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Improving Higher Education Attainment Among African American Women

Renee Knox

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IMPROVING HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

By

Renee Knox

December 2015

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Renee Knox

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DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
ED.D. IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

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October, 2015

**IMPROVING HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN**

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ABSTRACT

IMPROVING HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

By

Renee Knox

December 2015

Dissertation supervised by Gretchen Givens Generett, PhD

African American women enroll and persist in post-secondary education at higher rates than African American males, yet there is little research on the factors that contribute to their disproportionate college persistence in comparison with their White female counterparts. While this study reviewed critical theories that detail the educational challenges for African American female students, the study also interviewed women who experienced success in higher education attainment. This combined review illustrates strategies that break patterns that impede African American women's efforts and based on the findings suggest approaches to improve higher education attainment.

DEDICATION

To my Mom who had always encouraged my educational endeavors, despite her father's belief that women did not need to be educated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost I would like to thank my God for through him all things are possible. Whenever I needed strength I only needed to bow my head.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Dr. Gretchen Givens Generett for her unwavering support, guidance, and vast knowledge. Even though she was young enough to be my daughter I grew immensely under her tutelage. I could not have a better advisor and chair. I would like to thank my committee members Dr. FitzGerald and Dr. Griggs for the seeds you planted in my development. Dr. Fitz for pushing me to hone my writing skills; Dr. Griggs for supporting my research and for all the sister-friend talks that provided comfort and warmth along the road less traveled.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

African American women are a group marginalized by racism and sexism in academia (Moses, 1989). This work will review conditions that support them in their efforts to move successfully through post-secondary education. Given the complex intersection of race and gender, this work also will review critical theories that detail society's educational, social, and political perceptions that challenge African American female students' efforts. This combined review will illustrate strategies that break the patterns impeding women's efforts to transition through post-secondary education.

There is a plethora of information on the disparities in the educational experience of African American males. The research details their early education experiences of being overrepresented in special education programs as well as subjection to disproportionate school discipline and expulsion practices. The Teachers College Record in 2006 and the American Behavioral Scientist in 2008 contributed entire issues to critical issues affecting the African American male's movement through the K-12 and higher education pipelines. These special themed issues highlighted African American male inequities. The authors cited ranged from the Noguera (2003) on discussion on *The academic performance of African American males* Lewis' (2006) article on *The shortage of African American male teachers* and a Jackson & Moore (2008) discourse on *Public policy responses to educational and societal issues of Black males*. This research has led to many intervention initiatives such as the 2014 Presidential "My Brother's Keeper" initiatives to address African American male disparities in education, justice, and employment.

While these and additional concerns are relevant for all African Americans, this study is to explore the position of degree seeking African American women. Information on this topic is fairly limited. In this work I will discuss the limits of scholarship, and highlight features which hinder and support their academic success. This exploration identifies the conditions and support systems needed for African American women to successfully navigate post-secondary education at predominately white institutions (PWIs).

African American women have been the object of oppression in the United States since they were brought here as slaves. Nearly three centuries after their arrival, they continue to experience injustices perpetuated by a patriarchal, White male society. By virtue of their race, gender, and oftentimes class, African American women are positioned in the margins of the social structure. To understand the experiences that oppress Black women, one must look critically at the historical, cultural, and sociological impact of their positionality. According to Patricia Hill Collins, positionality for Black women is a standpoint of an oppressed group embedded in the contest of a situation characterized by domination and suppression.

This work will help us better understand the many ways Black women's racial issues have historically defined their experiences in attempting to attain a post-secondary education. Research indicates that the high scholastic aspirations African American females display in secondary education, appears to decline in post-secondary aspirations (Howard-Vital, 1989, p. 183). Howard-Vital (1989) concluded that there are "complex interactions in different racial and sexual context in higher education and without intellectual activity, African-American women become invisible, isolated, and powerless in this system" (p. 189). The invisible, isolated, and powerless status of African American women is not limited to educational

aspirations or male-female interactions, in U. S. history this status is even echoed within their gender group relations.

In terms of gender roles, all women suffer an underprivileged positionality in society (Plott & Umansky, 2000, p. 114). However, history shows that Black women endured conditions of racial oppression in the suffrage movement by White women. This racial inequity limited Black women's involvement in the movement and, ultimately, resulted in racial division. Instances of inequities are exhibited by mandates such as the Jim Crow laws. The enactment of such laws excluded Blacks from education and social gains as White women were obtaining many of those rights as a result of the suffrage movement. Likewise, "the women's movement of the 1970s, which sought to emancipate women, spoke to the needs of middle-class white women, not to those of most African American women" (Zamani, 2003, p. 6). This and other issues of White supremacy, as well as denial of racial justice, prompted Black feminist and suffrage movements in which Black women often were supported by Black males in their struggle against marginalization (Terborg-Penn, 1998, p. 2).

Black women's continued fight for equality shows the widespread issue of stratified racial differences, prevalent in patterns of employment, housing, and even parenting (Sewell & Heise, 2010, p. 401). With the rapid growth of female-headed households, Black mothers often must take a lead in parenting and teaching their children values that are different from those of the larger society (Bowen, 1988, p. 489). Black parents of all socioeconomic groups have to decide what perceptions they must adopt to protect their young. This group is constantly subjected to unreasonable legal practices, e.g. "unfair punishments, racial profiling, disproportionately unjust prison sentencing and widespread police brutality" (Prier, 2012, p. 48). Racial profiling is especially apparent in recent cases of police brutality against Black males (Ryberg, 2010). There

is an underlying factor in society of judging resilient interaction of Black youth's interactions, particularly, the males as hostile and aggressive. Black women as caregivers have to cope with both a nurturing role and the role model for teaching youth how to cope with their emotions. However because of these high-risk factors, Black parents must instill in their children deference-based lessons, such as how to interact with police and demonstrate non-threatening behaviors. This type of protective instruction is pertinent for Black parents, regardless of their social class. This parenting requirement to teach children how to circumvent situations that lead to unfair treatment can produce an emotional burden for woman. Their charge demands vacillation between the harsh reality lessons while simultaneously nurturing their children's intrinsic values.

In respect to housing and racial segregation, middle-class African American families live in closer proximity to less-advantaged communities than their middle-class, White counterparts. Positionality, shows that although higher income Blacks may live in mixed-race neighborhoods, middle- and lower-income African Americans tend to experience racial segregation and live in less integrated areas. The housing segregation is noticeable in cities like Pittsburgh, where there not only are racial divides between communities but physical ones as well. In "Black Picket Fences," Pattillo-McCoy (1999) details the realities of the "racial segregation, disproportionate poverty, and economic fragility of black middle-class neighborhoods, which are characterized by more poverty, higher crime, worse schools, and fewer services than white middle-class neighborhoods" (p. 3). These housing limitations lend a cultural stressor for Black women and parents that do not exist for White group individuals.

Racism has rendered it common for adult males to be absent from Black households (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008, p. 465). The growing number of single, Black women

heading households (Martin, et al., 2009) has produced a condition in which women are forced into “roles of being strong and self-reliant” (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008, p. 465). Black women have demonstrated this strength in overcoming community struggles and limitations on their freedom. This role has earned many African American women the title of strong, Black women. Sherry Parks addressed the “overwhelming emotional costs attached to this role” (Parks, 2010), and notes that “many Black women are overburdening themselves with unrealistic commitments to a role that is heavy and complicated, trying to fulfill the obligation of this role.” Many physical ailments are attributed to trying to fulfill the strong, Black woman role.

Despite efforts to soldier on and display strength, African American women’s competence and perspective continues to be minimized. Black women are stigmatized in scholastic environments, the media, and in literature, portrayed negatively as intellectually and morally inferior (Hull, Bell Scott, & Smith, 1982, p. xviii). According to Hill Collins, the Black woman is often depicted as “something wanton and insatiable, a controlling image that continues to invalidate the cases of Black women who are victims of sexual assault and violence” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 303). This discourse of perceived Black female sexuality is an issue exploited by Black and non-Black male perceptions, leading to psychological consequences in conversations of dating and marriage.

While there is historical evidence of employment discrimination based on race, the leadership roles in a patriarchal society still are assigned to men. This is evidenced by the domination of males — both Black and White — in opportunities in the workplace. The Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, and Buchanan (2008) study about White and Black women’s perceptions in the workplace indicated that both groups experienced “a pay discrepancy between men and women,

difficulty being hired or promoted, and a preference for men over women in positions of power and authority” (p. 458). However, the disparity is more prevalent for Black women, who are paid 83 cents for every dollar paid to their White, female counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Though working-class individuals have access to more advantages than their unemployed counterparts, wage differences are significantly relevant in the social positions of the disenfranchised.

In relation to issues of class and disproportionate structural inequities, many Black women are situated in economically disadvantaged groups. Class, another form of disadvantage that impacts choices, is relevant in discussions of college and college preparedness. Discussions of class disparities in education focus on issues of underfunded schools, financial supports, and the often-limited post-secondary educational experience of parents in disadvantaged groups and communities. Evidence-based research indicators from a presidential study reveal that predominantly African American schools are less likely to deliver programs that offer rigorous coursework, or college, career, and civic participation preparatory programs (Executive Order, 2012). For schools in economically disadvantaged communities, the deficiencies are pervasive. Shortages of family income, knowledge, and skill further negatively impact outcomes. Poverty also narrows the family view of what is possible. Explorations of post-secondary persistence, such as the work “Key Issues in the Persistence of Underrepresented Minority Students” by Carter (2013), demonstrate that the resource and social supports of class are significantly relevant in higher education pursuits.

Race- and class-based disparities in mental and physical health care include the limited preventive-care education delivered in Black communities. This shortage, along with limited access to health care, leads to higher rates of illness and mortality among Black groups.

Compounding the issue is “the disparities of lower quality of treatment African Americans receive when they are treated” (Snowden, 2012, p. 528). For Black women, who frequently are dealing with the “multiple intersecting sources of oppression,” there is a higher rate of depression as a mental health consideration (Carr, Szymanski, Taha, West, & Kaslow, 2013, p. 2). One of the main functions of racism in the United States has been to divide people with common class interests so they are less able to struggle politically in their common interest (Kawachi, Daniels, & Robinson, 2005). Black women lay at the intersection of race, class, and gender. To overcome and expose structural issues of power requires a model for social change to modify their positionality in American society.

My experience has shown that African American women who have demonstrated academic resilience have supports within or outside their educational institutions. To demonstrate the benefits of supplemental resources, this work will review programs that have shown success in improving outcomes for African American women. In this work, participants will be interviewed from programs designed to support African American women as they transition(ed) from home to higher education. One program was a community-based, female-focused program implemented at a predominately White institution (PWI) specifically to improve access and opportunity among traditional and non-traditional African American women. This program prepared students at an off-site location using culturally relevant practices, mentoring role modeling, and intensive academic advisement. African American women from a current program serving a diverse population also will be interviewed. This program, which is at a PWI, uses strategies such as rigorous first-year programming, peer mentoring, and college developmental classes, along with regularly scheduled, mandated advisement.

