business schools today have largely surrendered themselves to the role of mere producers of skilled employees, with a focus on the MBA, and treating students as consumers. Professional and moral ideals that once animated and inspired business schools have been severely impacted by a perspective that managers are merely agents of shareholders, obligated only to the cause of share profits. The literature suggest with a gaping hole at the center of business education, perhaps in management leadership, and a pervasive existence of corporate misconduct, the time is upon us to revise the intellectual, moral, and social context by which we train our future business leaders (Karemera et al., 2003; Khurana, 2007; Wolverton & Penley, 2004).

### **Demographic Shifts, Legislation, and Learning**

World War II not only sent many men overseas, but produced the first major influx of white women in the labor force. This historical period changed the order of needs and prompted the government to re-classify 55% of its jobs to include African Americans and women. The 1940s were also a time of educational opportunity by way of the G.I. Bill, which allowed for returning war veterans to access a college degree (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). The 1950s contributed to the changing socio-economic dynamics with an explosive increase in the national birth rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Also during this period an increase in research-intensive universities began to take on a major role in the economy (Khurana, 2007; LaHaye, 2010).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 represented the next major occurrences, opening the door of academia to African Americans, Latin Americans and other domestic citizens (Chin, 1996; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008). U.S. education also became

accessible to global citizens by way of the Immigrant Act of 1965. In addition, this historical era embraced the pointed guidance of federal legislation which directed learning institutions response to the influx of returning veterans of the Vietnam War (Chin, 1996; Choy, 2002).

Other types of legislation, such as Title IX (which radically altered how women fared on campuses) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (designed to remove barriers that previously barred many aspiring students) added other gateways and opportunities for access. Other demographic shifts were fueled by policy changes or new programs, such as the establishment of community college systems, the creation of programs of continuing education for women, and the creation of the Equal Opportunities Commission (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The literature has identified a type of parallel evolution between legislation and access to education.

The issue of educational equity resurfaced in the mid-1990s as a result of educational institutions being ill-prepared to respond to the influx of students with limited English proficiency (Hernandez, 2000; Lau, 2003; Ukpokodu, 2009). The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflected a combination of issues and concerns which originated from past workforce compliance legislation (i.e. affirmative action) and non-inclusive mono-cultural learning models and philosophies (Braxton, 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Following the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a reported rush to policy review and revision in many cities and states across the country occurred (Davies, 2006).

The progression of workforce concepts, which evolved from the 1960s legal/compliance models, to the social justice models of the 1970s, into the representation and acceptance concepts of the 1980s and 1990s had paralleled educational philosophies. The learning and teaching models that paralleled the workforce concepts generally progress from the “traditional” to the

“non-traditional” camps of thought. History clearly outlines the parallel shift in learning, teaching, and legislation along the demographic change continuum.

Until recently, African Americans were the largest minority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Consequentially, African Americans have been viewed as the primary recipients of legislative change and education reform (Guzman, 2001; Keller, 2001; Malveaux, 2003). With slow population growth holding the African American population steady at 13%, the legislative lens refocused on growth occurring within the Hispanic / Latino group.

### **Student Retention Impacts**

In 2010 the “What Works in Student Retention” (WWISR) Survey (Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, & Burkum, 2010) was mailed to 598 public four-year college and university Chief Academic Affairs Officers. Completed data was collected from 258 (43.14%). Information regarding institutional and student attrition and retention influences were included with particular interest in the areas related to degree completion goals, coordination of retention services, on-line coursework, and cross institutional collaboration (as expressed through co-institution articulation agreements).

Respondents were asked to rate 42 randomized institutional and student characteristics using a 5-point likert scale (5 = major effect; 3 = moderate effect; 1 = little or no effect). Of the 42 characteristics, the following four institutional characteristics were the only ones which indicated having a moderate or greater impact on retention: amount of financial aid available to students (3.7), quality interaction between faculty and students (3.1), student engagement opportunities in the classroom / active learning (3.1), and ratio of loans to other forms of financial aid (3.0).



Respondents also rated student characteristics contributing to attrition / retention using a 5-point scale (1 = little or no contribution to attrition; 5 = major contribution to attrition). Of the 15 highest rated contributors to attrition, 14 were related to student characteristics. Limited educational aspirations, academic preparation, low socioeconomic status, indecision about career/major goals, and adequacy of financial resources were the very top contributing characteristics in the 2010 study. Other notable characteristics included poor study skills (3.7), lack of motivation to succeed (3.7), and weak commitment to earning a degree (3.6).

The researchers suggest in the summary the themes in respondents ratings imply the perceived impact of students' attrition characteristics were more responsible for attrition than the institutional characteristics. The researchers stated "Although there is room for improvement, consistent ratings below the scale midpoint indicates that important institutional characteristics are satisfactorily achieved. Ratings on quality of instruction, classroom simulation, relevance of curriculum, positive attitude of faculty and staff, and access to courses support that contention." (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012, p. 223).

Public four-year college respondents were also asked to review the pool of 94 practices and identify the three that made the greatest contribution to retention on their campus. Although 19 out of 94 intervention strategies were identified as having the most positive impact, only 9 practices were chosen by 10% or more of the institutions as among the top three - first year transition support, academic advising, and learning support / assessment (Habley et al., 2012, p. 228, see Table 1).

Table 1

*Practices Making the Greatest Contribution to Retention*  
(Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities)

Item	% Selecting as Among Top Three
Freshman seminar / university 101 (credit)	24%
Supplemental instruction	16%
Tutoring	15%
Living / learning communities (residential)	14%
Advising interventions with selected student populations	14%
Mandated placement of students in courses based on test scores	13%
Academic advising center	12%
Summer orientation	11%
Early warning system	10%

These primary categories were very consistent with the types of retention programs, described as intervention “cluster” categories, thought to be closely associated with improved retention. This was found to be the same in the 1980, 1897, and 2004 WWISR studies (Habley et al., 2012).

**Minority Student Attrition**

The WWSRI study also examined the following four subsets of data: two-year colleges with 20% or more Black student enrollment (N=83); two-year colleges with 20% Hispanic student enrollment (N=37); four-year colleges with 20% or more Hispanic student enrollment (N=33); four-year colleges with 20% or more Black student enrollment (N=95). With the exception of consistently higher ratings across all categories by .2 to .5 degrees (on the 5-point likert scale), virtually no difference was reported as the causes of attrition for public four-year institutions with high minority enrollments.

Interestingly, the research respondents were chief administrators only. Examples investigating the responses of front-line staff, counselors, advisors, instructors, teaching

assistance, recent alumni, or current students were not included. In general, the findings imply by producing better academically prepared, more degree decisive, committed, and financially capable students many of the retention and attrition challenges would be addressed. The findings also imply for institutions with higher minority enrollments, administrators need to do more of the same. In this instance however, it is important to note the literature suggests these findings may be oversimplifying the issues and solutions (Braxton, 2000; Brunnsden, Davies, Shevlin, & Bracken, 2000; Choy, 2002; Fleming, 1984; Gardner, 2004).

### **Multicultural Students and Academic Culture**

As the scope of literature on student persistence narrows, offering a more focused examination of the general experience of multicultural students, a prominent work emerged on the psychological well-being of Asian American students. The interesting aspects of this study point to the impact of academic culture on this non-white population. Patel (1998) studied gender and racial discrimination of 100 Asian American participants ranging from 18-25 years of age. In this study the following five separate instruments were administered: Schedule of Sexist Events; Schedule of Racist Events, Asian American Graduate Student Hassles Frequency Scale, Hopkins Symptoms Checklist, Feelings of Inadequacy.

Results indicated that recent sexist and racist events accounted for 16% of variance in overall psychological symptoms, while lifetime events accounted for 12%. In particular, frequency of recent racial discrimination uniquely predicted symptoms of depression, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity. The interaction between recent sexist and racist discrimination significantly predicted a higher frequency of psychological distress. The interaction of lifetime racist and sexist discrimination does, however significantly negatively impact Asian American student's sense of self-esteem. This supports the need to further examine the relationship

between experiences of discrimination and psychological well-being among specific populations of ethnic minority women (Patel, 1998).

Overall, the results of this study suggest that experiences of racial and gender discrimination play a significant role in psychological well-being of Asian American female college students over and above generic life stresses. Also the research found that the greater the frequency of these types of incidents in the life experiences of diverse populations of students, the more likely it is that there would be significant psychological and self-esteem problems. Lifetime experiences of gender discrimination also seemed to significantly predict psychological symptoms and self-esteem issues. By examining the self-reported attitudes that promote persistence through degree completion for a particular group, we may have an opportunity to study and improve the overall experiences of all students (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Braxton et al., 1997; Davidson et al., 2009; Tinto, 1993).

Current literature also suggest' that African American students at PWI's experience a high degree of isolation, alienation and hostility (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1982; Cabrera et al., 1999; Cuyjet, 2006). Factors African American students employ to be successful at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) was examined in the case study, "Identification and Analysis of Successful Persistence Strategies for Urban, African American Students Enrolled at Predominantly Rural, White Campuses" (Zander, 2008). The purpose of the study sought to identify characteristics of successful African American students from urban settings at predominantly rural, white universities and investigate effective institutional interventions which may be used to enhance the success rates of students in similar situations.

Seventeen self-identified African American students from underfunded poorly rated High Schools from various cities within New York State participated. Each participant completed at

least 50% of their course work (greater than 60 credits) and was in good academic standing at the time of the study. Two focus groups included all 17 participants. Follow-up individual interviews involved 12 of the 17 members. Equal gender representation and a variety of university majors were included in the participant pool.

The interview questions, which were designed to examine the student success characteristics, focused on each subjects' individual attitudes and behaviors toward their educational commitment, interventions / supports, and external factors. The structure of the questions allowed for student response flexibility and easy organization of thematic results.

Research findings from this case study indicated that social adjustment factors were not a substantial barrier. Eight of the 12 students interviewed indicated they adjusted quickly and easily, and none reported serious adjustment issues. However seven students reported their "academic adjustment" as difficult compared to only two participants indicating it as having been relatively easy. The researcher identified academic adjustment as "the clearest pattern to emerge..." (Zander, 2008, p. 71) in the study with the majority of the participants (8) conveying they were academically dismissed at some point in their matriculation.

Each participant's willingness to reach out to family, staff, and faculty for help, as indicated by the interview transcripts, support the students' most primary difference between them and other similar students that struggled. The key thematic areas of family / home life, neighborhood, elementary & secondary school experiences, college search, college transition / adjustment (easy, moderate, and difficult), social & academic connectedness, and student identified sources of help emerged.

This research pinpointed personal resilience and student receptivity to multiple sources of support, specifically family and staff, as the two most common themes and critical elements of

success. In particular, a strong personal commitment to complete their degree and taking initiative to stay connected to those that care (Zander, 2008) was reported as central to black student persistence and success.

### **Black Students and Their Families**

The influence and impact families have on establishing a healthy sense of belonging within learning processes and learning environments, particularly for black students and their persistence is further researched by Herndon and Hirt (2004). The study, “Black Students and their Families: What Leads to Success in College” (Herndon & Hirt, 2004), was designed to look at the role of family in helping students succeed. The researchers selected two large, public research universities, one rural region, the other in a major urban area of the state with similar missions. Two groups were involved in this study (20 student participants and 18 student family members). The overall student sample consisted of 11 females and 9 males. The 10 students (4 female; 6 male) from the rural institution were enrolled in major degree programs such as chemical engineering, economics, English, computer science, and sociology. The 10 urban campus degree seeking students’ programs included mass communications, social work, psychology, and interior design. The 18 student family members included 8 from urban students and 10 from rural students. All students were in their senior year (which defined “success” for this study) and only one member within this group was female.

Following student interviews, as well as individual phone interviews with family members, a total of 1,801 responses were recorded. Eight primary themes (family influence, family expectations, macro perspectives on race, negotiating environments, role models, spiritual support, and sense of community) were organized into three stages of influence (pre-college,

early college, and late college). The comments associated with each theme were assigned a particular direction of support (positive, neutral, or negative).

The pre-collegiate stage, with 912 responses, had the most overall responses (50.7%). The most frequently mentioned theme was Family influence (i.e. encouragement, values, support) with a total of 661 (36.7%). Of the 661 responses in this thematic group, 422 responses reported indicated family as a positive influence.

The early college stage recorded the second highest responses (592 overall responses - 32.9%). The Negotiating Environments theme, which is included as part of the early college stage, had the second most frequent responses. This theme, which related to participants' perceptions of students' minority status in a predominately White setting, categorized students' impressions of the university climate, culture, and challenges associated with successfully managing adversity as a student of color at a PWI.

The results of this study propose pre-college experiences weigh heavily in overall family-student interactions among Black students. The high degree of positive family influence also supports the idea that the values instilled by family members continue to inform decision making leading to personal and academic success. Evidence within this study also suggests Black students' early foundational values and beliefs in support of family-like systems, or "fictive" kinships, may play a critical role in their success. This was found to be especially important for first generation black students and their success as a minority in a majority culture. Fictive kinship, in particular, was reflected in the researcher's solicitation for family participants, as noted by the lack of Black male adult involvement. Literature supports the idea that this void is commonly augmented by Black students connecting with black male role models such as teachers, coaches, and ministers (Harper, 2006). "Rural and urban students reported that

developing a sense of community (affinity; connectedness) with other African Americans on campus was crucial” (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 502). Suggestions that Black students, more so than other ethnic groups, seek to replicate support from extended kin and “kin-like” family members was also evident (Harper, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Influence from grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, as well as “kin-like” individuals unrelated by blood, are considered equally significant (Harper 2006, Staples, 1986).

### **Contextual Supports and African American Student Success**

The literature suggest little concern has been given to positive environmental conditions (Lent et al., 2000, p. 48) associated with discipline specific student career development. An examination of environmental factors that were most influential in contributing to African American student persistence in an academic discipline was reviewed in the “Case Study Analysis of the Effect of Contextual Supports and Barriers on African American Students’ Persistence in Engineering” (Montgomery, 2009). This study also considered the specific types of barriers encountered and how the study participants overcame these barriers. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit eight African American junior and senior college students at a Large, Mid-Atlantic State University (LMSU). Following the analysis of individual 1½ hour semi-structured interview transcripts, six themes (Being Black/Cultural Issues; Engineering Identity; Family Influence; Peer relationships; Academic Issues; Personal Issues) were identified as having the most impact on the study participants ability to persist in engineering.

Social cognitive career theory (Bandura, 1977), the theoretical framework for this particular study, asserts that contextual supports and barriers mediate persistence through their effect on self-efficacy (Lent et al., 2000). Five of the six themes were perceived as both contextual supports and barriers to persistence in the students’ major area of study. Being Black



at a PWI (BBP) and Engineering Identity were the two most prominent themes, contributing to approximately 40% of all comments. The data analysis showed the role of BBP intersected and blended with all other themes.

College level preparation in high school and other pre-college experiences, such as Academic Summer Enhancement participation and the Pre-College Summer Bridge Program, were also noted as instrumental in forming the participants' academic self-efficacy, personal self-efficacy, and engineering identity. Although research findings reported varied responses regarding the impact of discrimination, each of the participants reported the ability to be able to comfortably preserve their cultural values and traditions while successfully participating in the dominant culture.

Familial influence, positive peer influence, and faith were prominent contextual supports for overcoming academic issues and mental health issues (e.g. social isolation, acculturation). During each of the student's college transition and the preceding 2-3 years, cultural connections and culture-related activities, such as participation in the Multicultural Engineering Program (MEP) and involvement in National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), were found to be noticeable in terms of providing the necessary support and mitigating effects on any barriers they encountered. "Students were able to ameliorate the damaging effects of these barriers through personal initiative, peer and family support, and student support services." (Montgomery, 2009, p. 72).

The current research assumes student career behavior is primarily determined by barriers they may encounter during the transition process and years progressing through college (Lewis & Collins, 2001). According to the findings related to this study, the process underlying African American students' ability to persist and succeed, despite obstacles they encounter in the pursuit

of an engineering degree, involves conceptualizing persistence and success, within the context of being Black at a PWI. More importantly, conceiving the need for and having the ability to seek out academic and social support networks is essential (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Helm, Sedlacek, & Prieto, 1998; Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1983; Montgomery, 2009; Sedlacek & Tracey, 1985).

Although this review produced no empirical research related to African American undergraduate business student persistence at PWI's, the study "The Effects of Academic Environment and Background Characteristics on Student Satisfaction and Performance: The Case of South Carolina State University's School of Business" specifically sought to determine the impact of academic climate, student background, and social environment on student performance and satisfaction (Karemera et al., 2003). In addition to the researchers' primary focus being the examination and evaluation of factors affecting business student behavior and performance at historically black colleges or universities other areas under investigation included locating intervening factors such as socioeconomic, demographic, and environmental variables. These variables were used to evaluate the impact on college choice and performance.

