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# Black Male Student Success in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**



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Dr. Joey Cope, Dean of the  
College of Graduate and  
Professional Studies

Date: November 13, 2020

Dissertation Committee:



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Dr. Sandra Harris, Chair



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Dr. Karmyn Downs



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Dr. Simone Elias

Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

Black Male Student Success in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Cherise A. Johnson

December 2020

## Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for seeing me through this entire journey. There were many times that I second-guessed myself while on this journey, but the prayers of the righteous availed much. To God be the glory for all of the marvelous things He has done, more explicitly helping me achieve this milestone accomplishment.

To the person that was my biggest cheerleader, the person that I could tell anything to and never be judged, maybe chastised but never judged. Granny, although you are no longer here in the physical, I know that you are rejoicing up above. There is not a day that goes by where I don't long to hear your wittiness or listen to you tell great and awesome stories. No one in this entire, complete world could tell a story better than you! As I look back, I can now see that we are alike in more ways than I ever realized. Thank you for instilling into me the value of education. You were my first teacher, and more than anything, my heart's biggest desire was to make you proud. I still have a ways to go, but this degree right here is all for you!

To my mother, thanks for giving me life and pushing me along the way. There was never a time when you doubted my ability to succeed. Whenever I come to you with my random ideas, you support them, fully believe in me, and support me through it all. Thank you for all of the many nights and weekends you offered consciously and unconsciously to take care of the kids to ensure all deadlines were met. I love you! You did it... We did it!

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### Abstract

When compared to their peer counterparts, Black male students have a lower college attrition rate. Universities and higher education institutions explore ways to increase the retention and graduation rates for Black male students persisting toward college graduation, and all Black male students need to be included in the dialogue. This qualitative instrumental collective case study explored first-generation Black male college students' lived experiences that contributed to their persistence toward graduation from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) framed within Tinto's retention theory (1993). Snowball sampling was used to identify eight first-generation Black male students that were in good academic standing as a sophomore, junior, or senior and are persisting toward completing a bachelor's degree from an HBCU. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the academic and social experiences of a specific group of Black male students. The data collected for this study were obtained from eight Black male students currently persisting toward college graduation at an HBCU that aligned with the predetermined participant criteria. The findings suggested that academic and social support systems are critical for the Black male college students' success at HBCUs. These systems included student services, academic and nonacademic extracurricular organizations, campus environment, mentorship and connections, high school transition, and the ability to navigate the college school system.

*Keywords:* Black male, college persister, first-generation college student, HBCU, retention

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Education is the culturing of the mind (Forshay, 1991). The primary focus is to prepare students for the world and arm them with the ability to successfully navigate life (Heimlich, 2011). In recent decades, major economic and sociological shifts have made a college degree an ever-more important stepping stone for reaching and maintaining a middle- or upper-class lifestyle (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). A large majority of first-generation college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minorities face social and academic difficulties when trying to obtain a college education (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Coleman Tucker, 2014; López, 2018). In comparison to other first world countries and most third world countries, the United States currently has one of the lowest college completion rates (Goings, 2017; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010). Kim (2011) suggested that closing achievement gaps in educational attainment is essential for raising the education level of the U.S. population.

### **Background of the Study**

Various research studies suggest Black men are underrepresented in obtaining a bachelor's degree from four-year institutions of higher education in comparison to their Caucasian male counterparts (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Conger & Dickson, 2017; Davis & Otto, 2016; Druery & Brooms, 2018; Hall, 2017; Jett, 2013). According to Druery and Brooms (2018), the National Center for Education Statistics reported that Black male students represent less than five percent of the undergraduate college student population among the 15 million college students in the United States. Consequently, Black male students are faced with several risk factors preventing their academic success. These risk factors include institutionalized racism (Naylor et al., 2015; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017), lack of support systems (Druery & Brooms, 2018; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Naylor et al., 2015; Tolliver & Miller, 2018), and negative

narratives about their success (Druery & Brooms, 2018; Scott et al., 2013). One study revealed that close to 60% of the fastest-growing jobs demand an associate degree, while 46% require a bachelor's degree or higher (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). It is critical to identify what factors contribute toward the persistence of Black male students seeking to obtain a college degree from an institution of higher education to work toward closing the achievement gap.

The low college enrollment, attendance, and completion rates of Black male students threaten their economic stability (Davis & Otto, 2016). Naylor et al. (2015) found that without a college education, it is difficult to be successful in the modern workforce. Over the past four decades, student retention has been one of the most studied areas within higher education (Tinto, 2006). To explore student retention, Tinto (1993) challenged the quantitative outcomes by using a qualitative approach to investigate student experiences, types of colleges, and student demographics. Tinto's retention theory aimed to consider the role of the institution as well as the student in the ultimate decision for the student to persist through higher education. Even within the last 13 years, there has still not been significant growth in the sector of student retention. Tinto further explained there is still a need to research and address the challenges of student attrition in higher education.

According to Schuh et al. (2017), retention pertains to the goal the institution has set for students to maintain their enrollment to the next term or successfully finish their program. Powell (2009) noted that retention is one of the most common areas of study in higher education. Moreover, Schuh et al. (2017) noted Tinto's (2006) argument that the academics, environment, and social integration of students ultimately determines their willful choice to stay or leave an institution. From the viewpoint of Tinto, students enter college with several qualities that persuade them to attend an institution of higher education as well as complete a degree.

Creighton (2007) revealed four factors that are critical in confirming the retention of Black students in school. These factors include preentry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and personal and normative integration. Both Creighton (2007) and Tinto (1993) found the students most likely to graduate are the students who have a sense of commitment to the institution. Simmons (2013) noted that a student's commitment to their institution is linked to precollege experiences, socioeconomic background, and personal attributes. Ultimately, Black students encounter challenges with achieving academic goals and graduation completion because many college campuses do not resemble a familiar environment, which results in a lack of belonging (Owen et al., 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Harper (2012) argued that Black male students have the worst college attrition rate compared to other college students. However, Jett (2013) indicated Black male students are successful on the campuses of some Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Their success is attributed to making intentional support systems a priority in improving academic success. In addition, placing teacher interactions, stereotypes, and peer support at the forefront when constructing solutions is essential in an ever-evolving economy (Goings, 2016). Robertson and Mason (2008) reported that Black male students express the importance of "faculty involvement, financial assistance, classroom environment, academic and personal support, extracurricular activities and the ability" as they matriculate through college (p. 68). The disparity of Black male students will persist if initiatives to help encourage leadership and build personal identity are not a priority (Barker & Avery, 2012). It is imperative these needs are met to increase the retention of this population so they can obtain the goal of graduation. This study

explored the experiences of Black male students at HBCUs that contribute to their academic success.

The younger generation in the United States no longer achieves a much higher education level than their predecessors (Palmer et al., 2010; Swayze, 2013). According to Kim (2011), only two groups, Asian Americans and Whites, made notable gains over their elders. Goings (2017) stated as universities search for ways to increase student retention and graduation rates of Black male students pursuing higher education, all types of Black male students need to be included in the conversation: traditional and nontraditional. My current work environment as a high school teacher and an adjunct college professor teaching students of color, drives the passion for the area in which I researched. I am interested in researching support systems that help Black male students obtain higher education at HBCUs. In my current profession as a teacher, I can frequently observe the lack of representation of minority males entering college and persisting to college graduation. According to Harper and Kuykendall (2012), for many years, the status of Black male students in higher education has been disturbing, but, unfortunately, institutions are still in search of ways to prove Black male success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify experiences that contribute to first-generation Black male students' persisting toward graduation from HBCUs framed within Tinto's retention theory (1993). The findings contributed to the body of research to identify what positive support systems are essential for first-generation Black male students to persist toward completing a bachelor's degree successfully. Snowball sampling was used to identify approximately 10 first-generation Black male students who are in good academic standing as a sophomore, junior, or senior and are persisting toward completing a bachelor's degree from an

HBCU. The theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto's retention theory was used to frame the college experiences of the Black male students to better understand the support they need to work toward obtaining a degree in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1.** What student academic experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?

**RQ2.** What student social experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?

**RQ3.** What experiences toward persistence were provided by faculty, parents, and peers?

**RQ4.** What challenges were encountered and overcome?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Black male.** Human of the male gender belonging to the African American racial category (Buttaro et al., 2010).

**College persister.** Enrolled student who stays enrolled until degree completion (Hagedorn, 2012).

**First-generation college student.** Student whose parents or legal guardians' level of education is a high school diploma or less (Coleman Tucker, 2014; McFadden, 2016).

**Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU).** Two- or four-year higher education institutions throughout the United States that prior to segregation were the primary opportunity for African Americans to obtain an education (Jett, 2013; Lundy-Wagner, 2013).

**Retention.** The power to retain students as they persist toward college completion (Hagedorn, 2012).

### **Chapter Summary**

The research of this study is separated into five chapters. Chapter 1 consisted of the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of study, research questions, and

definition of key terms. Chapter 2 includes the review of the literature, which validates the significance and importance of this study. In Chapter 3, the methodology is described and includes the research design, selection of participants, data collection, data analysis, the researcher's role, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 includes the research findings as they relate to the research questions. Chapter 5 summarizes the results of the research conducted through this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify experiences that contribute to first-generation Black male students persisting toward graduation from HBCUs framed within Tinto's retention theory (1993). This study was constructed on the foundation of Tinto's student retention theory, which suggests factors that contribute to college attrition and completion (Tinto, 1993). Due to changing demographics, evolving workforce needs, and recognition of the democratizing effect of diverse campuses, the success of underrepresented minorities is now a state and national priority (O'Donnell et al., 2015). Kim (2011) emphasized how critical the need is for change to take place for students experiencing imbalance due to their race or socioeconomic status at various points in their educational journey. Studies show that education has positive impacts on the personal level, on the country's economy, and for social inclusion (Kitiashvili et al., 2016). However, Black male enrollment in higher education was reported at 4.5%, which is the same as it was in 1976 (Palmer et al., 2010; Swayze, 2013). This study aimed to identify factors that contributed toward the persistence of Black male students obtaining a college degree from a four-year HBCU. Results gained from this research study can be used to encourage college completion among Black male students and assist Black male students to complete higher education successfully.

Chapter 2 contains 10 parts. The first section examines Tinto's theory. The second section explains the importance of retention as it relates to higher education. The third section investigates the history of African Americans in education. The fourth section explores the history of Black male students in education. The fifth section highlights the challenges encountered by Black male students in higher education. The sixth section identifies the first-generation student. The seventh section discusses academic strategies that support success for

Black male students in higher education. Section eight identifies social strategies that support success for Black male students in education. Section nine highlights faculty, peer, and family support for success in higher education. The final section discusses HBCUs and their role in the education of Black male students in higher education.

### **Tinto's Theory**

According to Connelly (2016), in the academic sector of student retention, Tinto's model is the most respected. Vincent Tinto is a distinguished theorist in the field of higher education with decades of experience in the subject of student retention (Tinto, 2017). Tinto began researching student retention as a critical concern grew in higher education due to a steady decline in student enrollments (Tinto, 1987, 1999). The works of Emile Durkheim and Arnold van Gennep were used as building blocks as Tinto constructed the student departure theory (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1987; Wagenaar, 1988). The framing of Tinto's theory is adapted from the well-known "suicide" work of Durkheim (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto finds similarities among attrition behavior and suicide behavior in terms of voluntary withdrawal from a specific society (Bean, 1988). Tinto also believed there were similarities to Durkheim's theory of less isolation being linked to individuals being connected (Schuh et al., 2017). Tinto's initial idea of retention speculates that students who merge socially in the college campus environment will graduate because of an increased commitment to the institution (Aljohani, 2016; Connelly, 2016; Tinto, 1987).