The problem of practice addressed in this work is to describe strategies that improve opportunities of African American women's success in higher education. This work will analyze critical issues of data regarding educational success. This work will also challenge the data that commonly implies high enrollment and performance by African American women contributes to lower access for African American men (Howard-Vital, 1989). Evidence substantiates that African American women have higher post-secondary education enrollment and matriculation rates than Black men, but this does not lessen the burden for this group. African American women, in their commitment to replicate the accomplishments of White women, are new figures in the academic arena. Historically, the academy was a male society, with women — principally African American women — only recently gaining significant access. Despite increases in higher education participation among African Americans and females, it is said “there are salient formal and informal barriers to persistence for African American women” (Zamani, 2003, p. 8). As they enroll in post-secondary education, they continue to encounter racial and gender-based struggles.

The work by Shorter-Gooden (2004) helped identify the many coping strategies Black women use to counteract the stress of the racism and sexism they encounter in social interactions (p. 407). Without institution support, they are forced to develop a set of coping strategies to navigate this environment. While gender is an issue for all women, Black women must always contend with the combined issues of being Black and female. The structure of the American education institution is similar to the larger US society (Zamani, 2003, p. 7). As a result “Black women students, particularly on predominately white campuses are rarely integrated into the life and culture of the mainstream nor are there clear paths for them to effect change (Moses Y. T., 1989, p. 3). This leads to considerations of several issues impacting African American women's higher education persistence. These include: cultural identity issues; the absence of cultural capital; the

shortage of racial role models; and institutions' inadequacy in implementing culturally relevant practices and programming.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity issues become problematic for African American women because of the variety of distinguishable groups in African American culture. Although culture is predominately defined by the family and its values, there also are the cultures of race affiliation, economic status, and educational background, to name a few. These variances lead to vagueness in identifying culture and cultural norms. This information produces ambiguity and confusion around feelings of acceptance and rejection. One problem of ambiguity is related to the manner in which culture changes in the context of interactions. Culture for this work will primarily be defined by race. African American women are women, but the realness of their experience is tied to a variety of influences. Howard-Vital citing Mary Helen Washington's 1975 passage, says that "People other than the black woman herself try to define who she is, what she is supposed to look like, act like, and sound like. And most of these creations bear very little resemblance to real, live black women" (Howard-Vital, 1989, p. 190).

The stigma African American women endure has a historical background that is explored through critical theories of race. Cultural affiliation is very complicated, and labels can be unfair in respect to African Americans (Lareau, 2003). Biological distinctions among humans can be deceptive. Race may describe the group into which one is born, but there are numerous other social subtleties of beliefs and values that define culture. There are many negative stereotypes attached to African American women because of their race. Women often must dispel the labels created as the result of those stereotypes. A stereotype is a commonly held, simplified generalization that one group consciously or unconsciously holds about groups or races of

people. Stereotypes become dangerous when they are trusted for information. This can lead to prejudice and discrimination against groups. Stereotypes can result in groups forming erroneous information not based in objective evidence and seeing relationships that do not actually exist (McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, 2002, p. 9). The psychological, social, material, and political issues caused by stereotypes reflect the extent to which racialized beliefs define the life structures and opportunities of racial group members (Sewell & Heise, 2010, p. 401).

Identity issues can disengage students in the academic process. Regina Austin's 1995 article "Sapphire Bound!" describes how "Black females are stereotypically identified and labeled as overly aggressive, overbearing, loud, and audacious" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 12). This "angry Black woman" label is another negative assumption and identity issue women must combat. Although she is highly educated, the angry Black woman label, has been regularly attached to Michelle Obama for voicing an opinion on topics. For Black women to successfully persist, they must resist the "internalization of marginalization and fully embrace counter-negative race and gender ideologies" (Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010, p. 36). The research findings of Carla O'Connor (1997) conclude that high-achieving African American women actually embrace a strong, positive Black female identity (p. 626). Increasing institutional inclusiveness can help reduce bias assumptions.

Cultural Capital: The Role of Family and Support Networks in the Academic Experience of African American Students

The role of family support in African American culture is generally a key factor that drives women's interactions. The family unit establishes values by educational background, religious affiliation, and/or socioeconomic status that shape and inform the individual. Many of these factors are implicit. For most racial groups, the importance of women's roles and attitudes about their position in the family cannot be underestimated.

Because Black children must be prepared to deal with racism their entire lives, parenting is generally more complex for African American women than it is for White women. Furthermore, while the White family unit generally consists of parents, siblings, and grandparents, Black families have an interconnected relationship. Their families tend to receive support from the nucleus family, in addition to comfort and support from extended family. This extended family support generally crosses socioeconomic boundaries.

Race is prevalent in the cultural interactions of lower socioeconomic status. For this population, these interactions typically are limited to their homes or comparable communities. These families often are composed of individuals with limited or no post-secondary experience. Middle-class families normally have more social resources, and they often have higher education experience. Nonetheless, issues of race influence their cultural interactions and affiliations.

Kingston (2000) in Lareau 2003 talks about the inequalities of society. He asserts that “Beyond question, huge inequalities exist and Americans recognize them” (Lareau A. , 2003, p. 295). This reference implies that racial differences in class might not determine academic advantages. Again, the achievement gap goes across economic boundaries. Racial bias outweighs economic status. In his book “The Classless Society,” Kingston says that “My thesis is that groups of people having a common economic position — what are commonly designated as ‘classes’ — do not significantly share distinct, life-defining experiences” (Kingston, 2000, p. 1). The supportive makeup of the African American family network, however, is culturally consistent.

Carter (2006) found that the relationship between socioeconomic status and students’ college persistence was significant (p. 35). Marginalized groups are limited by their lack of

family financial and social capital. Although African American families characteristically encourage their children's higher education pursuits (Yan, 1999, p. 6), they frequently lack support structures. Students need these structures to make informed decisions in matters ranging from "managing deadlines and study habits, the importance of meeting an application deadlines," to decisions about "which college to attend, and what kinds of academic and social choices to make while in attendance" (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 252). Lack of that knowledge impedes students' ability to make decisions concerning college and career tracks.

The absence of family assistance for students entering higher education is not an intentional issue. Many minorities are first-generational college students from disadvantaged families. And again, these families have limited knowledge and experience of what is required to negotiate the academic system. There are also shortages of African American faculty and staff, particularly African American women, in higher education to support the students moving through the academe. Having support networks with whom they can identify is valuable for all women moving through complicated systems. I identified, in an earlier study on women and support systems, that women in particular have a need for networks of support. The Howard-Hamilton (2013) study concluded, and a Henderson, Hunter, and Hildreth (2010) study concurred, that a sense of belonging decreased feelings of isolation.

My personal experience speaks to this burden. While enrolled in undergraduate studies, I struggled with a core course. I spoke with family members, but their lack of experience did not support my need. My family was empathetic but did not have the insight to recommend that I speak to an advisor, the course instructor, or other university support staff. I was advised to

study more, drop the class, even to drop out of school if the difficulty in the academic system presented too much anxiety. The reality was that I simply needed a tutor.

Bourdieu speaks of cultural capital “in the institutionalized state” as an asset that contributes to “educational qualifications,” this supposition explains “the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success to specific profits of class” (Bourdieu, 2013, para. 6). “College-educated parents have better access to human and cultural capital through family relationships” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004) and can help ensure that their children understand the opportunities that are available through college attainment. Having families with higher education experience and sufficient levels of income are assets, and the absence of social and cultural capital presents an inequity separate from simply complying with academic obligations.

The lack of economic capital presents another hurdle for families of underrepresented students. The shortage limits discretionary finances to purchase books, computers, and other essentials for academic success. To bridge this hurdle in higher education, persistence requires adequate financial aid levels. A study of minority student persistence determined that “financial constraints also play a role in attrition,” and having an adequate aid guarantee enabled students to overcome the barriers related to their parents’ education and income (Carter, 2003, pp. 41-42). Financial aid is an institutional economic investment that would increase student access to scholastic enrichment resources.

Mentoring and Role Models

In addition to family support dilemmas, the scarcity of mentoring and role model prospects is significant. Mary Howard-Hamilton says “Critical race theory and Black feminist thought are suggested as appropriate frameworks to apply to the needs of black women in higher

education” (Howard-Hamilton, 2013, p. 13). Critical race and Black feminist theories detail the ingrained racism and sexism that are prevalent in society. Mentoring is an enhancement to support academic success.

The Henderson, et al. (2010) study of higher education faculty members stressed that “career advancement and greater retention rates are among the most reported benefits of mentoring; mentoring is one form of resistance to systems of oppression, organizational barriers, and other negative dynamics experienced by Black women faculty” (p. 29). The study found “peer mentoring consistent with African American women’s reliance on networks and relationships” (Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010, p. 36). And without faculty support, there are limits on the available support for students.

When Black and female faculty do not have sufficient peer network support, the amount of care and encouragement they provide for others is greatly reduced. Debra Harley, in her article about African American faculty at PWIs, referred to the matter of limited faculty as giving the available members “race fatigue” an issue of having too few individuals trying to mentor a large pool of students (Harley, 2008). One faculty member I know said she felt like the “universal Black person” at her institution because she was expected to address all issues of race and gender. This is problematic for African American female students because a shortage of approachable faculty also limits mentoring options.

A mentor offers students a personalized relationship with someone they can tell about their hopes and fears. Mentors are role models who help students visualize their opportunities and help them with the skills they need to cope with their surroundings. “Mentoring and interactive relationships with faculty members was determined to benefit the learning of students from all race/ethnic backgrounds, but interactions with members of their own race/ethnicity were

most significant for students of color” (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004, p. 563). These relationships can make a distinct difference on predominately White campuses where students can feel isolated because of real or perceived cultural differences.

Black students who felt strongly that the campus climate was cold and uncaring tended to have a strong inclination to leave their institution (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 121). The cold campus climate is more pervasive for females. “The campus presents an environment where they feel devalued, and to feel more comfortable, they need interaction with people most like themselves” (Hall & Sandler, 1982, p. 5). “Alienation, isolation, and marginalization have characterized the experiences of Black women in the academe and have caused them to develop various coping strategies to protect themselves” (Parker-Terhune, 2008). Mentoring helps students negotiate the transitions of campus life and understand the campus while also improving student’s identity acceptance and academic attitudes.