The survey instrument, which was designed to collect basic educational background and socio-demographic information (for learning outcome purposes), input regarding the university environment, and responses offering feedback on academic programs, activities, and services, was administered to 350 SCSU's business students. Of 350 business students surveyed, 223 responded (63.3%), representing the spectrum of freshmen to seniors at SCSU's School of Business. students, from freshmen to seniors (Karemera et al., 2003).

Using a five-point Likert scale, Chi-square tests and Likelihood ratio test statistics, student preferences were determined. This study revealed that satisfaction with academic environment and services, as well as high school achievements, were significantly correlated

with college performance (Karemera et al., 2003). The majority of the respondents were first year (39.6%) female (58.1%) business students coming from families with over \$50,000 in annual income (28%) compared to 20.2% from low-income families with earnings less than \$20,000. Most of the respondents (43.8%) also indicated math and science as their favorite high school subjects.

The hypothesis of independence between educational background and socio-economic attributes of students and parents, and their relationship on academic performance, were analyzed using  $X^2$  tests and Likelihood ratio test statistics. The results showed that performance in college is statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) to performance in high school. Although the degree of association between the family's income level and college performance was not statistically significant ( $p < .05$  level;  $p = .09$ , (Creswell, 2009) the researcher highlighted socioeconomic disparities as “notable”.

An observation of the responses reveal although a large proportion of students with a high interest in math and science gravitate toward the Business School at SCSU, most of the respondents pursued Management (42.4%) as their major area. While level of family income was not associated with college performance, the findings indicated expected job and internship opportunities are highly associated with academic performance. Finally, these findings suggested academic performance is not the same across areas of emphasis within the business major and varies according to major fields of study.

In addition to re-emphasizing the high degree of importance for supporting outside-classroom experiences, such as internships and leadership activities as an important and integral part of student learning outcomes and development (Kuh et al., 2006), these findings also reveal students with math and science interest “shy away” from pursuing math intensive areas of study.

The review of literature also suggest consideration be given to the type of 4-year institution an African American student might attend. An institutional type comparison study, “The Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities on the Academic Success of African American Students” (Kim & Conrad, 2006), analyzed whether African-American students have a similar probability of obtaining a BA degree if they attended a historically black college or university (HBCU) as compared to a predominantly white college or university (PWI’s).

This particular study used a two-part national longitudinal survey using hierarchical linear and non-linear modeling. There were 941 African American freshmen respondents in both initial (1985) and follow up (1994) surveys. The gender distribution from both types of institutions was broadly similar once colleges with four or fewer respondents and single sex institutions were eliminated. The final sample included 401 students in 10 HBCU’s and 540 students in 34 PWI’s.

In general, the research demonstrated no differential impact between HBCU’s and PWI’s among African-Americans. Specific notable findings revealed females were more likely to obtain a baccalaureate degree than males, HBCU’s are more likely to promote cultural relevant research, and that HBCUs succeed in spite of being significantly underfunded relative to PWI’s. The findings of this study lend support to the proposition that PWI’s may consider conducting research on HBCU methods. Finally, the study suggested merit for strong support from both the public and private sectors in order for HBCU’s to continue to significantly contribute to the overall higher education policy and practice in this country (Kim & Conrad, 2006).

## **Race, Gender, Psychology and Student Success**

Careful consideration to traditional and non-traditional factors (i.e. race ideology) which may influence Black student persistence and success were a primary focus in the study “Non-cognitive Predictors of Academic Achievement for African Americans across Cultural Contexts” (Young, 2005). The two aims of this study were to determine whether or not non-cognitive predictors of academic achievement differed across predominantly White and Black institutions and identify which factors (i.e., high school achievement, racial ideology and traditional non-cognitive variables) were the best predictors of college cumulative GPA for African American students at predominantly White and Black institutions.

Two hundred-fifty African American college students from two predominantly White institutions (PWI) and two historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) located in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic regions were administered the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire-Revised (NCQ-R) and the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI). The NCQ-R is composed of statements pertaining to perceptions and expectations of one's academic career, goals, and accomplishments (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989). The MIBI measures three well established dimensions of racial identity-centrality, ideology, and regard. These scales consisted of four subscales: assimilation, nationalism, humanist, and oppressed (Sellers, Rowley, Tabbye, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). These particular questionnaires were selected to determine which psychosocial indices best predicted academic achievement across predominantly White and Black institutions or institutional cultural context.

The majority of the voluntary participants (> 70%) were females in their first or second year (> 50%). The combined SAT mean scores of incoming freshmen at the HBCU's was 1019

and for the PWI's, 1170. The average cumulative GPA for students at PWIs and HBCUs was 2.9 and 3.1 (4.0 scale), respectively.

Following two semesters of data collection PWI and HBCU Data comparison analysis showed African American students at the PWIs had significantly higher high school GPAs compared to students at the HBCUs ( $t = 3.73, p < .001$ ). Among the racial ideologies, students at the PWIs indicated a significantly higher endorsement of the oppressed ideology subscale, Oppressed Minority attitudes ( $t = 2.24, p < .01$ ). African American students at the HBCUs had significantly higher scores on the constructs measuring perceptions of their ability to understand racism ( $t = 3.45, p < .001$ ), availability of a support person ( $t = 10.22, p < .001$ ), and establishing long-term goals ( $t = 4.46, p < .001$ ). While racial ideology was not a significant predictor of cumulative GPA for African American students at HBCUs, positive self-concept was a significant non-cognitive factor for predicting cumulative GPA.

These results suggest that there are other reliable, positive, psychosocial indicators (i.e., non-cognitive) of academic achievement that may help determine whether or not an African American student is a "good fit" academically. The study implies that while some positive psychosocial predictors of academic achievement may be "universal" and transcend the cultural context of institutions, other factors are relative or specific to a university or disciplines cultural climate.

Research suggest that there are subtle, yet important differences in the experience of domestic minority students compared to majority White students. Attitudes, aspirations, and expectations with which students enter college may vary among subgroups and affect academic performance (Allen, 1999; Braxton et al., 1997; Garcia, 2001; Helm et al., 1998; Karemera et al., 2003; Kim & Conrad, 2006).

Students' attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews play a significant role in shaping their identity as well as in constructing their academic and social environments. For African American Students at PWI's, it seems more academically profitable to hold perspectives and ideologies that neither violate the campus culture norms nor require them to give up too much of themselves (Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998). These findings support the historical perspective that psychological factors, such as an independent self-concept, negative perceptions of the traditional college context, a difference of opinion, and self-advocacy have been seen as contributing to retention or attrition of Black students (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994).

### **Minority Student Persistence and Major Theoretical Perspectives**

The literature has suggested as the national demographics shift and the ethnic profile of college students change, the curriculum, services, and opportunities that higher education offer would keep pace (Patel, 1998; Praetzel, 1999; Ukpokodu, 2009). This socio-cultural shift in the student profile requires transformative educational pedagogy. For philosophical articulations of educational environments and curricula that have characteristics of connectedness, the term "transformationist" is used. This term refers to pragmatists, feminists, and critical theorists, who are united in viewing learning as student-centered with solid concepts of knowledge and rational that have contingent human experience as their basis (Howe, 1998). In other words, these are schools of educational thought that are concerned ultimately with the "lived" experiences of the students. Transformationist scholars point to the need for learning to be relevant, for students to feel recognized for who they are, and for the presence of relationships characterized by care and concern (Wheeler & Trail, 2010).

These concepts become more relevant in understanding how students themselves, from diverse backgrounds, persist in learning environments. Philosophers of education, such as postmodernists, who do not give a central role to the lived experiences of students, may offer insightful critiques, but nevertheless are unable to offer guidance to the nuts and bolts of learning and teaching (Wheeler & Trail, 2010). The emphasis on "contingent human experience" leads to a fuller concept of effective education than those that are currently in mainstream practice.

### **A Critical Theorist Perspective, Alienation and Hidden Curriculum**

Critical theory is an intellectual construct characterized by a commitment to the view that theory and research should lead to improving social conditions, not just merely generating information. The focus of critical theory is raising awareness of the cultural dynamics that operate to oppress social groups and taking informed action to counteract the various forms of oppression within society (Williams, 1999).

Critical pedagogy is a prism that reflects the complexities of the interactions between teaching and learning. It highlights some of the hidden subtleties that may have escaped views previously. It enables one to see more widely and more deeply. This "prism" has a tendency to focus on variations of social, cultural, political, and even economic conditions, and it does all of this under the broad view of history. After looking through the prism of critical pedagogy, it seems clear that the basics aren't as basic as was thought, or at least not as basic as we used to think (Wink, 2000, p. 30). The literature has continued to suggest that critical pedagogy necessitates a departure from traditional ways of doing things and rethinking curricular knowledge and outcomes in relation to a global society (Ukpokodu, 2007). A learning environment which ignores a student's cultural frames of reference, modes of behavior, and communication style, provokes student alienation, frustration, and failure. Ukpokodu further



described methods for incorporating instructional strategies which seek to recognize students' particular backgrounds and characteristics within the context of instruction.

Two-hundred and twenty-nine college sophomores from three small, private universities in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States participated in an on-line student confidence and performance survey. The purpose of study design was to examine the degree to which social alienation, self-efficacy and career decision-making confidence relate to the academic performance of college sophomores (Ensminger & Lewis, 2011). The findings supported a student's sense of belonging to the academic community as having a strong correlation with the students' sense of self-efficacy and confidence. Interestingly, it was also found that alienation, self-efficacy and career decision-making were not related to students' academic performance as measured by grade point average.

### **Examining Educational Equity**

While critical theory has its roots in the philosophical traditions of the mid-1900s, its most popular proponent in educational theory has been Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who came to prominence in 1970 (Gadotti, 2008) with the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). Freire's central work highlighted the ways in which education can either be oppressive or liberating. Education must be directly related to solving the problems and addressing the difficulties experienced by those being educated, if it is to liberally serve the people (Gadotti, 2008).

Demographic enrollments by socio-economic class have been used as a method to measure the progress our nation has made in addressing past economic bias or favoritism. According to Anderson, Boyles, and Rainie (2012) students of color led the greatest enrollment growth in four decades. In 2011 the Lumina Foundation reported a 15% increase for Hispanics,

followed by increases of 8% for African Americans, 6% for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and 2% for Native Americans, suggesting significant promise in the efforts to address past economic bias (Fry, 2011).

Although recent reports show access and degree attainment leaning forward, the College Board (2010) issued “The Educational Crisis Facing Young Men of Color” report, which presented African American, Latino / Hispanics, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander group gender comparative results of two years of qualitative research. The issue of a comparative lack of success that males of color were experiencing in traversing the education pipeline revealed a more in-depth examination of the problematic conditions. The findings were even more disparaging for Black and Latino males compared to their female counterparts. While it is clearly important for young women to continue achieving at high levels, men’s absence in higher education and their resulting lack of preparation for the workforce create new economic and cultural dilemmas (College Board, 2010).

This report is further supported by literature which suggest by examining the self-appraised commitment of business students desire to earn a degree, it may improve the overall experiences of students (Astin & Scherrei, 1980; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Braxton et al., 1997; Davidson et al., 2009; Tinto, 1993). This line of thought also advocates that for learning to produce the most favorable outcome, specifically for the student, it must have some positive bearing on the students' community and their lived experience beyond the classroom (Fritze, 2012). Without such an approach, education serves only those in power and has the potential to be harmful and alienating to non-dominant groups (Friere, 1998).

## **Status Quo in Learning**

Subsequent critical theorists have highlighted and extended the discussion of the various ways in which the status quo in learning serves to oppress certain social groups. The ways that this oppression functions is through the hidden curriculum, or what McLaren (1998) called the "unintended outcomes" of the educational process. Contrasted with the explicit curriculum, the hidden curriculum is composed of messages conveyed or implied by the choice of material (or absence), as well as the manner in which educational activities are conducted. As a result, in contrast to maintaining the status quo in learning, critical theorists suggest instruction which highlights the need for curriculum which recognizes the personal, communal, and cultural circumstances of the student is a rational and logical approach in effective learning (Ukpokodu, 2009).

Educators and researchers concerned with applying critical theory to these personal, communal, and cultural circumstances have expanded on the work of Freire, McLaren, and others, and have developed what has come to be known as critical pedagogy, or equity pedagogy. The use of these approaches may hold considerable promise for changing the traditional method of instructional delivery and usher in new ways of instruction that are more sensitive to the felt needs and difficulties of the diverse student (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

## **Conventional Theoretical Models & Frameworks**

Dominant theories of student retention, which have been used to help explain persistence, emphasize student involvement (Astin, 1984) and social integration (Tinto, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005) as a positive influence on student's ability to persist. In addition to theories of student involvement, academic and social integration concepts and models have emerged from studies conducted in broad traditional university settings (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Although academic

and social integration theories have produced with mixed results (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Tinto, 2005), the theories themselves were not grounded in data specific to any particular major group, such as a focused study on business students (Karemera et al., 2003; Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

“The student departure puzzle” (Braxton et al., 1997) stated that no single view on persistence and retention is comprehensive enough to account for the complicated set of factors that interact to influence student and institutional performance. Different theoretical perspectives account for many key factors that shape what students are prepared to do when they get to college. These factors are central influences in the meanings students make within, and out of, their experiences (Kuh et al., 2006). A synthesis of retention, behavioral and self-efficacy theories are a logical outcome in order to provide a viable framework for future studies (Bandura, 1977; Braxton, 2000; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

### **Sociological Perspectives and the Tinto Model**

Social integration is often measured as a composite of peer-to-peer interactions and faculty-student interactions, while academic integration reflects satisfaction with academic progress and choice of major (Kuh et al., 2006). Tinto (2005) proposed that increased levels of academic and social integration would lead to greater commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation. These commitments in turn would increase the likelihood a student would persist and graduate.

Tinto’s early concepts as described in his interactionalist theory have emerged as the dominant sociological “model” (Braxton et al., 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Grounded in Durkheim’s 1950 theory of suicide, Van Gennep’s 1960 anthropological model of cultural rites of passage, and the predictive version of the Spady Sociological model, Tinto reasoned that

individual pre-entry college attributes (family background, skill and ability, prior schooling) form individual goals and commitments. The individual student's goals and commitments interact over time with institutional experiences (the formal and informal academic and social systems). Tinto suggest the extent to which the individual becomes academically and socially integrated into the academic and social systems of an institution determines a student's decision to persist or dropout (1993, 2005).

Tinto suggested an optimal learning environment was created based on six central elements:

1. the institution setting an expectation of success for students;
2. offering guided goal exploration;
3. securing a match between personal interest and a career path of choice;
4. establishing a "blended" (academic, personal, social) student support system;
5. connecting with faculty & administrators and;
6. promoting active student ownership in the learning process (Tinto, 2005).

Furthermore, the sociological perspective clearly states families pass on advantages of their social position to their children by way of a process of expectation development, an idea consistent with status attainment theories and the literature on first-generation students (Schoon, 2008).

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the historical overview of American business education and the prolific national demographic shifts. A "plumb-line" of information pointing toward general student retention and success impacts emerged. Studies relevant to minority student attrition and persistence within the multicultural student experience and academic cultural context were

discussed. The influence of Black families, or “family-like” support on Black student persistence, surfaced as a central theme within the various studies. The literature also guided the review toward a brief examination of Black student thought surrounding race and institutional culture. Evidence of influence from non-cognitive predictors on persistence and success is also presented.

The existing literature on undergraduate student persistence offered major theoretical perspectives (conventional; sociological; psychological) with regard to minority student persistence. Tinto’s interactionist theory on student departure emerged as the dominant sociological model. The literature also suggests traditional predictors of success for majority students may be inappropriate for minorities. Finally, very little literature was discovered specifically addressing attitudes associated with Black business student persistence at predominantly White institutions.

## **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to examine African American undergraduate business degree alumni from a predominantly White institution that have contributed to attitudes and behaviors leading to degree attainment and employment or graduate study. This study explored the issue inductively, with no central theoretical lens.

### **Research Questions**

In this study I inquired about the following overarching research question:

- What were the “lived experiences” of African American alumni from an undergraduate business degree program during their educational and subsequent education and employment pursuits?

The research questions were as follows:

- What are the experiences of African American alumni which have led to graduation and employment?
- What barriers did participants confront during their undergraduate and subsequent education and employment pursuits?
- What were the support systems that African American alumni experienced during their undergraduate and employment journey?
- How did the experiences of persistence inform participants’ decisions and actions following graduation (as they pursued either graduate school or employment)?

