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Persistence of African American Students at Predominately White Institutions

Candace Thompson

Eastern Illinois University

ABSTRACT

Using qualitative methodology, the persistence of African American students at predominately White institutions was analyzed. This was conducted through semi-structured interviews by six participants which evaluated African American students' overall persistence. Participants expressed what determined their selections of institutions as well as what institutional and personal factors negatively and positively affected their matriculation throughout the institution. In addition, the study provided recommendations to student affairs professionals to better serve this population.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family and support system. I would have not been where I am today if it was not without their continual support throughout my academic journey. I love you all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would just like to give honor to God, as without him this whole process would not be possible. To my parents, family and friends in the Bahamas and overseas, THANK YOU. You all have been there every step of the way. To my Mother Jasmen, thank you for understanding my journey when no one else did. My Thesis Chair, Dr. Jon Coleman, thank you for embarking on this journey with me. You have pushed me when I myself wanted to give up. You allowed me to focus on my passion areas and create a thesis that I am beyond proud of today. I am forever grateful of your assistance during this process and my graduate journey.

To my thesis committee members, Dr. Mona Davenport and Jeremy Alexander, thank you. You both have been an instrumental part of my journey at Eastern and I am beyond grateful for your knowledge of this subject area. To my participants, thank you for allowing me to tell your story, so that others too can be moved to help African American students in their persistence in education. To my mentors within the field, thank you for believing in me and providing me with the knowledge and resources to complete my Higher education journey. Lastly, to my Taylor Hall staff members, thank you beyond measure as you all have pushed me to be successful in everything that I have sought to do.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Society as a whole will suffer if higher education fails in its role to prepare a citizenry that acknowledges and respects the contributions of all its members (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000). Gaining equal access to quality education has long presented a formidable challenge for minority students in the United States (Robinson, 1990). Attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI) can be a challenge for African American students and play a negative factor in their success as only one third to one half of students who enroll at PWIs will leave with degrees and this is a cause for concern and a need for action to address the retention of African American students (Bourne-Bowie, 2000).

African American students attending PWIs will drop out in more significant numbers because of their race (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). The issue of student retention is a persistent problem in higher education and thus many African Americans students will not persist until graduation (Swail, 2004; Bourne-Bowie, 2000). Enrollment of African American students in higher education has increased in the past few decades and is set to increase even more within the next four decades (Akande, 2014; Bourne-Bowie, 2000). More attention needs to be placed on how to successfully support this student population in the future (Bourne-Bowie, 2000).

“Retention is the lifeblood of an institution” said Dr Johnetta Cross Brazell, the former Vice President of Student Affairs at the University of Arkansas (Hurd, 2000). Dr. Brazell has spoken volumes on the current issues’ universities are facing with regards to the retention of minorities. Universities across the country are being challenged with

retaining minorities due to the many barriers that come with matriculation, and in order to improve, institutions need to target retention initiatives that are specifically for African American students on their campuses (Hunn, 2014; Johnson, 2013).

The structure and formulation of college campuses were designed to serve predominately White students and not those of minorities (Jones & Williams, 2006). Institutions of higher education must therefore consider the present experiences of minority students in their institutions in order to enhance their ability to educate these students (Wright, Good, & Lampley, 2011; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Universities are required to work twice as hard at retaining and attracting minority students for colleges than their majority peers, but the process of retention has become a major issue for many institutions (Akande, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to examine the persistence of African American students at a mid-sized PWI located in the Midwest. The study identified the current factors that influence African American students in their college selection process and the factors that impacted their persistence at the institution. The study identified the needs of African American students in relation to their increase in persistence.

Research Questions

This study focuses on identifying the factors and influences that affect the retention of African American students at a predominantly white institution.

1. What are the factors about institutions that African American students consider in their selection of colleges?

2. What Institutional and Personal factors have positively impacted African American students' persistence?
3. What Institutional and Personal factors have negatively impacted African American students' persistence in college?
4. What ways can Predominantly White Institutions improve the retention of their African American students

Significance of the Study

African American students who do enroll in college, are among the population least likely to remain long enough to graduate and given the significance of a college degree in later life, retention of minorities should be a concern for higher education as a method of social change (Robinson, 1990). There is a need for more minorities on our campuses as they create diverse student bodies that help to create a positive living and educational environment for students (Karkouti, 2016). The experiences and concerns of African American college students has been a topic of discussion and research for many years but has yielded little success in the overall development and growth of African American retention in higher education (Shuford & Flowers, 2016).

This study provides more concrete information about African American students and their persistence at PWIs, as well as the experiences and factors that supported their persistence. Minority undergraduate representation continues to be dismal with African American students representing 12.3 percent of the population at four-year institutions (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002).

Limitations

Three limitations have been identified that impacted the information gathered from this study. First, generalizability and applicability regarding this population was seen as a possible limitation due to this study being conducted with a small sample size. The information gathered from this study only represented a group of African American students and thereby the study may not be able to generalize the results to all African American students.

Second, adaptability of findings was another limitation in the study. With the study taking place at a mid-sized rural Midwestern PWI, the results might be not applicable to other PWIs as additional factors may play a factor in the findings. Differences in environmental settings (rural, urban, or suburban) as well as institutional size and resources can affect how applicable the findings of the study will be for other institutions.

Third, researcher bias was also be seen as a possible limitation within the study since the researcher is a minority who attended a PWI for undergraduate and graduate school. To address this limitation, questions and coding was done with special attention to the participants' responses and correlated with the thesis committee.

Definitions of Terms

Minorities. A definable category of people who share an identity or status and are subject to prejudice, discrimination, and oppression (Bell, 2013).

Predominately White Institution (PWI). Institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Lomotey, 2010).

Retention. The measure at which a student persists in their educational development (Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008).

African American. American People having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Shuford & Flowers, 2016).

Persistence. The act of continuing toward an educational goal; student measure (Education, 2001; Wyrick, 2014)

Historically Black College & University (HBCU). Institutions that were established before 1964 for the sole purpose of postsecondary education for African American Students (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013)

Summary

This study focused on the persistence of African American students at Predominately White Institutions. Chapter one provided a detailed introduction to the study which included the purpose, research questions, significance of the study, limitations, and definitions. Chapter two will provide an analysis of the existing literature and its relation to the study.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

The importance of the role of higher education and minorities is clear as demographic projections suggest that greater numbers of students of color will enter the education pipeline in the years to come (Zamani, 2000). A new outlook is needed on the research of minorities and their persistence throughout college. As our nation becomes more diverse, educators and policymakers have the formidable task of not only attracting students of color to higher education but ensuring their retention, matriculation and learning success (Zamani, 2000).

In spite of the United States changing demographics and the inevitable “browning” of America, many contemporary college students from underrepresented groups continue to experience a diminution of their identity, status, and security as they pursue higher education (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). For this reason, a review of current literature is needed to understand minority students, the issues they are currently facing and how the trends that are associated with their persistence throughout college affect them. This literature review will focus on the access of higher education for minorities, the persistence and retention issues they face at predominantly White institutions, and the efforts needed to improve their overall retention within institutions.

Access to Higher Education

The experiences and concerns of African American college students have been topics of discussion and research for many years (Shuford & Flowers, 2016). Over half a century ago, the majority of African Americans had very limited opportunities for higher learning (Kim, 2002). When Harvard University was founded in 1636, only white males

were allowed to attend, and for a very long-time afterwards, higher education was reserved for White Americans (Jones & Williams, 2006). From 1636 to the 1830's, black students were almost universally excluded from institutions of higher learning because of governmental mandates, active discrimination, and practices of institutionalized racism (Karkouti, 2016).

Despite the barriers, in 1799 John Chavis, a Presbyterian minister and teacher, was the first black person on record to attend an American college or university (JBHE Research Department, 2019). It was not until 1823, when Alexander Lucius Twilight became the first African American to receive a degree when he graduated from Middlebury College in Virginia (Shuford & Flowers, 2016). In 1826, Edward Jones from Amherst College and John Brown Russwurm from Bowdoin College became the second and third African Americans to receive their college degrees and in 1828, Edward Mitchell from Dartmouth College became the fourth (JBHE Research Department, 2019). In 1833, Oberlin College was founded and became the first university to freely admit black students (Karkouti, 2016; JBHE Research Department, 2019). Although this was technically open institution, it was not until 1844 that Oberlin had its first black graduate by the name of George B. Vashon (JBHE Research Department, 2019). By 1860, only twenty-eight African Americans had obtained a baccalaureate degree (Shuford & Flowers, 2016).