Culturally Relevant Practices and Programming

When looking at higher education achievement, enrollment and retention of African American women are areas of concern. The Thompson et al (2006) study suggests empirical findings that minority students continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary educational attainment (p. 558). Although African American women are enrolling at a rate of two to one compared with African American men (Wilson, 2007) indicating that the Black male students were far less likely to obtain degrees than Black female students. However this gender difference is not a pervasive matter among White students (Thompson, Gorin, Obeidat, & Chen, 2006). Black women still need to make gains to decrease the Black-White graduation gap. Furthermore, follow-up to adopting theory to practice can work to narrow the differences and improve Black women’s attainment.

“Culturally relevant curriculum gives African American learners a framework to problematize domination and the authority of the dominant culture; and for Black women, it gives them the opportunity to alter and control the images that are presented of them” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007, p. 58). Culturally relevant educational programming is essential for marginalized students as a matter of social justice. Coupled with adult learning practices, culturally relevant programming moves learning from the teacher as expert and encourages learners to provide input in the education process. Theories of social justice imply that for individuals to succeed, there should be an equitable distribution of opportunities.

Jacqueline Fleming, as quoted by Coleen O’Brien (1988), states:

They [Black males and females] are ignored personally and in the curriculum. The Black experience is not given any acknowledgement at all, and at the same time, majority students are being deprived of information about the Black experience. ... This leads to a great deal of underlying tension, and to address the problem long term, universities must change the nature of the curriculum, change it so that all Americans are acknowledged and the curriculum does not promote ignorance (Moses, 1989, p. 6).

Sealey-Ruiz (2007) posits that “Black female students in particular possess knowledge unique to their positionality in American society, and they want to apply this knowledge to what they are learning” (p. 44). The use of culturally relevant practices supports endeavors that connect students to the curriculum.

As I move forward, I must reiterate that African American women come from varying backgrounds. Some are first-generation college students; some are legacies from better-educated family backgrounds. And there are innumerable backgrounds in between. These varying backgrounds result in commonalities and differences in values. Values can be a result of family heritage or be affected by socioeconomic status. Because of the race’s history of struggle to gain educational rights, most African American families place a high value on education. During the early 1900s, education of children was regarded more highly than the financial compensations of

the children working to increase their family's income (Giddings, 1984, p. 72). She further comments that, parents, including the female-headed households, sacrificed — sometimes working multiple jobs — to give children the opportunity to complete their education (Giddings, 1984). But the findings of a 2014 study on social inclusion by Lareau and Horvat indicate that middle-class African Americans “are much more likely than poor parents to maneuver and ‘customize’ their children’s educational experience” (p. 44). Despite economic differences and contrary to popular belief, most African American families support the educational advancement of their children.

My parents were not highly educated; however, they worked diligently to provide me the education they were denied the opportunity to pursue. They became knowledgeable about programs to shape and enrich my experience. One particularly valuable program with which I was connected was a mentoring program. The values of this program were numerous, but a major benefit was the information I received. Many peers from my socioeconomic background lacked the social capital this basic knowledge provided for me. It was a privilege that should have been provided for all students. The opportunity to benefit from guidance should not be provided to select students. The opportunities are not as random as we as a society would like to believe.

One responsibility of guidance counseling is to lead students to the resources they need to support their educational and career goals. Guidance is especially useful for first-generation, college-bound students. Studies have shown that students whose parents did not attend college were less likely to persist than those whose parents were college-educated (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 250). If disproportionate opportunities are at the core of

persistence and achievement problems, what systemic changes are necessary to transform practices that increase these inequalities?

A Quandary for African American Women

To restate this as a high-leverage problem, disproportionate access and educational opportunities are issues of power that disrupt and deny privilege. As far back as the late 1980s, Michelle Howard-Vita (1989) addressed this issue: “The intellectual void surrounding African American women ... is totally related to the politics of white male society...which does not recognize and denies the importance of African-American women's lives and contributions through racial, sexual, and class oppression” (p. 180). African American women stand on the shoulders of strong, great forebears such as abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, leader of the Underground Railroad. Whether they are married or single heads of households, today's Black women typically have the responsibility of nurturing her children in motherhood. When they are not educated, it leads to unemployment or underemployment, and it affects their quality of life.

The denial of educational opportunities influences Black women's ability to build family wealth and develop the knowledge and skills needed to influence their children's potential. The denial of opportunity ultimately affects the entire African American community. This issue is important because it interferes with this group's capacity for economic and/or social growth and its ability to contribute to society. Women have historically been the change-makers and guardians of the Black community. African American women are part of the historical struggles of this nation. They are a group whose veracity has persevered over disparity. A United Nations (1994) report on the status of women asserts that "Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate

fully in the development process" (p. 25). African American women are an integral part of the division of women. Increasing their potential for successful education is paramount for them to be included in the ranks as America competes in the global market. America's educational status is quickly falling behind that of other developed nations (see Appendix 1). This is a high-priority concern, and we need our greatest minds to help resolve the issue. Who are our greatest minds? The members of that population have the skills and ability to help the country remain a world power. In the First Generation Documentary Film, "Go College!" Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation said that "the No. 1 driver of a country's economy is its college-graduated rate." We cannot afford to allow any of our learners to fall through the cracks (or gaps) because of educational inequities. We cannot predict whose minds will help us solve our dilemmas.

The social justice implication is to decrease the widespread, unfair treatment of a group of individuals based on race, class, or gender. Much of the research is limited in its examination of the educational experience of African American women, but their history is still compelling. Patricia Scott Bell (1982), who is renowned for her work in women's history, notes that "Despite the fact that black women have always played important roles in American society, they have been almost totally ignored by students of American society and human behavior" (p. 85). To determine more fully the impact of the education of Black women, "We must know more about who they were and what they did, as well as the issues and movements that characterized the different periods of time during which they lived" (Collins-Thomas, Summer, 1982, p. 178). This validates the need for more research about the plight of these women.

The obstacles African American women have faced and the history of America's women's rights struggle are parallel in numerous respects. Collin's argued that "cultural patterns

of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society when looking at the equities issues of male dominance which have contributed to gender matters” (Collins, 2000, p. 42). Part of African American women’s history is woven within the women's rights movement. The movement began in the 19th century and continued through the 1960s with civil rights legislation. Black women had voting and wage issues related to the issues of White women, but their educational and public facility history was different, and equal protection laws became a starting point to endow Black women with a place in American history.

Black women, faced with sexism and racism, were left out of the feminist movement. The continuous fight for freedom requires them to continuously combat myths, such as the myth that Black women were already liberated. Individuals “have a tendency to identify with an oppression most like the one they have experienced, and consider all other oppressions as being of less importance” (Collins, 2000, p. 287). “In efforts to unite around the issue of racial justice, a significant segment of [Black] feminist activists came to recognize and understand their own oppression.” (King, 1988, p. 44) This motivated African American women to build Black rights and feminist movements (Hull, Bell Scott, & Smith, 1982). This depicts historical incidents that influenced separate context of sexism Black women formed in their fight to attain equality.

Although the civil rights movement was implemented to improve the rights of all Americans, the battle for African American women requires systemic changes to improve their marginalized condition. The history of public education shows that marginalized groups are severely disadvantaged by educational inequities. The concerns that impact this issue are numerous. First, there are deficiencies in college competence and academic preparedness that

impact the group's enrollment. This issue is connected to the unequal service and supports in schools attend by underrepresented students. Second is the "chilly climate" in higher education described by Hall and Sandler (1982): "institution practices which impede women students' full personal, academic and professional development by denying their acceptance of women as true peers and potential partners" (p. 2). This climate creates an environment that is not welcoming for women and puts them at a significant educational disadvantage. A commentary by Evans-Winter and Esposito posits "racism, sexism, and class oppression in the U.S. places African American females in multiple jeopardy of race, class and gender exclusion [within] mainstream educational institutions" (p. 13). Evans-Winter and Esposito also note that cultural identity issues further disadvantage Black women. They assert that individuals, "who are not socialized to have a strong sense of racial identification and commitment to fight against race, class and gender injustices at school, in the community, and in society overall" (p. 13). This impacts their motivation to enroll and persist in academic attainment endeavors.

Race is often a leveling factor for African American women, and the byproducts are the ways women manipulate a system that is not color-blind. There is considerable research on discrimination's effects on the health, mental health, and lifestyle choices for African American women. A 2006 study argues "that racial discrimination is not only a critical civil rights issue, but also an important topic of scientific inquiry and self-reported discrimination. The study illustrates that, "The recounting of one's experiences with being unfairly treated because of one's race/ethnicity is associated with poor mental health status for minority groups" (Gee, Ryan, Laflamme, & Holt, 2006).

Scientific evidence that suggests that racism ... can lead to truncated socioeconomic mobility... that can adversely affect mental health ... induce physiological and psychological reactions that can lead to adverse changes in mental health status [and that] the acceptance of negative cultural stereotypes can lead to unfavorable self-evaluations

that have deleterious effects on psychological well-being (Williams & William-Morris, 2000).

Having to deal with racism on a regular basis is unsettling. African American women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of race-related stress. Williams indicated in his report that discrimination on the basis of race or cultural background was connected with psychological distress (Williams D. R., 1999). When seeking intervention to cope with this burden, there is first the issue of professionals minimizing the affects psychological distress. Second, there often is denial of the emotional distress because of the stigma it presents for people in a community that does not value seeking psychological intervention. Because of the “strong” label, Black women have limited resources with whom to discuss their trauma. One woman from a 2010 study said that when confronted with a particularly stressful situation, “I had to use professional help first because some of the stuff that I was going through, people would just be like, ‘Oh girl, that’s just everyday life,’ or ‘You’re over-exaggerating,’ and I’m just like, ‘No, I’m not’ ” (Everett, Hall, & Hamilton-Mason, 2010). Mental health problems are considered weaknesses that are not tolerated in most Black communities, especially among groups that are spiritually active or where family support is available.

Spirituality is a major force these women use to cope. According to a 2004 report on African American women’s health care, religion and spirituality are highly significant in Black women’s health management (Dessio, et al., Spring 2004, p. 196). The stress associated with discriminatory practices contributes to a range of health conditions for African American women. Many of the illnesses affect the vascular and immunological processes, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of cases of high blood pressure, obesity, cardiovascular problems and diabetes within their ranks, as well as a disproportionate danger of disease

mortality. African American women develop high blood pressure earlier in life and have higher average blood pressures than White women (Health, 2010).

Another social justice issue, which will be discussed later in this work, is the substantial disparity in health care delivery for many minority groups. African Americans have high disease mortality as a result of high incidences of receiving late health care and limited preventive care. Socioeconomic status also limits factors that contribute to a healthy lifestyle, such as the availability of quality recreational facilities, healthy products in grocery stores, and green spaces (Williams & Braboy Jackson, 2013, p. 329).