### **Research Design**

This research used a qualitative approach, reflected within the overarching research question. My own personal experiences and professional background contributed to the application of constructivist ontology. The word ontology comes from the Greek word ontos,

which means “being”, and logos meaning “study” (i.e. the study of being) (Harvey, 2006). Ontology is more clearly described as the nature, and the organization, of reality (or being). Consequently it refers to "what exists" in a system: all elements within all category hierarchies and the relationships between them. Where reality is regarded as a constructed account, ontology should capture a shared understanding of the structured experience.

The basic ontological assumption of constructivism is relativism by which human sense-making organizes experiences into comprehensible, understandable, and explainable forms of artificial and constructed communication (Harvey, 2006). According to constructivists the world is independent of human minds, but knowledge of the world is always a human and social construction. Although under relativism there can be no “objective” truth, this interpretation should not be taken as an “anything goes” position (Crotty, 1998).

For this particular study I investigated the phenomenon of the experiences of persistence and success from the African American Alumni perspective. This research approach, based on a constructivist epistemology, used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Willig (2001) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis aims to gain an understanding of how participants view and experience their world.” (p. 66). Qualitative interviews, theme identification, and pattern recognition are elements embedded in the phenomenological method and adapted by interpretivist epistemology.

IPA techniques are also idea for investigating, in detail, the essence of “sense-making” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Willig (2001) adds that qualitative research is concerned with the meaning and core lived experiences that are rooted in the individuals’ socio-cultural context. This particular study required examining participant’s inner thoughts, perspectives on interpersonal interactions, and their perceptions of the relationship with the institutional



environment. IPA allowed the participants different perceptions to be grouped together in a meaningful way. By way of this inductive approach, data analysis and theme identification were performed within their own context, rather than from a predetermined theoretical basis (Creswell, 2009; Smith et. al., 2009).

Because the IPA design supported the researchers interest in better understanding the phenomenon of attitudes and behaviors of persistence through degree attainment, as well as the participants progression toward secured employment or graduate study (success) from the insider's perspective (Smith et al., 2009), this approach was very suitable. Although this approach was not generalizable, it allowed the data analysis to move from specific individual participants' experiences, toward a more general and broader context of ideas and understanding.

### **Institutional Context**

The institution selected for this study (pseudonym Westside University) was a public, four-year, research-1 institution located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The campus is located less than thirty miles from a major metropolitan area in an affluent predominantly white county. In 2013 Westside University had a total student enrollment of over 29,000 students with approximately 14% being students of color. Of the nearly 25,000 students, which were undergraduates, and the approximately 4500 graduate students, about two-thirds (67%) were state residents.

Westside University's business school offers a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with one of 4 areas of emphasis within the degree (Accounting, Finance, Management & Entrepreneurship, or Marketing). Prior to this study, the previous 10 years average enrollment of the business school was approximately 3000 students. African American students comprised less than 1% (42) of the overall student enrollment and averaged 6 degree

recipients per year. Nearly 63% of the degrees awarded were to female students. Overall, the business school had, on average, a 12.5% non-white student population over the previous 10 years.

### **Sample**

The researcher partnered with the institutions business school, and their diversity office, to select 10 to 15 Black / African American alumni through convenience sampling. These alumni attained a business degree from the institution at least 2 years prior to the study interviews, but no more than 8 years earlier. Participants were employed or attended graduate school. Verification of full-time employment or graduate study status was used as the primary selection criteria.

### **Data Collection**

In order to produce focused and information-rich responses, the researcher selected participants who provided the investigator with the best insight into the stated research question (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Thus, in cooperation with the study site program coordinator, names and email addresses of Black/African American business school alumni who earned their degree within the 2-8 year time period prior to the study were attained. Letters of invitation and consent forms via e-mail were then sent to the list. The participant response rate was 12, with 10 participants qualifying and being available to interview.

The interview procedure allowed participants to provide open-ended responses to a variety of guiding questions (see Appendix A). Through a semi-structured approach, each question involved exploring key interactions participants had with the following: parents; family members; friends not attending their institution; business school peers; other business students of color; other African American students; the general student population; other students of color

from different majors; school faculty and staff; campus administrators; the surrounding community; and potential employers / recruiters. Each participant was asked the same guiding questions. Although I adopted a facilitative and curious stance (rather than, say, challenging and interrogative) all guiding questions were covered in some fashion. By using this approach I gained a deep and more meaningful understanding regarding the personal experiences of each participant (Smith et al., 2010).

Face-to-face audio recorded interviews were conducted and used as the method for data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, with the permission of each participant to record the conversations. A neutral location, such as a local library study room, or quiet coffee shop was selected by the researcher and each participant. My previous involvement with the institution and the participants during their student years offered a trust base which facilitated a foundation for honest engagement. Once data was collected via the participant interviews, the electronic recording of the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Willig (2001) indicates because the IPA method "...accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to the research participants' life worlds", the resulting analysis will be an interpretation of the participant's experience (p. 53). While this methodology emphasizes the importance of language as a means to interpret the phenomenon, the analysis took into account that different individuals might attach different meanings to the same phenomenon. Meanings contained in each individual interview transcript were reviewed, accounts thematically identified, and themes integrated into meaningful clusters. Theme clusters were then examined within and across cases (Willig, 2001). The process of keeping detailed records of all steps, including sorting and identifying key progression phases, were followed.

These steps were helpful in understanding the participants' shared experiences and guided the process toward master thematic category analysis. For example every time a participant mentioned community, financial difficulties, partnering with another student to excel, or perhaps the discomfort of being "the only one", I recorded it in a coded form. During the raw data review state, these codes were displayed in a table or chart form. For the finished product, the data is presented in narrative form with quotes used as support. Table 2 offers a description of more specific step-by-step techniques used to guide the data analysis process.

Table 2

*Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis Stages* (Smith et. al., 2009; Willig, 2001)

Stage	Technique
<b>Stage 1: Initial Encounter with the Text</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reading and re-reading</b> - Identifying themes in the first case; List 'stream of consciousness' words, comments, and initial ideas (left hand margin of the transcript).</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2: Emergent Theme Transformation</b> <i>Theme Identification</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extract and Transform words, comments and ideas extracted (already listed in the LH margin) into <b>emergent theme</b> titles / phrases. Capture the essential quality of what was found in the text (right hand column).</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3: Clustering Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Look for connections</b> - List emergent themes separately from transcript; connection analysis within and between themes which are not convergent. Check theme clusters against original transcript to ensure that the themes hold true against what the interview produced. (i.e. Attach direct quotes to each theme from the transcript to ensure that the original meaning of the theme is not lost in the interpretation.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 4a: Master Theme Identification</b> <i>Production of a summary table</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison of the emergent themes; search for which share commonality or which contradict each other. Formulate into <b>super-ordinate themes</b> from <i>sub-ordinate themes</i>.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 4b: Case Integration</b> <i>Continue with other Cases</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a table of <b>master themes</b></li> <li>• Start with the master themes from case 1 &amp; look for further evidence in case 2</li> <li>• New themes may emerge in each subsequent case</li> <li>• <b>The process is cyclical:</b> go back to case 1 to see if they are represented there also</li> <li>• Prepare to go over the phases of analysis several times, going back over transcripts &amp; rethinking theme clusters</li> </ul>

<p><b>Stage 5: Reporting the Study Findings</b> <i>Write-Up</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <i>final stage of analysis</i> – Translate themes into a narrative account. Theme foci choice is based on the richness of particular passages and how they highlight or illuminate aspects of the account</li> <li>• Introduction, methodological rationale &amp; associated process</li> <li>• Analysis / Results – structure around master themes; discuss the various appearances of themes and relationships between themes (displayed in a table / diagram)</li> <li>• Distinguish between participant comments and researchers interpretation. Address reflexivity issues</li> <li>• Discuss theme analysis in relation to pertinent literature; share areas for future research, theoretical development and improved practice considerations</li> </ul>
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### **Trustworthiness**

Transcripts were checked for accuracy with coding continually compared to data, and definitions were maintained in a separate memo. Once the interview was completed and the recordings transcribed, member (or informant) checking was used via email and phone to insure accuracy (Willig, 2001). Each study participant was offered the opportunity to review and comment on their respective transcripts. In addition to securing a rich, thick description in the initial responses, this feedback measure contributed to a deeper understanding of each participants “lived experience”. My previous history with the student participants allowed me to build rapport with the participants and engage in honest open responses.

Finally, while this process was not error free, specific steps to protect the confidentiality of each participant were followed (i.e. the use of pseudonyms, consent form approvals, secured electronic transcript, and a protected laptop). These measures minimized incidence of incorrect data and supported my overall goal to provide findings that are authentic, original and reliable.

## **Summary**

This chapter discussed the research design and methodology used to conduct the study. Research questions, participant selection, data collection, and analysis methods were also described. The research results are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

## **CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American business degree alumni from a predominantly White institution that have contributed to attitudes and behaviors leading to persistence through degree attainment and employment or graduate study. The overarching research question which guided this study was “what was the ‘lived experience’ of African American alumni from a predominantly white undergraduate business degree program?” Associated questions were

1. What are the experiences which have led to graduation and employment?
2. What barriers did participants confront?
3. What were the support systems during participants undergraduate and employment journey?
4. What patterns of interaction did participants develop?
5. How did the experiences of persistence inform participants’ decisions and actions following graduation in either graduate school or employment?

Each student attended and graduated from the same predominantly white business school located at a public, four-year, research-1 institution located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States (pseudonym Westside University)

This chapter offers a brief overview and profile of the participating alumni and outlines the perceptions of their experiences. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, to ensure confidentiality. In addition, the following profiles provide limited demographic information, area of degree emphasis, and current type of employment or area of graduate study. All participants earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration. Each participant’s area of study or emphasis is reflected in Table 3. The area of emphasis most common amongst the participants

was Human resources, as noted by a total of five Alumni responses. Each participant enrolled into the same business school as a first-time entering student with one student transferring from another college on the same campus.

Table 3

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Academic Emphasis</b>	<b># of Parents in Household</b>	<b>Profession</b>
<b>Sierra</b>	26	Female	Human Resources Marketing	2	Sports Marketing Management
<b>Shelly</b>	23	Female	Human Resources Management	1	Healthcare Management
<b>Andrew</b>	26	Male	Information Systems	2	Education Administration
<b>Rianna</b>	24	Female	Operations Management	2	Financial Consultant
<b>Makayla</b>	27	Female	Human Resources International Business	2	Supply Chain Management
<b>India</b>	31	Female	Marketing International Business	2	Business Owner Entrepreneur
<b>Dejuan</b>	25	Male	Operations Management	1	Event Coordinator
<b>Matthew</b>	24	Male	Human Resources Management	2	HR Administrator
<b>Carmela</b>	26	Female	Human Resources Management	2	Business Owner Entrepreneur
<b>Davian</b>	24	Male	Accounting MS	2	Accountant

*\*denotes transfer student Alumni*

**Participants**

**Shelly (23 years of age)**

Shelly was a 23 year old Bi-Racial/Black alumni who entered college at 17 years of age. She attended a rural white high school and originally was interested in attending the University of Hawaii. Important influences on her decision to attend Westside were her mother and grandparents attended, as well as being a scholarship recipient. The Business School’s diversity



program also impacted her choice to stay. During Shelly's undergraduate experience she was employed in the Business School's diversity office. Following successful internship training with Target, she was offered a full-time Executive Team Leader position prior to graduation. Her experiences working in human resource management aided her in securing a more fulfilling role as a Client Services Manager for a nonmedical homecare agency. Shelly indicated how her experiences have heightened her sense of awareness around race relations, particularly in the workplace. She stated, "...you know when I sit in the room with all of the people who I'm working with now, I'm the only person of color, so it's always kind of interesting to see that..."

**Sierra (26 years of age)**

Sierra was a 26 year old entertainment marketing coordinator working in the sports industry. Sierra's professional background began as a marketing intern for a large public company in the information technology and services industry her sophomore year. She also interned within the Oil and Energy industry, as well as a small privately held marketing and advertising company her junior and senior years. Following graduation, she has worked on multiple projects and held marketing management positions with two different companies.

Affordability influenced her decision to attend Westside University. Her initial intent was to transfer to an institution that she described as being more urban and possibly a better "fit". While her mother was central in her upbringing, her grandmother, father and other diverse students within the business school were influential and supportive in her degree attainment. Sierra's challenged journey was chalked up as an invaluable learning experience as she remarked "...if I would have went to a college that may have been more open and more diverse, I may not have the perspective I do and I wouldn't have been as prepared as I was to enter into the workforce."

**Carmela (26 years of age)**

Carmela was a 26 year old entrepreneur who focused her interest in southern deserts, which evolved into owning her own cake design and event planning business. During her college years she interned in marketing and public relations and was junior executive within the retail sales industry. Following graduation she worked a few years in the information technology and services industry before launching her own business.

Her original interest in attending the University of Michigan and pursuing a degree in Early Childhood Education became altered by a combination of parental influences and the absence of a historically Black Sorority at University of Michigan. After enrolling in Westside and becoming a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Carmela became actively involved in local regional and national leadership activities. During her undergraduate years Carmela's parents provided the majority of her financial support. Carmela believed her experiences equipped her to know how to learn. She commented,

Now, I know the specific steps to success. I found that out as an adult, because I really put in the time to read, to watch videos, to listen to audio books, everything to really see what's gonna help me reach my goals. I put in that time myself.

**Rianna, (23 years of age)**

Rianna was a 23 year old consulting associate with a major international consulting firm who transferred into the Business School after attending the College of Arts & Sciences for a few years. She immediately considered transferring from Westside, prior to finding a community she resonated with. Once Rianna's older sibling, who was an upper-class Business student, exposed her to the Business School's diversity office activities and their academic community, she was determined to become part of this experience. In addition to being involved with the Multicultural Business Student Association, she was also very active with the Black Student

Alliance and African Student Association. As Rianna's mind set and motivation to persist through college and into the world of work was captured as she stated "... when I leave this university, what I'm seeing now is kind of similar to what I would be seeing outside of these walls." So kind of thinking, "Okay, if I can make it in this world at the University of Westside I can make it in any world outside of these walls."

**Davian (24 years of age)**

Davian completed his Bachelors and Masters of Science in accounting after a total of five years of course work. During Davian's undergraduate experience he worked at the University Career Services Center, the Business Schools diversity office, served as a mentor, and had two relevant internships. During his junior and senior years he was also involved in campus wide leadership through positions promoting school and college alliance building. He demonstrated a broad interest expressed in volunteer service, organization leadership, internships and employment. At the time of the interview he secured employment as an assurance associate at a large international accounting firm.

Although Davian struggled during his early years in college, he indicated his motivation to always search for solutions, as was expected by his family. Once Davian found his career path, his purpose for finishing became part of his plan. He affirmed "...the moment I found out what kinda career path I was gonna go on, I started doing internships. And then that helped me to realize what requirements those firms had if I was going to work there one day."

**DeJuan (25 years of age)**

DeJuan was a 25 year old administrative manager and event planner for non-profit foundation. Soon after being hired by his internship employer following graduation, DeJuan found a better fit as an operations coordinator in the on-line education industry. He has since

secured a third job out of graduation now working in a non-profit agency. During his undergraduate experience, DeJuan worked on campus in academic services and the diversity office. He was also heavily involved in multicultural organizations and being a leader in a traditionally Latino fraternity. Although DeJuan received significant academic scholarships, his economic background and first generation experience limited his financial literacy, compounding financial challenges. Over time, DeJuan also learned how to effectively balance social interest, academic demands, and issues of self-identity in a predominantly white environment. DeJuan continued to value the importance of recognizing difference as an asset. “You need to acknowledge these differences amongst people and when you acknowledge those differences amongst people you’re able to appreciate those differences that make us who we are... but beyond that you get to see an individual.”

**Matthew (24 years of age)**

Matthew was a 24 year old payroll specialist with an international corporation at the time he interviewed. Prior to this position, he worked in human resources coordinating new talent recruitment orientations and employee relations, while supporting accounting and data entry functions. He acknowledged his academic work prepared him for the related responsibilities, specifically in terms of employment law and compensation concepts. He was very active in student organizations like Society for Human Resource Management, Management Club, and the Multicultural Business Student Association. During Matthew’s first two years he was a non-scholarship student-athlete. He was also employed on campus as a resident hall advisor. Matthew mentioned how relationships have proven to be valuable in his career.

One of the big reasons why I got my job out of school was because of the connections I had made at WU. They saw someone who was a minority, who was really connected to the school - the company, I currently work with has a good relationship with the school and they want to try to keep that when it comes to recruiting. That’s why I was really big

[active] in recruiting. All the student groups I was involved in, professors that I knew, advisors that I knew, and keeping in touch with them after I graduated - and keeping those relationships with some of the people in Career Services, and then also my internship experiences that had helped me get the job that I have.