From the 1860 through the 1950's, approximately 10% of the total African American student population in college were enrolled at White campuses (Jones & Williams, 2006). At this time, in many states, African Americans were not permitted to attend institutions of higher education by law as well as the accepted historical negation

of opportunities for African Americans (Shuford & Flowers, 2016). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 are two legislative acts that helped to facilitate changes in higher education opportunities for African Americans (Johnson, 2013). African Americans' dream of achieving higher education was suppressed prior to the Civil War by a social system that severely limited educational opportunities for them (Shuford & Flowers, 2016). While still limited to a small percentage of Americans, the national population of college-aged students enrolled in higher education expanded from 3.2 million during the 1960's to almost 20.3 million by 2002 and African Americans shared in the increased access to college enrollment (Jones & Williams, 2006).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were institutions that were established before 1964 for the sole purpose of postsecondary education for African American Students (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). The population of black college students attending HBCUs during the 60's dropped to seventy percent, down from the ninety percent only a decade before (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Total enrollment for African American students continued to increase in the 1960s and 1970s aided by the influx of veterans from the Vietnam War (Shuford & Flowers, 2016). Currently there are 89 four-year and 14 two-year institutions that identify as HBCUs down from a high of over 120 before the changes of the 1950s and 1960s (Kim, 2002).

Before emancipation, many Whites thought that providing African Americans with a college education would endanger the existing system of slavery or later jeopardize the racially divided social system (Kim, 2002). Despite the civil rights legislation in the last half century, the national goal of providing ethnic minority populations with equal access to quality institutions of higher education and opportunities

for academic success has yet to be fully realized (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Education for African Americans has become one of the most valuable resources for improving their standing in America (Johnson, 2013). Higher education institutions suffer because of the lack of diversity in the academic community and this limits the opportunity for people to explore knowledge and gain an understanding of the world from a larger perspective than their own (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000).

The purpose of education is to provide students the opportunity to extend the boundaries of their familiar settings by exposing them to a world composed of people with opinions and attitudes differing from their own (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000). Actualizing an educational vision of equality in higher education in the new millennium requires the understanding of the sociopolitical forces that preclude and promote equal opportunities and academic success (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Over the last three decades, institutions of higher learning have witnessed marked increases in minority student enrollment (Zamani, 2000) and although the proportion of minority students participating in college has been rising it still lags behind the attendance rates of the majority white population (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002).

Students of color have marked changes in their representation since the 1980s and over the past 20 years have increased their greater presence on college campuses (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). This enrolment increase has provided institutions with the sudden existence of diversity on its campuses – a diversity that was unfamiliar to many students. At the same time, students of color on predominately White campuses today may be subjected to more intense experiences than students in the past decade and must cope with the additional burdens of racism, discrimination and pejorative stereotypes

confronting them in the classroom (Wright, Good, & Lampley, 2011; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002).

African American College Development

Colleges for Black students were initially founded by religious organizations and White benevolent societies to prepare Black teachers who would go on to work in segregated schools and colleges such as Avery College and Lincoln University that were both founded in the North in the 1850's (Kim, 2002). In 1854, Ashmun Institute (now Lincoln University) was founded as the first institution of higher education for black students and Wilberforce University was founded in 1856 as the second (JBHE Research Department, 2019). Between 1865 and 1890, hundreds of higher education institutions were founded to educate black students and many of these institutions were initially established as elementary and secondary schools with the eventual goal of becoming degree-granting institutions (Shuford & Flowers, 2016).

Since 1865, black colleges have continued to be vibrant and vital members of the college community (Jackson, 1988). But it was the U.S Supreme Court's landmark ruling in its decision in *Brown vs Board of Education* 1954 that finally directed higher education's move toward desegregation (Kim, 2002). The court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth amendment. Prior to this ruling, ninety percent of African Americans students were enrolled in HBCU's in the south and after *Brown*, black students in the South was no longer limited in their choice of college to attendance at HBCU's (Shuford & Flowers, 2016). Even with the ruling in *Brown*, it wasn't until after the Civil Rights of 1964 that banned discrimination in federally funded programs

including education that established African American access to all institutions of higher education (Shuford & Flowers, 2016; Kim, 2002)

Integration of the African American College and PWIs

In many ways, *Brown* set the stage for increased structural diversity on college campuses by opening avenues for Blacks to attend PWIs (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). The Higher Education Act of 1965 helped increase in enrollment of African Americans at predominately White institutions (Johnson, 2013). As historically White serving institutions opened their door to blacks, enrollments at historically Black colleges and universities decreased which forced many organizational changes such as merging with local White institutions in order to survive (Kim, 2002). Most public HBCUs also began to admit non-Black students and by the mid 1990's, three HBCU's actually had student populations that were predominately white (Kim, 2002).

Since the start of the 21st century, African American students are continuing to enroll in predominately White institutions in greater numbers than those attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Johnson, 2013). As of 2017, non-Black students make up 24 percent of enrollment at HBCUs, compared with 15 percent in 1976 showing a shift in the interest of both white and black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Although the increased presence of non-minority students is evident, HBCUs still play an important role in higher education as their overall enrollment has actually increased with non-Black students attending HBCUs helping to make those institutions more stable and able to continue their role in higher education (Kim, 2002). During the 2016-2017 academic year, 12,870 of the 49,500 degrees that were conferred by HBCUs belonged to non-Black students proving to be a significant

impact on the viability of these institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Minority Presence on Campus

Although the enrollment of racial and ethnic minorities at institutions has increased there has been a decrease in their overall presence on campuses. (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Access and completion rates for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students have always lagged behind those for white and Asian students (Swail, 2004). Minority students remain at a serious disadvantage in the admissions process and if access rates for minority students were on the same level with majority white students, students of color would align much more with the degree production rates of students of other ethnicities (Swail, 2004).

Many minority students can also be classified as first-generation students and there are additional obstacles that these students continue to face especially with being the first in their families to attend college (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Although enrollment in higher education is an accomplishment within itself many first-generation students, they are among the students least likely to graduate (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Strong correlation has been linked to the lack of parental support and the financial challenges that come with being a part of the social and academic life of an institution (Hunn, 2014).

African American Students

African American students will drop out of higher education in more significant numbers than their majority peers (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). Thus, they are more likely to impact retention efforts on our campuses and attention to this population warrants special

attention. Much of the research on African American college students at predominantly White institutions (PWI) indicates that African American students encounter difficulties in social and academic integration (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). African American students endure more hostile environments at predominately White institutions than their counterparts at historically Black colleges and universities which leads to an even greater number of obstacles that they must contend in order to succeed (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). African American students on majority campuses are seen as similarly vulnerable, less likely to fit in, feel alienated and adjust poorly on PWI campuses (Chavous, 2002)

African American students also showcase a greater degree of perseverance and drive for education at PWIs in order to achieve the same level of success as their counterparts at HBCUs, although this is the case many students are still achieving less and graduating at lower rates than their white counterparts (Johnson, 2013; Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). Enrollment of African American students at predominately White institutions are at a low 14 percent compared to a high 68 percent for White student enrollment (Johnson, 2013). African American students are having to rely more on their own resources in order to succeed at these institutions. This is because the external sources that are needed to succeed are not readily available to them as for their other counterparts (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). Deficient academic preparation and personal problems related to identity issues are also some critical issues that African American students face difficulty with at predominately White institutions (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000).

Factors affecting Retention

African American students face a myriad of barriers in pursuit of their educational goals and because of that, these barriers negatively affect African American students' perception and experiences while enroll in college which ultimately leads to them withdrawing from predominately White institutions (Houston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010). Having to prove one's worthiness represents another serious barrier for African American students in their aim for success at predominately White institution (Houston, Graves, & Fleming- Randle, 2010). African Americans in predominantly White institutions have had to couple the normal concerns of a first year student such as being away from home for the first time with those of having to adjust in an intellectual and society community that is unprepared to accept their cultural differences (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000).

Academic and Social factors also affect retention among minorities. Students who feel more connected to their academic endeavors are more likely to succeed (Baker & Robnett, 2012). The more engage students are, the more likely they will be successful. Tinto indicates that in order for college students to be successful they need to break away from friends and families from home in order to become integrated into the social and academic realms of college (Tinto, 1993). Failure to do so can contribute many academic difficulties for these students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Social interaction and academic success and adjusting to college settings go hand in hand with the persistence of African American students on their campuses (Bourne-Bowie, 2000).

Campus Climate

When examining retention among minorities, Campus Climate contributes to the overall experience of retention in students (McClain & Perry, 2017). An institution's history and tradition of inclusion or exclusion can also play a beneficial or detrimental factor to African American students' matriculation and retention (McClain & Perry, 2017). Good campus "fit" is defined as when a student's academic, social, and financial needs and wants are met by an institution (Velasco, 2015). How students adjust to this new venture in their life is an important part in the overall retention of a student (Swail, 2004). Poor retention rates often the result of a lack of student-college fit in African American Students (Zamani, 2000). Minorities often experience a culture shock when coming onto campus and being able to have a welcoming campus climate can aid in their retention (Swail, 2004).