For African American women in higher education, the stressor of race is compounded by gender-related microaggressions and social isolation/exclusion. These stressors disrupt their educational outcomes. Hall and Sandler use the phrase “chilly classroom climate” to describe “the multiple, small inequities present in coeducational settings that collectively create a chilling environment that puts women students at a significant educational disadvantage” (Hall & Sandler, 1982).

Through an extensive review of reports and surveys, they conclude that gender greatly influences classroom behaviors and interactions to an extent that is significantly detrimental to the education of women, citing a variety of systemic behaviors that disadvantage female students in these environments (Hall & Sandler, 1982).

These critical issues need to be addressed because the education of Black women serves to improve the race. In his 1787 publication, Benjamin Rush stated that women should be educated to become “guardians and stewards” of the family assets (Rush & Magaw, 1787).

Barriers of race, class, and gender bias cause Black women to face exclusion in mainstream educational institutions. Hill Collins (2000) speaks to Du Bois’ theory that gender far too often describes Black women’s positioning in discussions of race, class, and national oppression in the Black political economy (p. 42). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that

African American women earn lower wages than both African American men and White women. Data for 2008 from the National Center for Educational Statistics reveals that although African American women accounted for 64 percent of the total African American undergraduate enrollment and 71 percent of the graduate enrollment (Institute of Education Sciences, 2010), they were less likely than African American men to reach their peaks in the employment sectors. This is particularly obvious in corporate environments.

An example of social inequities is the manner in which African American women are depicted by popular culture and the media. They must constantly work to dispel myths projecting them as lazy, immoral or promiscuous. Addressing issues of power that exist between dominant and subordinate communities, as well as the male-female, black-white, and upper and lower socioeconomic inequities, is essential in dialogues related to the social justice issues of women.

Educational inequity is clear in the historically persistent Black-White achievement gap, which the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) contributes to the re-segregation of schools. Because of re-segregation, White students are more likely than Black students to attend schools that offer rigorous curriculums. Added hindrances for Black students are school funding inequities in their institutions and disproportionately concentrated poverty and deprivation in their communities (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). This inequity leaves students ill-prepared for college level coursework.

Study Significance (Significance of the study)

Through exploration, this study has identified programs that support their students and have a record of success in outcomes among African American women. Data will be collected from a program serving non-traditional students and a program serving primarily traditional age students, to deliver empirical evidence of practices that improve opportunity, persistence, and

graduation rates. Program resources are cited in the literature as factors in improving both access and retention.

Participation in the traditional program involves regularly scheduled advisement to monitor students' grades. The center provides tutoring services students can access on a voluntary basis or as recommended in grade-monitoring advisement referrals. Students are enrolled in University core courses as well as classes devoted to study skills and career exploration. They are assigned to a mentor during the early parts of their university experience, and that mentor is tasked with assisting in their university-life transition.

The non-traditional student program offered was offered from 1983 to 2004. This community-based, off-campus program was modeled after a community-based in New York. This program enrolled traditional and non-traditional African American women before their transfer to the main campus. The program began as a college experience for African American women from only one designated African American community and was later opened to African American women from other communities. The student population was primarily composed of first-generation students with academic and social barriers, such as low SAT scores or non-traditional student status. According to a former program administrator, the university paid for books, reduced tuition, and provided students with the compulsory interventions needed to ensure their successful transition to the university's main campus.

This administrator indicated that initial coursework requirements included prep courses in math, English, and writing, as well as tutorials on time management and test preparation. The program used culturally competent teaching practices and incorporated social activities to help enhance the women's racialized identities. The aim was to improve their self-efficacy.

Other program components were mentoring; academic and career advising; personalized guidance counseling; and tutoring. The program's goal was to provide a typically marginalized group of women with the skills and resources needed to successfully integrate into the institution's mainstream environment. Much of these programming efforts mirror strategies Yolanda Moses (1989) suggests increasing support specific to Black female students.

Recommendations from her work are for post-secondary institutions to:

1. Develop student services reflecting Black female students' presence.
2. Invite Black women to speak on campus.
3. Establish centers for students to meet for social and educational exchanges;
4. Encourage Black female students to participate in leadership activities.
5. Create a special place for Black reentry women (Moses, 1989, p. 6).

To address White-Black attainment gaps, Moses (1989) urges higher education institutions to review their practices and curriculum to integrate materials that are inclusive of all students' cultural needs.

My experience as an African American woman is not what propels this work — or maybe the ethnography will show that it does. In my undergraduate experience, I was a traditional and re-entry student from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background. I therefore possess an understanding of this work from multiple perspectives. My role as a mother and grandmother has challenged me to make a concerted effort to provide family members with opportunities that increase their social and cultural capital to alter their disadvantaged positionality. This role has involved modeling and providing the supportive family network required for the development of a strong, racialized identification.

My family instilled in me a positive racial and gender identity. I was always taught to have pride in my heritage, and that women are valuable. These values were continually reinforced by family members' personal stories of racial and gender triumphs. According to

Brown, Tanner-Smith, and Lesane-Brown (2009), “ethnic/racial identity represents a sense of attachment to a collective and imagined community of similar others. [It] improves academic performance among Black children, adolescents, and young adults ... and encourages perseverance despite obstacles” (p. 387). This racialized identity has increased my awareness and given me the “voice” I need to defy a racially oppressive system. My role as an educator has been one of an advocate, addressing practices that negatively affect minority students. My experience has been to nurture and cultivate students under my tutelage by not limiting my duties to academic work and addressing issues impacting retention.

My life is similar to that of many of the women who do not experience academic success. As an African American woman from an economically disadvantaged family and neighborhood, it is fair to say that my background should have reduced my opportunities to develop the aptitude and stability required for academic achievement (Payne R., 2005, p. 123). However, I did not suffer from many of the early-life educational inequities that often impacted my peers. In spite of their personal lack of educational proficiencies, my parents pushed me beyond economic boundaries to assure my learning success. A Herdon and Hirt (2004) study of Black students and their families support my descriptor of parental support. They state, “The family is the first unit to develop and nurture the student's capacity for learning” (p. 491). I had aunts, uncles, cousins, and godparents — even neighbors — encouraging me to fulfill my dreams of higher education completion. My personal narrative demonstrates that families — both the nucleus and the extended unit — work together to ensure academic success.

My mother had the foresight to obtain a mentoring couple to work with me during my early education. They were a college-educated White couple from an upper-middle-class neighborhood, and they took me to plays, fairs, and on other excursions. This experience

allowed me to develop in ways I might not otherwise have. These mentors and their family exposed me to social situations and cultural activities that strengthened my ability to develop formal registers to debunk the myths and enhance my skill acquisition (Payne, 2005, p. 135). As Gorski (2013) acknowledges, negative philosophies about students from poverty are flawed. He states, “It is incorrect to assume that poor people have a predictable and consistent cultural norm,” adding, that the disposition of people has more to do with “bias and the lack of access to basic needs that influences their experience” (p. 26). The family and outside support I received provided important social exposure and access to cultural enrichment. This support sustained me while I was working toward the “American Dream” and advanced my mission of obtaining a degree as my family’s first-generation college graduate.

Another factor that was significant in my early education was the experience of attending a neighborhood elementary school. The school was primarily staffed by Black teachers and administrators. As I recall, the staff engaged in culturally competent practices, responsibly nurturing and effectively educating the students under in their guidance. In a 2006 article, Ware identified a caring attitude and belief in a student’s ability to succeed as common qualities for successful teachers of African American students (p. 428). These teachers supported students’ efforts, celebrated their achievements, and valued their cultural identities. Such practices foster a culture that breeds positive attitudes about the role education plays in students’ lives.

Following a positive, fruitful elementary experience and upon moving into secondary education, I was selected for enrollment in a scholars program. This program offered advanced placement courses from middle through high school. I was, in essence, part of a tracking system; a positive system that encouraged participation in extracurricular activities that included school leadership programs, college fairs and visits, and mentoring opportunities. During the summers,

I was enrolled in programs on college campuses, including Upward Bound and the Junior Engineers and Scientists Summer Institute (JESSI). I believe that enrollment in this tracking system, family support, and the social exposure provided by mentors fostered my self-efficacy. These experiences provided me with social capital and prepared me to successfully navigate a system in which, historically, I could have been less productive.

This social capital is not readily present for many disadvantaged group members. This group typically lacks awareness of the resources that are available and interventions they might need to achieve academic success. The literature tends to blame underachieving victims instead of recognizing society's responsibility in reducing social disparities. My pre-collegiate experience was unlike that of many African American students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Though I experienced inclusion and guidance from instructors and administrators, I was nonetheless unprepared for the exclusion I encountered during my collegiate experience. My colleagues in secondary school were not all African American. We were a racially diverse group, but we were trained as academic equals. As I transitioned to higher education, I began to encounter racial bias, which was foreign to me. It was during my early post-secondary experience at a predominately White institution that I first experienced incidents of discrimination. It was something I felt but could not formally identify. I later recognized that the experiences rendered feelings of being devalued and treated as inferior. The work of Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), speaks of the way a climate of bias can "leave students feeling 'drained' by the intense scrutiny their everyday actions received in the context of negative preconceived notions about African Americans" (p. 67). The discomfort caused me to flee my first institution. I had to learn to cope within racialized systems.

Perhaps these are the things that drive this work. I somehow learned to move successfully through a system characterized by race, gender, and class oppression; a system in which I was confronted with exclusion and isolation because of the differences between the institutional culture and my own.

Coping Strategies for African American women

I believed, as Gorski (2013) states in his book's introduction, that if "I worked hard, did well in school, and followed the rules, I could be anything I wanted to be" (p. 1). I was successful at navigating the collegiate experience, but at what cost? This success resulted in a constant pursuit of group affiliation to encourage and strengthen my endeavors. I had to develop ancillary coping strategies to realize continuous advancement in a society relentless in its attempts to define what I should or should not be. I had the audacity to upset the power structure in place to define me. The lens of the identity theory speaks to the manner in which my family and support from the community positively impacted my self-concept. Research suggests that the absence of support disadvantages Black women "who are not socialized to have a strong sense of racial identification and commitment to fight against race, class and gender injustices at school, in the community, and in society overall" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 13). I had to depend on spirituality to temper thoughts of screaming with indignation when I was confronted with racial microaggressions, and I learned to counter the negative images and stereotypes the dominant culture spreads of members of my identity group.

However, racism is not the only battle African American women must combat; sexism brings more opponents to the table. I believe my ultimate resolve has been to endure the struggle with dignity and confidence in spite of the odds. The benefit of this endurance is gaining

transferable knowledge and understanding that I can share with my family and others who need to stand on the shoulders of truth and parity.