**Makayla (27 years of age)**

Makayla was a 27 year old supply chain manager who was hired by the major office supply retailer in which she interned. During her college experience she was very active as a campus student leader and peer mentor with Black and multicultural student organizations. She also worked in the business school diversity office and used her leadership skills to encourage other black business students to get involved in the diverse business student academic learning community. Makayla's parents are immigrant Africans who financially supported four other siblings' attendance at Westside. Her current professional path reflected interest to build upon her international business interest. "I am wrapping-up my fourth rotation a dealing sourcing product in China as a part of a leadership rotational program ...the next step is going to be a trip to China to go observe, um, manufacturing and sourcing of our factories. "

**Andrew (26 years of age)**

Andrew was a 26 year old Education Administrator who worked in middle school, high school and college settings. His strong passion to support access, equity, and success for all students prompted him to pursue a Master's degree in Education. Andrew was heavily involved with a historically Black Greek fraternity, the multicultural business students association, Black Student Alliance, Muslim Student Association, and involved in many volunteer and community service activities, in addition to working as a residence hall advisor. His engaging exchanges of support with his fraternity brothers and other diverse students in the Business schools diverse academic learning community were important points of reflection. Andrew reflected on his pre-college business exposure program activities and worked as a resident advisor. His overall

experiences and success influenced his younger sibling to attend the Business School at Westside University. Andrew characterized leadership and service as a core part of who he is when he remarked “I think in every endeavor that I did it was tied to giving back, and because of my, I guess, common thread of community engagement and service learning and all those things, it gave me a framework of my direction.”

### **India (31 years of age)**

India was a 31 year old entrepreneur at the time of interview. During her five years as a business student she worked in the Collegiate Athletics department where she received personal guidance and professional mentoring from a senior administrator. Following graduation her experience with city agencies and governments has helped her gain confidence with establishing her own consultant and special events business - providing services for individuals, businesses, and organizations. Westside did not offer school organized student activities, however she did find relevant service and leadership opportunities in the Black Student Alliance and Westside University student government. She commented

...always look for the resources out there. It's not always gonna jump out at you – what you should do or the way to make something happen. I feel like you have to dig a little deeper, do some research, ask people, meet with people. It really taught me to be more resourceful on my own instead of waiting for opportunities or people to come to me and offer me something.

### **Emergent Themes**

In addition to asking participants to share their current employment or graduate study activities, each interview included asking respondents to describe their overall college experience related to persistence. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers identified three primary themes and ten supporting sub-themes representing the lived experience and meaning found in the participants' experience of persistence at a predominantly white

business school. Regardless of the range of responses, the following 3 primary themes were: (a) Meaningful Connections, (b) Building Relationships, and (c) Decisions to Continue through degree completion. Associated sub-themes were: (a) relevant pre-college experience, matching misfits, institution interventions, the influence of a familiar face, (b) psychological well-being, experiencing cohorts and student collaborations, social and academic “kinship”, caring campus connections and business faculty, mentoring, and (c) continuous decisions to seek help.

### **THEME ONE: Meaningful Connections**

As with most any large group, such as a major community of university students, there can be the emergence of smaller groups. Similarly, the study participants attempt to become a part of the broader campus experience led to smaller group connections. However these participants indicated their awareness for making early contact with a caring person was magnified as they discovered how few Black business students were actually enrolled. Makayla stated, “WU is a really big school, 30,000 students and, it’s pretty easy for you to get lost and kind of swept up in the wind and just give up.” Although most of the participants expressed experiences of marginalization and the inability to connect, all of the participants were able to construct or discover at least one meaningful peer or professional relationship on campus early in the first year of their college experience.

**Relevant pre-college experience - academics, environment, and exposure.** Remarks about participants’ transition included references to the type of high school environment, academic preparedness, and pre-college exposure as influencing their orientation to college expectations. India, Andrew, and Carmela discussed the University’s Business Leadership Pre-College Program. India acknowledged “I don’t remember that [transitioning] being hard because I was in the business leadership program in high school so I automatically was able to enroll in

the business school.” She also remarked about being the only black student in her high school and said “...because I went to a private school I think, in high school I learned about studying on my own and kind of doing things on my own and not needing as much support.”

Andrew explained

...after that weeklong intensive boot camp, I learned a lot about not just business education, but also that if I chose to attend WU that I would find that I would have a community of support, a community of learners, and that is actually indeed why I chose to go to WU. So I think when I came to campus my freshman year, I had a jumpstart and that program gave me the tools out there to springboard myself into a great, uh, not just a great academic experience, but a great college experience - meeting new people from diverse and inclusive backgrounds.

Andrew also said his first contact was with the business school’s diversity staff.

**Matching misfits.** Carmela, who was also a participant in the pre-college business program, stated “I felt like I didn't belong to the full black community, like the BSA, Black Student Alliance ... I didn't connect like I wanted to.” Her experience was less grounded in staying connected with those who may have matriculated from her pre-college experience or the BSA. She was strongly influenced by childhood exposure to her mothers’ sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. AKA. “I didn't really know what a sorority was, but I admired her, anything that she did.” She concluded “Once I joined AKA, which was early in my college career, I felt like I had somewhere to belong to within [the] community at WU.”

Some participants expressed responses to student lifestyle differences and personal safety. Early feelings of discomfort were reported by India, Sierra, Matthew, Davian. India mentioned how she handled a mismatch with her first roommate,

So once I found the quality friends that I felt like I could relate to and I could have the same interests; that made it a lot easier for me. But initially when I first got there I was almost gonna, like, run for the hills. I didn’t think it was going to work out so well. I ended up moving in with another African American student about two months after I got there because the two rush girls, that’s what I call them, who didn’t have the same lifestyle as me, were interested in different things than I was interested in, - it didn’t work



out. So I moved in with another African American student who's my best friend 'till this day.

Matthew mentioned how his roommate didn't like African Americans and said,

I had a really hard time freshman year. Being in some – being somewhere where you're different from everybody else makes it really hard to have a great social experience your freshman year. Um, because people point you out, teachers call on you. You are pretty much – you are different and you realize that really fast.

Following a racially charged interaction with his roommate and floor neighbors he said

one [important relationship] was a lady who had worked in the dorms - she was able to move me from my current situation to a better situation, 'cause she knew the guy I was with was no good and he had already got in trouble for drugs or alcohol; she was definitely instrumental as well as [D-BAN] and my dad and mom just kinda calmed me down [as we were] trying to figure out things and just keep me on the right track.

**Institution interventions.** Sierra offered a description of her first challenge and the importance of making the right connection early.

I remember going to my first college party and the comments and the things that happened was just very eye opening, especially because I went to a [High School] that was more diverse, but in an accepting way. So I guess, I really wasn't aware that I was in an environment that I should have a heightened sense of awareness.

Then I leave the room; I come back. Um, people are using, you know, racial slurs to describe me, and I kind of just left and walked home because I think that was the first time that I'd been in that type of environment [that] it was accepted, and the people that I was with agreed as well.

She continued “my mom had to explain that it was – it's a difficult school because the environment that you're in is challenging... and not from an academic perspective, but from just an everyday showing-up-in-the-class perspective.” She stated, “I ended up joining a program that was specifically tailored towards diverse populations and keeping them within the business school. And that's, ultimately, what kept me there.” She described how she learned about the program,

I got this letter – I filled out my financial aid and I have a separate letter saying that I had a scholarship, which gave me that [confidence] – helping me feel better about the

situation. 'Cause from my perspective, going in, I didn't, you know, use this – I'm, I'm 18 at the time. I didn't want to pay for – I didn't want to pay to go someplace that I didn't want to go to. I would rather pay more to go to a place that I wanted to go to.

Obviously, I know that I'm lucky that I had that thought, even though it wasn't something I'd act upon. I think that that made a huge difference.

Davian also explained,

When I was a freshman I had a hard time just being at the university, um, at a university that was predominantly white, I went through certain problems - whether that was racial problems or just problems where just being in my classes and not having the same support groups as other people did.

[As] I was branching out, I got denied quite a bit. And then by joining this group and by becoming involved in this group, I was able to gather a lot of those resources that I felt that other people already had, so, it helped me out by giving me kind of a level playing field, by giving me additional resources.

Shelly described her experiences of connecting early by outreach efforts from the business schools diversity office staff -

They flooded us with e-mails coming into our freshman year, and I was a little you know just kind of confused. I was like 'oh, a diversity program, why do I need to go into a diversity program,' you know blah, blah, blah. Then I went up there for orientation on campus and I got to meet everyone and the staff in the office, and right away pretty much all of us who were in there knew that it was gonna be a place for us to be able to go to all four years and even past our four years for college, - just to help each other on school work, be able to go to some networking events, help each other with networking events, as well as just the staff in the office overall. You could tell that you know having a campus with [3]0,000 people, they wanted to create a program where people could come and be accepted and welcomed and help them through college, 'cause a lot of universities don't have that.

**The influence of a familiar face.** Overcoming feelings of discomfort, surprise, and shock associated with being one of only a few African American students on campus, and fewer within the business school was expressed. Rianna, the only transfer participant described her first experience during orientation,

I knew that, um, WU was predominantly white. But me, myself, walking in and being the only one in a sea of white people - that was like, 'Wow... this is, this is your life. This is

what I'm gonna be dealing with on a day-to-day basis.' So, so that was just day one. I was – I didn't know what to do with myself.

She goes on to explain how one of her older sibling's fraternity brothers volunteering recognized her and how

...that kind of made me feel a lot better. I was, 'Okay. I'm not the only one. Like, I know someone here.' And he took me aside and, like, kinda pep talked me and, um, introduced me to, [another African American upper-class student].

She continued,

I kinda wanted to give up in that moment and try to maybe possibly apply to another school, 'cause I, I didn't feel like I belonged. But seeing someone else who looked like me and who was comforting me and being there kinda helped me begin my journey.

Making at least one meaningful connection was described as a pivotal entry point for establishing important relationships and gaining membership into a group that fit each participants particular social and academic interests.

## **THEME TWO: Building Relationships**

When participants were asked what experiences led to their persistence through college and to discuss their support systems during their undergraduate degree program each described some type of mentally challenging experience. More importantly, patterns, examples and methods for accomplishing psychological well-being were provided.

**Psychological well-being.** While most participant experienced the classroom positively, some participants gave examples of a few mentally unsettling experiences. Davian, Rianna, and Sierra reflected on being the Black student in most all-white business classes. Davian remarked,

I definitely stuck out a lot more than other people, so I got called on a little bit more. Um, they would ask me certain questions that they wouldn't ask other people. So, for example, in some of my accounting classes, they would speak directly to me instead of other people. And it could have been just some of the basic questions that most of us did already understand. But they wanted to make sure that I was understanding it, um, and that we were all on the same page. So maybe if I understood it, then everybody else did

too. I mean it kind of just – I don't know, it got on my nerves a little bit just to be picked on like that. But I got through that.

Rianna commented, “I'd have some teachers who would either, support me or would kinda give me those similar looks like, "Why is she here?" Like, "Does she get this? Can she get this done?" But those were, ultimately, some experiences that helped me.”

Sierra said, “Within the classroom, I think that a lot of times it was just difficult for me to, to command the same level of respect that I knew some of my other students receive, from both my peers and from professors.” The classroom climate example she offered described a professor

... talking about bartering and he was talking about different ways that you can barter, yada, yada, yada. And he said something about bartering beans for Mexicans and bartering rice for Asians. And everybody in the class, like, laughed, [they] thought it was hilarious. And I looked at my friend and I was like, ‘Did he really – he just said that – like everybody's not – like, nobody's even, like, afraid to laugh’.

DeJuan explained,

I knew that it was a predominately white school but I just didn't know how much of it that it was, like, that until you actually get up there and you get in the, like, trenches and you're in class and stuff like that and you realize, like, hold on I really am – the only, like, black student in this class. And I think it's – it takes away from your cultural experience because you almost start to, like, just feel, like, that you should be something different. Yeah. Because so many, like, – ‘cause there's nobody else like you, you feel like you should be something different to connect with somebody.

Makayla described what she found to be an odd on-going incident of misplaced identity.

One of the weirdest [incidents] was I had a professor who really liked me and he'd mistaken me for another student. [Chuckles] And I was in his class, we were in two totally separate classes, me and Amy, he thought we were the same person because we have similar features and that was just weird to me. So he would talk to me about something that he talked to her about and I was like, “I don't understand what you're talking about.” He was like, “What? Weren't you here?” And I'm like, “Umm, No.” He was, “Oh, yeah, sorry.” [Chuckles] “I had you in this class.” I'm like, “No, I wasn't in that class with you. That wasn't me ... I mean we have similar features, but we're not the same person, right?”

Rianna said, "...just the comfort of knowing... someone else that I could get to know, and, you know, find my comfort zone, definitely helped." Similarly, Sierra said "...also the program, kind of gave me, um, a safe place for me to come to ...and safe in multiple ways." She further defined her thought when she stated,

... a place where I didn't necessarily feel like I had to, um, be anything but myself within that environment. And, ah, I think especially in the business school, the type of environment that it is that – for any student – it's, it's very competitive and it's – there's definitely a certain personality type that I think gravitates towards a business degree... and I don't necessarily have that personality.

The broader impact of a "safe" space was commented on by Makayla when she added; "...people from other schools would come and do – like come and use the office and have a safe place and because we – some of us would be there, they would come as well."

Most of the participants attributed experiences of belonging and emotional security to participation in meaningful small group experiences, having a diverse business school community oriented program and physical space.

**Experiencing cohorts and student collaborations.** In any community setting, there can be the emergence of smaller groups from the larger group environment. It is important to note for first and second year Westside business students, classes were not offered in the actual business school facility, thus the opportunity to interact and learn from upper class peers within the business school was limited. Consequently, the participants expressed the importance of self-constructed groups, university organizations, and diversity program activities as effective supports for producing meaningful learning relationships and promoting on-going persistence.

Carmela remembered one of the most important things she did was develop the habit of always asking business professors, instructors, and teaching assistants for help. She said "you need to know professors and the TAs one on one, [and go] in at office hours and really

connecting with them.” After asking her what prompted her to do this she replied “...It must have been just other people saying, you know, ‘Go in. Ask for help. Go to office hours.’ I wouldn't have come up with that on my own. I heard it from other students. ‘Just go in’ and go ask for help.”

Makayla discussed how she was accepted into a campus-wide honors program which included membership into a prestigious scholars’ community (PSC). As a result of the broad campus wide nature of the scholars’ community, Makayla said,

I probably knew one other person in each class. So if I ever needed anything or wanted to ask questions that I didn’t feel comfortable going to the [business] professor [about], I kind of bounced a couple of ideas off the [same] one person that I knew.

Personal significance offered Makayla mental clarity and purpose. She continued

The second semester I left PSC. I wasn’t with Business Diverse Academic Neighborhood (B-DAN) and I was in classes and, and everything kind of just lost meaning. I was just going through the motions, I don’t really know why or what this is for and I can do all this on my own, but what’s the point? And then I found B-DAN and I had a friend in every single class and we would study together or somebody would take the class the semester before and they would give you pointers. And they would say, ‘Well actually this is what the professor is like. He usually asks really tricky questions.’ Some of them would like the class so much that they would say like, ‘Yeah, this will be on the test. Like study this material better. Make sure you understand how these two are connected and you should articulate it in this way.’ Um, so that, that was really awesome.

Shelly stated,

I don’t think I would’ve graduated if the diversity program wasn’t there, or it would have taken me a lot longer than it did; I probably would’ve been there for five years. But just utilizing all of the staff in the diversity office to be able to sit down and show us okay so this is what you’re gonna need to do to graduate -here’s a TA or here’s a tutor if you’re gonna need help with this class or this class you’re gonna have to get this percent of a grade. But not only - they don’t just tell you that, but they say well this is how you can do it, here’s all of your sources. And you don’t get that a lot at the business school in general 'cause it’s pretty hush-hush...

Andrew specifically described the role and value of administrators grouping diverse business students in specific classes. He emphasized

...in the business school, some of our courses were, you know, 150, 200 students, but um, I liked the coursework and I knew my peers because of the ‘cohorting’ that was done in B-DAN and, um, I followed each – each class I had someone I had a class with before.

Rianna remarked about her observations prior to her transferring and what attracted her to the business school.

B-DAN basically tries to focus on marginalized students in the community, or at Westside, and help them with their academic success, professional development and just mentorship, and trying to bring in, um, find a community for this group of students at the business school, so that they can come study and meet other people like them.

She elaborated, “...you may see them in your classes, build relationships with them. And then have those study groups and come together and build your skills in, in whatever you're trying to do at the university.”