Compositional Diversity also ties into campus climate and how the lack of diversity on a college campus can affect minorities. Quaye, Griffin and Museus (2015), explains that compositional diversity is comprised of any effort to increase the population of students, staff, and faculty from inadequately represented races and ethnicities. Compositional Diversity is lacking on our predominately white campuses and can hinder a student's retention, which can also restrict and hinder interactions with minority students in and out of class which can hinder their social and academic experiences (Swail, 2004). Institution-wide commitment is necessary and can only be achieved by integrating minorities into all aspects of an institution's life (Johnson, 2013). Many academically successful African American students drop out of college because of feelings of disconnection or the lack of support from their institution (Gusa, 2010).

A hostile racial climate on campus has also been associated with lower academic adjustment, performance, and college persistence (Chavous, 2002). Students are less likely to ask for help when in an environment that is dominated by their white peers or fully participate in curricular related activities instructed by professors (Chavous, 2002). A student's ability to adapt to their campus environment reflects the students' ability to cope which directly relates to the success or failure of coping skills that they have learned from their experiences prior to coming to college (Swail, 2003). Predominately White institutions are unaware that they are continuing to create unresponsive and unfriendly campus environments that are not created for African American students (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002).

Support Services and Programs

Student Support Services, a segment of the Department of Education's TRiO program, was initiated to provide academic support programs that target first generation, low-income students as well as students with learning and physical disabilities (Zamani, 2000). African American students are often participants in these programs because many are either first generation or low-income college students. The TRiO program was designed to address academic development as well as the cultural, emotional, social and physical concerns of its intended students (Zamani, 2000). Support programs such as these have been recognized as being a significant contributor to student success for this population (Johnson, 2013).

Early intervention programs designed for first year students have also proven to assist in the retention of African American students at predominately White institutions and can be highly successful with the right commitment and dedication of staff and

faculty (Johnson, 2013). Minority students in particular need supportive environments on campus to help them achieve academic success and so universities need to take into consideration differences of African American students from their white peers when creating support programs (Jones & Williams, 2006). Multicultural affairs programs are also highlighted as important on campuses as providing an increase in visibility for those students (Jones & Williams, 2006). African American cultural centers and organizations can also provide support and a mechanism for students to become more fully integrated into the campus community by demonstrating the institution's commitment to these students (Johnson, 2013).

Best Practices

Positive student and faculty relationships are critical to minority student's success in college (Houston, Graves, & Fleming- Randle, 2010). Hiring African American faculty and staff can enhance a student's willingness to learn in a PWI community which helps to develop good student-faculty relationships which can be proven to be beneficial to African American students (Johnson, 2013). Students at HBCUs experience greater student-faculty relationships and those relationships are of a higher quality than the relationships that African American students experience at PWIs (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). African American students at Predominately White Institutions often credit their success to finding a specific black faculty and staff member to serve as a mentor during their time at their institution (Wright, Good, & Lampley, 2011). Mentoring is seen as an invaluable service to African American Students and can be beneficial by helping students successfully attain education and career goals as well (Johnson, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto's student integration model has had a great effect on the understanding of the issues surrounding student retention (Land, 2008). Tinto believes that the main reasons behind whether a student persists or drops out of college is dependable upon their academic and social integration (Bean, 2000). Tinto believes that student persistence is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and their commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out (Tinto, 1993). Tinto explains that before students enter college, they already are equipped with family and individual attributes that they have used before coming to college. He redefined the outcome of persistence as the interaction between students and their experiences in the campus environment (Tinto, 1993). As students develop individually and academically it leads to academic integration which leads to social integration where a student then finds their specific peer groups as well as interaction with faculty (Land, 2008).

Academic and Social integration then work together to help the students to continue with their goals and commitments which ultimately helps them to decide if they want to leave or stay within a university. Tinto's model supports efforts regarding retention to African American students and how they go through the cycle of student retention differently from their majority peers. Tinto's student integration model consists of six characteristics which all attribute to the shaping of the college students; their personal attributes, goals, institutional experiences, integration, goals, and outcomes (Swail, 2004). This cycle can be used as a resource to help institutions gain a better understanding of how they can help students to be retained at a predominately White

campus. Tinto (1993) argued that students who do not achieve academic and social integration often leave school which has been found in follow up studies (Bean, 2000).

Summary

The current literature identifies the access of higher education for minorities, the African American college development, and the integration of the African American college and PWIs. Furthermore, the African American student role is highlighted in addition to the factors affecting retention among minorities including campus climate. Current literature also highlights the need for campus climate, support services and programs as well as the best practices needed for a strong persistence of African American students at PWIs. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology used in the study.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

In this chapter the methodological framework that was used for this study will be outlined. The chapter will review the study design, participants, research site, data collection and data analysis.

Design of Study

A qualitative research approach was used to analyze the persistence of African American Students at predominately White institutions. Qualitative research has proven to be the most appropriate approach because it provides an in-depth understanding of the ways people come to understand, act, and manage their day to day situations in a particular setting (Health, 2011). These results of the study were used to determine what factors influence African American student persistence.

The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with students who identify as African American and attend a public Midwestern Predominately White Institution (PWI). Interviews were considered the best medium for this study because it provides great richness and depth of the information given (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews also allowed personal stories to be emphasized and allowed for a better understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Participants

For this study, six African American upper-class students at the institution was selected to be interviewed for their insights and thoughts on what has impacted their selection of, and persistence at, the institution. All participants identified as female and

ranged from 20-23 in age. From the list of participants, five were seniors and one a junior. Two of the six participants identified as first-generation college students. The self-reported grade point average among participants ranged from a 2.8 to 3.4.

A list of potential participants in this study was provided by the campus multicultural office which maintains a list of email contacts for students who identify as African American at the institution for the office's programs and services. The list was edited to only include students who are juniors and seniors with a 3.0 and above. Selecting participants with greater academic achievement on the campus provided more information on what factors have influenced the student's continuous presence at the institution.

Participants were recruited through a series of emails inviting them to participate. The emails were sent out three times over the course of a two-week period. Two as the initial invite to both the junior and senior mailing lists and once as a reminder email. Students were selected on a "first come, first served" basis. Four of the participants were recruited through the email method while the other two participants were recruited through referrals by a participant, a method called snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is where research participants recruit other participants for a test or study (Stephanie, 2014).

Research Site

The Research site was a public midsized PWI in the Midwest with approximately 8,000 students, located in a rural town of 21,000. Sixty-three percent (63%) of the student population identifies as White, sixteen percent (16%) identifies as African American, and twenty percent (20%) identify as other minorities. Interviews were conducted in the

researcher's private office located in one of the on-campus residential buildings. This site was deemed suitable because of its location and availability while still providing privacy for participants.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview which provided reliable and comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews allow for interviewers to develop an "interview guide" of questions that help to generate responses based on a specific topic. This method also allowed participants to be able express their views or ideas in their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews also allowed for follow up questions by the researcher based on participant responses. Appendix A provides the interview protocol that was used for this study.

Data Collection

The data was collected through the interviews with participants. The interviews ranged from a period of twenty- five minutes to forty minutes. These one-on-one interviews were then be recorded on a recording device and uploaded to the researchers drive and then transferred to two flash drives. The responses were then transcribed by a third-party system and then cross checked by the researcher for accuracy. The transcription was then coded for data analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy before the data was used in the study.

Role of the Researcher

In this study the researcher's personal experiences may influence the information

presented since they share the identity of a minority student who has attended a PWI for both of their academic degrees. The researcher's experiences at both their past and current institutions were one of the main reasons the topic of the persistence of minorities at PWIs, with an emphasis on African American students, was selected. The researcher worked to reduce the impact of any possible bias in coordination with the thesis committee to ensure accuracy and that participant voices are clear.

Treatment of Data

The interview recordings were transcribed from interviews and coded. Coding is considered a fundamental aspect of the researcher's process which allows data to be broken down and from that data, common themes emerge (Elliot, 2018). Two flash drives were utilized in order to create a back-up for the information that will be collected. Responses were stored on two flash drives that were placed in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the researcher. The information stored on flash drives will be kept for three years in accordance with IRB policies. After three years the flash drives with the data will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were conducted by the researcher, the interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed. The responses were then be coded. Different codes were assigned to participant responses to help identify common themes and codes that are found through the analyzing of the data. The identified reasons and factors that influenced the participants' student persistence at PWIs will then be assembled and presented in Chapter IV.