In 1993, Tinto's 1987 longitudinal model of departure was used as a framework to explore students' experiences as they transitioned into their first year at institutions of higher education. The longitudinal model of departure placed emphasis on the understanding that institutional departure and system departure are two separate things (Wagenaar, 1988). As

explained by Wagenaar (1988), institution departure describes students leaving from certain institutions, whereas system departure describes students leaving higher education completely. Tinto's theory of student departure is classified as a sociological approach because it focuses on the responsibility of social forces and structures as they relate to the college experience (Schuh et al., 2017). The central idea of this model is integration. In this model, integration is divided into two parts: social integration and academic integration. Tinto's model suggests that student success is mostly determined by academic integration and includes the students' engagement in activities offered by the institution (Holden, 2016). Likewise, emphasis is placed on institutions of higher education interpreting the behavior of student dropouts (Stewart et al., 2015). Additionally, Holden (2016) noted that Tinto considers it the task of the institution to incorporate strategies to support the student journey.

### **Theoretical Framework Discussion**

Student retention rate has been a significant focus for institutions across the globe since the establishment of formal education (Aljohani, 2016; Jüttler, 2020). Retention is critical because it is one of the primary factors to rate an institution's effectiveness (Barclay et al., 2018). Burke (2019) described retention as the continuous enrollment of students year after and year and where students remain within the study program and institution in which they are enrolled. Ultimately, high retention rates achieve institutional success, an increase in students paying fees and tuition, and achieving academically (Burke, 2019). Jüttler (2020) supported the claim that at the university level, the core mediators of student commitment to not dropping out depends on academic and social integration. Student retention in higher education is essential to institutions due to the impact on graduation rates and funding for the school (Borgen & Borgen, 2016). High retention rates reflect academic success and financial stability for the institution (Owolabi, 2018).

This information is pertinent for prospective students seeking a sound university to attend.

Prospective students research retention and graduation rates to measure the performance of the school.

Student retention is essential to a higher education institutions' success as the first two years are the most critical years for possible dropouts or transfers to other institutions (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2017; Manyanga et al., 2017). Previous research stresses the importance of high student retention rates and their need for the survival of higher education institutions (Burke, 2019; Ottley & Ellis, 2019). Supporting and providing guidance to students in making good educational choices may assist with maximizing student retention (Ertem, 2020). Students who define their achievement goals and expectations have a better chance of remaining with the study program and focus on their educational goals. Burke (2019) suggested that more preliminary resources should be invested in providing support to students who desire higher education degrees by spending more time on educational decisions before entering higher education. Upfront support and resources will encourage and promote student retention (Owolabi, 2018).

In comparison to other racial groups, Black male students at higher education institutions have a lower graduation and retention rate (Goings, 2018; Ottley & Ellis, 2019). Ottley and Ellis (2019) argued the difficulties that Black men encounter to persist and obtain a college degree are an area of study that should be explored. Earning a college degree increases the possibilities of a career, future income, and personal gratification (Owolabi, 2018). Ottley and Ellis (2019) noted although higher education institutions are providing programs to improve retention of the Black male students, the number of Black male students leaving the institutions before obtaining a

degree continues to grow. They suggested that campus-based qualitative research is needed to help institutions identify best practices that aid in retaining Black college men.

### **History of African Americans in Education**

The education of African Americans was uncommon and inconsistent in Texas and many other Southern states during the 1800s (Butchart, 2010; Hornsby, 1973). More specifically, formal education for African Americans was not available for those that desired to become educated (Danns & Purdy, 2015). Prior to the Civil War, it was believed that if African Americans were educated, disorder and disobedience would arise (James-Gallaway, 2019). Restraining Black education was employed as a plan to suppress the Black population (Beyer, 2014; Hornsby, 1973). Despite that, the United States Congress launched the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 (Fleischman et al., 2014). One of the major accomplishments of this bureau was to oversee and organize a large educational initiative established in Southern states (François, 2014; Parker, 1954). The bureau managed schools that provided primary, secondary, and postsecondary education to African American students (Childs, 2017). At these schools, African American students were taught by teachers from Northern states, most belonging to the American Missionary Association (Bentley, 1955; Elliott, 1952; Parker, 1954). The American Missionary Association was an organization founded in 1846 to abolish slavery and support the education of African Americans (Parker, 1954).

In January 1866, with the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau, Texas opened 10 day schools and six night schools for African American students (Elliot, 1952; Hornsby, 1973). By July 1866, this number drastically increased, and Texas had formed 90 schools operating during the day, night, and on the weekends (Hornsby, 1973). As a result of the increased number of opened schools, very little help was needed from the Northern states (Elliott, 1952; Hornsby,

1973). However, many people belonging to the Southern White community were not overly accepting of Northern White missionaries working at African American schools (Butchart, 2010; Hornsby, 1973). Their hatred was displayed by burning the schools down and threatening the missionary teachers (Bean, 2007; Elliot, 1952; Hornsby, 1973).

In the period of Reconstruction, Texas asked for a united educational system that could be shared by all children (Texas State Historical Association, 2020). Unfortunately, from 1873 to 1875, the state legislature revoked many laws of the period of Reconstruction and reestablished segregation (Wilson, 2010). Apart from this, spending a third less on the education of African American students, Texas also paid African American teachers less than their White colleagues (Butchart, 2010). For this reason, African Americans wanted their constitutional rights protected and turned to the courts for help (Hoffer, 2014).

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* United States Supreme Court case of 1896 led to the decision of “separate but equal” in reference to the laws of racial segregation (Childs, 2017; Hutchison, 2015; Menand, 2019). This phrase implied that as long as a group of people had access to legal rights, services, and opportunities, they could be treated differently (Hoffer, 2014). The ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 mandated the legal right of racial segregation (Hoffer, 2014). Following this decision, the need for African American schools was questioned, and funding remained disproportionate compared to White schools (Hornsby, 1973; Parker, 1954). African American parents were responsible for paying a “double tax” to assist with cultural events, athletic programs, and to offset the lack of funding available to the Black schools (James-Gallaway, 2019). Likewise, Black teachers understood their roles extended beyond the classroom and instruction (Butchart, 2010). Black teachers had to use their personal funds to contribute to

the success of their Black students inside and outside of school (Danns & Purdy, 2015; James-Gallaway, 2019).

Meanwhile, several changes took place during the 1950s. Lash and Ratcliffe (2014) noted that one of the most significant turning points in the history of African American education was *Brown v. Board of Education*. The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* prohibited segregation in education and left a profound impact on educational programs for African Americans. With San Antonio being among one of the first school districts to comply, Texas was leading the way in desegregation in the South (Childs, 2017). Furthermore, in 1964 in Texas, the majority of all African Americans attended integrated school districts in the South and represented 60% of desegregated school districts in the South (Wilson, 2010). In Texas, ranging from the Reconstruction era to the present, there are still many questions and disputes surrounding the subject of education and Black students.

### **History of Black Men in Education**

In society and academic settings, educators are overwhelmed with negative conversations about Black boys (Goings, 2015). Historically, Black male students have not been well supported, and more steps need to be adopted to promote the success of African American male students (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). According to Jackson et al. (2013), the pursuit of higher education is a goal for many minorities, including Black male students. As an important part of the family, Black male students obtaining higher education degrees contribute to the success of the minority communities (Lawrence & Sharp, 2019). Therefore, institutions need to change higher education by enhancing the quality and support to provide an equitable education for Black male students (Naylor et al., 2015).

Much of the research on Black male achievement presents alarming statistics and often negative stories about their chances of academic success (Wood et al., 2015). Harper and Kuykendall (2012) acknowledged the increase in attention Black male students in higher education has received over the last 15 years due to low completion rates by this particular population (Goings, 2018). Dulabaum (2016) noted that compared to their counterparts, Black male students are more likely to drop out and are less likely to succeed in college-level coursework. According to the Black Demographics (2018), 10% of college degrees were earned by Black students, 12% were graduate degrees, and 7% were doctoral degrees. These researchers also imply that Black students in grades K–12 encounter the same problems as Black students transitioning into higher education (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). The only chance to ensure an increase in results for degree completion is by making sure Black male students have equal access to affordable and quality education (Naylor et al., 2015).

In general, Black students perform academically better when provided with great family support and encouragement (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Yet, Kim and Hargrove (2013) highlighted the resilience of Black male students at predominantly White institutions and HBCUs. They found some Black male students are successful and gain support from family, peers, mentors, and faculty. To increase the academic success of Black male students in higher education, Black Male Initiatives (BMI) are being implemented on many college campuses (Druery & Broom, 2017). These initiatives are programs to help support the experiences of Black male students and help student retention and graduation completion. Black Male Initiatives include academic enrichment, mentoring, socioemotional development, social involvement, and civic engagement (Clark & Brooms, 2018). Administrative support and mentorships have also been found to be conducive to African American male students' academic achievements (Vincent et al., 2019).

## **Challenges Encountered**

Higher education in the United States faces an unprecedented challenge in maintaining a diverse student population (Conger & Dickson, 2017). Frazier and Rhoden (2011) acknowledged that diversity on many campuses in higher education is suffering due to the lack of Black male students. Naylor et al. (2015) pointed out that Black male students are continuously overrepresented in poverty and underrepresented in the system of higher education. Richardson et al. (2019) linked the negative educational experiences of Black male students to their low representation in undergraduate programs. Wood and Palmer (2013) acknowledged that Black male students have the lowest college completion rate, and universities are constantly seeking ways to offer support to this particular population. Matthews-Whetstone and Scott (2015) concluded that fewer Black male students would make the choice to attend and graduate from college if systems to support Black male students are not available. The findings of Dulabaum (2016) revealed five common barriers as reasons why it is hard for Black male students to persist toward college completion. The barriers include lack of financial resources; college preparedness; college, work, and family balance; support and engagement; and lack of focus and self-motivation.

### ***Financial Resources***

Achieving financial freedom is often further delayed by excessive student loan debts. Over the past few decades, an increase in the number of young adults attending college accumulated high levels of debt (Shim et al., 2019). Socioeconomic status plays a significant role in an individual's ability to progress through the educational system (Jackson et al., 2013). Individuals with economic issues rely on the support of financial assistance to assist with the cost

of higher education (Peters et al., 2011). Financial aid is an essential part of determining the college of choice for African American male students (Buttaro et al., 2010).

### ***Academic (College Preparedness)***

According to Ottley and Ellis (2019), many Black college male students withdraw from higher education due to the deficiency of secondary school learning. Also, the lack of preparation, low expectations from teachers, lack of role models, and financial issues are all factors that contribute to the departure of Black male students from colleges and universities. High numbers of college dropouts are often due to the disengagement and unpreparedness of students (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

### ***Career and Employment (College, Work, and Family Balance)***

According to Wood et al. (2016), further research suggests that Black male students' views of working may be the determining factor in influencing individuals' success in higher education. However, they found that working a job was viewed as unfavorable in their academics when students had to work to pay for their educational expenses. Overall, there is evidence to suggest the higher number of hours students work, the more likely they are to reduce their course loads and less likely to continue.

### ***Environment (Support and Engagement)***

In addition to the burden of work, the environment is another key factor in Black male students' success. The bidirectional interactions with the environment influence the individual, and inversely the individual primarily affects the environment (Jackson et al., 2013). The parental level of education and occupational status directly relates to the Black male's ability to be academically successful (Pais, 2011). The more educated the parent, the more education will

be valued and encouraged among the children in the family (Jackson et al., 2013). Furthermore, parent support seems to match the ability of the student to be successful.

### ***Motivation***

Motivation is the drive to inspire one to complete and achieve their goals (Zumbrunn et al, 2014). According to Harrison et al. (2015), the belief in one's ability to succeed is vital to an individual's academic success. When compared to other minority undergraduate students, Black male students were reported to have lower self-efficacy (Reid, 2013). Self-efficacy is a concept related to the motivation and advancement of African American male students in higher education (Alexander, 2016). Likewise, Brown and Sacco-Bene (2018) noted Black male college students report experiencing frustrations, separation, and invisibility. They also expressed feelings of uneasiness, dissatisfaction, and weariness (Brown & Sacco-Bene, 2018).

Welton and Williams (2015) called attention to the burden of school policy reform and acknowledged the pressure placed on schools for the initial purpose of the high-stakes exit exams. These exams were designed to ensure students are ready to enter the workforce and postsecondary education. Although there is a plethora of related information related to underachievement and overrepresentation of Black students statistically low performance rates in higher education, there is little in the literature that seeks to examine why the Black male's educational plight is so bleak (Scott, 2012).

There is a large body of literature that examines race as a factor in university admissions policies as well as acts of racism once Black students entered higher education (Kane, 1998; Thomas et al., 2012). It is also worth noting there are not many successful depictions of Black male students highlighted in the literature (Scott et al., 2013).

In academic settings, there is power in the presence of Black educators and their profound impact on student outcomes (Richardson et al., 2019). Thomas et al. (2012) suggested there are not enough positive Black faculty members on campus, and the campus environment can seem hostile to Black students because of the tolerance of racist people and their attitudes. Moreover, in higher education, Black male faculty make up three percent of full-time faculty at colleges and universities (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017).

The lack of funding provided to academically, capable African American students may be a leading factor of poorly represented African American students and faculty members in higher education institutions (Goings et al., 2015; Louis & Freeman, 2018; Wilder et al., 2015). The importance of retention and graduation of Black male students is indicated by the lack of Black men holding professional positions (Davis & Otto, 2016; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). Facilitating access to education is especially important for disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities, as they often need more time, services, finance, and support for getting a quality education than majority groups do (Kitiashvili et al., 2016). Harper and Kuykendall (2012) mentioned that finances play a significant part in the persistence of Black male students toward academic success. Kim (2011) suggested that closing these gaps in educational attainment is essential for raising the education level of the United States population. In most cases, ethnic minorities' achievements lag behind those of the majority groups (Kitiashvili et al., 2016).

Moreover, the challenges faced by Black male students on campuses have been well documented. Predominantly White universities continue to be less appealing (Harper, 2012). These significant gaps are unlikely to change without reducing disparities at each transition point in the education pipeline (Kim, 2011). Peters et al. (2011) argued that access to financial aid is

critical to Black students' admission and persistence through colleges and universities. Revealing the roles of stakeholders and approaching the issue from various perspectives will help to understand the challenges of Black boys and men and develop a form of support for Black male students (Goings et al., 2015).

### **First-Generation College Students**

Education offers a world of opportunities for essential equality in the presence of various cultural groups (Jackson et al., 2013). A first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parent(s) has not obtained a degree from a four-year collegiate institution (Phillips et al., 2020). In 2010, approximately 4.5 million first-generation college students were enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States (Schelbe et al., 2019).

First-generation college students experience some difficulty with adjusting and are reported to achieve a lower level of success when compared to students of different ethnicities (Jackson et al., 2013). According to Coleman Tucker (2014), colleges and universities are increasing their efforts to offer support to students that are the first in their family to attend college. Moreover, first-generation students experience a significantly lower graduation rate compared to continuing-generation students (McCallen & Johnson, 2019). Likewise, in their first year, first-generation college students are more likely to drop out than their peers (Schelbe et al., 2019).

According to McCallen and Johnson (2019), the journey for first-generation students is filled with challenges, and most times, first-generation students are at a disadvantage. The challenges include but are not limited to the following: college readiness, family support, personal characteristics and self-efficacy, and financial challenges (Ober et al., 2020). Implementing summer bridge programs on college campuses is one approach to help students

develop the required competencies needed to succeed in higher education (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). These programs are commonly used to assist at-risk students as they transition into college to foster inclusion and integration (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Oftentimes, first-generation college students maneuver through the collegiate experience with families who have no prior knowledge of higher education (Huynh, 2019; McCallen & Johnson, 2019). Past research suggests that connecting with others socially, campus involvement, and a sense of community is crucial in the persistence toward graduation (Wille & Alston-Mills, 2017). A contributing factor in college enrollment, attendance, and completion is the socioeconomic background of the first-generation student (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015). First-generation students typically come from low-income homes, and the most important component is the cost of attending college and access to financial aid (McCallen & Johnson, 2019).

### **Academic Strategies That Support Success**

Higher education institutions should be invested in providing equal education opportunities for all students (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). The understanding that education provides an equitable opportunity for everyone is a misleading belief throughout the field of academia (Jackson et al., 2013). Unfortunately, most research connected to Black male achievement reveals terrible statistics and disturbing stories about their chances of academic success (Scott et al., 2013). Palmer et al. (2014) indicated the rate of success for Black male students varied and was dependent upon the type of higher education institution. Druery and Broom (2018) emphasized that Black students experience stereotypes, feelings of isolation, and gendered racism, all of which negatively impact their academic success. Xiong et al. (2016) suggested that validation is key in transforming uncertainty into confidence and ultimately promoting student success. Among factors identified related to academic success, precollege factors such as

academic readiness and financial resources remain areas missing in most African American and Hispanic students' lives (Bonner, 2010).

Also, many students come from schools without the needed preparation to be college and career ready (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Boyraz et al. (2016) asserted that higher levels of Black students were more academically involved when attending an HBCU. Strayhorn and DeVita (2010) stated that when Black students experience difficulty in college, their academic success becomes compromised without a system of support.

Congress implemented TRIO programs in the 1960s to help low-income students achieve success in higher education (Palmer et al., 2014). Presently, the TRIO includes the following: (a) student support services, (b) educational opportunity centers, (c) veteran upward bound, (d) upward bound math-science, and (e) the Ronald E. McNair post baccalaureate achievement programs. Though funded under the Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the TRIO programs provide access to the social, economic, academic, and cultural components that cause the transition to college to be challenging for first-generation college students (Blake, 1998). Students are given the opportunity to take advantage of the variety of college access and support services offered by TRIO, starting as early as the sixth grade (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

According to Thomas et al. (1998), an essential part of helping minority students gain college access and success has been incorporating college readiness workshops, college academic instruction, counseling, mentorship, tutoring, and financial aid awareness seminars. Studies suggest programs like TRIO and other precollege initiatives play a key role in supporting minority students from low-income families who persist toward achieving college success (Graham, 2011; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

## **Social Strategies That Support Success**

Among African American college male students, creating supportive social bonds continue to be central pathways to persistence and success (Jackson et al., 2013). Experts claim the involvement of Black students in academic clubs and organizations help these students to develop, adapt, and socially integrate as they enter college (Brooms & Goodman, 2019).

Brooms and Goodman (2019) suggested Black male students and their participation in predominantly male programming and campus engagement have links to student leadership, dedication, and success. Moreover, these connections provide African American male students with specific achievement goals and better affect their academic success. Providing environments that promote social involvement and academic success could improve the higher education experience for African American male students (Simmons, 2013).

Students can prosper more by recognizing their social aspects and examining opportunities to create a productive social and intellectual environment (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). For African American male students to adapt to the college environment, they must possess the drive, self-esteem, and determination (Palmer et al., 2015). To help manage the challenges related to the transition into higher education, institutions should consider implementing focus groups or other support mechanisms for Black male college students (Druery & Brooms, 2018).

According to Brooms (2017), upon entering into higher education, one of the biggest concerns for the success of Black male students is their perception and experience of the campus environment. Hall (2017) claimed that students must adjust to the academic and social climate of the institution. Druery and Brooms (2018) proposed that participation in male-centered programs would communicate the experiences of Black male students and offer ways in which Black male

students can be supported as they maneuver through higher education. To gain more students of color in higher education, minority students must be engaged intellectually as well as socially (Hall, 2017). Harper and Kuykendall (2012) discussed common strategies that have been employed, such as student-staff mentor pairing, special organizations, and various social activities to respond to the problem. Likewise, past studies revealed that organizational membership and affiliation are very impactful in the choice for Black male students to persist through college (Harper & Harris, 2006; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015).

### **Family, Faculty, and Peer Support for Success**

#### ***Family Support***

Frequent communication with family may allow the African American male to value and invest more time in the academic journey while engaging in the social environment (Buttaro et al., 2010). Encouragement and motivation from family are significant contributing factors to educational success for African American male students. Furthermore, academic, emotional, and financial support from family promotes success for students (Clark & Brooms, 2018).

#### ***Faculty and Peer Support***

Hall (2017) reported that university staff and faculty, while supportive, must acknowledge that negative behaviors of faculty members exist, and members must be proactive in confronting and reducing such practices. Richardson et al. (2019) acknowledged that Black student outcomes are heavily influenced by the power and presence of Black teachers. However, Louis and Freeman (2018) pointed out that in the American academy, Black faculty members are extremely underrepresented. The findings of Reddick et al. (2011) revealed that students found support for their higher education goals through invested teachers, counselors, community members, and peers. According to Trent et al. (2020), academic achievement, along with the

emotional well-being of minority students, are impacted by social interactions with peers. Brown and Sacco-Bene (2018) stressed the importance of peer group influences because they are one of the greatest influences on the student's academic and personal development.

The key to transforming uncertainty into confidence and ultimately promoting student success is validation (Allen, 2016). Reddick et al. (2011) revealed that peer and parental encouragement, engagement in extracurricular activities, outreach programs, and assistance with financial aid are all factors increasing the chances of at-risk youth attending college.

Mentoring has been a vital resource in developing individuals and promoting achievement (Louis & Freeman, 2018). Mentoring programs are an essential component of any higher educational academic program (Jacobi, 1991; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). Dahlvig (2010) suggested that mentoring programs are a necessity for improving minority success in higher educational settings. Having a mentor can be a life-changing experience for Black male students and professionals (Louis & Freeman, 2018). Likewise, researchers have also suggested that mentoring programs for minorities are even more critical for success when the minorities are male (Saddler, 2010). Harris (2012) concluded that mentoring programs have a direct impact on the success rates in college for male students of color by providing the necessary support services.

Many campuses in higher education have started to implement programs that seek to help Black male students persist toward success (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). These programs are referred to as Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs (Druery & Brooms, 2018). Black Male Initiative programs are designed to help Black male students push toward persistence and increase the retention rate of Black male students in higher education (Clark & Brooms, 2018). One of the sole responsibilities of BMI programs is to cultivate student involvement, social and academic

integration, and provide an environment of support to Black male students on college campuses (Boyd, 2007; Druery & Brooms, 2018). Black Male Initiative programs are supported through campus groups and include program staff, faculty support, and peer mentors (Druery & Brooms, 2018).

Scott (2012) revealed four themes for increasing Black male students' participation in higher education. These include (a) skilled and culturally competent teachers, (b) high standards and academic opportunity, (c) mentorship, and (d) family and community support. These four identified factors lend credence to previous research (Carter, 2005; Scott, 2012) that has been used to show that more support structures should be implemented that will increase the rate of Black male students who not only matriculate through high school, but who also attend higher educational settings. The multiple themes also help to dispel some previous findings that suggest a one-size-fits-all approach would be most appropriate (Brown, 2009).

### **Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

For more than 150 years, the purpose of HBCUs has been to highlight education as well as confront racial disparities in society (Crewe, 2017). HBCUs are institutions established prior to 1964, with a responsibility to serve African Americans (Palmer et al., 2014). Based on Crewe's study (2017), the ending of slavery and the Civil War prompted the need to develop institutions to support African Americans interested in furthering their education. As a result, the establishment of HBCUs was formulated during legal segregation for the purpose of educational and economic empowerment in the lives of African Americans (Palmer et al., 2014). The Freedmen's Bureau was the motivation behind the formation of educational institutions to assist African Americans as they adapted to the free world and the era of reconstruction (Crewe, 2017).

Presently, HBCUs only make up approximately three percent of colleges and universities, and in the United States, there are only 105 HBCUs (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Crewe, 2017; Jackson & Jackson, 2016; Palmer et al., 2014). According to Palmer et al. (2018), HBCUs are commonly known for promoting a supportive atmosphere that contributes to the advancement of Black students. For several generations, HBCUs have provided Black students the opportunity to obtain higher education when they could not be admitted elsewhere (Jett, 2013). Palmer et al. (2014) reported that more than 60% of Black male students are enrolled in HBCUs, and although HBCUs only make up 2.1% of higher education institutions, they graduate large numbers of Black male students. There are six goals for HBCUs (Roebuck & Murty, 1993):

1. To continue the historical and cultural tradition of teaching and research about the Black condition.
2. To serve the Black community in various leadership roles.
3. To supply an economic function in the Black community.
4. To provide Black role models who examine social, political, and economic issues endemic to the Black community.
5. To produce graduates who engage in tackling race-related issues in society.
6. To produce Black scholars who disseminate scholarly research and teaching to the Black community.

Black male students attending HBCUs explained their experience as a warm, welcoming social environment similar to their experience before college (Shorette & Palmer, 2015).

Research has shown that HBCUs are fundamental institutions to higher education (Patterson et al., 2013). Historically Black Colleges and Universities are traditionally known for engaging students that are often underrepresented and giving them the skills needed to graduate as well as

gain access to some of the nation's top graduate programs (Shorette & Palmer, 2015). Although fewer African American students are attending these institutions today than in previous years, HBCUs continue to play an essential role in the educational promotion of Black students (Brown & Sacco-Bene, 2018). HBCUs gain recognition for their success in graduating minority students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Shorette & Palmer, 2015).

In comparison to predominantly White institutions (PWI), HBCUs contribute to a more supportive learning environment for Black male students (Jett, 2013; Palmer et al., 2010). HBCUs are widely known for welcoming and graduating students who are not academically prepared (Palmer et al., 2018). In past studies, Black male students have expressed that in reference to faculty and staff, they feel more welcomed on the campuses of HBCUs (Boyratz et al., 2016; Goings, 2018; Palmer et al., 2014). Boyraz et al. (2016) argued that Black students attending an HBCU would more than likely not experience academic difficulty as they would by attending a PWI. In relation to Black students, it was reported that better overall performance and more personal growth were obtained from attending an HBCU (Brown & Sacco-Bene, 2018). Ultimately, the goals and missions of HBCUs along with their supportive environments aid in the production of successful Black collegians (Jett, 2013). HBCUs have acquired notoriety because of their impactful presence as they continue to foster the success of Black students (Palmer et al., 2018).

### **Chapter Summary**

The beginning of this literature review explained the history of African American male students in education and then expressed the current state of Black male students in education. Following this explanation was a discussion of challenges encountered by Black male students in higher education. Academic and social strategies, in conjunction with faculty, peer, and family

strategies that have proven to be successful in supporting Black male students in higher education were presented.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify experiences that contributed to first-generation Black male students' persisting toward graduation from HBCUs framed within Tinto's retention theory (1993). The findings contribute to the body of research to identify what positive support systems are essential for Black male students to successfully obtain a bachelor's degree. Snowball sampling was used to identify eight first-generation Black male students in good academic standing as a sophomore, junior, or senior and are persisting toward completing a bachelor's degree from an HBCU. The theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto's retention theory was used to frame the college experiences of the Black male students to better understand the support they need to obtain a degree in higher education. The research questions were framed in Tinto's (1993) retention theory principles. Generally, Tinto's theory of retention suggests the following factors are combined in order for a college student to achieve success: academic integration, social integration, faculty interaction, parent support, and peer support.

Chapter 3 includes the methodology and the research design for this study. Chapter 3 starts with restating the purpose statement, addressing the research questions, and discussing the research design. Chapter 3 explains the data collection and analysis used for this study. Lastly, Chapter 3 will conclude by describing the trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the limitations and delimitations of this study.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research was to identify experiences that contribute to first-generation Black male students persisting toward graduation from a four-year HBCU. Snowball sampling was used to identify eight first-generation Black male students in good academic standing as a sophomore, junior, or senior and are persisting toward completing a bachelor's degree from an

HBCU. The theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto's retention theory was used to frame the college experiences of the Black male students to better understand the support they need to obtain a degree in higher education. As the researcher, I created a guided protocol (see Appendix A), which was used as the semistructured interview questions for the participants. The semistructured interview included open-ended questions based on the research questions. The research questions were framed in Tinto's (1993) retention theory principles. Generally, Tinto's theory of retention suggests that four factors are combined for a college student to achieve academic success. These four factors form the following research questions.

**RQ1.** What student academic experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?

**RQ2.** What student social experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?

**RQ3.** What experiences toward persistence were provided by faculty, parents, and peers?

**RQ4.** What challenges were encountered and overcome?

### **Research Design and Method**

This research aimed to identify experiences that Black male students had, which encouraged them to persist toward a bachelor's degree from a four-year HBCU. Creswell (2009) suggested the opportunity to study and comprehend the significance that groups and individuals assigned to social and human issues comes from qualitative research. Orb et al. (2001) asserted that qualitative researchers use their research to question, investigate, and explain people and their natural environments. In fact, Lewis (2016) argued that qualitative research is one of the most common forms of research used to examine and understand the experiences of Black male students in higher education. More specifically, in this study, the qualitative instrumental collective case study method was utilized to conduct in-depth examinations of experiences from the perspectives of Black male students. Stake (2003) affirmed that case studies are not

determined by research methods but defined by the concern in individual cases. The participants' viewpoints were expressed through this case study method to share their personal stories and provide artifacts of those experiences. The stories and artifacts of the individuals were analyzed as data were collected to report and assign meanings to their experiences. By using the qualitative case study methodology, I was able to gain information from the sample population.

Based on Starman (2013), case studies were the first primary types of research in the sector of qualitative methodology. Furthermore, Yin (2003) argued by using a case study, the researcher is able to use their connections to various programs, communities, and relationships of the organization or individual being analyzed. Also, I had a chance to explore the phenomenon through a number of different lenses (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) shared a constructivist view and believed that truth is comparable and is influenced by one's perspective. Yin (2003) proposed a researcher should use a case study when (a) the focal point of the study is to explain "how" and "why" questions, (b) one cannot control the behavior of those active in the study, (c) one wants to cover contextual conditions because they may be applicable to the phenomenon under study, or (d) the limitations are not distinct between the phenomenon and context.

### **Participation**

Participant profiles were generated based on data collected as background information from the Black male participants at the start of each interview. Each participant was given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Table 1 displays the collected background data of each participant and supports the participant criteria was met.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Classification	College Route
Dylan	22	Senior	Traditional
Mason	20	Sophomore	Traditional
Nick	22	Senior	Traditional
Jaxson	23	Senior	Traditional
Tyson	20	Sophomore	Traditional
Karter	21	Junior	Traditional
Deshawn	25	Sophomore	Nontraditional
Ralph	22	Junior	Traditional

The participants for this study were selected using snowball sampling. According to Ghaljaie et al. (2017), this sampling is used when the researcher is presented with challenges in finding participants who meet the criteria. This approach allowed the current participants to recruit others who possessed similarities in compliance with the subject matter. The sample population included eight purposefully selected Black male students currently in good academic standing attending various HBCUs located in Texas. There was an even split in reference to the HBCU institutions; four of the Black male students attended one HBCU in Texas, and the other four Black male students attended another HBCU in Texas. All Black male students were enrolled as full-time students at their respective institutions. None of the participants were married, and none of the participants had kids. Of the eight Black male participants, seven were considered traditional college students, and one was considered a nontraditional college student. The study's participant criteria included being a first-generation college, Black male student between the ages of 18–25, actively enrolled in their second, third, or fourth year of college at an HBCU in Texas. By being currently enrolled and in good academic standing on the college

campus, this demonstrates persistence toward earning a bachelor's degree. After participants were confirmed, I sent out a follow-up email to provide participants with additional information about the study. The email included an informed consent form and demographic questions about their age, enrollment status, and grade point average (GPA). Following the completion of the demographic profile, the participants participated in a semistructured interview.

### **Data Collection**

In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the academic and social experiences of a specific group of Black male students. Lewis (2016) pointed out that a number of studies examining the experiences of Black male students in higher education use interviews as a technique to study. Through these methods, the stories of eight Black male students that were currently enrolled or have graduated from an HBCU were analyzed. These students were also asked to provide secondary sources of data, such as artifacts, websites, and blogs. After interviews were completed, the next steps included organizing documents by participants, transcribing, and condensing the information.

Orb et al. (2001) agreed that qualitative researchers depend on collecting data through interviews, observations, published materials, and audiovisual materials. Interviewing, one of the most common approaches in qualitative research, is used to collect data by allowing participants to express themselves (Jamshed, 2014). In their personal storytelling, the researcher has the opportunity to examine a person's issues that exist underneath the surface (Rooney et al., 2016). In addition to storytelling, taking field notes are customary resources used in qualitative research to help document contextual information (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). By using this method, researchers are able to gain an understanding of peoples' shaped meanings of the past and the present (Rooney et al., 2016).

The main source of data collection for this study was in-depth interviews with participants. In-depth interviews are described as loosely structured, straightforward, personal interviews with each participant (Queirós et al., 2017). See Appendix A for the guided protocol used to conduct the interviews. The guided protocol was created from the research questions, the research literature, and the researcher experience. All interviews with students varied depending on schedule availability and flexibility. Interviews were conducted and recorded using the Google Meet video-conferencing application. Saldana and Omasta (2018) supported the interview process by noting:

When a study's purpose and questions focus primarily on people's experiences, perceptions, feelings, interpretations, values systems, and so on, any data gathering method can help gather those insights, but interviews will most likely be the more direct way of getting them. (p. 180)

According to Jamshed (2014), recording is essential to data collection and transcribing because handwritten notes can be unreliable. I asked all participants for permission to record the interviews for accuracy of field notes, transcribing, and condensing of information. However, I also kept observation notes while recording each interview session. The interviews were scheduled for one hour and did not exceed two hours. After each interview was recorded, the Trint Automated Transcription software helped to transcribe the audio files to text files. The participants were given the opportunity to verify the interview transcripts for reliability to ensure accuracy. I was the only person with access to the composition notebook containing the handwritten files as well as the participant artifacts. These items remained locked in a file cabinet in my home when not in use. Digital files used for research were kept on my personal desktop computer locked with an access code that only I possessed. For confidentiality, the names of

participants were replaced with pseudonyms. After completion of data analysis, all hard copies were shredded, and all digital files were discarded.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Using qualitative methods to analyze data allowed me to gain rich information from my sample population. In addition to themes, the emerging constructs were examined to gauge a deeper understanding of students and their persistence toward obtaining higher education. From these themes, I was able to identify patterns of my participants collectively as a group as well as separate individuals. The constant comparative method (CCM) was first referenced by Glaser and Strauss in 1968. They indicated that this method was multifaceted and could be used in social sciences for several theories. The objective of CCM is to classify data by comparing incidents (Knotten et al., 2017). In this method, the experiences of the participants were compared to identify similarities and differences. Next, similarities and differences were placed in groups. From there, I then began the coding process. For this method, three types of coding were applicable: initial coding, descriptive coding, and in vivo coding. Although this process was repetitive, it was critical because I had to review my choices and recode multiple times. The constant comparative method was used to perform an in-depth examination of experiences from the viewpoints of Black male students. By using this method, I was able to determine the emerging patterns among Black male students attending HBCUs. After the patterns were identified, I was then able to create tables that outlined my findings to support my research questions.

A mixture of interviews, artifacts, and field notes were used for coding. After condensing the information, the next part of the process was to develop a codebook. The codebook allowed me to analyze patterns and categorize the evolving themes. In addition to themes, there were

some constructs that developed and helped me gauge a deeper understanding of students and their desire to persist toward obtaining higher education. Saldana and Omasta (2018) suggested that coding utilizes the participant's own language as a symbol system for qualitative data analysis. The purpose of the process coding method was to identify forms of participant actions, reactions, and interactions, as suggested by the data.

The qualitative instrumental collective case study method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of experiences from the perspectives of students. By using this method, I was able to determine the possible emerging patterns among the Black male students. After the patterns were identified, I was able to create themes that strengthened my findings to support my research questions. Saldana and Omasta (2018) noted that in qualitative research, a code is identified as short words or phrases that are representative of visual or language-based data. The purpose of using the process coding method was to identify forms of participant actions, reactions, and interactions, as suggested by the data. As with all data, analysis and interpretation are required to bring order and understanding (Nixon, 2014). Coding the data helped to identify the similarities and differences among the interviewed participants.

### **Researcher's Role**

According to Orb et al. (2001), a researcher's main role includes listening to the participants and observing them in their natural surroundings. As an adjunct professor at several community colleges, I first became interested in studying the topic of Black male students' success in higher education because I noticed there were always more female students enrolled in my classes. No matter if the class was face-to-face or online, I always ended up with a larger female population. After seeing this consistently, I initially wanted to know where all of the men were, but more specifically, where the minority men were. I knew there was an obvious

disconnect, and I wanted to become a change agent. It was at that point I decided to apply to teach at the high school level. During my six years of teaching in postsecondary education, I have a better understanding of why students, more specifically, minority male students, do not include college in their future plans. Once I enrolled in this doctoral program, I wanted that to be my focus of study. I wanted to research why Black male students choose not to attend, complete, or earn a four-year college degree. In order for me to fully understand the “why not,” I wanted to gain insight into the “why” for those who chose college as their choice.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is used to bring the reader to believe that a body of research is honest and reliable in its reported findings. In the field of qualitative research, there is a heightened assumption of bias due to the methods and hypothesis of the researcher. To ensure trustworthiness as a researcher, I evoked a balanced research relationship with all participants. From the balanced relationship, the expectation was to foster trust, disclosure, and awareness. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argued that to establish credibility, the process of member checking was the most important technique. Member checking is a technique applied in qualitative research to achieve participant validation. Member checking was implemented among the study participants to explore the credibility of results. After the individual interviews were transcribed, they received a copy of the transcription. This approach was used to verify the captured information was accurate, and the participants were also given a chance to make any revisions if needed. Following member checking, peer checking was conducted. Peer checking provided the opportunity to gain valuable feedback from an impartial colleague to strengthen trustworthiness. Triangulation was employed in this study to reinforce validity and remove biases. Prior studies suggest the primary purpose of triangulation is to eliminate possible bias

resulting from using only one methodology. Hence, triangulation was the use of two or more precise approaches to show a more detailed representation of my study findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics is a crucial point in research because the ultimate goal is to help make a generalization of others while maintaining the study participants' protection. Orb et al. (2001) defined ethics as choosing to do the right thing and preventing harm. By applying ethical principles to research, harm can be avoided. To prevent possible ethical conflicts, I received approval from the institutional review board (IRB; see Appendix B) prior to gathering any data in order to confirm the data collection, data analysis, and reporting. An informed consent was given to all participants to satisfy the requirements of the IRB. Participants were issued a written copy as well as the opportunity to discuss it verbally so every aspect was clearly understood.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are defined as points of research that may occur and are sometimes beyond a researcher's control; however, without these pieces, the study becomes insignificant (Simon, 2011). It was assumed that participants would freely share substantial information in reference to their lived experiences as Black male students attending an HBCU. As a researcher, I did not have control over the accuracy of the participants' responses. The expectations of student participation included being genuine and honest in all interview responses. However, readers are informed of the participants' potential lack of honesty. It was also assumed the study findings would yield beneficial information to help the retention and completion of Black male students that pursue higher education. Lastly, it was presumed all participants were familiar with this study's significance and importance.

## **Limitations**

A limitation is defined as a matter or occurrence that emerges within a study that is beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). This study contained several limitations. Unfortunately, there was no way to ensure participants did not give a false account of their lived experiences at HBCUs. Also, the responses of these participants may or may not be similar to other Black male students in higher education. Furthermore, with a small sample population, generalization could be difficult. With the research questions provided, some participants may feel forced into a particular response. By the same token, the interviews are time intensive because the participants have the opportunity to speak freely. This study was based on self-reported data and could be considered as a possible limitation. The students volunteered to participate in the study, and their responses may not be generalized to all Black male students in higher education. In closing, more limitations may be revealed upon completion of this study.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations are explained to be qualities that restrict the scope and determine the boundaries of a study (Simon, 2011). This study used data from a limited number of HBCUs, which limits the possibility of the findings. Secondly, the data collected in this study were taken from a snowball sample student population. The study's participant criteria required students to be a first-generation college, Black male student between the ages of 18 and 25, actively enrolled in their second, third, or fourth year of college at an HBCU in Texas. The participants were also currently enrolled and in good academic standing on the college campus, and these criteria demonstrated persistence toward earning a bachelor's degree (see Appendix C).

## **Chapter Summary**

In Chapter 3, the description of the methodology was provided, along with an explanation of the study's purpose, research design, setting, participant selection process, data collection, data analysis, and coding of data.

Chapter 4 will report the findings of this study. Chapter 4 will identify themes that emerged during the data collection. This information will be shown by using text and figures to demonstrate the results of data analysis. Chapter 5 will review the study, identify conclusions, provide implications for practice, and suggest future studies.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify experiences that contribute to first-generation Black male students' persisting toward graduation from Historically Black Colleges and Universities framed within Tinto's retention theory (1993). Chapter 4 provides the results of this study, including underlying themes expressed by analyzing meaningful testimonies from the in-depth interviews. Themes are reported by the research questions.

### **Research Question 1: Experiences Toward Persistence That Supported Students**

#### **Academically**

In approaching research question 1, I examined the experiences that supported Black male students academically toward persistence on the HBCU campus. The recurring theme from all eight participants was student services, specifically tutoring, and academic advising. All Black male participants mentioned the significance of these student services on their respective HBCU campuses. These services were visible and well-known by all Black male students in this study.

#### ***Student Service Tutoring***

Tutoring was one of the academic resources used frequently by half of the Black male participants. Tutoring was especially crucial for these male students during their freshman year. Initially, all of the Black male students assumed that freshmen year in college would be easily doable. However, students found out they would need additional help to maintain their grade point averages. They had no problems going to the student service offices and getting tutors to ensure they were successful in their courses. Ralph and Mason both stated they thought college would be a "breeze" just like high school and they would be able to "live life." They realized

they were not fully prepared from their freshman experience, but they were thankful for the academic support they received from the tutors provided by student services. Mason voiced:

Like me, it took me a little minute to actually accept tutoring, but tutoring actually helps, and that will probably be one of my advantages, tutoring really helps, tutoring helped clear up a lot of issues that I couldn't get on my own or that my teacher actually couldn't even clear up with me, you know, tutoring actually is a big part or that's a big role in academics. When I actually figured that out and I actually started using those tutors and figuring out they was actually helping me on stuff that I couldn't figure out or that my teacher couldn't figure out with me, that was very resourceful.

Tyson stated:

When you walk into the library, they have the writing center, they have a math tutorial center. And then we have other centers like where they have computers if you don't have computers. For people that don't have computers and printers.

Likewise, Deshawn described the same experience and expressed the convenience of the library on his HBCU campus (see Figure 1):

I would say my school does provide the necessary resources with any one of their students to be successful. That's the career center. That's tutors throughout the campus. So, three different locations you could find the new libraries, five floors full of all kinds of resources and computer labs.

**Figure 1***Campus Library Accessibility*

Ralph knew he was in need of help and went out to find it. Ralph stated, “I quickly had to look for outside help other than myself, and it was readily available because whenever you walk around campus, you always see these signs about the student services center and online tutoring.” Ralph explained the support he received from the tutoring student services center by attending sessions he saw on the flyer placed around campus (see Figure 2). He stated:

They made sure it was available if needed. And they always went out of the way to remind you that if you need help, it’s here. They have events or you’ll have these dudes in the library from the tutoring center and they’ll just literally walk around and hand you cards saying, we offer tutoring 24/7 online. So, if you need help, we’re here. And, you know, that was very helpful. Just, them putting it out there. So, even if you didn’t need it right now, you know, two months from now, you’d be like, oh, yeah, here’s the card. I can just go get tutoring.

Figure 2

*Academic Flyer*


Can't figure out a math problem?

Stuck on a concept in economics?

Need help editing a paper?

Ready to toss your calculator across the room?

DON'T WORRY - WE HAVE YOU COVERED!  
SUPPORT AVAILABLE TO YOU 24/7

## ACADEMIC SUPPORT & TUTORING

Option 1 -  
Face-To-Face Zoom  
Tutoring & Writing Help

If you want to connect with one of our University Tutoring Center (UTC) tutors in a live and interactive format, you can do so through the Zoom platform. Please follow the link: [redacted]

Next, enter one of the following meeting ID numbers.

General Tutoring: [redacted]  
Writing Center: [redacted]

Click join and you will be connected and a UTC staff member or a Writing Center staff member will greet you and get you going.

UTC hours are:  
Monday - Thursday 11:00 am - 10:00 pm  
Friday 9:00 am - 5:00 pm

Writing Center hours are:  
Monday - Friday 9:00 am - 7:00 pm

Option 2 -  
Online Tutoring

All registered [redacted] students have access to free online tutoring. To access the service, please log-on to the student portal [redacted]

[redacted] Click on the Tutoring button and follow the link. It's that simple.

Online tutoring is available 24/7, all year around.

*Student Service Academic Advising*

Like the tutoring experience, all Black male participants referred to the academic advising available on their HBCU campus. They found this resource reassuring and a means of academic reinforcement to stay focused and keep their grades up. Karter stated:

They have programs you can sign up for if you need tutoring. They are just open to helping you, and they are not stingy with the help; if you need help, they'll let you know when and where to be.

He furthered explained:

Their office is really right by the gym. So, it's just like they're really good with interacting with us. But like it really goes back to what kind of kid you are and how you handle your business; if you don't handle your business and somebody has to stay on top of you, then the advisor is always in your face. But if you take care of your business and stuff like that, then it's really probably like a once a week visit.

Similarly, Tyson expressed, "I would say my academic advisor, she is always there. If I need her for help for something, she's doing it as a positive influence for me. 'You know you got this. Keep going, it is gonna be fine.'"

Mason also spoke highly of his academic advisor. He said:

Well, when it comes to that, my academic resources were number one. Mines came from my advisor. So, any time, any time my grades slipped even a little bit. You know she was calling me or emailing me, you know, you need to pick this up or you need to pick this up or if you are having trouble in the class. You know, you should go to tutoring.

## **Research Question 2: Experiences Toward Persistence Which Supported Students to Integrate Socially**

When looking at research question 2, I explored the experiences that helped the Black male students integrate socially at their HBCU. One main theme emerged from this question: student life organizations, specifically academic extracurricular organizations and nonacademic

extracurricular organizations, helped Black male students persist toward graduation at their HBCU.

***Student Life: Academic Extracurricular Organizations***

Seven of the eight participants were involved in at least one or more than one educational organization on their HBCU campus. The academic extracurricular organizations consisted of student groups that promote student academic achievement. These organizations allowed the students to network and build relationships with students who looked like them and had the same academic goals, including obtaining a four-year degree and being a role model to others.

Deshawn explained the significance of being a member of the debate team:

I would say one I'm on the debate team at [my school]. And so being around those student intellectuals in that capacity definitely helps motivate you, especially with me being a little older and them being younger than me. It showed you maybe where I'm lacking, and it pushed me to dive hard into my studies so that I can catch up. So that definitely plays into it.

Tyson reflected on his experiences with academic organizations:

Yes, I'm currently in two organizations, CAB, which is the Campus Ambassador Board. When they plan like events and stuff for the campus and stuff like that. And my major club, which is Criminal Justice Club. And we do stuff like with the police department and stuff with the fire department and like CPR classes. Community service events and you can put it on your resume, and it looks good on a resume. With the CAB organization, I know stuff that a lot of people on campus don't know because the organization plans it and then they don't tell everybody. They just tell us in the meetings and then it'll be like a big surprise to other people, and I already know stuff like that.

Ralph discussed his academic organization and the things he felt were most helpful:

I'm also in an organization, the Commuter Student Association, and we held a little study session. So, it was like we just got a bunch of TAs and we also had other students that needed help. And I went there, and I was a tutor, and I was tutored that night. And that was a successful event.

Jaxson spoke highly of his time on the debate team. He said:

I was three-time international speech and debate champion, two-time HBCU speech and debate champion. To me, the debate team was the foundation of education that was outside of our own understanding of our majors and minors, learning things that didn't actually involve our majors.

Nick, also a debate team member, shared his experience by saying:

I would say the debate team is my main organization. But I have participated in other clubs. I'm currently in the political science school of Pre-Law Society. I try to stay within proximity of what I see myself being or what my interests are. I actually see myself one day being a lawyer.

### ***Student Life: Nonacademic Extracurricular Organizations***

Seven of the eight participants were also involved in at least one extracurricular organization on their HBCU campus. The nonacademic extracurricular organizations consist of student groups that promote social engagement, positive school culture, and emotional support. These organizations helped the students to come out of their comfort zone and meet new individuals outside of campus-related events. Tyson thought back to his freshman year and began to remember where it all started:

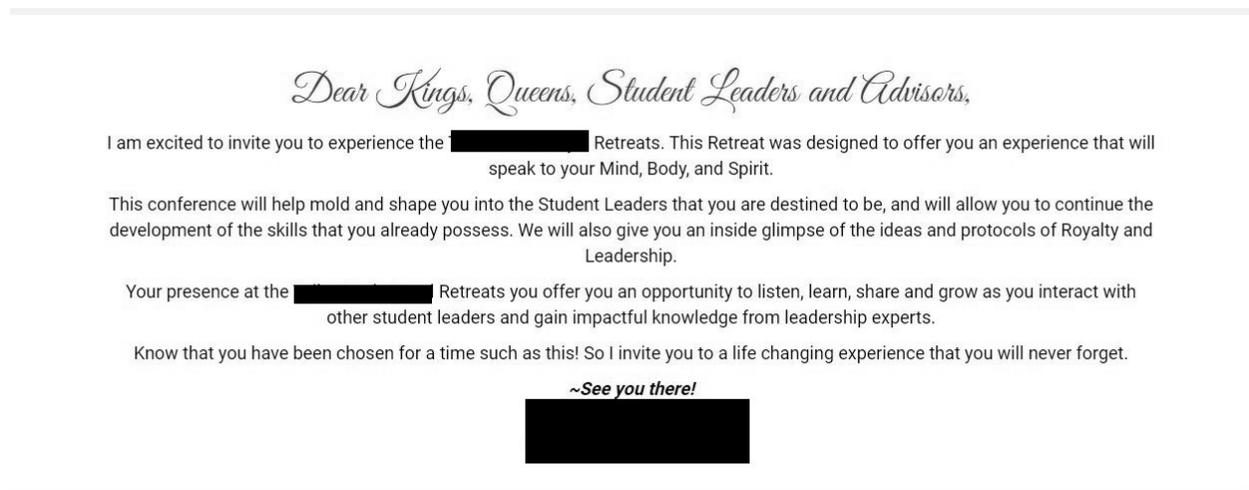
So, my freshman year, they had this program, PALS, where they get, like older classmen to like be mentors over the freshmen. So that way they [are] just not strangers on the campus and show them around campus like a big brother, big sister relationship with the freshman. And that really helped because I got close with a lot of the PALS. And I'm still close with them today and they help me. I would text them when I need to know something or like, if I didn't know where something was.

Jaxon was able to shed light on the experience of being a member of the royal court as Mr. Maroon and highlighted his experience from attending the HBCU royal retreat (see Figure 3). He stated:

Being on the royal court, it gave me the opportunity to be a leader. But in royal court, it gave me the opportunity to actually stand out and serve my school. There is this thing called, I think, the royal court retreat, it's before school starts. And so they had kings and queens from all over the United States from different HBCUs come together. And we come together, and they teach us different types of etiquette and how to go out and how to wear your crown, how to be queen, be a king, how to talk, how to speak, and how to do a lot of things. It was amazing because just seeing, like, not only am I a king at my school, but I see other kids from their schools, and they're part of these different organizations. They were a part of SGA or part of a Greek organization. A lot of similarities. A lot of things we can relate to. And we all came together, and it was like a big like a big bang combustion, you know what I'm saying. And also, whatever they are and we speak to them, they'll tell us things about their school, and we tell them things about our school. And we'll take from each other the advice to take back for our schools.

### Figure 3

#### *HBCU Retreat Invitation*



Dylan expressed the excitement of the activities that became rituals for his HBCU institution as well as translated what he had seen on TV shows compared to the reality of attending and HBCU. He commented:

But I think the thing that really kept me engaged within school was just having the regular social events at the school; that being said, like I came from a predominantly White high school from my former state to know that there's a moment in campus where on Wednesday where we're just heading the class between two other ones, there's a deejay scene out there just playing music. And the Greek life will come out. They would stroll and just kind of do what we've seen on TV. I think it's living in color. If I'm not mistaken, where this is like that whole little mindset of that, you think, well, this is what a Black school is, but to kind of walk on campus and see, like some of the stuff that they reference is actually really true to the heart of a predominately HBCU, predominantly Black university.

### **Research Question 3: Experiences Toward Persistence Supported by Faculty, Parents, and Peers**

When examining research question 3, I analyzed the experiences that were provided by faculty members, parents, and peers to help Black male students persist toward obtaining higher education at an HBCU. Findings included the campus environment and mentorship and connections.

#### ***Campus Environment***

More than anything, all Black male students spoke highly of the HBCU campus environment. All participants offered nothing but positivity when speaking on behalf of their campus culture. Six of the eight participants went so far as to describe attending an HBCU as a “culture shock” because they had not ever been exposed to seeing so many Black people in one setting with the same goal of academic success. Deshawn was one of the participants who felt a sense of culture shock. Deshawn explained:

So, it was a bit of a cultural shock. I guess so to speak with I started going to [my school]. Just to see the different energy that they had there is different from what I’m used to. Where I’m from is a little more strict, a little more stern, but here is more free reign, the students here can speak freely.

Nick gave a grand introduction and explained how he felt strongly for his HBCU.

I attend the [college name removed], the heart and soul of [an urban Texas town]. I tell people [my school] was the best thing that happened to me personally. Now with everything in life pros and cons, ups and downs. [My school] is not all peaches and cream. But as far as my goals and aspirations, being at [my school], has honestly put me

years ahead of my competition and put me years ahead of where I would have been had I attended somewhere else. Coming from high school, I planned on attending a PWI.

In reflecting on his overall HBCU experience, Dylan explained the admiration he has for his institution:

I'm currently attending [college name removed]. And my experience has been lovely. I've had a good opportunity to go to an HBCU for a change. The culture of an HBCU changed my perspective because where I grew up was a very mixed culture. So being around people [with] like-mindedness and of my same racial, ethnic background was one of the things that I had an opportunity to experience. And like what I mentioned before, the high school transition experience from where I came from my original state of Virginia to Houston was different. I actually went to a predominantly White high school. And me being more of a minority class, I think the African American population there was only like 15, 20%. And being a kind of majority-minority there to coming to a state and a region where a university is predominantly one ethnic focus, it wasn't different. It was kind of not rough in the beginning, but it was kind of interesting to begin to kind of meet with African American people with the same thinking, the same mindset as me as on campus. So, it was a very interesting experience, but I really have enjoyed it and slowly started to warm up and build what is kind of called the HBCU culture.

Jaxon reflected on the culture that he experienced as a student at an HBCU.

Being around Black excellence in general and also not just that, just the feeling of having family around you, people that you don't normally call your blood or anything like that. But these people really go to bat because at the end of the day, we are all we have. And I believe that everybody at an HBCU understands that once they get there and being at an

HBCU, that's the whole point of us being there in the first place. The sense of family, sense of brotherhood, sense of sisterhood. I can't speak for other HBCUs, but being in Third Ward or being in the middle of the city played a big role in the success of me.

### ***Mentorship and Connections***

All Black male participants unanimously echoed each other's sentiments of the endless connections made with faculty and peers on their HBCU campus. They also mentioned having both male and female mentors throughout their time in college. Through their collegiate experience, they have made lifelong friendships and hold one another accountable to ensure that all academic goals are achieved. Ralph mentioned:

So, I'm on the soccer team, and there's this dude. He actually is like I guess he's sort of a mentor for me. And he just so happened to also be a math tutor. So, whenever I expressed to him that, you know, classes were getting hard, he was like, "Oh, I can help you out. You know, this is what I do." And he was readily available. And it was very, very monumental because I'm pretty sure without him, you know, I would be real sluggish right now.

The majority of the Black male participants had similar viewpoints. Tyson echoed these sentiments by stating:

A lot of my professors were like, very motivating and they wouldn't, like, quit on you. Like, other schools would but like here at [my school], we're a community and we're one, we feed off each other. So, they would motivate you.

As Deshawn reflected over the connections made with faculty members, he stated:

I will say more than the open-door policy from my professors. That's been the best source personally. Sitting down there with an English major professor or English

professor and actually having her go through word by word an essay that's due. You know not a lot of professors will do that for you? Especially when it's due that day, they're not going to take the time to tell you it's too late. You know, it's too late. But having someone there with you to actually help you out and explain to you, your error and show you how to do it correctly, that I really appreciate, I appreciate that a lot.

Dylan also made lasting connections with staff members on his HBCU campus.

It was my freshman year. As many freshmen understand that you have to live in a specific dorm. Just sitted and fitted for freshmen. In there, I had a housing manager and his name was Mr. Hawkins. Mr. Hawkins was one of the hardest people I've ever met in my life. He was very strict about stuff, very keen on rules. But there we realized he did that to bring the best out of Black students that he was around. And ever since then, after moving out of my freshman dorm into a different housing unit. He remains a center person of communication and resources.

Nick, a debate team member, also shared a similar encounter:

The people I met on the [my school] debate team, though they were not in administration, or administrative positions of advisory, they became mentors and advisors. And I still tell people to this day going to law school, which is my goal right now, is going to be made possible because of the people I've met on the [my school] debate team.

#### **Research Question 4: Campus Challenges and Barriers**

When examining research question 4, I explored the challenges that were encountered by Black male students as they persisted toward obtaining a degree from an HBCU. Findings were high school transition and the ability to navigate the system.

### ***High School Transition***

Six of the Black male participants openly admitted to having difficulty making the personal and academic transition from high school to college. For some more than others, the academic transition was the hardest. They were forced to be responsible and accountable for their academic and personal affairs. After entering college, the participants accepted they were not as mature as they initially thought they were. Having to make decisions about class scheduling, time management, and overall well-being quickly became overwhelming for many participants.

Tyson openly expressed the issues he encountered with the transition from high school to college. He stated:

Well, for starters, the transition from high school to college was different because I am not so far away from home, but I am on my own, really. I mean the professors are not always on you like the teachers were in high school. And then walking everywhere to class, like you got 10 minutes, say you get out of class at 11 a.m., and then your next class starts at 11:10 a.m., you got to walk from point A to point B in a certain amount of time.

### ***Ability to Navigate the System***

Another recurring theme was the college students' ability to navigate the system due to their lack of knowledge and successfully getting things done on a college campus. Some participants mentioned having issues with obtaining and submitting their academic paperwork to the admissions office. Others were frustrated by having to walk far to get to the various campus buildings in inclement weather conditions. Ralph mentioned a similar experience with the lack of empathy shown about having to walk around the campus for various classes. Ralph said, "So

about the outside thing, walking in the cold was the worst or having to get used to walking in any weather and the professors not caring about what's going on outside the classroom.” Another barrier for Ralph was not being able to engage fully with some professors.

A lot of these STEM professors come from other countries, and their accents are very, very, very, strong. I personally have an accent, and I always thought it would be something slight. But these professors have very, very thick accents. It is very hard to understand what they're saying, especially since sometimes you know they are speaking fast and can only assume you know what they are talking about. All that stuff together is just pretty hard to keep track of what's going on in class.

Deshawn made it known that understanding the school system itself was the most difficult part of his experience. He stated:

The school system was probably one of the biggest challenges. But I kind of felt on my own. I was just figuring out everything, where is this at? Who do I need to talk to for this? I got my transcripts in and they weren't correct. They gave me F's where I had A's. So, I'm trying to get that fixed. It was a rough patch. It was almost discouraging. It was my first semester at [school name], and it was disappointing because it was an HBCU. I felt disappointed in what I was experiencing, which kind of made me mad because I held them to a higher standard. I feel like I wouldn't have gotten that at [school name]. I would have gotten treated a lot differently, and they would have been more clear. But that was definitely the hardest part. I was getting all my ducks in a row with the school and how they run and how they operate was the hardest thing I had to encounter.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the findings revealed from the interviews of eight Black male students currently persisting toward completion of higher education at an HBCU. In this qualitative instrumental collective case study, I used a guided protocol to explore Black male students' lived experiences to obtain a degree in higher education. Examining these participants' lived experiences resulted in descriptions of how student services, student life organizations, campus support, and campus challenges contributed to their persistence toward higher education at an HBCU. Chapter 5 summarizes the study, presents conclusions, implications for practice, and makes recommendations for future research studies.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

This qualitative instrumental collective case study explored the lived experiences of first-generation Black male college students that contributed to their persistence toward graduation from HBCUs framed within Tinto's retention theory (1993). The theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto's retention theory was used to understand better Black male college students' lived experiences and the support they need to obtain a degree in higher education. This chapter highlights the explanation of findings and recommendations for further research. The significance of themes and how they connect to the research questions are discussed, and suggestions for implementing support mechanisms at institutions of higher education to encourage retention and completion of Black male college students. This chapter ends with a reflection and final remarks.

### **Summary of the Study**

As part of qualitative data collection, in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded to explore the academic and social experiences of eight Black male college students. The data collected for this study were obtained from eight Black male students currently persisting toward college graduation at an HBCU that aligned with the predetermined participant criteria. To support their claims, several of the Black male participants shared artifacts such as academic flyers and event invitations to shed light on their academic experience.

### ***Brief Overview of the Problem***

Harper (2012) argued that Black male students have the worst college attrition rate compared to other college students. Goings (2017) argued that as universities search for ways to increase student retention and graduation rates of Black male students pursuing higher education, traditional and nontraditional Black male students need to be included in the conversation. Jett

(2013) indicated that Black male students are successful on the campuses of some Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Their success is attributed to making intentional support systems a priority in improving academic success. Robertson and Mason (2008) reported that Black male students express the importance of “faculty involvement, financial assistance, classroom environment, academic and personal support, extracurricular activities and the ability” as they matriculate through college (p. 68). However, the disparity of Black male students will persist if initiatives to help encourage leadership and build personal identity are not a priority (Baker & Avery, 2012).

### ***Purpose Statement and Research Questions***

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify experiences that contributed to first-generation Black male students’ persisting toward graduation from HBCUs framed within Tinto’s retention theory (1993). The findings contributed to the body of research to identify what positive support systems were essential for first-generation Black male students to successfully persist toward completing a bachelor’s degree. Snowball sampling was used to identify approximately eight first-generation Black male students who held good academic standing as a sophomore, junior, or senior and were persisting toward completing a bachelor’s degree from an HBCU. The theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto’s retention theory was used to frame the lived college experiences of the Black male students to better understand the support needed to work toward obtaining a degree in higher education. The research questions were:

- RQ1.** What student academic experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?
- RQ2.** What student social experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?
- RQ3.** What experiences toward persistence were provided by faculty, parents, and peers?
- RQ4.** What challenges were encountered and overcome?

### ***Review of the Study Design***

Lewis (2016) argued that qualitative research is one of the most common forms of research used to examine and understand the experiences of Black male students in higher education. In this study, the qualitative instrumental collective case study method was utilized to conduct in-depth examinations of experiences from the perspectives of Black male students. The instrumental case study provides insight into an issue or helps refine a theory. It also plays a supportive role by facilitating our understanding of some of the experiences of Black male students in higher education. The purpose of using the qualitative instrumental collective case study is to allow the researcher the opportunity to explore within each and every setting. This particular case study also examined multiple cases to understand the similarities and differences among cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The data examined were collected from eight Black male students currently attending HBCUs in Texas. The study's participant criteria included being a first-generation college, Black male student between the age of 18 and 25, actively enrolled in their second, third, or fourth year of college at an HBCU in Texas. After each interview was recorded, the Trint Automated Transcription software was used to transcribe the audio files to text files. From the audio files, themes emerged and constructs were developed, and I was able to gain a deeper understanding of Black male students and their persistence toward obtaining higher education. Based on these themes, I was able to identify patterns of my participants as a group as well as separate individuals. All participants were currently living and attending school in Texas, and they were also enrolled and in academic good-standing with their higher education institution.

### *Summary of the Major Findings*

The findings of this study are summarized by the responses to the following research questions.

**Research Question 1.** Research question one explored the student academic experiences that contributed toward persistence at the HBCU. The findings were:

- Students' lived experiences with access to student services tutoring.
- Students' lived experiences with access to student services academic advisors.

**Research Question 2.** Research question two discussed the student social experiences that contributed toward persistence at the HBCU. The findings were:

- Students' access and lived experiences to academic extracurricular organizations.
- Students' access and lived experiences to nonacademic extracurricular organizations.

**Research Question 3.** Research question three discussed the experiences provided by faculty, parents, and peers that contributed toward persistence at the HBCU.

- Campus environment.
- Students' lived experiences with mentorship and connections available on campus.

**Research Question 4.** Research question four discussed the challenges that were encountered by Black male students persisting toward college completion at the HBCU.

- Lack of preparation in high school to support the transition to college.
- Ability to navigate the system of protocols and procedures on campus.

### **Interpretation of the Findings and Discussion**

A comprehensive conclusion of the findings suggested that academic and social support systems are critical for the success of the Black male college student at HBCUs. These systems included student services, academic, and nonacademic extracurricular organizations, campus

environment, mentorship and connections, high school transition, and the ability to navigate the college school system. Turner and Grauerholz (2016) acknowledged that throughout history, Black male students have not been well supported, and more steps need to be adopted to promote the success of African American male students. Findings of this study suggest the conclusion that a variety of academic and social supports available at HBCUs support Black male students when pursuing a college degree. This is consistent with Palmer et al. (2018), who believed that HBCUs are commonly known for promoting a supportive atmosphere that contributes to the advancement of Black students. Likewise, Hall (2017) claimed students must adjust to the institution's academic and social climate.

### ***Research Question 1***

Research question 1 examined the academic experiences that contributed to the persistence toward college graduation. Based on the findings, academic support is critical to Black male students while they are on their collegiate journey. Through their lived experiences, they shared the importance of tutoring and academic advising. All eight Black male participants agreed the accessibility to student services, more specifically tutoring and academic advising, were resources critical to their persistence toward graduation from an HBCU. Some participants explained how the visibility of these services alone made them feel academically supported. For example, one participant stated, "I quickly had to look for help outside myself, and it was readily available because whenever you walk around campus, you always see signs about the student service center and online tutoring." All participants expressed various situations in which they were able to find help when help was needed. In fact, the participants placed great emphasis on the convenience of the support offered by student services on their HBCU campus. The participants pointed out multiple times the academic resources on their campuses were readily

available. Thus, a suggested conclusion is the importance of access to academic supports to college persistence. Boyraz et al.'s research (2016) supported Black students were academically involved when attending an HBCU. These findings also support the notion the rate of success for Black male students could depend on the type of higher education institution (Palmer et al., 2014).

### ***Research Question 2***

Research question 2 examined the social experiences that contributed to the persistence toward college graduation. Based on these findings, a suggested conclusion is that belonging to academic and nonacademic extracurricular organizations encouraged Black male students to persist toward college completion. All participants were members of at least one extracurricular organization. Each participant expressed that access to campus organizations was made available during their freshman year of college. The majority of the campus organizations did not require the participants to meet any specific membership criteria. However, there were a few that did. For example, the campus fraternity organizations and the campus king and queen royal court had membership criteria. As members of these organizations, the participants were connected to students from similar backgrounds and ethnicity. They were able to motivate each other and serve as accountability partners. These findings supported the involvement of Black students in academic clubs and organizations help them develop, adapt, and integrate socially as they enter college (Brooms & Goodman, 2019). Through their interviews, the participants expressed that belonging to these organizations helped them remain committed to not only the institution but also to achieving academic success. Likewise, past studies also revealed organizational membership and affiliation are very impactful in the choice for Black male students to persist through college (Harper & Harris, 2006; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015).

### ***Research Question 3***

Research question 3 examined the support provided by faculty, parents, and peers that contributed toward the persistence to college graduation. Based on these findings, faculty and peers played a major role in Black male students persisting toward college graduation. The results of data collected indicated it was not only the campus faculty, it was also other students attending the institution that the students felt supported in their retention. Their depiction supports the claim that having a mentor can be a life-changing experience for Black male students and professionals (Louis & Freeman, 2018). The most commonly used statement reported by the participants was their relationship with the staff members on their campus. The participants often called the staff member by name and expressed how the staff member left a lasting impression. They also mentioned various reasons why the staff member was such a significant factor in their success as a college student. In addition, other studies revealed that in reference to faculty and staff, Black male students felt more welcomed on the campuses of HBCUs (Boyratz et al., 2016; Goings, 2018; Palmer et al., 2014). Thus, the findings support the conclusion that persistence is supported by positive relationships with others at HBCUs.

### ***Research Question 4***

Research question 4 examined the challenges encountered by Black male students as they persisted toward college graduation. Based on the findings, most Black male students had a hard time transitioning from high school to college. A few of the participants initially believed that college would be similar to high school. However, they quickly learned there was a distinct difference between the two. The participants were not accustomed to making their class schedule or walking around a large campus to get to class. The participants also discussed the difficulty of navigating social and academic affairs on their college campuses. For instance, several of the

participants encountered misunderstandings when submitting paperwork to the admissions office and confusion about their academic transcripts. Past research shows the TRIO programs created from the Higher Education Act of 1965 are expected to support first-generation college students and rectify issues they encounter as they transition from high school to college (Blake, 1998). To help Black male students become acclimated into collegiate life, they need more programs and initiatives to help Black male students navigate areas of uncertainty. Research shows that programs like TRIO and other precollege initiatives play a vital role in supporting minority students from low-income families who persist toward achieving college success (Graham, 2011; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

### **Implications for Practice**

Implications for practice are based on the findings. Considering the findings that suggest accessibility to student services is essential and necessary for Black male students to achieve college completion, higher education institutions need to increase awareness. Community colleges, universities, and national, regional, and state organizations could use this study's findings to increase the knowledge of their leaders on how to retain Black male students in higher education. By providing introductory courses or sessions before the first semester at the higher education institutions, Black male students would be informed of the support programs available to them. In addition, higher education institutions should provide training to university personnel regarding peer tutoring, mentoring, and other support services available to ensure that staff members promote and encourage student awareness. Since many Black male students are first-generation students (students whose parents did not graduate from college), they often do not have appropriate knowledge about the process of reaching out for help on a college campus (Coleman Tucker, 2014).

This study found academic and nonacademic organizations were held in high regard from Black male students' perspectives persisting toward college graduation. Jackson et al. (2013) suggested that male students create supportive social bonds to continue central pathways to persistence and success among African American college male students. Interacting with other students that related to their upbringing, and in many ways, mirrored their lifestyle, aspirations, and academic dreams provided stimulation. Brown and Sacco-Bene (2018) noted the importance of peer group influences because they are one of the biggest influences on the student's academic and personal development. Black male students are motivated by seeing firsthand examples of other students staying true to themselves and their commitment to their institution. Thus, an implication for practice is that colleges provide a variety of opportunities and access to social activities on campus for students.

To assist Black male students as they persist toward college degree attainment, a welcoming campus environment and establishing mentorships and connections play a significant role in completion. Past research has revealed that students found support for their higher education goals through invested teachers, counselors, community members, and peers (Reddick et al., 2011). Thus, college campus leaders should structure the campus environment to promote Black male students' success with a variety of welcoming activities. According to Harper and Kuykendall (2012), common strategies such as student-staff mentor pairing, unique organizations, and various social activities would offer support for Black male students to be successful.

The challenges and barriers that deter Black male students from attending and completing college are reduced by increasing Black male high school students' educational aspirations. Knowledge of the college admissions process and access to resources for parents and students

should be the goal for high school counselors and teachers. Too often, many high school parents are not as involved in the college decision process. Therefore, first-generation college students maneuver through the collegiate experience with no prior knowledge of higher education (Huynh, 2019; McCallen & Johnson, 2019).

Understanding the collegiate experience is critical to a student's success in college. Furthermore, students may not realize the valuable investment a college education will provide over their lifetime. This suggests that institutions of higher learning should create opportunities for Black male students, such as summer bridge programs and other Black Male Initiatives to promote academic achievement. Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019) emphasized that implementing summer bridge programs on college campuses is one approach to help students develop the required competencies needed to succeed in higher education. If students were given in-depth knowledge regarding the benefits of gaining a college prior to entrance into higher education, Black male students' educational goals might increase at a higher rate.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Ultimately, HBCUs' goals, mission, and supportive climate promote the production of successful Black collegians (Jett, 2013). This study is an addition to the growing research regarding the postsecondary success of Black male students. More proactive strategies are needed in higher education to ensure outreach is available to foster supportive services and programs for Black male students as they persist through college. Further research recommendations could include:

- Explore the long-term impact programs and services provided by the institution have on the success and academic advancement of Black male students in higher education.
- Explore the Black male students' perception of the challenges in higher education

through the experiences of more participants from other demographic regions.

- Explore initiatives that are offered to Black male students while in high school that will highlight the academic best practices for being successful in overcoming challenges and persisting toward a college degree.

### **Reflections and Closing**

This study examined the lived experiences of Black male students that contributed toward persistence while attending an HBCU. Through the virtual interviews of the Black male participants, I was encouraged by their determination and commitment to the field of academia. From their conversations, I witnessed maturity and heard their drive to succeed at all costs despite their current circumstances and situations. The Black male participants were studious, outgoing, and excited about sharing their stories in order for the Black male voice to be heard. All of the participants recognized the study's importance and desired to be the change agent for future generations. As a result of this experience, I have a deeper understanding of the worth of support systems and how crucial they are for the collegiate academic success of the Black college male population. In my current role as an educator, I feel hopeful and capable of impressing upon them the importance of utilizing the available support systems and resources that are available on many college campuses. My study on Black male students is essential to research because the study results indicate suggestions that can improve success rates for Black male students that attend two-year and four-year institutions. It may contribute to improving the environment of support for Black male students in higher education. Furthermore, this study's findings might inform how to strengthen family support for urban African American male students exploring their life-pathway choices and educate community leaders about the needs of urban African American male students.



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### Appendix A: Guided Protocol

1. What student academic experiences contributed toward persistence while at the HBCU?
  - a. While attending an HBCU, what was your perception of academic support?
  - b. In your own words, tell me about a time when you felt academically supported by your HBCU?
  - c. What academic support activities did you participate in? Tell me about them.
  - d. How frequently did you participate in these activities?
2. What student social experiences contributed toward persistence at the HBCU?
  - a. What social support activities did you participate in? Tell me about them.
  - b. What are the benefits of belonging to student groups and organizations on your HBCU campus?
  - c. When was access to these student groups or organizations made available?
3. What experiences toward persistence were provided by faculty, parents, and peers?
  - a. At what age did your family start encouraging you to attend college?
  - b. In what ways did your family support your decision to attend an HBCU?
4. What challenges were encountered and overcome?
  - a. What are the biggest challenges you encountered as a student attending an HBCU?
  - b. In what ways did you overcome these obstacles? Be specific.

## Appendix B: IRB Approval

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885

July 30, 2020



Cherise Johnson  
Department of Educational Leadership  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Cherise,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Black Male Student Success",

(IRB# 20-106 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

### Appendix C: Participant Email Solicitation

Hello Mr. \_\_\_\_\_.

I'm currently seeking participants for my dissertation that I am completing at Abilene Christian University, in which I will examine the lived experiences of Black male students persisting toward graduation at an HBCU in Texas. To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be a first-generation college, Black male student between the ages of 18 and 25, actively enrolled in their second, third, or fourth year of college at an HBCU in Texas and currently enrolled and in good academic standing on the college campus. This demonstrates persistence toward earning a bachelor's degree. Do you meet the above criteria? If so, are you willing to effectively, vividly, and accurately to the best of your ability reflect on that experience and participate in my study by agreeing to participate in a recorded, in-depth interview? The recorded, in-depth interview will take place via video conferencing. To honor and respect your time, the interview will last 45 minutes, on average, not to exceed two hours. Do note, there may be a possibility for a follow-up, recorded interview to get clarity on previous answers you provided; this will also be done via video conferencing and can last up to one hour. The recorded interview(s) will be arranged according to our availability, keeping in mind the need for two-hour blocks of time for the official in-depth interview. I encourage you to take some time (no more than three days, please) to consider your participation and amount of effort on your behalf that this study will entail. If you agree, I want to assure you that you have the right and ability to terminate your role at any point during this process. Do email me at [xxxxx@acu.edu](mailto:xxxxx@acu.edu) to inform me of your decision to participate, or not, in my study. If you agree to participate, do state whether or not you agree for the recorded, in-depth interview to take place via video conferencing, as well as a minimum of three (3) possible dates and times (remember, two-hour

blocks of time) we can schedule the recorded, in-depth interview between August and September. If I have not heard back from you within the next three to four days, I will do a courtesy follow-up call or email you. I appreciate you taking the time to consider your participation and look forward to hearing from you soon!