Every participant offered insight into how effective a cohort experience was for them in terms of building meaningful relationships during their college experience. Reflecting back India said

I think being very involved in school life; having a community of friends and administrators, and mentors, to support me, was really important for me. I came into the school with that, you know, doing the business leadership program of course. I had people that were looking out for me and interested in my success and that I could go to and talk to for advice or suggestions. Early on there, when I got my job in the Athletic Department, that was really [good]. I was really into sports so, with Ms. Dickson becoming my mentor there, and her being so well connected and encouraging - [it was] things like that, which helped me graduate.

**Social and academic “kinship”.** Patterns of persistence from these participants suggested one-on-one and small group experiences formed safe and mentally healthy interactions. Those interactions were reported as producing family-like connections. India expressed how her decision to live with connect with two African American women, her roommate who was a business student, as well her employer who became her mentor, have produced two important life-long relationships. Carmela’s closeness to her sorority sisters and

leadership activity carried through her out college. Andrew and Davian each offered examples of how similar relationships helped them as well. “I was more comfortable in classes where I, one, knew people, um, two, there may have been other students of color or people I could relate to on different levels”, said Andrew. Davian also purported

[It was] hard at first, but got people around me that had my back all the time. And, um, if I did experience any sort of, um, problems, they would help me out, whether that was a problem with my health or a problem with, um, at school, people around me treating me a certain way. Um, they always had my back, so it made me feel a little bit more comfortable. But it was really hard at first to build that up.

Shelly explained the role of serving others as an important element for supporting other underrepresented students’ persisting. She noted,

...not only you know ask[ing] people for help, but also giving back to some of the younger students, because you know I saw some freshmen come in my senior year and they were just completely lost and you know being able to give back to them and help them through some of their situations as well was good.

Makayla shared how she developed trusting personal relationships with others as a result of working together in a business schools diverse academic community.

So going out to party with whoever you want to party with you learn that you can’t just party with anybody. So I would go out with people from the Business Diverse Academic Neighborhood, we would all party together. And because they took care of me in school, they take care of me outside of school.

She concluded, “I think that it [B-DAN] allowed for a really nice college experience, so a home away from home. You do have to learn how to stand on your own two and be independent, and you’ll have growing pains, right?”

Makayla and DeJuan were, and continue to be, very close friends. She remarked “whenever we were interviewing for jobs or we were nervous about going to career fairs we’d go together. And that’s actually how I got the job that I’m in.”



**Caring campus connections and business faculty.** Although every participant had a variety of faculty experiences, overall they were reported as positive. Carmela, Andrew, and Matthew each followed practical steps to engage faculty and stressed the importance positive relationship with professors. Andrew explained how connecting with one professor helped him in with another professor before they even met. He recalled

...the instructor came up to me and he told me, hey, Professor Eliot told me to check in with you, you're a student who has just great observation skills and gives great feedback and, um, she told me to check in with you, um, throughout the semester to see how I'm doing, how the class is doing, what can we do to improve.

He continued,

...that interaction more so clinched the deal with me engaging with the curriculum and my business professors to a different degree, whereas if I hadn't had that conversation with him, I probably would have been that student in the back of the classroom kind of chilling, waiting for the semester to be over. But, because of his positive reinforcement, his affirmation, um, and his, uh, just say, just astuteness of following up with student feedback, was something - that, I deem, and still deem, as important. So, I think that added so much value to classroom experience.

Matthew explained how taking responsibility to connect with professors produced success for him.

I think it was kinda two parts... One I guess going to office hours and, you know, at first I guess what I would do is introduce myself after every, uh, every - not every class, but every 'first class' every semester [with] a new professor - just introduce myself and let them know who I was, try to sit in the front, um, try to be engaged in the class, and if I had questions go to office hours.

**Mentoring.** Simple things, which may seem to be straight forward, can become day-to-day challenges at various stages throughout any students' college career. At its most basic level, these participants described mentoring relationships which helped them know that that they were not alone, realize that someone cared, and demystified some of the challenges associated with academic, social, and career decision making.

Participants discussed mentoring as an important ingredient in learning about resources, internship and employment opportunities. Participants also indicated receiving valuable advice along the academic and decision-making journey was also important. Davian reported he realized "...there are certain people that you can talk to that will help to improve your experience." Once he secured on-campus employment through business school diversity program staff, he then explained how a variety of professional mentoring relationships with his employer evolved. He said "the staff at the [career center] job also helped me to kinda know what path I want to go on. Um, they had helped to kind of mentor me and show me which classes were the right ones to take, and what I should think about in deciding my future..." He continued, "...they treated me like family also and were really helpful supporting me a lot..."

Matthew clearly remembered how relevant internships, experiences, and relationships were in launching his career. After receiving rejection letters from graduate programs, and being under the stressful elements of searching for employment, he recalled

I think I had two tests that week and I think I had to work the next day so I wasn't gonna go, but Stacy kinda convinced me to go and I was like 'alright I'll give it a shot'. And I ended up meeting one of the HR directors there and I talked to her for almost an hour about my experience in my internship that I had at IBM for the past few years and she told me about an opening that they were having and so I basically think I applied for the position and then interviewed probably within two weeks and then I found out I got the position as I was leaving my last final. So just from, like, the connections and – um, like I said the people that were there to support me, um, I don't – I definitely wouldn't have, you know, at least I wouldn't have been at Wave Runner."

Matthew's involvement in the Society of Human Resource Management and the positive encouragement he received from the student organization faculty advisor resulted in him taking action to secure his first job. He also described the network of relationships in support of this accomplishment when he stated,

...the student groups that I've joined and the connections that I've had and then when I, you know, started working for Wave – interviewing for Wave Runner a lot of people

heard good things about me from relationships I had with; B-DAN with, um, Kelly Bonner from the Peer Mentorship Program who was really close with Les Gide who's our VP of HR.

The participants reported personal growth and academic success was promoted by their involvement in business and ethnic specific student organizations, business diversity program activities, academic study groups, and culturally responsive peer and professional relationships.

### **THEME THREE: Decisions to Continue**

Participants were asked what experiences led to their persistence through degree completion and how those experiences are affecting them now. Although most of the participants expressed the importance of family influence, making early connections with school peers or administrators, and building a network of useful relationships, they all agreed the most important determinant in their persistence was the on-going decision to persist.

India indicated how central it was to be able to know when to change your direction in order to make progress in the long run as she described deciding to drop a class.

I felt uncomfortable when I didn't really understand the content, and when I didn't understand the content those classroom experiences were dreadful. I remember I took a computer science class which probably had 500 students in it, um, and I just didn't feel smart whatsoever. I ended up withdrawing from that class.

Similarly, Matthew also mentioned how he had to abandon his second interest, medical school, when he withdrew from a physics class.

India also cited how certain success required a proactive mindset.

I got my international business certificate for taking so many number of international business classes. So, I remember having to go to the advisors office to get help with what courses to take and what order and where to graduate on time and things like that. They were very helpful but I had to really try to figure it out on my own.

Even though Carmela made a point to note there was "pressure to graduate" from her parents, she declared "Just the sense of the knowing – I mean having the mindset like, 'I know I

can do it. I can get out and I'm not going to drop out.' That wasn't an option." She contextualized, "I also wanted to get out and be in the world as quickly as I could, too." She continued, "...it really motivated me to get out as quickly as I could, to create something else – in my life. So I guess the need of wanting to move on to something else really helps you."

As Sierra reflected on her experience of persistence she recalled, "I think part of the reason also why I stayed, why I did stay is because just my personality, I learned, for better or worse, to adapt; negative situations or positive situations" and recognized her ability to "obtain consistency, either way." She specifically referred to her purpose for being in college when she stated "... I came to college to get an education."

As Makayla remembered how large her International Marketing class was she recalled decisions she made to encourage others.

We made a pact that you had to sit in the front and so we would sit in the front. And if you came in late - DeJuan always came in late and walked in whenever the hell he wanted - and we would give him shit for it, like, 'No, that's not okay.' So that accountability. And if you were falling asleep in class then having somebody you know stab you with a pen and tell you to wake up or just having somebody there to, to catch you when you fall.

Similarly, DeJuan emphasized his reason for continuing were also personal and said he chose to persist in order to

...know that I could, like, keep going and actually achieve this and even though it was something very difficult for me as far as my academics, to know that I could just – I could get over that obstacle and keep pushing forward with it.

Andrew explained there were many times he felt the urge to give up, but also affirmed how important it was to approach learning with an active focus and being prepared for class. He emphasized, "...when I was in classes I would pay attention to the professors". Davian and Matthew both concurred. Davian proclaimed

I was able to kinda figure out what type of – how I should go about different classes, so the blueprint for success for each of my classes. I was able to see that you need to kind of adapt to the teachers; you need to adapt to a test that they're providing to you, that you need to just to continue to adapt to what's happening around you or else you're not going to succeed.

Other examples of personal decisions to persist emerged in Rianna's choice to transfer into the business school. She said, "I've always seen myself as a businesswoman, but I never knew that there were a lot of people that looked like me pursuing this degree." After being inspired by MBSA and B-DAN events she confirmed "I think that's when I began my first steps into – applying to the business school." Rianna experienced what she described as a moment of "knowing that, 'Okay' - This is something that I can see myself doing as well". When talking to Shelly about her internships she explained

...one of the kids in B-DAN told me to go talk to them at the career fair..., and so I went to the career fair and talked to them and I got an internship with them... then I was offered a full-time position coming out of college based on how I did on the internship.

Matthew poignantly concluded

I definitely feel like it ultimately comes down to if you, you know, if you want it or not. Um, you know, I mean 'cause there, like I said, there was times where I wanted to, you know, switch schools and transfer schools or go somewhere else, um, or not continue on. Um, and yeah I did have the support system and everything but then in the end it's kinda your decision if, you know, if you want to go through it; if you want to – if it's worth it to you. Um, so I guess just having that belief in yourself that you can do it.

The participants' insights pointed toward each of them understanding the importance of taking personal ownership and responsibility for their decisions to seek help along the way, make the necessary adjustments, and adapt to a very difficult academic and social environment.

Most participants explicitly claimed the majority of their activities and efforts worked toward them persisting through degree completion. Embracing challenges as an active learning opportunity was a common concept. Andrew clarified this mind set when he explained "I think in every endeavor that I did it was tied to giving back, and because of my, I guess, common

thread of community engagement and service learning and all those things, it gave me a framework of my direction.” He specified,

...every endeavor, every opportunity that I kind of embarked had some academic excellence component to it. I was always told by many of my mentors that the goal at the end of the tunnel is to graduate and I didn't do anything that would stray or get me too knock me off of that goal. So when I was in say, you know, a fraternity, there was a GPA component to it. When I wanted to be an RA, there was a GPA component to it. When I had to apply for scholarships and other kinds of internship opportunities, or just connect in a way that was different than the norm, there was an academic component to it. So at all ends of the spectrum, I think what kind of kept me grounded was this academic achievement, academic piece, to be a constant reminder at every twist and turn...

Matthew discussed how important it is to decide to actively engage in learning for your own growth. He concurred

...when you become a junior and senior you're starting to think 'well how can I apply this in the real world' or 'why is this important, why does this matter?' So I think a lot of those class discussions and debates, or role plays in that we did in HR - whether it was disciplining an employee, laying off an employee, or just certain things like that, as well as case studies, trying to problem solve, you know, critical thinking and trying to think outside the box - I think helped as well.

Although Shelly continued to refer to others, like her father, as motivation to continue onward, she owned her choice to persist in order to help her parents. She said she constantly focused on the thought that

...my dad is African American and seeing him without a degree trying to make it through the U.S. society and find a decent job..., I've seen how difficult it's been for him... and just to be able to make them proud, and hopefully help them out in the near future [is what I want to do] if me and my sister can get our degrees.

**Participant considerations.** Andrew referred to his experience as a “training ground” and consequently claimed he “didn't have any negative experiences”. He asserted

It was a – or is, still a – I'll say, a mirror to what life is outside of Westside, given the dynamics of the people... the interactions you have with students and their lifestyles and their religious views and so on and so forth.

Likewise, Davian discussed how he valued the experience but noted how success required an unswerving amount of determination.

If I didn't go through any of those hard times throughout my undergraduate career, I think that once I started work, once I started entering the real, real world, I would've been a little bit more shocked. Um, it was hard and I wish I had a lot more help. But it takes a certain type of person to kind of be determined to get through all of that stress.

He continued,

I think it would take somebody that's willing to go through [laughs] the worst; somebody that's gonna keep their head up even through the bad; somebody that's positive the whole time. Um, there's a lot of negativity out there, so if you're not positive, you're gonna get lost in all of that. It also takes somebody that's willing to reach out, because if you are a very introverted person, then you're gonna get lost. And that's not – I guess that's not really fair, but life isn't fair.

“Socially it was probably some of the best years of my life.” DeJuan mentioned. He talked about “hanging out” and “getting exposed to different people from different places and different social economic status” as having been exciting. In terms of the business school however, he expressed experiencing cultural taxation. “I didn't want to represent every single black person in the world, I just wanted to represent myself; my opinions, my beliefs.”

DeJuan passionately elaborated on how he initially decided to pursue a business degree because he had “this glamorized, kind of rags to riches story” in mind, and how “you go to school and you study business and you get a good job and you have all this money and stuff.. Although he earned his business degree, he recalled part of his academic exploration being very limited.

I look back, and I think and I, I wish sometimes I would have just explored something different; I would have just explored a different major, I would have explored something besides just, like, ‘I was accepted at business school so that's that.’ And there were opportunities for me to explore and I don't know why I didn't just, like, you know, double major in something that was of a lot of interest to me.

Makayla remembered moments of anxiety that caused her to care less about her class effort. A conversation she had with an Advisor caused her to realize “You have a tool-kit and in your tool-kit you’re going to have certain tools. You want to make sure that those tools are sharp for whenever you want to use them.”

While India simply stated “one size doesn’t fit all”, Carmela emphasized

I found out that, you know in order to really get what you want in life, you really have to put in strong hard work, time, and dedication to get what you want... and really believe in yourself. Don't let anyone talk you out of it or question your actions.”

### **Findings Related to Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American undergraduate business degree alumni from a predominantly White institution that have contributed to attitudes and behaviors leading to degree attainment and employment or graduate study. The overarching research question explored the “lived experiences” of African American alumni from an undergraduate business degree program.

The associated research questions were as follows:

- What are the experiences of African American alumni which have led to graduation and employment?
- What barriers did participants confront during their undergraduate and subsequent education and employment pursuits?
- What were the support systems that African American alumni experienced during their undergraduate and employment journey?
- How did the experiences of persistence inform participants’ decisions and actions following graduation (as they pursued either graduate school or employment)?



## **What are the experiences of African American alumni which have led to graduation and employment?**

Some of the participants indicated having a background of strong academic tradition and family legacy, graduation was the expected. Pre-college experiences equipped the participants to be able to perform well academically and understand the value of their education. Although these items were important, making a decision to establish and build connections with others within the campus community was critical. The combination of safe physical space and like-minded people supported the on-going need to remain authentic in a progressive effort to adapt and adjust to the surrounding environment. The two foundational ingredients of space and peer support offered a solid base for continuous personal, social, academic, and financial self-assessment.

As Sierra reflected her family legacy and her early decision to major in business she recalls how she perceived a difference in her ability to focus on her studies as compared to other students' whom may not have had a clear academic path.

...most people walking in the [business school] door, they've already declared their major. They know what they're doing. The difference between a lot of those students and myself is I had a fairly good understanding of what I wanted to do... and I didn't necessarily come to college to party. I didn't come to college to have 'that' college experience. I came to college to get an education because that's what, you know, my family had taught me to do. I also feel like I come from a rare circumstance that all my grandparents have some sort of degree above high school, as well as my parents. So that expectation was there that I think a lot of other students of color, and specifically black students, don't have.

Rianna remembered how the presence and interaction of a fraternity brother of her older brother's, who attended WU, aided her successful transition. She remarked, "... just the comfort of knowing him, and then him introducing me to someone else that I could get to know, and, you know, find my comfort zone, definitely helped."

Most of the study participants echoed Matthew's and Andrew's sentiments about the importance of family, friends and the student community, Business Diverse Academic Neighborhood [B-DAN], which led to degree completion. Matthew responded

...definitely family and friends and then definitely the Business Diversity Program [B-DAN] um, with their support... it was definitely some of the relationships I made... another one, was a lady who had worked in the dorms... There was times where, you know, I wanted to go home, I wanted to quit, I wanted to give up but, you know, talking to my mom, talking to my dad and just having support of the Program as well, cause, you know, it's kinda like a family away from home. I feel like without all of that, I definitely – I don't think I would have made it.