Summary

In this chapter, the methodological framework used in this study was presented. The target population was identified and method for selection to participate in the study was detailed. Finally, the collection, treatment, and analysis of the data was laid out. In Chapter Four, the data collected is presented and analyzed for common themes and shared experiences.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the persistence of African American students at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). This chapter will highlight the themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews of six junior and senior African American students at a PWI. The findings will be organized by research questions and will identify the themes that emerged from the interviews. Participants were asked a series of questions (Appendix A) to determine the factors that they considered in selecting their institutions, the factors that impacting their persistence in college, and how retention efforts can be improved at these institutions.

Findings

Research Question #1. What are the factors about institutions that African American students consider in their selection of colleges?

Location

When participants were asked about factors that they considered when applying to colleges, many expressed that geographic location was a huge factor in their decision. The proximity to home stood out among the participants as many stated that their ties to family determined how much distance would be acceptable to them. Numerous participants spoke about their need for independence from home and the urge to be away from their current environments. Participant 3 stated that, "Distance was big thing for me...I didn't want to be too close to home." She went on to say that while she knew she wanted to stay in Illinois, she also did not want to be as accessible to family at home.

Participant 1 expressed similar thoughts as Participant 3 stating that, “I would definitely want to stay in-state, but not too close to home.”

Some participants addressed the fact that their family circumstances affected the need for proximity. Participant 1 expressed that she did not want to attend a nearby university because that school had been in her family tradition and she had stated that she was looking for something different. Participant 2 talked about how her Green Card process affected what institutions she was considering stating “I just applied to all the schools, schools just in Illinois” as she was more comfortable with a system, she was already familiar with. Participant 6 talked about how negative relationships with her family in Chicago affected how far she wanted to go to attend college. She said, “I applied to schools that were not so far away from home.”

Participant 6 highlighted that that she did have a choice of going back to New York which was her hometown but had become accustomed to the Chicagoland area, so she was interested in staying closer to her new home. Participants also expressed the need for distance from their homes but also the importance of having ease of access in order to be able to return as needed. Participant 3 alluded to that factor when she emphasized that although she wanted distance between her home and the institution, she still wanted to have the access to come back to her hometown whenever she wanted without too much difficulty or excessive travel.

Cost and Affordability

A second factor mentioned by participants was regarding the costs and overall affordability of the institution. Many participants expressed how difficult the selection of their college was because of the financial constraints that came with their selection.

Participant 2 expressed how she choose the institution because it was the only institution that provided her with sufficient financial aid. She said, “A lot of schools I had to drop because they would not give me financial aid.” At this time in her academic journey she was going through the green card process and went on to share, “When they found out I was not a citizen of the United States, they then dropped my financial aid.”

Participants also expressed how important finances were for their parents as well. Participant 2 talked about how she knew that she had to keep it cheap when looking at colleges because her father was going to be paying for her education. She said that at the time many institutions required her to prove she would be able to afford her education, but her parents were sending her brother to college as well and they would not be able to afford both of their expenses “My dad can’t afford two kids coming to college.” She went on to say how cost had been a major factor that she “kept in the back of her head” because she knew that they would not be able to afford as much.

Numerous participants expressed how important affordability was within their search. Participant 4 explained “Affordability was a big one...” when it came to decide on the right college. Participant 6 was also clear that “Money was the most important thing to me...how much an institution was and how much I would have to deal with pertaining to loans academically.” She went on to express that on her FASFA she is an independent student, so she needed every assistance available to her. Participants further explained how the financial aid package that schools had offered played a substantial role in their selection. Participant 4 explained how she compared her potential colleges based upon which one provided her with the most aid, “the place that gave me the money and scholarships helped me decide.” This was seen across participants. Participant 5, a

student athlete at the institution, expressed how she narrowed down her selection on which institution gave her the best aid package to play, “This institution was the school that gave me the most money, so I chose to come here.”

Alignment of Values

The third factor mentioned by participants in selecting a college was how the school’s values aligned with their own. Participants expressed how the institution had to meet many of their values and criteria coming in so that they would feel comfortable as a student there. Participant 2 mentioned how she sought to choose an institution where she knew that she would persist. Her parents instructed her “To pick a school that you think you’re going to finish all four years at...” and that is what she did. She said that with this in mind, she picked her current institution. Many participants also expressed how important it was to feel comfortable in their environment and institution. Participant 5 expressed that she wanted “A close environment, like a home.” She went on to explain how she wanted an institution that would offer her the chance to be not only comfortable there but would go that extra bit to also make her feel at home. Participant 1 expressed similar views during her college search experience. She recounted a story about her campus visit to the institution and how the President addressed incoming students and family. She said that it was during his speech that her mother started crying and it was at that moment that they realized that this was the institution for them.

Many participants also highlighted the theme of belonging in their conversations and there were numerous mentions on the importance of size and fit when it came to the right institution. Some participants expressed how they wanted to be a part of a big environment while others felt the need for a smaller one. Participant 3 identified that she

wanted to know how big or small the college was as it was important to find something that was the right size for her, “I didn’t want a too small campus, I wanted a big public place... [however] I didn’t want nothing too big.” Participant 5 also had similar thoughts and highlighted that “I paid attention to how big the school was, how much the enrollment was, as well as student to teacher ratio.”

Participants also highlighted the importance of diversity within the institution. Participant 4 expressed how she wanted the institution to have “safe spaces for people like me...”, a reference to the color of her skin. She also mentioned that she was looking for safe spaces for other marginalized populations as well. Participant 2 expressed similar thoughts and articulated how she wanted an institution to be diverse and that although many institutions had mentioned it, she wanted to be able to see it. Many of the other participants expressed similar views including participant 1 who expressed that an institution had to have, “some type of black community available.” Overall, participants expressed that these were the key factors that affected their selection. While there were numerous other factors that individual participants used and mentioned throughout their interviews, those factors were not shared consistently among the different participants.

Research Question #2: What institutional and personal factors have positively impacted African American students?

When speaking with participants regarding the factors that positively affected their persistence, several themes were found. Participants expressed that their connection to family, determination, mentorship, and campus involvement were the most prominent personal factors that positively affected their persistence. Support Services, staff, faculty-

student relationships, and pre-college mentoring programs were identified as the key institutional factors promoting their persistence at the institution.

Personal Factors Promoting Persistence

Many participants expressed that a number of personal factors about themselves were critical for them to successfully persist at the institution. Several of the participants talked about their connections with family and the support they provided to the student. Participant 4 talked about her family's influence on her and how her mom always told her, "I always groomed you for this..." This helped her to realize that she was ready for college and could be successful, especially when she experienced obstacles. She went on to express that she never experienced any homesickness because she knew how to take care of things herself. Participant 2 expressed similar views, explaining that she had a commitment to her family and that she had made a promise to them "I told my parents that I was going to finish at one school for four years and not change to another school and I am going to keep that promise."

Although many participants mentioned their connections to family, many also mentioned their own determination and drive as factors that influenced their persistence. Participant 4 stated that "I'm a person that would like to basically defy the odds. I don't like to be claimed as a statistic or whatever." The other participants expressed similar attitudes towards their persistence. Many attributed their success to their determination to correct the mistakes of the past. Participant 5 expressed that, "People in my family, especially on my mom's side, my cousins, barely finished high school. So that made me want to be the one who finished." She continued by saying, "My mom didn't really go to

college or anything, so I think that it is really important that my siblings and I get it (college) out of the way.”

Participant 1 expressed similar thoughts towards family, but for her she had that example of persistence and success set for her by family unlike many of the other participants.

“I don’t think anybody in my family had gave this up. They went to college and they finished. Knowing my mom went to college, my aunties and all my cousins got their degrees...I definitely kept going because of God and the examples around me and because of my own desire to succeed.”

Participant 6 expressed that she persisted and stated that her main reason for staying within the institution was because her education was providing her with a roof over her head. Participant 4 had similar reasons why she persisted but said that when she thought of leaving the institution, she told herself “I’m so close, I might as well push through and I know that I could do it. Just keep my head up and continue to do what I’m doing to get that degree.”

Mentorship and campus involvement are the second theme that was mentioned by the participants that personally impacted them. Many talked about how their involvement in campus organizations allowed them to meet individuals whom they would self-identify as a mentor in their life. Participant 3 talked about how seeing her mentor succeed in college made her realize that she too would be able to do it. Almost all of the participants talked about their involvement in organizations on campus, such as the Black Student Union, student government, and other student organizations. They talked about how these organizations helped them to branch out and make connections with other African

American students. Participant 4 emphasized that being involved in her organization allowed her to become a role model for other women and people of color on campus.

Participant 3 stated that because of her involvement with her residential community, she gained mentors within the hall's leadership and expressed that seeing people like her in those higher positions allowed her to realize that if they can do it, she can too.