CHAPTER 2

A Review of the Theories

To improve post-secondary attainment among African American women, institutions must employ strategies specific to this group to reduce gender divisions that impact their perseverance. The two theoretical frameworks guiding this study are Black feminist and critical race theories. These frameworks examine issues that impact systemic inequities. This study uses these theoretical lenses to explain the roles race, class, and gender play in the lives of African American women. Since an educated citizenry drives a nation's economy, this chapter reviews practice barriers to higher education attainment. This review will examine practices used by programs at Predominately White Institutions (PWI's) with demonstrated success in persistence and degree attainment. Using information from these successful models help in creating frameworks that reduce the challenges and improve successes for African American women in higher education.

Critical race theory

“[Racism] is not how you look; it is about how people assign meaning to how you look.”

— Robin G. Kelly, historian (2014)

A review of critical race theory (CRT) as a movement to improve the conditions leading to higher education persistence for African American women reveals that this perspective is central to transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism, which is difficult to address, has produced a struggle in the everyday experiences of African American women. This struggle is embedded in a societal oppression that challenges these women's existence. An overview of the premises of CRT outlines the issues presented by this oppression. CRT identifies power structures founded in White privilege and

supremacy. The first tenet of the theory is that racism is a feature of American life. Delgado and Stefancic define it as “the usual way society does business in the common, everyday experiences of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The second tenet is that racism has been used to uphold White supremacy. Delgado calls this feature “interest convergence” “because it advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), with large segments of society having little incentive to eradicate it” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The third tenet is that racism is intentional. Delgado asserts that “race and races are products of social thought and relations,” and they do not correspond to a “biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A fourth tenet to eradicating racism is that it is important for oppressed people to “communicate to their white counterparts matters that whites are unlikely to know” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The fifth tenet is to understand the historical contexts of race and racism. Delgado theorizes that “the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times,” and that “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, authors of “Critical Race Theory: An Introduction,” “CRT began in the 1970s as a movement in the field of law; however, current theorists in the field of education use CRT to develop an understanding of race, and its role in academics” (p. 2). Law professor, Derrick Bell, was instrumental in the movement of critical race theory from law to education. CRT ideas are used to help explain disparity issues with respect to “school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum, history, and IQ and achievement testing” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These racial disparities, which begin in early education and continue in post-secondary experiences, are connected to a deficiency in

institutional interventions to meet the needs of minority learners. “We seem to study them but rarely provide the kind of remedies that help them to solve their problems” (Ladson-Billings G., 2006).

With respect to African Americans, there is a lack of higher education cultural competency in the curriculum. A student in a Moses (1989) qualitative study addressed this issue. The student’s comment was “They [Black males and females] are ignored personally and in the curriculum. The Black experience is not acknowledged at all, and a majority of students are being deprived of information about the Black experience (Moses, 1989, p. 6). This sentiment is reiterated in research by Ladson-Billings and Sealey-Ruiz (Ladson-Billings G., 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

African Americans continue to fall behind, despite current reforms in education. A 2012 Statistical Analysis Report of the U.S. Department of Education reveals that the Black-White gaps exist in k-12 preparation and achievement influence postsecondary persistence and outcomes (Ross, et al., 2012). Essentially, much of the data indicates that educational reforms have done little to reduce barriers or increase educational equity. “The critical race theory framework for [the field of] education is different from other CRT frameworks because it attempts to foreground race and racism in the research, as well as a separate discourse on race, gender, and class” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 63). This inequity has multiple tentacles, and what generates the issue is debatable. Derrick Bell indicated in discussions around *Brown v. Board* that the legislation, in an effort to integrate students, caused many Black schools to close. Losing schools that understood the culture of Black students might have resulted in students being placed in environments where the cultural norms were dictated by White cultures. “Academic performance improves when Black youth realize their connection to similar

others and recognize the significance of ethnicity in and outside the school domain” (Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Lesane-Brown, 2009, p. 386). Related to higher education inequities, African American students in the Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) study indicated that Whites subject them to negative racial assumptions, extending from how they entered the university to their academic abilities and inabilities (p. 67). This struggle places an undue burden on students to prove their worth.

My personal experience was in line with the efforts of the women in the Shorter-Gooden, K. (2004) study. Like those women, I used coping strategies such as “altering my outward behavior and avoiding contact with certain people and situations” (p. 406). Discomfort led me to suspend my post-secondary experience until I learned to value myself. The development of this self-worth diminished the importance of the perceptions others held for me. Not allowing the actions of others to dictate my behavior strengthened my ability to operate in PWI campus environments that did not support my cultural needs and norms.

Solórzano (1998), who is noted for his use of CRT to address racial microaggressions and campus racial climate, posits that critical race theory constructs of race and racism are ingrained in our society. His position is that racism is central in understanding the ways in which (legal and educational) theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate people of color while upholding White supremacy in the United States (Solórzano, 1998). In further discussions of the racial campus climate, the work of Strayhorn (2013) found that “Black students felt strongly that the PWI campus climates were cold and uncaring (47 percent of African American students compared to 24 percent of White students) and also tended to have strong intentions of leaving their current institution” (p. 121). He notes that “The weight of empirical evidence suggests that female college students perceive campus climates as less encouraging and less welcoming than

male students” (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 117). This evidence of cold climates for female students and faculty is affirmed by the work of Hall & Sandler (1982), Whitt, Edison, Pascarella & Terenzini (1999), Morris & Daniel (2008) and for female faculty in the 2008 study by Hart and Jennifer Fellabaum. However the work of Moses (1989) and Turner (2008) addresses the particularity of the multiplicity of these issues for Black students and faculty.

Black women are constantly faced with racism and sexism in society. When this racial and gender bias is internalized it impacts issues of identity and self-confidence. In any effort to improve attainment among African American women, we must dissect racial oppression. “When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice.” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 64). Many of the women interviewed in this study spoke of the ways program guidance had supported their self-confidence development. A Martinez & Dukes (1997) speaks to ways this confidence allows them to reject negative images of their groups, accept themselves more fully (p. 504) and cultivates opinions that countered race and gender oppression.

The CRT social justice commitment works toward “eliminating racial oppression as a broad goal of ending all forms of oppression” (Solórzano, 1998), and “CRT recognizes that race alone cannot account for disempowerment” (UCLA School of Public affairs, 2014). The CRT social justice tenet supports efforts to eliminate disenfranchisement; its role in academics also provides an approach focused on reducing the multiple inequalities experienced by women. A study of Black feminist thought will reveal challenges specific to African American women in their academic endeavors.

Black feminist thought

“We have a job as black women, to support whatever is right, and to bring in justice where we've had so much injustice.”

— Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977)

“If the society today allows wrongs to go unchallenged, the impression is created that those wrongs have the approval of the majority.”

— Barbara Jordan (1936-1996)

These quotes support the viewpoint of Black feminist theory and validate its importance in this work. Critical race theory provides a context of race and class; however, Patricia Hill Collins posits that gender becomes an added issue for Black women, who are uniquely situated at multiple intersections of oppression (Collins, 2000). Studies support the notion that women, in general, often face institutional, political, and cultural barriers; however, these barriers are compounded for African American women because we encounter additional obstacles such as racism and discrimination (Thomas, et al., 2009).

The lens of Black feminist theory describes the central role of race, class, and gender within the historical and contemporary struggles for African American women. This struggle is reflected in their lived experience and affects their higher education attainment. The women's rights movement did not adequately serve black women. The movement became racially divisive, and Black rights movements began as a result. Patricia Hill Collins positions that Black feminism and Black feminist thought grew from African American women's need for a collective struggle out of a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000); a need for self-definition rather than allowing society to define our identity (Collins, 2000). To change this domination requires first viewing how Black women's thoughts and actions uphold someone else's subordination (Collins, 2000, p. 287). This can be promoted when post-secondary curriculum is made more inclusive, as shown in a study by Sealey-Ruiz (2007). Her study with Black, female, adult learners showed how incorporating a culturally competent curriculum allowed students to

“deconstruct negative images and problematize and reject White domination” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007, p. 48).

African American women are enrolling in post-secondary education at higher rates than African American men. A 2006 report in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) shows that Black women accounted for 63.6 percent of all African American bachelor's degree awards; 70 percent of master's degrees; and more than 60 percent of doctorates. Black women are the majority of African American enrollees in law, medical, and dental schools (Anonymous, 2012). Although enrollment and graduation rates among African American women are increasing, “little attention has been given to study the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations” related to their academic success and persistence (Thomas, et al., 2009, p. 160). There is little research on the factors that contribute to the disproportionate statistical college persistence of African American women in comparison with their White counterparts.

Some factors in persistence revealed by the Thomas, et al (2009) study were that “self-efficacy and motivation improved the academic perceptions and ability to succeed among African American women” (p. 167). This study recommended institutional interventions that include role models, mentors, and emotional support to improve the coping and the academic needs for this group of women. These are interventions/interactions that reoccur in research as relevant factors for African American student’s persistence. This substantiates the necessity of supportive outreach services and the need to expand the pool of black faculty and staff.

The implication that a lack of culturally relevant practices (CRP) in education leads to problems in identity and image is pertinent and accurate. One researcher in the area of CRP states explicitly that “Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning” (The Education

Alliance at Brown University, n.d.). Students have specific needs and often are discouraged by educational systems that do not support them. African American women are fighting many stereotypes about their identity, and they need to be affirmed in the educational process. Additionally, Johnson-Bailey (2001) found that the “African American woman in her higher education study felt excluded and stereotyped in the classroom and curriculum, and often Black students are forced to choose between affirming their culture and academic success” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007, p. 48). Adopting Black feminist methodologies improves academic experiences for women, who need to have curriculum references that validate their history and purpose.

“One function of Black feminist thought (BFT) is to give voice to Black women who have been told in many ways they do not matter; making BFT a viable and critical social theory to empower Black women” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007, p. 46). This school of thought helps foster feelings of belonging as they face the complexities of being female and Black. Incorporating these frameworks can change the delivery of education to a multi-marginalized group of individuals. Access to higher education is important, but so is success. It is not enough to simply admit students from historically underrepresented groups; institutions must ensure structures and supports are in place for them to succeed (Shorter-Gooden, 2013, p. 209). This can only happen when institutions work to foster diversity and culturally competent practices.