Matthew concluded "...I think that's when I started to realize I had people who loved and supported me and that I could lean on — to help me through the last two years of college...".

Andrew also described B-DAN in a similar fashion when he stated

...what's great about the B-DAN Program [is], I think that was more of the home base, you know, that academic neighborhood was something, um, that whenever I needed help, which I needed a lot of help with the business curriculum, um, there were my peers who allowed me to lean on them for support and they leaned on me to get through our business curriculum.

By actively seeking membership in a variety of relevant formal and informal "socio-academic" family-like peer support groups, common bonds with other students were created. Also in order to progress along the path of persistence, these participants embraced responsibility and ownership in their own success. This was reflected in seeking help to solve financial challenges, roommate issue, concerns regarding social acceptance, academic progress, or simply adjusting to a new and unfamiliar environment. Along with developing transferable practical, technical, and interpersonal skills, these participants were able to solidly anchor themselves in a solution oriented, "success-only" mentality.

Makayla recalled how she took initiative to seek a relevant community although she was initially granted membership to an honors group. She mentioned

... everything kind of just lost meaning. I was just going through the motions, I don't really know why or what this is for and I can do all this on my own, but what's the point? And then I found B-DAN and I had a friend in every single class and we would study together or somebody would take the class the semester before and they would give you pointers. And they would say, "Well actually this is what the professor is like. He usually asks really tricky questions." Some of them would like the class so much that they would say like, "Yeah, this will be on the test. Like study this material better. Make sure you understand how these two are connected and you should articulate it in this way." Um, so that, that was really awesome.

Matthew remarked "It takes different groups on campus to provide assistance, whether that's financial assistance or social assistance or even corporal assistance. It takes certain groups that address those matters to help you get through your experience."

The philosophy of student self-initiative was also embraced by Andrew when he stated "You know, I think it all ties into my upbringing, and what I've always been taught..., to give back, ...and that kind of service spirit allowed me to make great connections with – well, not just people but, departments and offices, and leave a meaningful mark while in college."

### **What barriers did participants confront during their undergraduate and subsequent education and employment pursuits?**

The practice of charging business students more than others at public institutions is a fact at Westside University. Business School tuition differential exasperates concerns related to the ratio of loans to other forms of financial aid and a fear of incurring financial burden after graduation.

David, whose parents were both involved in real-estate as professionals, responded

Financially, [it was] a horrible experience all around – my freshman year, [when] I came in – my financial experience, I didn't really know too much about what was going on. I left that up to my parents. But I did receive a lot of financial support from my diversity program on campus - that did help to ease some of the stress that I had with that. And I would say that, um, financial stress was the biggest stress that I had throughout my undergraduate degree.

Then my sophomore year, [which was] soon after the housing crash, housing-market crash of 2008... the financial burden kept getting worse and worse. So then I really needed to come over to my diversity program, and they really helped me to figure out different ways to receive scholarships, or to receive grants, [to] talk to financial aid.

Those were a lot of things that I didn't know going into my freshman year that I wish I did know, um, because there are certain people that you can talk to that will help to improve your experience. And, um, then that's also when I received my job at the career office on campus was my sophomore year. Um, I figured that that was just time to do something about it instead of just stressing about it and letting that stress build up.

Then my junior year, finances were still bad, but I was able to get through. I knew the people to talk to and they were able to help me out - but I did receive a lot of loans. And, [the] same with my senior year, I received a lot of loans -but I was able to apply to a few more scholarships that I didn't even know about my junior year and my sophomore year or my freshman year.

At that point, I found out that some of those scholarships, there are hardly any applicants and it's just a bunch of free money that's out there- that if I did apply my freshman, sophomore or junior years, that I probably would have got. But it just wasn't advertised well at all.

Right now, after the fact, after my undergraduate degree, the financial stress is still there because, once again, I mean it's – you're paying back your loans now. So, but now, that I have a job, that's gonna help me tremendously with paying off those now.

Because of this type of financial reality, each study participant was employed during their undergraduate experience. Although Dejuan received significant scholarship funding, financial literacy proved to be a great challenge. He remarked,

... for the first time I was like, – I was doing my financial aid completely on my own, I was taking out loans that didn't need to be taken out, taking out loans in my mom's name that didn't need to be taken out and I just – it was this almost feeling of control. Like, I was able to control this money. In all reality, like, the money was really controlling me. It is the, like, weird thing about it is that, like, this money was controlling me and I thought I had control of it but it just, like, that was not the case. \*\*\* You know and it's rough because you're not taught about, like, money when you don't have money. You're just taught about, like, how to get by, how to go from A to B, how to live from paycheck to paycheck, but nobody ever says, like, oh when you receive a large amount of money or when you get a job and you're making thousands of dollars a month or something like that; how do you deal with it. How – what do you do with it?

Participants were able to secure employment as R.A's., work-study employees, administrative paraprofessionals, student research assistants, off campus workers, and summer interns during their undergraduate years. Although Rianna recognized the difficulty of contending with financial difficulties, she also expressed gratitude for having had the experience when she said

So it's like my – not only my gift to me but my gift to the – to myself and to them, that I can make it through. So, although it was difficult, it was very ...it was very rewarding that I was able to, to do that for, for myself, and for them. But it was difficult.

India's revealed her memory surrounding her finances during college when she said

You know I was just talking to my husband about this last night. I was like I know I ate in college but I don't remember going to the grocery store, ...like, I don't remember how I ate. I mean somehow food arrived. I always had a job in college. I always had a job. I had student loans and scholarships to pay for my tuition so I didn't worry about that part as much, but I always had a job in college, um, to pay for my housing and I was pretty fortunate that my parents were very supportive - helped me with groceries or with, you know, cell phone bills or whatever I couldn't pay for which wasn't a lot 'cause I actually did work lots. Um, I felt like I had to full time job in college.

As Carmela remembered her experience she stated

My parents supported me the entire time I was in WU, so that wasn't really a problem. Um, I did get a job, though, my senior year [laughter], just to kinda add some more – I just wanted to work my senior year... I didn't have that college struggle, like some people. I would see them [others] have that struggle... I didn't really have that, and I'm really grateful that I didn't have to go through that and my parents helped me.

The overall social and cultural environment was a substantial barrier. The school climate was described as hyper-competitive and very inflexible. Sierra commented

the environment that students have in the business school in their first few years is very different from, you know, say somebody would have in Arts & Science degree in that it [Arts & Sciences] seemed very much more explorative [exploratory] – versus in a business school... most people walking in the door, they've already declared their major.

Difficulties with simple interactions leading to meaningful connections, particularly with majority white students, resulted from some experiences of racial prejudice leading to racial isolation. India commented

I'm going to a college that's all white and there's very few black people there. Like, I knew it was a good institution academically but socially I didn't know where I was gonna fit in to that. Once I found the quality friends that I felt like I could relate to and, you know, I could have the same interests; that made it a lot easier for me. Um, but initially when I first got there I was almost gonna, like, run for the hills. I didn't think it was going to work out so well.

Examples of class room isolation, stemming intellectual prejudices and insensitive classroom instruction formed apprehensive behaviors when choosing work teams or performing task in group work. For others, because there were so few Black students in Business School courses, some participants indicated a reluctance to respond to questions during class. Although the quality of classroom instruction was considered to be appropriately challenging, in general, examples of interactions with professors were, at times, experienced as culturally insensitive. India indicated "...freshman, sophomore year I just feel like I was a number, like I was just, you know, one of the many." Andrew shared, "I was more comfortable in classes where I, one, knew people, um, two, there may have been other students of color, um, or people I could relate to on different levels." Sierra said, "Within the classroom, I think that a lot of times it was just difficult for me to, to command the same level of respect that I knew some of my other students received, ...from both my peers and from professors.

One of the more concrete examples Sierra elaborated on regarding her academic alienation, particularly in the classroom, was reflected in comments about an international marketing class.

...the professor was talking about bartering and he was talking about different ways that you can barter, yada, yada, yada. And he said something about, you know, bartering beans for Mexicans and bartering rice for Asians. And everybody in the class, like,

laughed, [and] thought it was hilarious. [Laughter]. And I looked at my friend and I was like, "Did he really – he just say that – like everybody's not – like, nobody's even, like, afraid to laugh..."

...I think I had the – at the time – I guess “the gall” to go to somebody to speak about it. And, um, then I spoke to somebody. I think she was an assistant dean. She basically said – she was like, "You know you're not the first person that's told me this, personally."

She continued,

And it's not the first time this professor has been told, ...or has been, um – this is not the first time someone's said anything about this professor. But, unfortunately, there's not really anything that we can do." Um, and it wasn't from the place of trying to get him fired. It was just from a place, like this needs' to be addressed – he didn't have to lose his job. But there's, obviously, ways that you can always improve – and ways that you should conduct yourself. And so, I think in-class was even sometimes very uncomfortable. I didn't feel that as much when I took my Arts & Sciences classes. ...I definitely felt like the business school was very, um, for lack of a better word, it's a bro.'s club, it's a brothers, you know... It's very much like an old boys' club. And when you're a woman and when you're a black woman it's difficult to try to make those connections with people that have no – that see no value in making those connections with you. Um, whether that's because they think that you're potential is less, or because of whatever reason.

Interestingly, although there were few African American students within the Business School, a tendency to confuse some African American students with others was mentioned.

Cognitive psychologists refer to this phenomenon as “the cross-race effect” (Eysenck & Keane, 2013). Makayla recalled

One of the weirdest ones was I had a professor who really liked me and he'd mistaken me for another student. [Chuckles] And I was in his class, we were in two totally separate classes, me and Amy, he thought we were the same person because we have similar features and that was just weird to me. So he would talk to me about something that he talked to her about and I was like, “I don't understand what you're talking about.” He was like, “What? Weren't you here?” And I'm like, “Umm, No.” He was, “Oh, yeah, sorry.” [Chuckles] “I had you in this class.” I'm like, “No, I wasn't in that class with you. That wasn't me.” So that was with a teacher thinking that I looked the same as somebody else and we don't – I mean we have similar features, but we're not the same person, right? And he wrote us like letters of recommendations when I studied abroad. So I was like ‘what’ how did you – you wrote me a letter and you wrote her two totally separate letters.

Consequently, these obstacles produced additional barriers including limited administrative and institutional responsive to these study participants. Ultimately limited access to business school student networks specific to academic, social, and support information were confronted. Rianna explained

Some negative, I guess, experiences outside of the classroom was not feeling like the programs that I was a part of, like MBSA, B-DAN, were supportive – or supported or cared about, that there were some, um, I guess you can say – I don't know if it was, um, I guess the administration at the School of Business didn't seem to understand or support those types of programs.

Meaning not understanding, because, not coming to sit down and talk with the students who were part of the program, but making assumptions about what they thought the program was about. And so that negativity kind of continued this thought in my mind that this university doesn't care about the people of color at the university, which hurts.

'Cause you're like, "I'm here. I'm part of this community at the university. I'm part of just trying to continue on the legacy of the university and how – and like the statistics of it being a great university, not because of the white students that go there, because of the entire population.

But seeing them as looking down on you like, "Well, I don't understand why this program is needed. You need to change it or call it something else." Or, like you were saying, stealing parts of the program, and trying to create their own to push out the programs that are already in place.

So those are some of the negative experiences where I tried to fight back and stick up and talk about the programs, and get them to understand what the programs are about and what they meant to me, and trying to bring in other students to talk about it as well, just so that they can understand. But, at the same time there's that pushback of them not listening. So that was hurtful and, yeah, upsetting.

Academic preparedness was not an issue for everyone, but was mentioned by Carmela and DeJuan. Carmela stated,

I felt like I was prepared for college, but when I got in, I noticed that when I was a freshman, I didn't have good study habits, and I wasn't able to prioritize what I should be doing in school, how I should, go about getting help. Um, I had to learn that on the way, but college was hard. And I felt like I somewhat struggled in college.



DeJuan recalled,

Looking back on my experience academically, I almost feel a little, like, ashamed of it just because, uh, I felt, like, I should have done better. I felt, like, I should have done better, I should have put more of a focus on my academics, I should have just done more in that area of my college career.

He continued,

I think when you get into a really rough spot it's easier to just let things kinda go and act like they don't exist versus actually dealing with them. And it was a lot easier for me to just let things slide than to just jump in and deal with them. But then once I reached that place where I knew I needed to deal with those I was often just so late in the game that I, I was, like, just trying to catch my breath. \*\*\* And just, like, or, like, sometimes felt, like,, like, some,, like, if,, like, a fish out of water; it's just trying to, like, find anything,, like, grasping for air or something, like, that. And, um, I, I, I do feel, like, it was a lot easier at times to just, like, put on this front, like, everything was right and, like, everything was going well instead of just dealing with it. And I don't know really where that came from because growing up that wasn't how my family dealt with things and that wasn't how my Mom dealt with things.

In general, the barriers experienced during the participants education and employment pursuits did not deviate much from their undergraduate experience. Participants described their transitions as more competitive and even less sensitive, in some instances.

**What were the support systems that African American alumni experienced during their undergraduate and employment journey?**

Family and family-like influence played a major role in each participant's decisions of persistence. In most cases, parental involvement was more than providing financial support. The participants indicated their parents' interest in their academic progress, social welfare, mental well-being, and overall success prompted them to press forward. Matthew said he found support with "...family and friends and then definitely the Business Diversity Academic Neighborhood."

Matthew continued,

There was times where, you know, I wanted to go home, I wanted to quit, I wanted to give up but, you know, talking to my mom, talking to my dad and just having support of B-DAN as well 'cause, you know, it's kinda like a family away from home. I feel like without all of that I definitely – I don't think I would have made it. So I think that kinda

gave me the motivation to keep going on, to keep doing it, seeing the older – the upper-classmen being able to succeed as, you know, African Americans, or, you know, or anyone in general. Just succeeding and being able to, I guess, lay the foundation for the under-classmen can help pave the way.

Davian described his support systems in a similar way. He stated,

the biggest ones [support system] were my family – I felt like I did have a lot of support systems, a lot of people that were rooting for me and that had high expectations of me; which really kept me going in all my p's and q's 'cause I feel like at college you can really get lost in the melee and if you don't pick yourself up that's – you're just lost. Um, so having, um, my family here; I was the first person in my immediate family that went to college so they are really proud of me and so that encouraged me and motivated me to keep going. And they are always supportive of me whether it was financially or, um, you know, coming to different programs that I was involved in and supporting me that way; that was really great.

Also nearly half of the participants indicated they had at least one older sibling in attendance at Westside during the same time they were enrolled. Rianna emphasized the importance of not only having her brother on campus, but knowing and having the support of his fraternity brother was a relief. She remarked, "...just the comfort of knowing him, and then him introducing me to someone else that I could get to know, and, you know, find my comfort zone, definitely helped". These very important sibling relationships reinforced purpose and at times were trustworthy feedback sources and emotional encouragement.

Pre-college exposure and academic preparation were consistently affirmed as important factors supporting academic confidence early in their college transition. As Carmela recalled her pre-collegiate experience she mentioned how her older brother having attended WU inspired her. She said, "He studied, um, political science. He's a lawyer now. So I confirmed that I wanted to go to WU. My brother went to WU. It's like, "Okay," you know, "I definitely want to go." She reflected on the high school period following her Junior year as important and commented, "...my junior year, I took [participated in] BLP, the Business Leadership Program – that was like the best experience. I loved the whole experience I thought it was amazing."

Specific mention of the business pre-college leadership program experience not only exposed students to the practical application of business skills and the potential rigors of the business discipline, but also introduced students to enrolled business students, important staff, and faculty. These business school contacts provided opportunities for participants to make meaningful academic and social contacts in their first few days and weeks on campus. Davian remarked,

I think being very involved in school life; having a community of friends and administrators and mentors to support me was really important for me. I came into the school with that, you know, doing the business leadership program of course. I had people that were looking out for me and interested in my success and that I could go to and talk to for, you know, advice or suggestions.

A blend of business school and campus-wide academic oriented peers comprised the support on-campus student community. India reported how her peer and professional relationships served as essential elements of her persistence through graduation. She stated,

I ended up moving in with, uh, another African American student about two months after I got there because the two rush girls, that's what I call them, they were, you know, did – were – who didn't have the same lifestyle as me, were interested in different things than I was interested in and it didn't work out. So I moved in with another African American student who's you know, my best friend 'till this day.

She continued,

My friends; they were a – a lot of them were doing good, some of them not so much but the ones that were doing good we hung out together and I believed, you know, the people that you hang out with directly impacts how you're doing so you need to hang out with people that are on the same track and doing the same thing you're doing - so they were great. And like I said, I have a lot of those relationships and friendships still going on to this day. Ms. Dickson, in the athletic department, was my mentor then - she's still my mentor and I'm very close to her. She, not only gave me a job but taught me about how to talk to people, how to speak in public, how to approach people about opportunities, how to, you know,... whole bunch of things like that. So, her advice and her role in my life had been priceless to me.