Institutional Factors Promoting Persistence

Participants also identified a number of factors specific to the institution that helped them to successfully persist during their college career. Support Services and Staff was the first of the factors mentioned by participants as they described their experiences with persistence. Participants talked about their experiences with minority-serving services on campus, such as TRiO and Gateway, and how they centered their involvement with the campus in these programs and that the connections they had with the staff working there substantially helped them on their educational journey. Participant 2 expressed in her interview that "If it wasn't for TRiO, I wouldn't be here right now." She explained that her connection with her TRiO advisor was critical to her success and how it was her advisor who was the one who encouraged her the most during one of the most trying times of her academic career "I know if I didn't have her, I don't think I would have been sitting at this institution right now."

Participant 6 expressed similar views on the support services that were provided by the institution. She talked about how she connected with the department's executive director and how it was through meeting her that she was introduced to TRiO. The student expressed how she was already involved in Gateway because of her low GPA and ACT scores and was required to attend mandatory study tables, but although this was the

case, her TRiO advisor encouraged her to also attend tutoring and because of that she was able to turn around her academic performance and raise her grade of an F to a B by the end of the semester “TRiO really helped me out.” Alongside TRiO, additional offices under the minority affairs umbrella were also mentioned by participants. Participant 6 in particular talked about how recognition by the minority affairs office on campus helped her to continue on, “They gave me a scholarship because I was black, and I studied abroad” which was a surprise as she didn’t apply for it but it was due to her minority status that she was recognized and that support was crucial to her continued persistence.

Participants also mentioned pre-college minority programs and how those programs recruited them here but also helped to keep them at the institution. Participant 4 spoke about Access Granted; a departmental program based out of the minority affairs office at the institution. She talked about how this organization helped her decide to come to the institution, but most importantly it helped her to continue and make progress towards graduation.

Career Services was also mentioned by participants as a valuable service that helped them to discover more about the institution academically. Participant 3 shared “If I didn’t go to Career Services, I probably wouldn’t have done that extra major.” She continued by expressing how attending those events and going to resources that the institution offered was a big thing because otherwise they would actually not know what resources were out there otherwise.

Faculty-student relationships were also mentioned by the participants as important to the connections that were formed by the participants. Participant 1 mentioned how her connections with her major professors allowed her to become more comfortable with her

professors, which in turn allowed her to attend more teaching sessions as well as to visit them during office hours. “They were always kind and open and that helped me understand what was going on” in the class materials. Participant 3 shared similar views when she discussed her relationship with her sociology professor. The positive and supportive relationship pushed her to become more of a leader on campus and allowed her to become a peer leader and co-teacher of the freshman foundations class taught at the institution. She shared that her connections with the residence hall staff and supervisors also helped her to tap into her full potential and gave her the courage to apply for leadership positions within the department including becoming a Resident Assistant.

Research Question #3. What institutional and personal factors have negatively impacted African American persistence in college?

Like the positive factors, participants identified the factors that negatively impacted their persistence in college in the same two major themes: Personal factors and Institutional factors. Personal factors included adjusting to the new environment, change in social relationships, and navigating the complexity around financial aid and paying for college. Institutional factors included the lack of feelings of inclusion by campus staff and organizations and the impact of how the local community impacted students’ feeling of acceptance and welcome. These factors made persistence more difficult for the participants even though they found ways to address and overcome them in their efforts to continue their education.

Personal Factors Inhibiting Persistence

When talking to participants about their persistence within the institution majority mentioned how the adjustment to the campus negatively impacted them. The participants talked about how college was a different and new environment than what they were used to and not having the support from others that they had prior to college was jarring. Participant 3 talked about how she experienced difficulties during her freshman year because she didn't know how to get out and socialize with others. "I didn't join anything because I didn't have anybody to talk to or I felt as though I was not what they were looking for. I don't know, I felt under-qualified." She continued by saying "I was too scared." This was a common feeling expressed by a majority of the participants.

Participant 5 shared how she experienced trouble adjusting to being on her own while learning how to manage her academics while also meeting her obligations as a student-athlete. She went on to say how she struggled academically because she had a hard time adjusting to being by herself "Socially, it was kind of nerve wrecking because it was like I got here and didn't really know anybody." Participant 1 also had similar views and stated that for her, adjustment was hard because it was a different experience "It was different because I didn't have first to eighth period every day," She went on to talk about how personal distractions came into factor as well such as partying and toxic relationships. The majority of the participant's also shared similar views about how navigating personal relationships affected them as well.

Participant 4 recounted a similar experience adjusting to living with a new roommate. She talked about how issues with her roommate resulted in her deciding to live with her significant other at that time. She went on to talk about how looking back,

her avoiding these issues and not seeking help from hall staff made her experience with her roommate was one of the biggest mistakes of her life. “I should have just gotten a new roommate or just moved out because that was very stressful. My GPA wasn’t where it could have been my freshman year because I was dealing with that roommate.”

Participant 1 mentioned personal relationships issues as well. She expressed how she suffered from depression and anxiety during her first year because of the toxic relationships in her life which ultimately affected her academic success. She stated, “I’m not saying I flunked out, but I was receiving C’s and B’s instead of A’s which I preferred.”

Multiple participants mentioned their financial situation as a negative factor in their ability to persist throughout their time at the institution. Participant 4 expressed how she was unprepared for the financial realities of college and had financial difficulties in her first semester because she did not know how she would be able to pay for her tuition.

The statement came out on the first of the month and I’m like what is this? I see the amount and I’m like how am I going to pay for this? Like I don’t have this money

...I had to take out loans as that was the only way I would be able to afford here.

Participant 6 also shared how financial struggles that also affected her persistence while at the institution. She talked about how she did not have a good understanding of financial aid going into her college search and how it would affect her financially afterward. She applied for some scholarships at her institution but didn’t receive any so she had to rely on the minority support staff to help her understand her options. “All I knew was like the government gave me the money, the state gives me grants, give it to

Eastern, pay it off and go to school. I did not know a lot about those financial classes that help.” Without family who could explain the system, she was unable to figure it out on her own.

Institutional Factors Inhibiting Persistence

The majority of the participants also shared the view that certain institutional factors had had a negative effect on their persistence at the institution, most specifically in the sense of community and the campus environment of which they were now a part. Participant 1 expressed how she had felt segregation within the black community while participant 2 expressed the thought that the institution “has a diversity problem,” and that as minority students they do not feel welcome on the campus. She went on to explain that she feels as though the institution has been focusing too much on the wrong things such as a new e-sport facility which cost the institution almost \$50,000 instead of investing that money into their minority students. Participant 1 also mentioned how as black students they would feel more comfortable at the institution if the campus had more inclusive practices for all students.

Participants also discussed how they felt they were treated by the campus community. Participant 1 shared that she felt that the employees that the institution was hiring were racist and shared concerns with how those workers have been treating minority students. Participant 2 recalls the institution’s homecoming in 2018 and how it was the first time in school history that they had an all-black homecoming court. She stated, “I know racism is everywhere, but it’s like I haven’t had to deal with it as badly as I had to deal with it now.” She spoke about how her experience on that homecoming court was one she would never forget. Their court was not allowed to do certain tasks that

members of the court before hers could do because they were receiving death threats, emails and confederate flags waved at them from the community. She continued by sharing how the community at the institution felt as though the homecoming court was not diverse because there were no white students present.

Many Participants expressed similar views to members of the local community not being accepting to the black students at the institution and how they were constantly being watched even when shopping at local businesses in town. Participant 2 said,

I have always thought about transferring to a different school, but my thoughts have changed. My freshman year it was because I was going through a rough time and I wanted a fresh start. But if I had to transfer now, it would probably be just to go to a school that's a little bit, a little bit more diverse, a little bit more welcoming than my institution.

Participant 1 also explained that she voiced her concerns to the institution's president about the issues that minority students continue to face around campus and town.

Many participants also mentioned the lack of a welcoming environment when it came to classes and organizations on campus, which resulted in many of them not taking opportunities to get involved as many of their majority peers did. Participant 3 expressed how she wanted to be involved in registered student organizations on campus but did not because she felt as though she would not be accepted because of the color of her skin.

She stated:

Most of the exec boards in business [organizations] are mostly white, so I feel like they wouldn't accept me...I'm not going to get it because, well they don't like to

elect people who are black or anything and that's what it seems like so I just never applied.

Participant 5 expressed similar views as she mentioned how she felt that the opportunities available on campus always went to her white counterparts and how she had friends who were interested in those opportunities as well. Participant 3 talked about how she wanted to be a part of institutional programs such as TRiO but because she did not meet the requirements, she could not be a part of the organization. She said, "I feel bad for the people that don't take advantage of TRiO."

Research Question #4. What ways can predominately White Institutions improve the retention of African American Students?