CHAPTER 3

This is a qualitative case study of African American female students from two PWIs in Western Pennsylvania. Past students from these institutions, were selected as appropriate for this research, because of their institutional history of successful student outcomes. Because of these women's successful outcomes, the research question is "What are the practices that expedite successful matriculation for African American females at Predominantly White Institutions?" The study aim was to examine the participants' perceptions of significant institutional practices that reduce challenges and improve higher education attainment for African American. This area of study is significant to improve performance, reduce attrition and addressing the needs of African American women.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine, identify, and understand strategies that increase educational advancement among African American women attending PWIs. Research has demonstrated that institutional resources and campus climate are significant factors in persistence for students of color. For African American women, there are the added issues of alienation and isolation created by the obstacles of inequitable treatment, marginalization, sexism, and racism, which challenge their ability to succeed (Terhune, 2008). Some of the elements that lead to successful higher education attainment for African American males, identified by Simmon (2013), are equally significant for African American women. These basics include aspirations and goals; social integration; minority faculty engagement; and student organizational involvement (Simmons, 2013, p. 62). The questions in the study were designed to look at these features as well as the influence of family, cultural and socioeconomic background.

The research of Guiffiida and Douthit (2010) indicates that connections with Black faculty “can increase the self-efficacy of Black students, which in turn leads to academic persistence and success” (p. 312). Tinto (1993) also theorized that higher levels of social integration are especially important for Black students to succeed (Guiffiida & Douthit, 2010, p. 314). Student organizational involvement is essential for Black women. As far back as 1989, Yolanda Moses cited that “There is increasing anecdotal as well as statistical evidence that minority students' academic success in college is linked to certain emotional, social, and academic supports” (p. 6). Findings reveal that for women, “not feeling socially and culturally isolated and the need for support networks and positive racial socialization messages was significant for their well-being” (Parker-Terhune, 2007). The 1997 study cited by Bean & Vesper reveals “Contacts with advisors, having friends, and living on campus were significantly related to satisfaction for females and not males” (Bean & Vesper, 2014, p. 18). In short, for African American women, supportive advising and social outlets — along with mentoring — enhance their ability to cope.

This work has reviewed African American female’s history to identify culture and components which challenge race and gender in an effort to improve their higher education attainment. This study centered the sentiment in Tinto’s foundational work on retention in higher education. He states, “What is needed and what is not yet available is a model of institutional action that provides guidelines for the development of effective policies and programs that institutions can reasonably employ to enhance the persistence of all their students” (Tinto, 2006, p. 7). Given the rising number of African American women enrolling in higher education, there is a need to gain a better understanding and knowledge of practices that support

their experience. This area of study is important for documenting and theorizing the relationship between institutional support and student achievement.

The participants were students previously enrolled in ancillary programs at PWIs. Both of the campuses were at Catholic universities. One program is an on-campus program. This program serves mostly, traditional-age academically and financially disadvantaged students. The second program was a community-based program, whose student population consisted of non-traditional, African American females. Both programs have demonstrated success in retention, advancement, and completion rates. This work will use case studies to compare, describe and analyze what program components, participants perceive as elements which scaffold(ed) their academic process.

Methodology

Qualitative research is a method for understanding the ways people construct meaning and make sense of the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). One of the attributes of qualitative research is that the data can be used to describe and give voice to the participants' perceptions. This method was selected over quantitative because I wanted to have the ability to probe and observe participants reactions to interview questions rather than simply measure their responses. Observing the women's reactions allowed me to determine when to probe the participant for more clarity. The probes were helpful when they seemed unsure about how to respond to the question or when they displayed discrepancies between their responses and their body language. This design also gave voice to participants' attitudes and opinions about the influence of institutional programs involvement at two PWIs. This method was selected to identify if these program practices contributed to the participants successful academic

persistence. The aim is understand the types of support that improve attainment among African American women in PWIs.

The research technique consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews using field notes and a digital voice recorder. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and the list of names and pseudonyms is kept on password-protected computers. The recording files' transcriptions and analysis of interview data are saved in a locked file desk. The interviews were conducted at mutually convenient locations such as the women's' offices and private rooms in coffee shops. The participants' responses were recorded with the time, date, and place of the interview, and field notes were taken to record observations. The process was conducted using the semi-structured interview questions and prompts. (See Appendix 1).

The research used purposeful and snowball sampling in order to identify participants. The aim of this study was to determine whether and what educational supports were linked to their African American female successful higher education attainment. Therefore, the subjects invited to participate in semi-structured interviews were students who had received their undergraduate degrees. The women involved in the study were from two different program located at predominantly white universities. Both groups were initially involved with university-supported programs. Also, both of the programs provided services to help incoming, disadvantaged students reach academic success.

The program serving non-traditional students was situated on the main campus of the university. The other program, with the non-traditional student population was located off campus. The off-campus program goal was to cultivate the social and academic skills needed for successful integration into the university's main campus culture. The individuals from these programs were purposively chosen because of their involvement in the identified programs. This

purposeful sample of women was identified by either recommendations from their institution or snowball recommendations from other participants. Participants from the non-traditional program were identified by community members, former mentors, academic advisors, and other participants. The subjects from the traditional university program were recommended by the program director and advisors. The women from both programs, were identified as appropriate for the study due to their history of successful college achievement. For this study successful achievement is defined as undergraduate college completion. They were also recommended because of their potential to provide a rich quality of data about practices which scaffold academic experience. The sample offered a variety of perspectives and depth of data. Data was collected during the months of March and April during the spring of 2015.

The central question of this study was, “What are the practices that expedite successful matriculation for African American females at Predominantly White Institutions?” The women were probed in semi-structured interviews for their in-depth perceptions of significant institutional practices to determine if and which practices reduced challenges and improved their higher education performance. In their interviews the women were questioned about their personal interpretations and reflections of their cultural identification, their early education and higher education experiences. The significance of the questions and probes were aimed at examining and comparing their connected life and educational challenges, supports and influences.

Participants

All of the participants self-identified themselves as African American females. Three of the participants attended college as traditional students. The other participants attended college as non-traditional students. Six of the women identified their socio-economical background as

lower income. The women ranged in age from 34 to 67. Six of the participants were first-generation college students. Two of the participants were married and three of the women had adult college educated children. All of the participants are gainfully employed. Five participants hold managerial positions, with two in senior executive positions. Five of the participants had graduate degrees. One participant with two master’s degrees is presently completing work towards a doctoral degree. Another participant is currently enrolled in a graduate program. As agreed upon in the informed consent, the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Participant	Name	Age	Employment	Education	Program
Participant 1	Taylor	40	Event Coordinator	Master's Degree	Traditional
Participant 2	Trina	34	Human Resource Director	Bachelor's Degree	Traditional
Participant 3	Sandra	37	Public School Director	Master's Degree	Traditional
Participant 4	Linda	55	Service Coordinator	Master's Degree	Non-Traditional
Participant 5	Rhonda	47	Program Director	Bachelor's Degree	Non-Traditional
Participant 6	Kim	51	Program Coordinator	Master's Degree	Non-Traditional
Participant 7	Brenda	67	Deputy Director	2 Master's Degrees	Non-Traditional

Table 1-Participant Demographics

All of the participants except Brenda were educated in public school system. Participants Taylor, Trina and Sandra entered higher education straight out of high school as traditional students. They applied and were accepted to their university in a formal, conventional application process. The caveat was because of their economic and educational disadvantages, they were admitted to the university with an agreement to enter an institutional program. The women from the non-traditional program were recruited in various formal and informal ways. Most reported they learned of the program by word of mouth. Linda said she attended an orientation/testing with a colleague and was invited to take the initial entry test while she was there. Enrollment criterion for the non-traditional program was based more on cultural and educational disadvantage than economics factors.

Financial assistance to cover tuition, books and fees was offered by both programs. Housing expenses were included in the traditional student aid packages; while dinner and childcare was an extra amenity awarded to the women in the non-traditional program. One of Ruth's comments was, "Like I could literally go from work, pick up my kids, take them there because they fed them and they had childcare. And the classes were in the next building." However, Taylor and Trina like the non-traditional women students worked also to supplement other living expenses for themselves and/or their families.

Traditional students Taylor, Trina, and Sandra as well as non-traditional student Brenda completed their education in four to five years. Brenda commented,

I graduated from that program as one of the – unh-unh – as the first one who graduated in five years. Most of the students they said took about ten years to graduate and I did not. I just was very aggressive with my education and came out in five years.

One factor that possibly impacted the student's years to graduate were the programs supplemental course requirements. These consisted of basic reading, writing, math, cultural and personal skill development classes. These program mandated courses helped with skill development but did not count towards graduation credits. The tradition program courses were located on the main university campus. The traditional students were only enrolled in the remedial courses for one summer and as needed, along with their core program courses up to one year. The non-traditional student program had an off-site location with full access to university main campus services. However, they were not compelled to transition main campus core courses until they cultivated the skill and confidence to function as independent learners.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and printed out to prepare the data for review. After reading and rereading the transcripts the participants were asked to review their interview responses and authenticate the information. In the case of unintelligible data participants were asked to repeat their comments. The data was first coded individually, based on the participants' responses to the questions and probes. According to Saldana (2013) this coding helps to identify repetitive patterns in the data (p. 5). A comparative method was used to analyze participant similarities and differences in the coded data. This data was used as the lens to determine the initial themes. Color-coded highlighting of participant statements and words clearly identified patterns which were categorized for the emerging themes. These themes revealed a connectedness between the women's lived and higher education experiences. What emerged as the thematic content of the study was that participants from both programs expressed similar views about the influence of program resources, cultural identity and issues regarding barriers and challenges.

The coded data was placed under the themes to better outline the initial thesis and some of the coded data fell under more than one category. One example of this overlapping was that family background represented both resources and challenges. Family provided encouragement and nurturing but that lack of family higher education experience limited the women's knowledge linked with academic decision choices. However the overarching theme was similar to results in the Shorter-Gooden (2004) study which indicated that resources served as a "buffer against the oppression" that typically impacts African American women (p. 415). The resources of family support and the implementation of institutional program supports seemed to influence the successful achievement among the women in this study. Although student success can be

defined by the student's attainment of their own goals; success for this study was categorized by higher education degree completion.

Findings

Cultural Heritage and Identity

When queried about their racial identity and cultural heritage, all but one woman deliberately defined themselves as African American women. During the interview however, the one other woman spoke in terms of being from an all-Black community and school. The issue of membership in a marginalized community was one of the obstacles identified in educational experience of African American students at PWIs. Hill Collins (1990) described Black women's survival in their shared struggle out of oppression being tied to having a sense of community and self-definition (p. 222). Brenda states:

As an African American female that has gone through many different kinds of definitions people trying to put on us and say as a race and as part of our culture period, we've gone from being Negro, to being black, to now being African American. But the most wonderful thing about our culture is that no matter what it is that others try to define us as, we know who we are.