In addition, a select group of encouraging staff, administrators, and faculty created these participants support systems. India finally added,

...I remember getting assistance to do my GRE and all these other things that I am so grateful for..., people that I could come to, talk to, that [which] gave me opportunities and resources to better myself. I think that was really, really invaluable to my success. And I don't know if it was me searching out these people or following up on my promises, or what made people help me or assist me, but I'm just really grateful that all those people were around for me.

The diverse business academic neighborhood was a primary support community for the majority of participants. This business school program was described as an extension of "family-like" relationships grounded in trust and accountability. Makayla mentioned,

...the Diverse Scholars Program, it offered some funding, um, that you would kick towards tuition. So I didn't really have to take out so much loans and I was able to just focus on school, which is awesome. And then if I needed to pay like my living expenses, they actually offered me a job, so I worked in the office. And that allowed for me to have more "piece of mind", which I think is priceless, right? Like I don't have to stress out about how I'm going to pay my rent next month. I don't need to stress out about how I'm going to eat. I can literally just focus on my schoolwork and the experience versus like baggage that you kind of have to carry with you.

The coupling of formal and informal support included like-minded peers, mentors, and employers. Discipline specific academic programs, multicultural leadership experiences, and service oriented student activities were strategically arranged to produce a comprehensive support network.

**How did the experiences of persistence inform participants' decisions and actions following graduation (as they pursued either Graduate School or employment)?**

Post-graduate experiences included a lack of effective cultural responsive orientation activities, transitional support, mentorship opportunities, and general guidance. However, each participant noted the rigorous lessons learned during their undergraduate experiences prepared them to have an unswerving resourcefulness and self-determination. Most of the participants indicated they have a deeper understanding and appreciation of choices and consequences. Matthew said "...you learn about the team, the team dynamic; learn how to work with other

people, and then you go out in the real world; learn how to resolve issues if it's not working out with the issues that I had then in college then I solved those. Just the critical thinking and trying to problem solve kinda help relate over into the job I got when I got hired. 'Cause a lot of the issues were – weren't really black and white."

The most commonly expressed idea carried into the participants post-undergraduate experience was participants' decision to embrace experiences as opportunities to learn. Matthew said, "I pretty much felt different than everybody else. I knew that, um, anything I would do would be more scrutinized or would stand out a little bit more. So I needed to make sure that I used that to my advantage". Experiences of persistence resulted in participants taking ownership of their own learning and success. Taking the initiative to network, build relationships, problem solve, think critically, learn new skills, and excel in their career path were consistently indicated.

As a professional, Makayla explained how her undergraduate experience trained her to have difficult conversations in situations involving differences or misunderstandings. She explained these experiences prepared her to be an effective leader in culturally deficient work environments. She discussed the ability to have crucial conversations and remarked, "...if you have high-end emotions or there's a lot at stake, how you are able to get out of the clouds, and get out of perceptions or personal bias and really you just stick to the facts and let the facts guide you".

Makayla continued,

If I had to recap on my fundamental skills that I strive in now, I could say that I learned them in college. So one of, one of the biggest skills that I'm actually applauded for is, ah, establishing like a mutual respect and just having a simple dialogue and not getting people to be defensive, but creating a safe-zone for them to share what they want to share. Um, and I'm really good at crucial conversations. I don't know how the heck that happened, but that's pretty fundamental when you're in the political realm of corporate America, and that's "crazy pants".

Makayla talked about “how mutual respect exchanged between two people” taught her how you can get them [employees] onboard to do what you need to do.” She also stated she learned “developing people is fundamental to being a leader.”

As she shared examples of critically thinking skills acquired during her undergraduate experiences she proclaimed,

So if I want to be a C-level exec what does that mean? What other factors do I need to consider when you [professionals] need to report numbers to Wall Street and is it really just the number, or where do the ethics come in? The scale of what you’re capable of and really learning how to be a visionary, and it’s okay to dream and, to take a dream and to be able to drill it down to, to a step-by-step process. B-DAN taught me that; WU taught me that. And yeah, I guess I’m pretty grateful that I went to WU. I can point you to where you need to go. I can have [influence] you think differently about whatever you’re thinking. I can help break stereotypes, because I’m not one of them.

Carmela and Rianna expressed a sense of personal growth and professional maturity as the result of persisting through graduation. Carmela commented, “I’m really investing in myself any way that I can”. She described how daily spiritual self-care was central in her professional pursuits. She stated “I thank God for just this day, me being here. Then I say "Good morning" to the universe. Then I put what I’m thankful for. And then I put an affirmation at the end”. As an entrepreneur, she emphasized how her ability to organize herself begins with having her inner-self grounded. In addition to learning about fundamental success principles through books, videos, workshops and trainings, she continued “... just living outside your comfort zone..., that's how you will grow...” She concluded,

It's about putting in love into whatever you do in life. If you give love first, then everything would follow afterwards. So, um, and going about it the right way..., you know this is how life works, the law of attraction. And, really, life attracts life and really thinking positive thoughts. It really is a mindset change that I've had to learn to go through.

Rianna remarked

...my lived experiences, and what I've experienced at the university, and what I'm experiencing now ...it all came full circle. And I just feel blessed that I made it through and continued to pursue my passion and what I care about most in life.

Just through attending the university and making it through [all] the struggles and all of that, [the] tribulations.... I just feel – I don't know. I'm just so glad that I'm a part of it [this research]. And I feel like if my story helps others um – I don't know – I'm just glad that I'm here.

By way of persisting through these undergraduate business degree experiences, each participant expressed how possessing a mindset for growth clearly reinforced their ability to develop or build support systems for themselves and others.

Table 4

*The Mindset Comparison*

<b>Fixed Mindset</b>	<b>Growth Mindset</b>
Wants to <i>prove</i> intelligence or talent.	Wants to <i>improve</i> intelligence or talent.
Avoids challenges for fear of failure.	Engages challenges to improve.
Gives up in the face of tough obstacles.	Persists in overcoming obstacles.
Avoids hard labor.	Sees labor as the path to success.
Treats criticism as an attack.	Treats criticism as an opportunity.
Feels threatened by others' success.	Feels inspired by others' success.

(Dweck, 2006)

The Dweck (2006) mindset comparison, displayed in Table 4, outlines fixed and growth mindset characteristics found in participants in this study.

**Statement of Essence**

In general, building connections, establishing support systems, and intentionally making decisions to “grow through” challenges emerged as major themes. This particular phenomenon of persistence also points to the importance of sustainable, contextual social and academic relationships.

These findings describe the participants' ability to establish on-going, trusted relationships with like-minded peers and professionals in the beginning stages of developing support. The significance of individuals identifying and securing safe physical and mental space during the early stages of this process is central.

Taking personal ownership in building connections with others within the campus community also emerged as critical. These findings support the idea that contextual relationships, such as responsive peers and professionals, are also important. Particularly for this phenomenon, a blend of business school and campus wide relationships formed systems of support.

Finally, this phenomenon notes the significance of “persisters” embracing each experience as opportunities to learn. Examples of overcoming social barriers, academic obstacles, and financial difficulties were viewed as experiences to gain new insights and improve the ability to respond to difficulty effectively. These findings support and contribute to the knowledge of the experience of persistence by offering these results as the essence of the core experience

This chapter provided an overview of the interview results from the 10 African American alumni participants. Also the chapter examined how these graduates perceived their experience of persistence at a predominantly white business school located in the Rocky Mountain Region. Three broad overarching themes emerged from this study: meaningful connections, building relationships, decisions to persist. Chapter 5 will provide interpretations and conclusions as illustrated from this particular study. Recommendations for future research and the limitations of this study will also be discussed.



## **CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION**

This retrospective phenomenological study was concerned with the “lived experiences” of Black alumni who graduated from a predominantly white undergraduate business degree program. The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and behaviors which may have contributed to or lead to degree attainment and employment or graduate study.

Accordingly, 10 African-American Alumni shared their perceptions of their past experiences during their undergraduate business program at an institution located in the Rocky Mountain Region. This chapter discusses the findings as related to the literature and provides a study summary. An interpretation of the data, conclusions drawn, study implications and recommendations for future research will be presented.

### **Discussion of Emergent Themes**

The participant interview and data collection process produced three main themes: (a) meaningful connections, (b) building relationships, and (c) decisions to continue.

#### **Meaningful Connections**

The literature related to academic and social integration (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 2005) offered valuable context for considering the importance of the participants pre-college experiences, college relationships, their particular ideas of persistence, support systems, and their personal choices related to persisting through graduation (Tinto, 2005). The literature suggests a student’s decision to persist is a function of their ability to integrate into the institutions academic and social systems (Tinto 1993, 2005). These participants’ ability to integrate into the social and academic environment was improved by pre-entry college experiences. Participants who were involved in the business school’s pre-college program made immediate connections following enrollment. Involvement with faculty, staff, and upper-class

students resulting from their pre-college experiences produced opportunities for relationships which allowed for an easier transition and early adjustment. The other participant's individual academic and personal adjustment took form, but an increased effort to make formal and informal academic and social connections was required.

Although each participant expressed having a high degree of college academic readiness and academic confidence, they all acknowledged how having people who cared about them early on positively influenced on-going persistence (Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1983; Montgomery, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The reality of being immersed in a predominantly white environment in general, coupled with the intensity of a competitive business school culture, was quite different than anticipated and very overwhelming for several of the participants. Even though participants expressed a clear awareness of being in a difficult, and at times hostile environment, they were more focused on identifying people and places that were accepting and supportive of their need to belong, personal interest, and emotionally connect.

In a few instances, a single contact blossomed into a range of experiences and self-constructed networks. However, in most cases a combination of individual initiative and administrative structure facilitated cohorts and student group collaborations.

The role of family was a constant emotional support system for each participant. In some cases the idea of fulfilling family expectations was important. In others cases, completing their degree in order to improve their financial position was encouraged by family members. Although parental financial support was mentioned, in most cases family support served as a source for purpose, accountability, responsibility, and motivation. Particularly for black students, these findings are in accordance with research suggesting pre-college experiences supported by family are central and offer a high degree of positive support in terms of academic interest, confidence,

and decision making leading to personal and academic success (Harper, 2006; Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

While parental support and family influence was important, the analysis showed having interacted early with at least one responsive administrator, like-minded African American (or business students of color), or encouraging faculty was the most pivotal experience. These participants were able to vividly recall supportive individuals, programs, communities, and systems of support throughout discussions about in-class and out-of-class barriers. While maintaining an understanding of the family and financial sacrifices, these participants seemed to embrace ownership in their personal growth process.

As the literature affirmed, conceiving the need for and having the ability to seek out academic and social support networks proved to be essential (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Helm et al., 1998; Minatoya & Sedlacek, 1983; Montgomery, 2009; Sedlacek & Tracey, 1985). In all cases, once the participant's established a meaningful connection on campus with at least one person who could identify with their specific challenges, they were able to more effectively launch their own experience.

### **Building Relationships**

While the literature suggest there are subtle, yet important differences in the experience of domestic minority students compared to majority White students (Allen, 1999; Braxton et al., 1997), the aspirations and expectations with which students enter college may not differ (Tinto, 2005). The study participants were searching for an affordable, welcoming, and safe learning environment. Expectations of experiencing a supportive campus climate, a quality education, experiences with student groups, and social activities were reflected in the interview transcripts.

In addition, interactions with faculty and other students that would offer a network of support and compliment their overall development as business students were desired.

Also the anticipated rigors of business education and the variety of challenges associated with being a student on any campus can provoke anxiety. The participants in this study described some of the difficulties, hardships, challenges, and pressures associated with being immersed in a competitive predominantly white business school culture as Africa American students.

Fortunately the participants' ability to counteract early concerns of rejection, discrimination, and hostility were fulfilled by their adaptability and effort to build networks of support. By making at least one caring connection and continuously building relevant student and staff relationships, these participants were able to experience both mental relief and practical support associated with the counter-cultural psychological stresses. This study supports the findings of counter-cultural psychological stresses as indicated in the Campus Racial Climate and Adjustment of Students to College study (Cabrera et al., 1999). In accordance with Lent et al. (2000), as the psychologically and environmentally supportive conditions improved, the participant's feelings of cultural isolation and cultural taxation decreased. In addition, the study participants' psychological well-being improved and the capacity to discover and engage in a sense of community evolved. The increased ability to engage in community resulted in a more definitive focus on persistence and graduation.

According to community psychologists McMillan and Chavis (1986), there are four key factors that define a sense of community: (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) fulfillment of individuals' needs, and (d) shared events and emotional connections. The literature also describes how involvement with student peers, campus staff and faculty, co-curricular activities, and classroom engagement all influence students' sense of belonging (Astin, 1984). In order for

students to flourish, transformationist scholars assert learning must be relevant, students need to feel recognized for who they are, and the presence of relationships characterized by care and concern also have to exist (Wheeler & Trail, 2010). Study participants offered examples of trusting relationships, expressions of loyalty, and group membership, which align with the literature.

The study findings support the idea that family-like systems may be a central element in African American student persistence, particularly at predominantly white institutions. The idea of family-like support was commonly noted in the interviews. Participants described this by having positioned themselves as academic and social “accountability partners” with other African American students. These roles and relationships manifested themselves through student organization involvement, course clustering, and peer-to-peer social and academic support. Being a type of big brother or big sister to others also proved to serve well as a source of support for their own personal success. This study supports previous research by Harper (2006) which validates “kin-like” philosophy as central for African American student success, particular in an environment that may be difficult to establish successful social and academic relationship patterns and networks.

Persistence for these study participants turned out to be more than simply acquiring a degree. The rigors of the environment developed sound academic and social skills, produced strong personal character, and promoted a desire to make it easier for other business students to succeed. While the structured university and business school programs provided a relevant context, an enhanced level of academic and social networking was accomplished by the participants themselves. Their ability to continuously make connections served well in maximizing the effectiveness of key supportive relationships. The single participant who

contended he did not connect early with the business school pointed out uncertainty of degree choice, delayed degree acceptance, and being more comfortable with students outside the business discipline delayed his adjustment.

Because participants chose to immerse themselves in a progressive blend of personal and institutional social and academic support systems, their networks gave them a chance to fulfill a wide range of fundamental needs (academic support, peer mentoring, professional guidance, career development, employment, etc.). Having the opportunity to feel safe, express their personal thoughts and opinions, ask for help, receive pertinent academic and social information, share stories, and experience emotional connections, produced mental stability for the study participants.

### **Decisions to Persist**

As previously mentioned, the literature indicates making meaningful connections early in one's college experience is important for achieving social and academic integration (Kuh et al, 2006; Tinto, 2005). Building relevant support systems, which include family, faculty, and peers is also supported as positively influencing persistence (Habley et al., 2012). It is also plausible to understand how the findings in this study indicated that students begin college with certain expectations and their experiences at an institution can have a direct impact on their decision to persist (Harper, 2006; Zander, 2008).

Interestingly, the various types of support systems used were only effective based on each participant's determined attitude and on-going choice to engage these individuals and systems. Although participants discussed a variety of needs, such as seeking social connections with like-minded African American students, academic support from experienced professionals, and internships or employment from classmates and mentors, the common denominator was each

participant consciously decided to seek assistance and opportunity. Each “persister” also decided to surround himself or herself with other Black students determined to graduate. These findings support the idea that a critical intersection exist between Black identity status, the selection of out-of-class activities, and the use of student organizations as platforms for hope and self-empowerment (Harper & Quaye, 2007). In addition, through leadership and student organization membership study participants acquired cross-cultural interpersonal skills, developed care for other black students and disenfranchised groups which are also consistent with the literature. (Ensminger & Lewis, 2011; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

While evidence showed the B-DAN experience offered support through scholarships, employment assistance, course clustering, comprehensive early alert systems and the like, the actual “act” of persisting resulted from the participants themselves deciding to maximize the benefits from a safe and encouraging environment. The study participants’ ability to understand negative encounters, financial difficulties, academic challenges, cultural isolation and other similar hardships and take personal ownership in response to these challenges reinforced a pattern of overcoming and produced one small success after another.

Consequently, for these study respondents, persistence occurred from a series of “personal choices” focused on seeking out, developing, and engaging “relevant” personal and institutional support systems. These findings support literature related to personal motivation and successful persistence strategies for African American students enrolled in predominantly white university environments (Allen, 1999).

In conclusion, the decision to measure experiences according to the practical, technical, and life skills acquired, versus immediate concerns of comfort and accommodation, may serve

well in placing marginalized business students on a path of rich informal experiences filled with life-long transferrable lessons.

### **Implications**

Literature suggests a student's ability to adapt to a college will greatly depend on the student's perception of the institution's level of commitment (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The level of commitment may be interpreted by a single encounter, group interactions, or formal support programs and activities (Habley et al., 2010; Mehan, et al., 1994). Institutional commitment plays an integral role in an institution's ability to retain students (Tinto, 1993). This study supports the idea that students may be impacted by individual, group, and differing levels of support with school peers, administrators and faculty. The findings also suggest revisiting strategies for building an atmosphere of support for different types of students entering business education may be worthy of high prioritization. Consideration given to these findings may offer business schools an opportunity to attract and support a growing diverse student body (Black Admissions, 2006).

Research has suggested pre-college exposure and related experiences improve the level of student preparedness upon college entry (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). In addition to these valuable skill and confidence building opportunities, access to important peer and professional relationships prior to entering business school is also important. The study findings also suggest researchers may consider granting equal importance to practical, early childhood, financial literacy experiences. This study supports the idea of family involvement in pre-college experiences as a method to improve the wide disparity in understanding the value and payoff of a college degree, particularly for Black students (Braxton et al., 1997; Tinto, 2005).



In Tinto's six central elements believed to promote an optimal learning environment, he emphasized the extent to which a student experiences academic and social integration will influence the degree a student decides to persist (1993, 2005). These study findings are in support of Tinto's research.

### **Implications for Practice**

While the study findings do not support a single formula for promoting persisting, the emergent themes of establishing at least one meaningful connection early, actively building relationships and making on-going decisions to persist do, in fact, inform numerous practical and theoretical ideas.

#### **Making Meaningful Connections**

First, it can be easy to overlook how important discovering a safe space and a supportive atmosphere can be. The findings from this study guide literature suggesting establishing a sense of belonging may be even more exacerbated when belonging to a marginalized or underrepresented group (Allen, 1992, Herndon & Hirt, 2004, Zander 2008). Connecting to a community that reflects common understandings and contextual support is not only important, but supports the most fundamental ingredients for any student's positive mental health and psychological well-being (Patel, 1998, Montgomery, 2009; Lent et al, 2000). The implied strategies Black business students may consider in their efforts to identify and cultivate a supportive living and learning experience include the following:

- Anticipate asking for help; be prepared to seek assistance to identify, understand and effectively respond to social and academic barriers and transitional concerns.
- Identify meaningful contacts early during first semester in order to support social and academic transition and adjustment.

- Discover formal and informal opportunities to engage peers in culturally responsive community engagement activities.
- Discover formal and informal opportunities to engage peers in culturally responsive academic and social activities within the business discipline.
- Identify financial literacy opportunities, scholarship guidance and fiscal resources.

In addition to establishing meaningful connections during the first semester, the study findings guide Black students attending predominantly white business schools to consider the importance of making discipline specific pre-college connections prior to their first year in college. These ideas are supported by literature geared toward encouraging student involvement in different types of orientation experiences early in the transition period (Karemera et al., 2003; Kuh, et al., 2006; Young, 2005). Participation in thoughtful pre-college business education experiences and exposure oriented talent pathway programs may easily facilitate cohort groupings, student collaborations, social and academic “kinship” type interactions, and caring campus connections (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, Cuyjet, 2006).

### **Relationship-Based Networks as Support Systems**

Study findings also inform literature of the centrality relationship-based networks have within student support systems. Examples of how student peer to peer relationships specifically formed under common hardships and challenging circumstances may form long term bonds are provided. These bonds may result in students sharing important academic information, career development opportunities, on-campus employment, paid internship experiences, or exposure to potential mentors (Hernandez, 2000; Karemera et al., 2003). The findings also support the idea that reflective thinking may be connected to long term sound decision making beyond the undergraduate experience.

## **Persistence as a Personal Choice**

Although the potent impact a balanced blend of social and academic experiences have on black business student persistence is evident in these case studies, it is clear the onus of initiative and responsiveness rest with the study participant. Consequently, the most significant area of application is reemphasizing underrepresented students of color within a predominantly white Business school environment who persist establish personal ownership, foster quick and responsive methods to effectively perform, and create interdependent administrative; faculty/student relationships (Allen, 1999).

Students who possess the ability to seek out help, problem solve, take personal responsibility to adjust and adapt, as well as streamline personal potential with the talents of other students around them will find tremendous effectiveness persisting. Persistence was described as an on-going activity, which occurred regularly. Understanding the critical element of persistence as an on-going activity is critical for students, staff, and faculty

In the instance of this study, participants' initiative and the responsibility by participants to take action, elevated as school peers and the university community partnered with the student. The more experienced upper-class students of color supported the success of the entering and underclass peers. The result was a sound investment in a vibrant, performance oriented, socio-academic culture where students embraced ownership of community success. Both general and discipline specific mentoring can be used to encourage marginalized students and their decisions to continue.

Interestingly, these study findings alluded to the thought that specific challenges associated with hardship produced a type, or caliber, of graduate who may be better equipped to advance productivity, pursue self-empowerment, rapidly solve problems, and inspire employee

morale and motivation as long as support was sought out. While the idea outcome for African American business alumni, business schools, and industry is to develop a forward thinking inter-dependent highly skilled culturally competent group of professionals, it is important not to overlook the delivery of such an idea requires institutional and organizational support. Finally, business schools that strategically align with business strategy, and consciously choose to emphasize people strategies, will have an opportunity to gather an immense supply of innovation that may create workable solutions to social and organizational challenges.

### **Future Research**

This study examined the experiences of persistence from 10 African-American business alumni who attended a predominantly white institution. Considering the limitations and findings of the study, research that would add to the body of literature regarding African-American business student success might include responses from family members, front-line staff, counselors, advisors, instructors, teaching assistants, other recent alumni, or other underrepresented alumni groups.

Also performing a deeper analysis of African American gender experiences may illustrate a more focused perspective on issues associated with black male and black female experiences and expectations (Patel, 1998, Cuyjet, 2006). Most importantly, exploring the mental health of Black business students and professionals may offer valuable persistence knowledge. Exploring the impact of social and academic culture on this non-white population in these various manners may lead to more detailed persistence oriented insights.

### **Mental Health**

The ability to transition, adjust, adapt, persist, graduate and pursue a desirable career is perhaps the most important set of goals any student can accomplish. In addition to these

particular goals, the study offers insight regarding how specific experiences of Black business students at predominantly White schools prepared these alumni for comparable career challenges. Consequently, developing qualities related to steadfastness despite difficulty is evidenced.

While the characteristics of perseverance are described as useful, it is important not to overlook issues and concerns associated with marginalized or underrepresented students' mental health and psychological well-being along the journey's path. As a result further examining the psychological well-being of Black business students are worthy of future research consideration.

Also by exploring experiences of discrimination and aggression, obvious and subtle symptoms of aggression may be discovered. In particular, "microaggressions" (Wing, 2010), which are described as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, can negatively impact the psychological well-being of a person. Whether intentional or unintentional, these types of interactions communicate hostility. Along with exploring obvious inequities, giving attention to this area of study may offer insights on ways to positively impact depression, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity experienced by marginalized populations in business and business education.

### **Alumni**

Finally, the study scope could easily be extended to examine the experiences of Black business professionals who graduated from predominantly white institutions. This type of retrospective longitudinal study could look back in time and continue looking for trends of persistence and success in the work place and the overall life cycle of participants.

By repeatedly interviewing participants at set intervals over a long period of time developmental trends across the professional life span can be observed. Furthermore, the

implications for these three major categories of future research would provide educators and executives a framework to explore persistence and success practices appropriate for engaged African-American business students and professionals.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African American undergraduate business degree alumni from a predominantly White institution that have contributed to attitudes and behaviors leading to degree attainment and employment or graduate study. The research explored the “lived experiences” of African American alumni from an undergraduate business degree program at a public 4-year research institution in the Rocky Mountain Region

The researcher successfully engaged 10 participants leveraging trust established which was built during previous student-professional encounters. Because there were no previous studies specific to business alumni discovered during the literature review, the study findings provided a valuable perspective regarding the experiences of African American business student “persisters” attending predominantly white business schools in the western United States.

By using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted producing three main themes: (a) meaningful connections; (b) building relationships; and (c) decisions to persist. The findings were shared within the framework of the related themes from Chapter 4. Based on the study findings, future research opportunities include African American group difference comparisons (gender, transfer status), student and alumni mental health, and long term examination of alumni patterns of persistence.

## **Conclusion**

Although African Americans are experiencing an upward trend in overall degree attainment, it is important to continue considering how reference group orientations and personal identity influence career aspirations and degree choice. The whole idea of having a strong community is that we want our students to act without prompting. Group orientations, as reflected in this study, result in collective action, camaraderie, teamwork, and community like nothing else.

It is clear business education desires to produce a community of graduates that align with the talent demands of business and industry. However, today's challenge encompasses a growing diverse student body never before encountered. Developing innovative talent in an unpredictable world economy suggests we consider continuously examining and re-examining the types of experiences our diverse future leaders are having within and outside of the classroom.

Actively supporting building community with students from diverse context, one valuable relationship at a time, is far better than any school or institution administrator espousing platitudes about valuing diversity. Simply put, meaningful relationships and close bonds during the educational journey impact students profoundly. Those close bonds, developed through repeated experiences of success, will carry forward into continued success. Understanding these influences may better position underrepresented business students and concerned administrators to offer cultural responsive business education, positively respond to the math science and technology gap, and address academic disparities and talent resource tensions.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB COVER LETTER

**CSU letterhead**

December 23, 2013

Dear Participant,

My name is Aswad Allen and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the School of Education. We are conducting a research study on experiences of persistence of African American Business students that have graduated from a predominantly white institution. The purpose of the study is to better understand the “lived experience” of students from this particular group. The title of our project is *Experiences of Persistence in Business Education: A Retrospective Phenomenological Analysis of African American Alumni*. The Principal Investigator is Linda Kuk, Ph.D., School of Education, and the Co-Principal Investigator is Aswad Allen.

We would like to interview African American alum that have attained their business degree from a predominantly white institution in the Rocky Mountain region. Participation is voluntary and will take approximately 90 minutes. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

All interviews will be recorded, with the contents of those interviews remaining confidential. Aswad Allen will maintain the interview audio files on secured computer and access to the interview data will be held confidentially. Names will be changed when reporting out in order to protect your identity. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how African American business students perceptions about their learning and social environment, as well as how these perceptions influence attitudes and behaviors that impact overall persistence (through degree completion).

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

If you have any questions, please contact Linda Kuk at 970-491-7243 or Aswad Allen via email at [aswad.allen@gmail.com](mailto:aswad.allen@gmail.com). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-1655.

Sincerely,

Linda Kuk, Ph.D.  
Principal Investigator

Aswad Allen  
Ph.D. Candidate, College and University Leadership

APPENDIX B  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY  
Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: *Experiences of Persistence in Business Education: A Retrospective Phenomenological Analysis of African American Alumni*

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Linda Kuk, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Education, 970-491-7243

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Aswad Allen, School of Education, PhD Candidate, [aswad.allen@gmail.com](mailto:aswad.allen@gmail.com)

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

You are being invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as an African-American alum from the University's School of Business, graduated from the School of Business within 2-8 years ago, and are currently employed or are a graduate student. Your "lived experience" may contribute to better understanding the attitudes and behaviors leading to degree attainment and employment or graduate study.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?**

Linda Kuk, Ph.D. and Aswad Allen (graduate student researcher) from the School of Education will be conducting the study.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes (beliefs or feelings) and behaviors that influence African American business student persistence (through degree attainment) at a predominantly white institution in the Rocky Mountain Region.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

The interviews will take place in-person at a time and location that is convenient for you. Your time commitment for the one time interview and possible follow-up is no more than 90 minutes.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

You will be asked to meet with the co-principal investigator and answer a series of questions during a one-on-one interview. With your permission, the interview and various follow-up checks for accuracy will be audiotaped. This process should last no longer than 90 minutes. You do not have to answer any question that you would rather not answer. The researcher may follow-up with you after the interview, and you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy.

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You should only participate in this research if you are an African-American alum from the University's School of Business, graduated 2-8 years ago, and are currently employed or a graduate student.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

There are no known risks associated with this research. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no direct benefits to you associated with this research.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?**

We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. For this study, we will assign a pseudonym to your data (John Doe) so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent and in our data spreadsheet which links you to your pseudonym. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your pseudonym, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Linda Kuk at 970-491-7243. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

*Do you give permission for your interview to be audiotaped?*

- Yes*
- No, please do not audiotape my interview*

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3pages.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study	Date
--	------

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant	Date
---	------

Signature of Research Staff



APPENDIX C  
IRB Approval



Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office  
Office of the Vice President for Research  
321 General Services Building - Campus Delivery 2011 Fort Collins,  
CO  
TEL: (970) 491-1553  
FAX: (970) 491-2293

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

**DATE:** December 19, 2013  
**TO:** Kuk, Linda, Education  
Allen, Aswad, Robinson, Dan, Clark, Kelli, Education  
**FROM:** Barker, Janell, Coordinator, CSU IRB 2  
**PROTOCOL TITLE:** EXPERIENCES OF PERSISTENCE IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: A RETROSPECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ALUMNI  
**FUNDING SOURCE:** NONE  
**PROTOCOL NUMBER:** 13-4710H  
**APPROVAL PERIOD:** Approval Date: December 19, 2013 Expiration Date: December 16, 2014

The CSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects has reviewed the protocol entitled: EXPERIENCES OF PERSISTENCE IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: A RETROSPECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ALUMNI . The project has been approved for the procedures and subjects described in the protocol. This protocol must be reviewed for renewal on a yearly basis for as long as the research remains active. Should the protocol not be renewed before expiration, all activities must cease until the protocol has been re-reviewed.

If approval did not accompany a proposal when it was submitted to a sponsor, it is the PI's responsibility to provide the sponsor with the approval notice.

This approval is issued under Colorado State University's Federal Wide Assurance 00000647 with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). If you have any questions regarding your obligations under CSU's Assurance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Please direct any questions about the IRB's actions on this project to:

Janell Barker, Senior IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1655 [Janell.Barker@Colostate.edu](mailto:Janell.Barker@Colostate.edu)  
Evelyn Swiss, IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1381 [Evelyn.Swiss@Colostate.edu](mailto:Evelyn.Swiss@Colostate.edu)

Barker, Janell

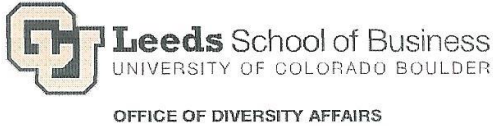
Barker, Janell

Approval is to recruit up to 15 participants with the approved recruitment cover letter and consent form. The above-referenced project was approved by the Institutional Review Board with the condition that the approved consent form is signed by the subjects and each subject is given a copy of the form. NO changes may be made to this document without first obtaining the approval of the IRB.

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**Approval Period:** December 19, 2013 through December 16, 2014  
**Review Type:** EXPEDITED  
**IRB Number:** 00000202

APPENDIX D  
LETTER OF SUPPORT



October 11, 2013

To: Aswad Allen  
1697 S. Ironton St.  
Aurora, CO 80012

Colorado State University  
Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office  
321 General Services Building  
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011  
Attn: IRB Coordinator

Re: Dissertation Research Study

Colorado State University, Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office:

It is with great pleasure that the Office of Diversity Affairs at the Leeds School of Business serve in partnership with Aswad Allen in his research efforts to contact and connect with our alumni that identify as Black and/or African-American. Our understanding of this project is that he intends to partner with our school, specifically our diversity office, to select 10 to 15 African American Business School Alumni for his dissertation research study.

As the Schools Diversity Program coordinator, I will provide email contact information and partner with him to distribute research interest and consent communications. If he should need my assistance regarding any other relevant study compliance items, I am happy to assist.

Regards,

Adrian Green  
Program Manager  
Office of Diversity Affairs | Leeds School of Business  
University of Colorado Boulder  
303.735.0588 | Adrian.Green@Colorado.EDU

APPENDIX E  
GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Can you describe your overall experience at Western University?
2. What experiences led to your persistence at Western University?
3. How did you feel about your experience academically; socially; financially; culturally?
4. Will you talk about your experiences specifically related to attaining your degree from the business school?
5. What were your “in-class” experiences?
6. What were your “out-of-class” experiences?
7. Can you talk about any support systems you may have had?
8. How do you believe these experiences helped you graduate from Western University?
9. How did these experiences guide your decisions and actions following graduation?
10. How do you think these experiences are helping you in your employment / graduate school now?
11. Is there anything else about your experience at W.U. you would like to share?