Three areas of focus were found when looking for ways that the institution can improve the environment for African American students. Participants shared beliefs that efforts to promote inclusivity, provide academic support and mentorship programs, and working to create a sense of belonging would all improve the overall satisfaction of minority students with the institution and aid in another students' ability to persist.

Promote Inclusiveness

Inclusivity on their campus was identified by a majority of the participants as being needed for African American persistence in higher education. They expressed that they felt as though their minority voice was not being heard when it came to the events hosted on the campus as well as the planning that goes behind those programs.

Participant 1 expressed how the institution needs to hold more inclusive events on campus where black students can be comfortable attending. She talked about how

inclusivity should also be visible in the advertising and publications that highlight the university and its events so that students of color are able to relate more to what's happening and that all students see the importance of visible diversity. Participant 6 highlighted the importance of the institution talking to the minority organizations on campus to involve them and their members in the planning of events on campus for the students to ensure that all student voices were being heard and their needs would be met.

Participant 4 also spoke about how the leadership of the institution should be going to the different events that are being help on campus by minority organizations so that they are able to better understand how to program for this population. Other participants mentioned how they wanted their institution to listen to the needs of the minority students on their campus. Participant 1 talked about how "If they (the institution) just listened, they would get it." She further went on to talk about how this experience is frustrating her because she believes that the administration is not understanding that the minority students are getting tired of talking about the same issues with no real resolution or progress being made.

Participants expressed how they felt that as an institution, more minorities should be hired for faculty and staff positions. Participant 1 expressed, "We need more black people in power..." Participant 4 talked about how she wanted some genuine care from her institution. She stated:

Don't just say you want to have more stuff, or you want to show diversity but you're only doing it as just another thing on your checklist. Basically, you're trying to fulfill a checkmark and that really shows that you're not genuine, you don't actually genuinely care about it.

She continued on by mentioning that if the institution actually cares about something, meaning minorities, they would be willing to put in that work.

Provide academic support and mentorship

The second area of importance for the majority of the participants was the need for more support from the institution when dealing with academics and their personal transition into college. Participant 4 talked about the need for a peer mentoring program and how the institution had previously had one, but it ended. However, they did hear that there were now efforts in the works to bring it back and she expressed how minority students need peer mentors that can help them adjust to campus and give them “the real spill about the institution.” Participant 2 shared similar views “Some African American students come to college to get away from their life, but some of them aren’t serious about college and that’s why they drop out or they don’t have mentors.” She further pressed the importance of having a mentor or a group to help African American students adjust through college and understand how to be successful both personally and academically.

Participants shared that they felt that there is a need for support groups within academic majors especially for minority students. Participant 1 stressed that there is a need for support for groups based on academics as well as general mentorship programs. She stated in her response how it is necessary, “To get a group of like-minded individuals in your major.” She also shared how her experience with a mentorship organization on campus helped her to find a mentor who provided her the support she needed. Participant 4 also stressed the need to bring back these programs to campus because they have the potential to be beneficial for the future of our students.

Creation of a Sense of Belonging

Participants shared the need for a sense of belonging for African American students enrolled at an institution. The majority of participants shared how important it was for minority students to feel like they belong. Participant 4 talked about how important it is for marginalized groups to be shown around campus but more importantly, highlighting the different things on campus that would help to create a feeling a belonging for them. She also went on to talk about how programs should be created that help these minority students with adjusting so they are knowledgeable of important campus offices, such as financial aid as well as other valuable resources on campus.

Participants also mentioned the need for safe spaces on campuses for minority students. Participant 2 shared how the one of the biggest concerns for minority students on the campus was personal safety. She emphasized that by talking about how the students on the campus were seeking answers from the president about the status of the campus' multicultural house. Participant 4 also talked about how she wanted a safe space for herself and other minority groups on the campus to gather and feel relaxed. She highlighted the importance of these kinds of places on campus for minority students, "I feel like sometimes we have to mend what is broken within us first to be able to go and feel comfortable in predominately white schools, cause we could feel uncomfortable anywhere, depending on where we are from..."

Most of the participants talked about how they felt recognizing minority students' achievements was a way to demonstrate the institution's commitment to those students. Participant 5 expressed how she would like to see the institution "Recognize the people of color who get good grades, who are first generation and so on..." She continued by

saying how she saw this at another institution and felt that it was important and something that could easily be done by her own institution.

Participants talked about the need for greater promotion or awareness when it came to the minority-based student organizations on campus. Participant 3 in particular talked about how she was unaware of the minority Greek letter organizations on the campus. She stated “I didn’t even know we even had black sororities or fraternities. I didn’t even know because I never saw them.” She expressed how she wanted to join a sorority her freshman year but all she saw were the white organizations. She shared how she felt that “They [black Greek letter organizations] are here, but they are not,” and that was a source of frustration for her in not knowing about a possible community available to her that she was not sufficiently informed about as a new student.

Summary

A number of important themes arose from the interviews with the six participants regarding their persistence at a Predominantly White Institution. Research question one, identified the factors that African American students considered when looking at institutions of higher education which included geographic location, cost & affordability, and the alignment of their own and the institution’s values when deciding where to attend college. Research question two highlighted the personal and institutional factors that positively affected participants including self-determination, family support, mentorship, support services and staff, and campus involvement. Research question three identified the negative factors that had impacted the participants making persistence more difficult. The participants identified that barriers to their adjustment both academically and personally were key hurdles that they had to deal with as well as the institution’s internal

and external communities which significantly impacted their sense of welcome and inclusion within the campus. Finally, research question four identified some improvements that institutions can make for this population of students. Participants emphasized the need to promote inclusiveness on campus, provide academic and mentorship support and create a sense of belonging for African American students.

Chapter Five will discuss the meaning of the findings from this study and how student affairs professionals can utilize this information in their work. The chapter will include recommendations for the profession as well as potential future research expanding on the findings of the study.

CHAPTER V

Discussions, Recommendations, Conclusions

The importance of higher education for minorities is clear and demographic projections suggest that as greater numbers of students of color will enter the education pipeline in the years to come this importance will only increase (Zamani, 2000). This study analyzed the persistence of African American students at a Predominately White Institution for their impressions of the factors that impacted their ability to persist towards graduation. This chapter will discuss the findings from this study, how it aligns with current literature, implications for the profession, and recommendations for further research.

Discussion

There are many factors that contribute to students' overall persistence. Much of the research on African American college students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) indicates that African American students encounter difficulties in social and academic integration (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). The participants in this study expressed these concerns. From this research and current literature, three major themes were identified that are present throughout. They are Connection to Campus, Community Support, and Campus Environment.

Connection to Campus

Velasco (2015) defined good campus “fit” as when a student's academic, social and financial needs and wants are met by an institution. When identifying what factors contributed to students' overall selection of the institution, numerous elements were

presented. Students identified that the most important aspect of the selection of the institution was the degree of alignment with their own personal values. Participants expressed the importance of the ability to feel comfortable at their institution. How students made this determination varied with one participant sharing how it was the moment her family heard the institution's president passionately speak at an orientation that provided the certainty that this was the right school for her. Students want to feel a sense of connection to an institution which helps them to make their decision regarding enrollment easier. Current research speaks heavily about the importance of personal connections because they aid in a successful transition for students. Swail (2004) spoke about how minorities often experience a culture shock when coming onto a new campus and having a welcoming campus climate can aid in their retention.

Geographic location was another theme highlighted by participants as key in their decision to apply and enroll at an institution. Students expressed the need to be far enough away from home to feel independent, but still close enough to be able to be accessible if needed. This was a common thread among the participants as most of them wanted to stay in Illinois but not close to the Chicago area. This sense of independence was important for these students but being able to access a familiar place was of even greater importance. Tinto (1993) indicates that in order for students to be successful they have to break away from their friends and families. Although this is a case for some, it differs for many African American students in how they define this kind of independence.

African American students have to deal with many unique challenges coming onto a PWI campus and home can often be seen as a safe place for them. Holmes, Ebbers,

Robinson, & Mugenda (2000) found that African Americans in predominantly White institutions have had to couple the normal concerns of first-year students, such as being away from home for the first time, with those of having to adjust in an intellectual and societal community that is unprepared to accept their cultural differences. Participants expressed that for many of them this was their first time away from their families and that they suffered from major adjustment issues transitioning into college. This within itself puts these students at a disadvantage to successfully persist.

Another theme highlighted was the basic logistics of attending a particular institution. This included cost, major, financial aid, etc. Participants talked about how finances played a major factor in their decision making and how it determined if they would be able to enroll or not. Reeder & Schmitt (2013) expressed that African American students are having to rely more on their own resources in order to succeed at these institutions. This is because the external sources that are needed to succeed are not as readily available to them as for their majority peers. The majority of the participants expressed how cost played a significant factor in their selection. They expressed how they chose the institution that would be the most cost-efficient for them and their families and most importantly who offered the most aid. Because of this, these students are faced with selecting institutions that have the best final financial situation rather than which institution can provide them with the best experience possible.