This sentiment is echoed the conclusion of the Howard-Vital (1989) study where she comments, "Unless we African-American women take an aggressive, unrelenting, lead in identifying who we are, we will continue to react to distortions and perceptions created by others" (p. 190). The work of Sullivan & Esmail (2012) positions that both the social identity and identity theory indicates positive racial identity as a significant predictor in topics of positive well-being (p. 152). Brenda's quote indicates a strong sense of racial identity. This strong sense of identity was a characteristic several of the women attribute to standards instilled either by the family values or program involvement. In response to questions about her cultural identity participant Rhonda highlighted the role of family influence on her values, stating,

I have grown up in a very Afrocentric family, and we have been for lack of a better word were taught to participate in social justice and volunteering, and getting in jobs that serve other people. And making a difference in our community. And that's what I try to hang my hat on and pass down to my kids. And it's not as heavy and concentrated as it was when I was growing up, but I still have a lot of elements in my home and my upbringing and our morals and values remain the same.

African Americans as a group are diverse. However, Hill in his book entitled *The Strength of Black Families*, identified strong kinship ties, achievement and work ethic orientation as traditional strengths found within the family unit (Hill, 2003). Also, related to kinship ties, Black family bonds tend to include extended family and community members. This is even more prevalent in families with Afrocentric values. Afrocentric individuals and families identify with an African consciousness and awareness. Nobles (1974) as cited by Fine, Schwebel and James-Myers (1987) asserted that a hidden strength of Afrocentric family beliefs were increased "social solidarity and psychological security" (p. 12). This comment by Ruth shows passionate cultural identity.

Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Lesane-Brown (2009) studied the ways of family ethnic/race socialization influenced positive academic performance. They found this exposure as a significant "indirect support for an oppositional culture perspective" (p. 400). This research along with the work of Howard-Vital (1989) shows evidence which reinforces the importance of improved positive self-identity as salient in supporting the well-being of individuals. This validates the need for interventions that promote positive self-efficacy as a priority in the development persistence improvement plans.

Similarity of the Participants

A random outcome of this study was the similarity of the women's backgrounds. Although they were recommended for this study because of enrollment in the programs; their persistence and resilience was criteria for selection. The program at both universities was to

assist individuals who were academically and financially disadvantaged. However, all but one of the participants was a first-generation college student. A factor that typically presented challenges to attainment. The programs were designed to reduce this challenge. Another similarity among the women was found in a review of their career current status. The women have or were currently working in mid or high-income level positions. One of the participants spoke to the way program support and intervention had even been instrumental in her early career path. Trina commented that,

I remember one of my grades went from an A to a B and my [counselor] at the time, called me to his office. We made an appointment and he kinda asked me what's going on... it seems you're slipping, and I said I'm really struggling with work. And he said it just so happens that one of our alumni of the program is a VP at [a bank] and he's looking for tellers and you can design a flexible schedule.

She went on to say,

And so I don't think that was a formal element of the program, but him just knowing what was going on with me, he was able to provide an opportunity which grew – I was promoted six times and on – and this is a funny story – so on the last day of my senior year, my HR director made me an offer for a managerial position at [the bank].

The inference here is the importance of guidance as a resource. In this example the program counselor also served as a mentor to this participant and his academic intervention lead to a fulltime career prospect.

Resources

The resources which African Americans require are often different than those of other traditional students. According to Shorter–Gooden (2004) much of the literature asserts the importance of encouragement as a resource which increased outcomes among African American women. This encouragement includes “networks that provide advice, emotional support, and/or material support” (p. 407).

Family support was also identified as a resource, Trina stated:

My grandparents on both sides of my family were very much into academics and wanted me to pursue advance education and things like that to the point where honestly growing up I had no clue I was poor because for every A my grandmother would give me \$100.00, so I was a 4.0 student just to get new shoes and purses and be able to shop on my own. So I think some of that.... kind of guided my attitude towards education.

Another participant Brenda reported:

When I say my family supported me, when you're talking early education experiences....I went to a private school and that was something that was because of my grandmother's generation, who really did believe in having the private education for us and was able to solicit the funds from everyone to make sure that we could be there.

Based on the data, the all of the women contribute affiliation with their institutional program as a relevant factor in their academic resilience. They recognized and spoke to many ways program supports had eliminated structural obstacles of race and class at PWI's. Like Sandra's viewpoint as she reflected on the program in this comment:

It always felt like home in there, because that's how they made me feel there. And I don't think I would've had that home feeling if it wasn't for the program. I don't think I would've completely felt at home at [the institution] if it wasn't for them. With the counseling, the staff, and just being with students that looked like me, and came from the same background as me.

Taylor's perspective was:

We had an academic advisor that would help guide us through the process. That was separate from the academic advisor for [the] school that we were [enrolled] in, and that's one of the things that I can always say that helped me. [This advisor] was an inspiration, because he was always encouraging as well as following up to make sure I was doing what I needed to do.

Carter (2006) links minority student persistence to campus climates which foster inclusion and student engagement (p. 40). The research of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) speaks to the importance of affirming relational systems in student positive outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This work corresponds to 2004 Pascarella, et al and the 1995 work by Kuh, which showed evidence of the significant generative impact of positive out-of-classroom experiences and student persistence. In addition to these factors positive school and faculty interactions

which improve student's social and academic engagement, has a greater impact for women (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005).

Issues of gender were less prevalent for the women at the community-based program where the program was comprised of an all-female population. In fact, gender was often identified as an additional support, among these group members.

And then we supported each other. You know, the students. We [were in a diverse community], and [in] the same boat, some a little more advanced than others. Some a little behind than others. But we all felt that camaraderie that we're all here – it's a little different when you go on campus and there's young kids. There's White kids, there's Asian kids, and you [are] a working adult. And they just popped out of bed and came to class, and you're dragging in from work.

In another reference to colleagues as a support resource Linda stated:

Well, as adults, most of the women in the program at Hill College were women who had full-time jobs, so they worked, a lot of them, and myself also worked. So what we did, we would get together as students and we became our support. We would have group talks maybe before class to see where we were to help get us through the next phase, to maybe talk out our frustrations, that kind of thing.

She went on to say:

Because I think as older students and African American women, we're real good at just coming together, and talking together, and talking out our frustrations, or, "What can I do? I'm going through this," that kind of thing. So we were our support system. That was my experience. We were our support system. The women of [this program] were our support system.

Consistently, throughout the interviews, the participants spoke of the sense of belonging they received as a result of being a part of a program. The solace of program participation was characteristically described as nurturing.

Also, financial support was not a deliberate question, but this resource was recurrently declared as an essential institutional support during the interviews. Both of the programs provided financial support. Linda reported, "I was stunned when I found out that this was a program [where] that the funding was made available in terms of scholarships. So when I

graduated...I graduated clean, owing nothing”. Kim reaffirmed this sentiment asserting, “Economically, they provided the scholarship money to help me continue my education without trying to take out a whole bunch of student loans, at that time.” An example from Taylor was that the program counseling helped her to avoid a financial aid dilemma with advisement on the course load requirements to keep her financial aid eligibility. She was not knowledgeable of institutional aid requirements and spoke to program intervention with this comment, “if a school advising is only giving you the minimum of the full-time [credits] but not making sure that you’re covered for financial aid status, how you would know that as a student?” She recalled in another incidence when

I was about to graduate in my undergrad, I didn’t realize I wasn’t fulfilling all the requirements that was necessary. So [the program counselor] was the one who was able to really tell me – even though I had the other advisor, [what] I needed [to do] to graduate.

Financial access and adequate guidance is addressed by Carter (2006) as an important resource “for researchers and practitioners in designs for interventions that affect particular populations” (p. 43). These interventions are particularly important for individuals who are first-generation college students. And it was noted, that first-generation college student status was a characteristic of all but one of the respondents’ interviewed for this study. Students from families without college-going traditions have less social capital than other students. This can create difficulty if programs are not offered to ease these students’ higher education transitions. Although the structures of the two university programs in this study were different, both programs had features to help the students with academic, social and financial assistance. These institutional contributions fostered their ability to overcome obstacles and realize successful attainment.

CHAPTER 4

The results of the study show the viability of institutional commitment in efforts to improve educational attainment among African American women. The backgrounds of women in this study were similar to the backgrounds of individuals who are historically less successful in navigating educational systems. Their backgrounds were not unlike my own, but their stories were different. The programs at their institutions alleviated the challenges many African Americans incur in pursuit of academic achievement. Similar, to most of the women in the study, I was a first-generation college student. Also my family bond ties and background resembled the women's accounts of supportive family ties. However, unlike the women in the study I did not receive the institutional interventions that supported their effort. My own story was finding internal motivation to work toward my goal (Thomas, et al., 2009, p. 161). This intrinsic motivation helped me develop strategies to cope with the psychological stressors many African Americans face at PWIs. However, the women in the study spoke of a number of external motivators (e.g. advisors, peer alliance, etc.) offered during their program participation. These represent examples of external motivators can influence academic outcomes The narratives of the study participants' offer compelling evidence of ways institutional outreach programming alter the risk factors and improves higher education resilience among, marginalized populations. The evidence presented suggests that the programs greatly influenced persistence. Second, the program helped the women to resist issues of bias. Third, the programs provided networks which offered emotional sources of support.

African American women are situated into two or more marginalized groups. They are both Black, female and frequently socially disadvantaged. The study of critical race theory shows how society functions to deny accesses to power to people of color. This access includes

equal employment opportunities, education as well as adequate housing and health care. Black feminism speaks to how the intersectionality of race, sex and class compound the oppression for women. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) states that “Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people” (p. 221). Both theories address the suppression of advantages by the dominant group. Education is a significant advantage that reduces oppression and improves collective outcomes.

The support of the programs in this study also appeared to provide the women with a buffer against the issues of racism and sexism. The women did not indicate facing “the institutional, political, and cultural barriers” typically experienced by black woman at institutions of higher education (Thomas, et al., 2009, p. 159). They mentioned the potential threat of such issues, but more often spoke about the inclusion provided by program.

The narratives of the interviewees not only demonstrate a direct correlation to the institutional intervention and students’ academic outcomes. Their data may also demonstrate a link between outreach programming and social achievement. A social achievement outcome of the study for further investigation is information on the woman’s current positionality. This investigation could assess the relationship between academic and cultural programming and social achievement. This inquiry emerges from the details of the participants’ current status. All but two women have subsequently attained graduate degrees and all of the women have managerial level positions (the woman who was not working during the interviews is currently employed).

Another finding of this study was that the intervention efforts of both programs provided a network for the participants. Shorter-Gooden (2004) talked about the importance of networks in the lives of African American women. Among these networks, she outlined those which

“provide advice, emotional support, and/or material support as central for this group of women” (p. 407). The women in the study expressed that program membership offered them a peer-network, which supplemented their support from families, friends and prescribed institutional advisers. This alternative support was captured in comments where they spoke about the support derived from having people from similar academic, racial and/or life situated backgrounds.

The data from the women’s interviews revealed a clear relationship between program support and successful outcomes. They spoke of ways the program helped them overcome the challenges of race, gender and socio-economics which customarily impact African American females seeking higher education attainment. The program involvement provided counseling, guidance and cultural components which offset the academic and social disadvantages of their backgrounds. The deliberate and unplanned emotional support of program involvement was another feature which kept the women from experiencing the isolation typically experienced by disenfranchised groups on college campuses.

The successful outcomes of the women in this study show the merits of continuing discussions which revise theories and connect research to policy and practice. Much of the current research cites Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory indicators suggesting that persistence and effective retention is aligned with policy and college commitments to students. His departure theory positions that persistence issues are related to students’ poor socially and academic integration into the university environment. Because it was designed for the traditional-age, largely white student population right out of high school some of Tinto’s earlier departure theories work did not fully represent culturally diverse students (Seidman, 2005, p. 9). Building on Tinto’s models, Simmons (2013) examined additional factors such as aspirations and goals,

minority faculty engagement and student involvement as practices and policies to help higher education institution retain more of its enrolled students (p. 64).

The work of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research (Volume 2)*, a revision of their earlier findings and insights reflect the changing needs of for institutions. Some of their early conceptual framework questions were to examine the evidence of the differential institutional influence on student change and development and the evidence of the effects of different experiences within the same institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 7). Their data is useful in program and policy plans to increase educational equity. However, with the more current availabilities of statistical database information they were able to refine and expand their own research findings.

This study has yielded data indicating that reducing resistance impacts attainment outcomes. The specifics revealed in this study are that government and institutional interventions are pivotal in efforts to improve outcomes. Both programs provided resources that allowed the students to successfully compete in higher education. Also, both programs were as result of intentional institutional desire to reduce barriers of exclusion this group has historically experienced. The traditional college program was funded by the state to serve disadvantaged students. The non-traditional program was funded through foundation grants.

The African American females were the study focus because of the shortage of information on improving outcomes specific to this population. In searches for information concerning African American educational inequities, much of the work is centered on the male experience. As a result, many initiatives to increase African American higher educational persistence are focused on improving male outcomes. As a matter of social justice, African American women must receive the same access to human rights and opportunities that is

afforded others in society. The resources presented in this study improved the women's degree completion and better-educated individuals are better able to compete in the workforce. Moving African American women forward improves our ability to contribute to our families, our communities and society as a whole.

CHAPTER 5

“Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to the error that counts”

Nikki Giovanni

Given the complex intersection of race, gender and class, this work has reviewed conditions that supported African American women in successful higher education attainment. The study shows ways institutional support removed the resistance which typically produces less successful outcomes. The introduction of this study details the inequities in experience of African American women and critical issues that need to be addressed. An outline of the resistance began on page 9 and revealed many challenges to the academic among African American females. Their challenges include cultural identity issues; matters of cultural capital; the shortage of racial role models; and the lack culturally relevant curriculum and practices.

Characteristics of the women in the study’s collective identities were race, socio-economics and/or age. The formation of positive cultural identity allows African American women to resist the negative race and gender ideologies of historical oppression. The programs explored in this research offered the women communities and activities where they could socialize with individuals from similar experiences and backgrounds. The programs held on-site cultural events as well as providing the women opportunities to experience varied off-site activities. These activities offered the women opportunity to build comradery with like others. These types of connections are significant in efforts to stimulate positive cultural identity and cultural capital development.

The lack of cultural capital reduces higher education attainment among African American females for multiple reasons. The social capital of families who lack college traditions affects their ability to understand the academic process and expectations. This is where the guidance of the program staff members bridged the gap in family background and awareness for many of the

women. Also, the lack of cultural capital influences access to social networks and impacts one's ability to integrate into the campus culture. For women, who find the campus climates chillier than males, a lack of social integration increases concerns of alienation and isolation. The program's also provided mentors and racial role models, which further offset the effects of cultural capital absence. Racial role models are especially important for African American Women. Alienation is reduced by connections between the college environment and student's personal identity. Critical race and Black Feminist theories suggest this oppression is derived from the racism and sexism ingrained in American society. Therefore, another strength of mentoring, for African American women, is that it reduces the negative dynamics of the oppression (Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010, p. 29). Therefore, the mentoring and communities offered by program involvement was an advantage that not only assisted cultural identity development but also reduced exclusion.

Cultural capital is also impacted by government funding and policies. The programs examined in the study clearly established that systematic investment lead to positive results for the women represented in this research. Initiatives to reduce challenges must address the issues of funding, public policy along with addressing institutional climates. The issues of funding are multifaceted; beginning with funding for preschools and continuing to higher education financial concerns. Preschool programs prepare youth for kindergarten and provide youth with the opportunity to develop positive socialization skills. There are preschool programs with fees but there is not much access to preschool programs for low-income families unless they are at or below the federal poverty level. The federally funded programs require parent involvement, reducing the involvement of youth from working poor families. However many youth from disadvantaged families enter low-performing schools which offset the advantages from the early

participation. Also, African American students disproportionately attend low-performing, under-resourced schools. Government funding is allocated based on a school's ability improve. Educational reform requires funding interventions that reduce performance sanctions, so low-performing schools can access to quality resources and teachers. Also significant for African Americans are disparities in discipline. African American students are suspended at higher rates than White students for subjective infractions. Data from the U. S. Department of Education show that black girls in public elementary and secondary school nationwide were suspended at a rate higher than any race or ethnicity (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

These funding disparities produce unequal opportunities. Reduction of African American female higher education disparities begins with better academic and non-academic resources. The women in the study very seldom spoke of qualified guidance and mentoring prior to their post-secondary experience. This was telling in their comments of early education support where the research participants, identified family as their primary early education support base. Therefore increased guidance and counselor contact is a compulsory intervention. Counseling, outreach to parents, builds the capital of school trust among groups that usually find school environments unwelcoming. Other early education supports include workshops to increase parent/student college preparation education. These types of supports are pertinent in underserved schools to strengthen college application and enrollment for groups who lack higher education traditions.

Awareness of women's issues specific to African American females is another area requiring policy attention. More research is needed to investigate strategies to improve their success. Inclusion in the curriculum is one strategy that fosters positive identity development and diminishes negative stereotype myths. Also, there are psychological issues of generational

trauma as a consequence of persistent oppression and racism. As a result many African American women and girls have adopted protective mechanisms that resemble anti-social behavior. Some of these behaviors are being loud and audacious in order to have a voice and resorting to the protection of disengagement because of their feelings of dissociation. Current initiatives sponsor leadership and support programs for African American boys and men however those types of initiatives are needed to improve outcomes among women and girls.

The next steps in advocacy, is to increase government and institutional awareness in support of marginalized group issues. My personal experience of institutional isolation and coping with racial and gender bias, is an area that the programs in the study addressed. The programs offered both peer and staff support so the women did not have to cope in isolation with issue that arose during their tenure at PWI's. The mission of both programs in the study was to improve access and support for disadvantaged students. The state funded program in this research, promoted cultural competency as a component of the program development. The other program established their own guidelines; however both programs promoted social and cultural development. The results are models of diligent institutional efforts which have improved outcomes among African American women. To eliminate their challenges, institutions with missions to improve diversity, are compelled to address cultural competency issues in both staffing and programming. Staffing issues require endeavors to improve diversity awareness and to increase the pool of diverse faculty and staff. Moving from research to practice indications validates that increasing positive racial and gender interactions serves to reduce student departures. In efforts to improve attainment among African American women, implementations of supports focused on equity are also essential to improve outcomes. Returning to critical race and Black feminist theories of oppression to help define ways culturally relevant curriculum and

practices reduces institutional barriers. Racial and sexual domination reduced by curriculum presented in frameworks that alter negative societal stereotypes. These frameworks also improve the understanding of differences and interactions among cultural groups.

The economics of cultural capital also impacts higher education enrollment, persistence and attainment. Although there is a dearth of research around the impact of financial aid and student persistence, financial assistance was a recurring theme emerging from the study. Some of the women in the research had families to support while simultaneously working towards degrees attainment. Therefore childcare and meals were significant supports in the financial assistance offered by their program. These women described these type of support as essential to their enrollment and persistence. The 2006, study by Carter, cited financial shortage as a key factor impacting higher education attainment among minority students. To improve outcomes this is a responsibility requiring government and institutional commitment. The social justice the issues are the quandaries around the affordability of education and financial support. The skyrocketing costs of education hinder the equality of access for many. Students from more advantaged or families with college tradition are often better prepared to attend to the financial concerns of higher education. The mid- and upper-class families are often prepared in advance and have financial assets or knowledge of how to seek and qualify for aid. With the systemic imbalance in wealth and delivery of resources many disadvantaged families lack the knowledge for accessing and effectively participating in the financial aid process. Understanding of the financial aid process also allows students to select schools based on their quality and offerings not the costs. Therefore, another effort to improve the social conditions of all citizens is the promotion of financial aid awareness as an important policy issue for schools.

When funding for special programs is not available, the role of offices of student and academic affairs is to provide services that enhance student's academic experience. Their academic and non-academic responsibilities range from academic and career guidance to activity development to support the needs of all students. In addition to these resources, adequate counseling is a resource to cultivate the student experience as they navigate higher education challenges. The programs from the study outlined activities and supports which can be replicated with institutional incorporation of agenda to foster cultural inclusiveness. As a matter of social justice women and girls should not spend their energy conquering adversity and rising above the challenges. Interventions such as these improved aspirations of post-secondary attainment of the women in the study. This study has also demonstrated that success with educational persistence and attainment improves the economic security among the African American community of women who are wives, mothers and daughters. And strong education outcomes strengthen the nation.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions and Prompts

Research question: “What are the practices that expedite successful matriculation for African American females at Predominantly White Institutions?” These questions were developed by reviewing the positions of authors such as Gay, Nieto and Ladson Billing.

1. Tell me about yourself, including your racial and cultural heritage, socioeconomic background, and school experiences.
2. How did your family and community support you during your early educational experiences? Were there challenges? If so, explain.
3. Why did you enroll in a community-based or campus-based academic program?
 - a. What was your academic history before attending the university?
4. Describe the extracurricular activities offered during your university experience.
 - a. Do you feel these activities enhanced your experience? If so, how?
5. Do you feel this program offered services that supported you? Other students? (Define support)
 - a. How did it support you academically?
 - b. How did it support you socially?
 - c. How did it support you emotionally?
 - d. How did it support you culturally?
6. Do you think the support in this program influences(ed) your academic achievement?
 - a. Give examples.
7. Were there other aspects of the program that helped you overcome challenges and difficulties during your university experience? Academic experience?

- a. How did these aspects support your academic achievement?
- b. What additional supports would you have liked to have?

Academically? Socially? Culturally?

8. Do you have any final comments concerning your academic experience?