A final factor discussed in the research that was also present in this study was the importance of offering their intended academic major in order to create a connection to the institution. All the participants expressed interest in the institution's specific programs and majors and although this was discussed by them, all of the participants were looking

for majors that are offered at most four-year institutions. As a result of this general interest, the institution's academic offerings were less of a factor than the other elements they identified and instead their focus was on the financial and personal challenges they faced.

Community Support

African American students need continual support as they navigate their academic journey. This support is critical, and for these participants it was provided by family, peers and mentors. This support became an important factor in these student's persistence. Participants in this study expressed that multiple individuals impacted their success. First, and most prominently was how their family had been a significant source of support throughout their time at the institution. Participant 1 talked about how the idea of her going to college was something that her family never gave up on and because of this constant support she had every intention of staying. Participant 2 similarly shared that her mother always told her that she would be able to make it through.

Stories of family support like this showcase how determined African American students are in an environment that was not created with them in mind. African American students also have to demonstrate a greater degree of perseverance and drive for education at PWIs in order to achieve the same level of success as their counterparts at HBCUs. Despite this, many African American students at PWIs are still graduating at lower rates than their white counterparts (Johnson, 2013; Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). Pewewardy and Frey (2002) explained how predominately White institutions are unaware that they are continuing to create unresponsive and unfriendly campus environments that

do not support African American students and unless students receive the necessary support from somewhere else, their persistence is at risk.

Secondly, involvement on campus and the benefits received from involvement with their peers is another major way that African American students get the emotional and social support they need. Most of the organizations highlighted by participants were minority organizations and for the students, these organizations provided them with a sense of community that many had never had before. Jones and Williams (2006) highlight how multicultural affairs programs are important on campuses as they provide increased visibility for students and serve as a clear sign of the institution's commitment to its minority population. Although these programs are meant to increase visibility, if they are not properly promoted and advertised, then minority students will be unaware of their existence and subsequently miss out on a key source of support during their time on campus. Participants shared that they were unaware of some of the multicultural programs available to them on their campus and that the later discovery was a source of regret and lost potential. One participant's lack of awareness that the institution had historically black Greek organizations prevented her from being involved with them when she first arrived on the campus.

Thirdly, existing research also mentions how often student organizations can provide support and mechanisms for student success and that these are often unsuccessful with minority students (Johnson, 2013). Although this opportunity is taken by some, the participants expressed apprehensions about how to become involved on a predominately white campus. Feelings of a lack of welcome in these groups, the idea that they don't belong, can limit minority students from the full value of student engagement. Research

has continued to look at African American students and what they face while being enrolled at a predominately white institution. These students are continuing to feel more vulnerable, less likely to fit in and alienated on PWI campuses (Chavous, 2002).

Lastly, mentoring is seen as an invaluable service to African American Students and can be beneficial by helping students successfully attain educational and career goals (Johnson, 2013). A majority of the participants mentioned having a peer mentor or faculty/staff member on campus that they are able to look up too who served as part of their support system. Participants discussed the older students and staff who served as mentors that were gained through her involvement, and how through them, the students knew that they could accomplish what they had. Similarly, participants also shared how that involvement allowed them to continue that process and be a role model for incoming African American students at the institution. The trend of mentorship continues to be highlighted throughout this study and can be seen as an aid in students' overall development.

Wright, Good & Lampley (2011) stated that African American students at Predominately White Institutions often credit their success to finding a specific black faculty or staff member to serve as a professional mentor during their time at their institution. This was seen as the case for most participants as they all expressed having a mentor of color. Although this was the case for most, one participant talked about her white sociology professor becoming her mentor and how he had a significant impact on her academic career which demonstrates that professional mentorship, by anyone, can be significantly impactful. Positive student and faculty relationships are critical to minority students' success in college (Houston, Graves, & Fleming- Randle, 2010) and

that stood true in this study as many participants expressed how important connecting with their faculty were. These students talked about how their professors made them feel comfortable and also encouraged them to apply for leadership roles as well. Faculty involvement in students' lives continues to be an important aspect to help students to successfully matriculate.

Campus Environment

Compositional diversity is generally lacking on predominately White campuses which can also restrict and hinder interactions with minority students in and out of class and hinder their social and academic experiences resulting in lower retention of these students at the institution (Swail, 2004). It is necessary then for higher education institutions to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for all of its students. In this study, participants expressed that the minority voice on their campus was not being heard by the administration and faculty members. Thus, as a result there was a disconnect among African American students on the campus. As students of color, it is often hard to feel welcome on a predominately white campus. If these institutions continue to fail to create more welcoming environments, these students will continue to suffer and retain at lower rates. Participants directly stated how they would feel more comfortable at their institution if the campus had more inclusive practices for all students in programs and services. Institution-wide commitment is necessary and can only be achieved by integrating minorities into all aspects of an institution's life (Johnson, 2013).

African American students often endure more hostile environments at predominately white institutions than their counterparts at historically Black institutions which can lead to an even greater number of obstacles that they must contend

with in order to achieve their educational goals (Reeder & Schmitt, 2013). If the racial climate around the institution is one that promotes negativity, then students feel as though the community is not accepting to the black students at the institution. Students described how being constantly watched while doing business around town or receiving death threats as part of the homecoming court at the institution brought that lack of welcome home to them. In that moment, she realized that racism was indeed real on this campus and that she was now a victim of it. A remarkable achievement, one that would normally be a source of connection to the institution for any student, was ruined because of the color of her skin and instead of serving as a positive influence for retention, instead became a negative one.

A hostile racial climate on campus has also been associated with lower academic adjustment, performance, and college persistence (Chavous, 2002). Participants in this study all expressed that as a result of the lack of a welcoming environment at their institution, they have not been as interested in involvement in, and around, the campus. These students also expressed how they felt that the opportunities available on campus went to their white counterparts and, because of that, they lost much of their motivation to be involved with the campus community. This was reflected within curricular based activities as well as some participants expressed wanting to get involved in activities associated with their major programs but did not because of the sense that they were unwelcome and did not 'fit in'. Chavous (2002) expressed similar concerns stating that students are less likely to ask for help or to fully participate in curricular related activities as instructed by professors when they are in an environment that is dominated by their white peers (Chavous, 2002).

Minority students in particular need supportive environments on campus to help them achieve academic success and so universities need to take into consideration the differences of African American students from their white peers when creating support programs (Jones & Williams, 2006). The findings of this study confirm Jones & Williams' work that African American students are in dire need of an environment that can successfully aid in their success. Students need safe spaces and programs that will help to guide them during their time in college whether it is the need for more programming for minority students to creating spaces on campus that cater to their unique needs.

Along with this, minority students also need to be better educated on the resources that are available to them on campus. A common complaint from participants was that they were unaware of the resources and programs that are available to them and as a result had failed to utilize them. One student in particular discussed how she did not know much about financial aid and because of this lack of knowledge, she missed out on a number of financial opportunities that would have made her transition and time at the institution much easier. Minority students often have a number of factors impacting their awareness of the resources designed to support students, so it becomes critical for institutions to ensure that all students are educated, aware, and are supported to take advantage of these services.

Overall, minority students are continuing to experience difficulties in their persistence within higher education. These students need continual support and guidance in order to be successful and graduate. The themes found in this study clearly highlight the present concerns of these students and what is needed in order for them to persist.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

Persistence plays a major factor in the overall success of African American students on campuses. In the world of student affairs, all professionals need to be aware of how they can assist African American students. This research will be especially beneficial to those in student-serving roles but can also provide good insights to those in senior level positions in both academic and student affairs. Often student affairs professionals are the first people students see when coming into an unfamiliar territory. So, it is imperative for professionals to ensure that these students are being supported as they matriculate throughout the institution. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been developed:

1. *Actively provide support.* African American students are in dire need of support as they embark in higher education. As this group of students are the most likely to drop out of university compared to any other minority race, professionals should make it a priority to help and provide them with the necessary tools to help them to be successful on their own. Staff and faculty cannot provide support from a distance but instead need to operate from a place where they can be interactive and hands on in their development. These students are wanting the support, but in most cases, do not know how to go about asking for it.
2. *Promote the resources that are available.* In order to provide support, professionals should promote the resources that are available to these students. This study found that many of the students were not aware of the resources available to them so it may be necessary for all professionals to be able to lead students to the resources on or off campus that can help in their success. While all institutions may not have the

same level of resources readily available, we can do everything possible as professionals to identify those resources that should be made to help students in locating and using them.

3. *Create safe and welcoming environments.* African American students strive in environments that are welcoming and that provide a safe haven for them. Research shows that these students manage a great number of challenges as they enter a college campus and that having an environment that is welcoming and safe for them will help them persist successfully. These students continue to face negative racial climates, but institutions can help end that by providing them with a climate that is ready for them. African American students should feel no different than other students on campus so by creating an environment that recognizes the needs of both minorities and majority students, all students can be successful.
4. *Create mentorship initiatives.* Studies show the importance of mentorship among African American students and how these relationships often bring more success to their lives. Student affairs professionals should create mentorship programs that help to match African Americans or other minority students with people of color on the campus. This would allow these students to have a personal connection with someone who is like them and allow them to have a positive role model. Finally, this would increase the support system for these students to further help them successfully adjust into a new college environment.
5. *Create more minority-based programming.* African American students need programming that is focused on their needs and wants as students. These programming efforts can allow them to create safe havens among students but will

also allow them to have an environment that they are able to debrief in but also help them to build up themselves. Student Affairs professionals can create programs that will help this population throughout their collegiate career.

6. *Provide awareness to all staff and faculty.* Continuing research about this population of students and the challenges they face in the realm of higher education is necessary to keep the profession informed. Student affairs professionals need to expand the knowledge of those working with students so that can be aware of the issues this group of students face. A keyway that this population of students can be helped is if by increasing awareness of their needs so that resources, time, and effort can be placed on providing these students, and all minority students, the tools they need to be successful.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. This study could be replicated at multiple predominately White institutions ranging in various sizes and geographical locations. This would allow for a cross-comparison to be made to determine if there are any differences with regard to the location and size of the PWI when dealing with persistence with African American students.
2. A larger more diverse sample size should also be used to help to create a better understanding and applicability over a larger group of students. This study's participants were all female, not by design, and as such may include some intersectional elements related to the participants' identity as women.
3. This study could be replicated with a focus on a different minority population such as International students, Hispanic students, or other demographics that face

similar issues at PWIs. Focusing on different populations may determine if the issues faced on predominately white campuses are the same for all minority groups.

4. Finally, a quantitative study could be performed using the results found here to determine the actual prevalence of the factors identified by the participants. Such a study would determine the scope of these issues across a larger percentage of the population allowing for greater generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

The retention of African American students has been a focus of researchers for many years. As this population continues to be at a disadvantage as they enter the realm of higher education, this study sought to highlight and bring awareness of the issues surrounding African American students and their persistence at Predominately White Institutions. This study found support for current research findings and that these students were still experiencing recognized challenges as they pursue higher education.

Three major themes arose from this study that played a significant role in the persistence of African American students attending a Predominantly White Institution: the student's feeling of a Connection to Campus, the presence and sense of Community Support for the student, and the programming and physical Campus Environments. These themes established the primary areas that African American students focus on and think about when they explain their ability to persist at an institution. The importance of these factors in the students' experience provides a better understanding of the needs of this student group, needs that have been seen in

multiple studies before (Johnson, 2013; Chavous, 2002; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). African American students continue to experience major challenges and obstacles compared to their majority counterparts and are in need of intentional and specific kinds of support in order for them to be successful in higher education.

There is strong evidence of the need for more intentional support from institutions that should be looking for ways to support all students, recognizing that there are legitimate different needs and that programs and services designed to reach and serve the majority population may fail to produce the same benefits for minority students. African American students are hurting and are yearning for experiences like their white counterparts on college campuses. The goal of education is to provide equal access for all, so when students feel less than equal in their pursuit, then the institution is failing in its mission. Research shows that this particular demographic group will continue to drop out in faster rates than their peers (Bourne-Bowie, 2000) at time when minority students' attendance is high but, as a percentage of the general population, enrollment at Predominately White Institutions continues to be at an all-time low.

Student success is the primary focus and goals of professionals in student affairs and solutions to problems preventing this success are a key area of concern. Professionals should not be afraid to support minority students as they matriculate through college by addressing areas of concern that can provide both academic and personal success for students. African American students are able to not only persist at Predominately White Institutions but thrive, however the low rate of this success clearly highlights that there is significant room for improvement. The students in this study all persisted because they knew they wanted to and did so not because of the

lack resources available to them or the negative experiences they experienced, but despite them. These students have defied the odds that have been against them and, like many African American students out there, they too have dreams to be successful. Thus, it is the duty of institutions of higher education to equip all students regardless of their race and ethnicity an equal and fair opportunity for learning.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Has anyone in your family attend college before? If yes, who?

2. How old are you?

3. What is your classification?

4. What is your self-reported GPA?

5. When you made the decision to apply to college, can you talk about what things you were looking for from an institution, both academically and personally?

6. Can you describe for me what the selection process looked like for you when you were deciding where you would enroll in college?
 - A. Were there any specific factors that helped made the decision possible?
 - B. Where did you get information from about the schools you were looking at?

7. What were any “must have” requirements that the institution had to offer for you?

8. So you made the decision to enroll at EIU, Can you talk about what it was like for you that first semester? What did you enjoy? Did you have any difficulties?

9. Persistence is defined as “The act of continuing toward an educational goal or student measure”, using that definition, can you talk about what has helped you to persist at EIU?

10. Was there anyone, faculty, staff, or student that helped you persist at EIU?

11. EIU has several programs and offices to support African American students. Can you talk about your experiences with them, if any, and how they affected you during your time here at EIU?

12. Have you ever considered leaving EIU?
 - A. If yes, can you talk about what factors made you think about leaving?
 - B. What were the reasons/factors that made you decide to stay?

13. What do you think EIU can do to make African American students more welcome and successful during their time here?

14. If you were able to speak to incoming African American students who were coming to EIU, what advice/suggestions/information would you give them to help them be successful?

Appendix B

Email Communication

Initial Email

Hello University Student,

My name is Candace Thompson and I am a second-year graduate student in the College Student Affairs Master's program at Eastern Illinois University. You are receiving this email because you have been identified as a junior/senior African American student. As a part of the requirements for my degree I am conducting Master thesis research on the persistence of African American Students at Predominately White Institutions. I am interested in interviewing six to eight African American students who would like to talk about their experience at university in the area of persistence/success.

By participating in this study, you will be required to take part in an hour-long interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary and at any time you can withdraw without any penalty. Involvement in this research is confidential and your information will not be shared with anyone other than my thesis advisor.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my study. It is my hope by conducting this study that I will be able to gain a better understanding of the persistence of African America students at Predominately White Institutions. If you have questions about this research you may contact myself or my thesis advisor, Dr. Jon Coleman at

jkcoleman@eiu.edu.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to my email (cathompson3@eiu.edu). Participants will be selected on a need basis regarding the study. I thank you in advance for taking the time out to consider your participation.

Candace Thompson

Reminder email

Hello University Student,

My name is Candace Thompson and I am a second-year graduate student in the College Student Affairs Master's program at EIU. I am emailing you a reminder that you that you are still eligible to participate in my study on the persistence of African American Students at Predominately White Institutions. I am for African American students who would like to talk about their experiences at university in the area of persistence/success.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my study. It is my hope by conducting this study that I will be able to gain a better understanding of the persistence of African American students at Predominately White Institutions. If you do have any questions about this research you may contact myself or my thesis advisor, Dr. Jon Coleman at jcoleman@eiu.edu.

Please respond to my email (cathompson3@eiu.edu) if you are interested in participating this study. I thank you in advance for taking the time out to consider your participation.

Candace Thompson

Final email

Hello University Student,

This is the last chance for students interested in participating in a study on the persistence of African American students at Predominantly White Institutions. It is my hope by conducting this study that I will be able to gain a better understanding of the persistence of African American students and what institutions can do to improve the environment for these students. If you do have any questions about this research you may contact myself or my thesis advisor, Dr. Jon Coleman at jkcoleman@eiu.edu.

If you are interested in being interviewed, please respond to (cathompson3@eiu.edu). I thank you again for taking the time to consider your participation.

Candace Thompson

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Informed Consent

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Candace A Thompson, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University. You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as an African American student who meets the requirements of being a junior or senior at the university.

The purpose of this study is to examine the persistence of African American students enrolled at Predominately White Institutions. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Any responses you share will not specifically be associated with you or your personal information. The interview should take approximately forty-five mins to an hour and will be recorded.

Following the interview, transcribing will take place. The data from this study will be kept on two flash drives for three years following the completion of the study. At that point, the flash drives will be destroyed. I appreciate your participation in this study and thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact my thesis advisor Dr. Jon Coleman by email at jkcoleman@eiu.edu.

Are you willing to participate and be interviewed?

Name:

Signature:

Date: