Factors of Persistence for African American Men in a Student Support Organization

Lamont D. Simmons
University of Memphis

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine factors of persistence for two African American men involved in the Project Empowerment (PE, pseudonym) student organization at a predominantly White institution. The participants are undergraduate student members of PE, a campus-based organization designed to enhance African American male retention. The researcher conducted interviews with both participants, and analyzed the data verbatim uncovering these four themes: (a) college preparedness, (b) high aspirations and goals, (c) social connections and relationships, and (d) growth through student organizational commitment. The study found that components of PE support African American male persistence. The findings implicate the need for ethnic-based programs for African American men, and for institutions to encourage program participation among this student group.

Keywords: African American males, higher education, organizations, persistence, retention

The retention of college students remains an important goal for all postsecondary institutions (Flowers, 2004-2005). However, many institutions struggle to retain a significant proportion of these students. According to Museus and Quaye (2009), more than one-half of all students who enter higher education depart prematurely from their institution. The reasons for these departures are unknown, and not easily credited to a narrow set of explanatory factors (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Of particular concern to many in higher education is the persisting problem of early departure among African American men. They have the lowest retention and graduation rates compared to females and other ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In 2000, more than one-third of African American men earned a bachelor’s degree (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). This statistic supports the need for higher education institutions to implement effective retention practices that promote a culture of high degree attainment among African American men. Higher education’s potential to address African American male retention was the catalyst for the present study. The present study focuses on how campus-based organizations enhance retention among African American male undergraduate students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the retention research centers on the longitudinal process of college student departure. This process generally examines the pathway of student entry into higher education, culminating with degree completion rates for an array of student cohorts (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Embedded within this process are individual and institutional determinants that shape student departure and persistence decisions. Aside from its explanatory power, the epistemological underpinnings from these factors can enable higher education institutions to develop practices or policies that retain more of its enrolled students (Tinto, 1993). A few factors reviewed for this study help explain retention among African American male members of a student support organization, which include

- aspirations and goals,
- social integration,
- minority faculty engagement, and
- student organizational involvement.
These factors relate to the themes uncovered from this study. Furthermore, these factors contribute to higher education’s way of knowing about retaining African American men. This article begins with a brief review of the literature discussing pertinent factors associated with African American male retention and persistence. The article will then provide an overview of the interactionalist theory, a common framework used to explain student departure and persistence decisions. Finally, the findings that emerged from the data, along with potential implications for higher education practice and research are discussed.

Aspirations and Goals

Astin (1975), Bean (1982), and Pascarella and colleagues (1987) found that initial aspirations and goals are significant predictors of degree attainment. Strayhorn (2008) observed that aspiration was critical to African American persistence; and was particularly significant to African American men who desired a post-bachelor’s degree. Strayhorn (2008) stated, “Black men who hold graduate aspirations are 5.13 times more likely to be retained than those who hold lower aspirations!” (Strayhorn’s emphasis, p. 79). Campus-based interventions and supports, such as peer mentoring programs, study groups, and learning communities, serve to uphold the continuity of aspirations among African American students (Strayhorn, 2008).

Social Integration

Research studies suggest that social integration (or student involvement) promotes degree attainment. According to Tinto (1993), higher levels of social integration are indicative of increased student persistence. Student social integration is usually sustained through faculty and peer interactions, and their involvement in intellectual and social activities (Stage & Hossler, 2000). Social integration holds more relevance to degree completion among men than it does for women (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Under this circumstance, gender is more weighted when social integration is “measured by peer group relations, residency, and hours spent engaged in social activities and intercollegiate athletics” (Astin & Oseguera, 2005, p. 247). For African American men, early engagement into the fabric of campus life is significant to their persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For these students, “campus involvements and social networks provide the social and cultural capital necessary to succeed on a predominantly White or historically Black campus” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 80). Therefore, sustained levels of involvement and networking can stimulate African American men to successfully negotiate their higher education environments and persist toward a college degree.

Minority Faculty Engagement

Student interaction and engagement with faculty increased student persistence toward degree attainment (Harvey-Smith, 2003). The chance for persistence is more likely when African American students connect with African American faculty. These faculty members are uniquely positioned to serve as role models, and “support students who may feel disconnected and isolated” (Quaye, Tambascia, & Talesh, 2009). Toward that end, “connections with Black role models who have been successful in higher education can increase the self-efficacy of Black students, which in turn lead to academic persistence and success” (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010, p. 312). Unfortunately, these connections are rare because of the shortage of African American faculty in higher education (Turner & Myers, 2000). The shortage continues to implicate increased chances of dropout among African American men, especially when only 5.4% of full-time faculty is African American (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Higher proportions of African American faculty on campus are strongly associated with higher graduation rates among African American students (Turner & Myers, 2000). Recruitment and retention of African
American faculty, particularly on predominantly White campuses, may help to achieve better graduation outcomes.

**Student Organizational Involvement**

Student organizations serve as the gateway for enhancing retention and persistence; and bridge the gap toward academic achievement (Kuk & Manning, 2010). Harper and Quaye (2009), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Tinto (1993) all have cited degree attainment as an outcome for students involved in campus-based organizations. Padilla and associates (1997) found that minority student participation in ethnic-based organizations fostered persistence, and allowed these students to "retain and nurture a sense of ethnic identity on campus" (p. 134). Feelings of ethnic identity help bridge the cultural gap between the home environment of minority students and the environments at their predominantly White institutions (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). While these findings support the value of minority student involvement in student organizations, they fail to highlight any usefulness for African American men. Bearing in mind the importance of social integration, research is needed that examines the utility of student organizations as a way to enhance retention among African American men (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study's framework is Tinto's (1975, 1993) interactionalist theory. This theory informs that persistence is realized when students effectively integrate with the academic and social realms of a college (Seidman, 2005). Braxton and Hirschy (2005) contend that "academic and social integration influence a student's subsequent commitments to the institution and to the goal of college graduation" (p. 67). Standards of academic integration include outcomes associated with grade performance and intellectual development. The underlying notion of academic integration is that students meet the institution's explicit standards around these outcomes, and can identify with the social structure of the academic system. In a similar way, social integration is concerned with the compatibility between the student and an institution's social context (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). To a degree, both forms of integration involve student engagement with peers, faculty, social systems, and the intellectual life common to the college environment.

Interactionist theory values a student's socioeconomic background, personal attributes, and pre-college experiences as integral to integration (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). These and other characteristics shape a student's initial commitment to their institution. Essentially, initial commitments drive subsequent commitments, thereby positively affecting persistence (Braxton, 2000). The core of interactionist theory typifies the confluence of background, commitments, and integration that compel student departure and persistence decisions.

The theoretical nature of interactionalist theory has been subject to criticism by many scholars because of the universal application of its findings. Attinasi (1989, 1992) and Tierney (1992) critiqued Tinto's (1975) theory, suggesting that it fails to explain persistence and dropout decisions for culturally diverse students, students at commuter schools, non-traditional students, and community college students, among others (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). A line of reasoning is also made that the theory does not "acknowledge the influences of financial resources, connection with an external community (such as family or work), and classroom experiences on a student's decision to persist" (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005, p. 68). In response to these criticisms, Tinto's work has been refined and clarified to account for explaining student attrition and persistence for diverse student populations in higher education (students of color, academically at-risk students, adult students, and transfer students), and for different institutional types (non-residential colleges, two-year colleges, the urban college, and large public universities, Tinto, 1993).
The limitations of Tinto’s theory suggest the need for strong research-based information on retaining diverse student populations (Flowers, 2004-2005). Flowers described how having research-based information particularly affects African American student retention:

...researchers and higher education personnel who require evaluative information on the effectiveness of certain theoretical frameworks and research findings for African-American students are inadequately equipped to make reasonable judgments on the quality, correctness, and worth of research-based information that might have the potential to design services and programs and refine policies to increase the retention rates of African American students. (p. 24)

Flowers essentially argued that research-based information on African American students strengthens the existing research literature. This denotes that higher education researchers and practitioners can cull information needed to enhance retention outcomes for their African American students.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The existing retention literature offers very little information on how retention programs enhance African American male persistence. Additional inquiries, to bridge the gap between what researchers understand about persistence and what higher education institutions know, are needed to improve retention and graduation outcomes (Tinto, 2005). This study examined the factors of persistence for African American men involved in the Project Empowerment (PE, pseudonym) student support organization. The study placed emphasis on how PE enhanced retention among African American men. To achieve the stated purpose, this research attempted to answer two questions:

- What factors do two African American male PE members perceive as critical to their persistence toward a bachelor’s degree?
- How do the program components of PE help to foster the retention of African American men?

The findings from this study might equip higher education personnel with research-based information suitable for developing and structuring student support organizations.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study approach to understand how the Project Empowerment student support organization enhances the retention of its members. This approach was suitable for this study because it allows the researcher to provide an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). Qualitative research itself allows participants to create data using their own voices. This results in a meaningful understanding of the examined phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The research took place at a large public university in the mid-South. The participants are undergraduate student members of PE, an organization developed to enhance the retention of African American men. Following negotiations for access with the associate dean of multicultural affairs, the researcher attended PE mass meetings as a way to recruit participants. Initially, four students were identified for the study, but only two students committed. Those two students chose pseudonyms, as “GQ” and “Jordan.”

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with both students were held on two separate days. These interviews were used to elicit and examine the participants’ perspectives on factors they perceive as critical to their own persistence toward graduation (Bhattacharya, 2007). The interview structure offered flexibility for the researcher to probe for details, and for the participants to expand on
both participants for a second time to check the accuracy of information given in the first interview.

The researcher regularly attended PE mass meetings, with the intent of gaining insight into the organization’s structure, topics discussed, and other relevant activities. The agendas from these meetings were useful, and contained event information and meeting topics. The researcher perused the multicultural affairs’ webpage on the institution’s website for historical and other information related to PE. These supplemental data collection activities helped to ensure triangulation by using multiple data sources. In addition, triangulation helped the researcher to compare and contrast data collected at different times and in different places (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis

Coding was the technique used in this study to analyze the interview data. The coding process allows the researcher to make notations next to pieces of data that may be relevant for answering research questions (Merriam, 2009). The researcher followed this same process by thoroughly examining the interview transcripts and making comments most apt to the research in the margins. The researcher used the codes to construct and uncover patterns among the data.

The data collected were analyzed in relation to the research questions in the study. The findings from this study revealed four broad themes, each representing factors perceived as critical to persistence and graduation attainment. Each theme is followed by illustrative quotes from the interviews, which strengthened the participant data. These four themes emerged from the interviews and data analysis: (a) college preparedness, (b) high aspirations and goals, (c) social connections and relationships, and (d) growth through student organizational commitment. These themes were selected because they responded directly to the research questions, and were consistent with the interview data.

The researcher employed respondent validation throughout the study to ensure the trustworthiness of these data. Feedback was solicited from participants on the accuracy of the collected data. This was done informally through e-mails and telephone calls. This technique helped to validate the researcher’s transcription and interpretation of the interview data (Merriam, 2009). In the end, the process led the researcher to edit the transcripts, which better reflects accurate participant accounts.

Participant Summary

The researcher developed a simple survey to collect demographic data on both participants. Participant background information gathered from the surveys is described below.

GQ. GQ self-identifies as both Black/African American and White/Caucasian. He is a 20-year-old, first-year student, expecting to major in criminal justice, with either a business or public administration minor. His undergraduate grade point average (GPA) is between a 3.50 and 4.00. His cumulative high school GPA ranged from a 3.00 and 3.49. GQ is involved in a number of campus-based student organizations (including PE), and is employed when school is out of session. GQ, however, volunteers at least 6 hours per week tutoring children at an elementary school. Both of his parents attended four-year institutions. His father earned a bachelor’s degree, and was the first in his family to attend college. His mother took college coursework in high school, attended college for three years, but did not finish. GQ was offered scholarships and loans to fund his education, and has some financial backing from his parents. He expects additional funding sources to finance his education in the future.

Jordan. Jordan self-identifies as Black/African American. He is a 25-year-old, second-year student majoring in social work. His undergraduate GPA ranges from a 3.00 and 3.49. He did
not report his high school GPA. Jordan is involved in a number of campus-based student organizations (including PE), and is employed 20 hours per week on campus. Neither of his parents attended college. Jordan currently funds his education through grants, loans, and from his own income.

**FINDINGS**

As relative newcomers to higher education, both participants have already discovered what it takes to persist academically. A combination of personal and institutional factors is likely to foster their persistence toward graduation. From the data analysis, participant responses revealed these themes related to perceived factors of persistence.

**Theme 1—College Preparedness**

The participants in this study attended “good” high schools in their respective hometowns. Although they had mixed experiences in the way their schools prepared them (GQ’s high school offered him a high level of academic support. His teachers cared for his overall academic development and well-being. Jordan felt differently. He believed the teachers at his school were disinterested in preparing him for college, presumably because of his status as an athlete; and ostensibly because of his race. At one point in the interview, he said that the teachers were just trying to get him out of there [school]) for college, their accounts reflect the importance of teachers and family members to their college preparedness. GQ attended Catholic school for 12 years, and felt prepared for college. Until recently, he never considered why his parents sent him to Catholic school, nor did he have insight into the benefits of his private school experience. GQ described how his high school experience and family prepared him to transition into higher education:

I understood the reason why they [his parents] kept me in private high school as long as they did. [Catholic school] definitely had an impact on how I studied, the way I was disciplined. There’s nothing against instructors at a public school by all means. But I feel like the instructors at a private school, they really care about the students and what they’re teaching them. And, help them to understand and develop, as in, what they need to know, and also why it’s important . . . why you should learn this material.

GQ’s comment reveals the level of appreciation he had for his high school experience, and the way it prepared him for college. His family helped him to see the link between a college education and future job opportunities. Consequently, he understood the value of this connection, and was determined to do well. He mentioned,

I feel the need to not, to not let her [mother] down because the one thing she wanted was for me to be successful. To be successful, we have to have a college education in today’s world. And it’s very relevant with the economy and the jobs. If you don’t have some type of higher education, it would limit your job opportunities.

Tinto’s (1975, 1993) interactionist theory supports pre-college schooling experiences and personal attributes as positive to student persistence. For GQ, his high school experience and determination to succeed are likely to contribute to his college persistence. In addition, his family’s value of participating in college strengthened his intent to earn a bachelor’s degree.

For Jordan, his large, predominantly White, “ranked” public high school did not offer the same level of preparation and support, as did GQ’s high school. He noted that teachers and counselors did not take a stake in his academic development; nor were they willing to assist him in preparing for college. He discussed how his status as a student-athlete hindered him from receiving much needed academic assistance:

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I don’t think that I went to a bad school. I’m just saying I didn’t get any learning from it because I was a sports player. And so, I was an icon, and they basically just let me do what I wanted to do. It doesn’t matter when you play sports. You do the work, but ... I don’t think I learned like I’m learning now [as a college student]. They definitely could have done a better job preparing me for college. They weren’t really focused on what I was trying to do in life. They were just getting me out of there.

What Jordan described may be consistent with the politics of K-12 school systems, wherein school personnel tend to perpetuate African American male exclusion into the postsecondary education pipeline. What this means is that adolescent African American males are regularly discouraged by teachers and counselors from participating in college preparatory curricula and activities (Strayhorn, 2008). Although Jordan wished he had firmer teachers that supported his learning, he was encouraged, self-determined, and worked relentlessly to graduate from high school. Possibly, these attributes functioned to counter the exclusionary tactics that kept him from being adequately prepared for college.

Despite his high school experience, Jordan’s grandmother was instrumental throughout most of his life, and supported his preparation and participation in higher education. Their relationship solidified Jordan’s commitment to do well in college. He noted,

> We went through so much besides school for her just to give up on me. She still stuck by me through thick and thin. But she’s getting older, so she really don’t have time, to just ... really worry all the time about me. And you know, I’m staying on track. And I’m not going back.

Even with his grandmother’s waning support, Jordan’s motivation and determination are likely to influence his capacity to earn a college degree. These attributes drive commitment to higher education, positively affecting student persistence toward degree attainment (Braxton, 2000).

**Theme 2—High Aspirations and Goals**

The participants in this study hold educational aspirations beyond a bachelor’s degree, and expect to become leaders in their respective professions. In their accounts, both participants discussed these aspirations. GQ said,

> Hopefully, I will be able to obtain an internship with the United States Secret Service ... and hope to seek employment with the Secret Service later down the road. If I need to go on and do other education ... as in a master’s degree, or as in law school, I will do that to work with the Secret Service.

Clearly, GQ is steadfast to achieve his occupational goal. Stage and Hossler (2000) suggested that educational aspirations and goals materialize during formal schooling, usually in middle and high school. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 marked the beginning of GQ’s aspiration to a career in law enforcement. While in elementary school, he recalled viewing President George W. Bush on television being briefed by “the guy in the suit” about the attacks. He later inquired of his teacher about the men, which sparked his aspiration and career interest.

Jordan understands that graduate study is necessary for him to become a medical social worker. He aspires to earn a master’s degree, and knows that a bachelor’s degree is the stepping-stone to achieve his occupational goal. He concretely described how he would arrive at this objective: “I want to get a bachelor’s, a master’s degree ... both in social work ... because I want to work in a hospital as a social worker.” Contrary to the assumption made by Stage and Hossler (2000) that educational aspirations form before college, Jordan’s aspirations developed as a college student. Advisement from a faculty member and practical experience in a hospital solidified his education and career goals. The educational aspirations articulated by both
participants are important to their career trajectories. As noted, persistence is greater when these men conceive earning a graduate degree early on (Strayhorn, 2008).

**Theme 3—Social Connections and Relationships**

College and university campuses are the context for social exchange among students; and are the source of student involvement in clubs, organizations, and other activities. Involvement is one way for students to develop relationships with peers and faculty. Both participants perceive these relationships as critical to their persistence and future success. GQ discussed how interaction with peers in a learning community continues to foster his academic success and persistence:

> The living learning communities here is a great way for people to branch out, and to meet people. Academically, if I have trouble getting a concept or if this person gets the concept, then this person can help you out, to understand that concept.

GQ's involvement in his learning community is an important factor to his academic success. His "belonging" and perceived satisfaction of the living learning community represents congruency with Patton and associates' (2006) findings linking campus-based supports positively to persistence. GQ also perceives that developing good relationships with faculty and staff is important for retention. He stated,

> If you have a good relationship with professors and people in higher spots [vice-presidents and provosts], and you talk to them, they more than likely will help you out in some way . . . to help you graduate, or to help you retain a job or internship. I think that brings a settling experience for a college student. Especially an institution that's very big.

Jordan finds that peer interaction through leadership development activities is significant to his persistence and future success. He is actively involved in a number of campus leadership experiences; and perceives the interactions from these experiences as helpful to him achieving his goal. He noted, "I want to do as much leadership as I can do . . . only because I want to work in a hospital as a social worker." The statement suggests that Jordan desires the interaction from his leadership experiences to be the conduit of his long-term goal of becoming a medical social worker.

Jordan made a significant statement on leadership that marked a different perspective from this theme. The extraneous data revealed Jordan's enthusiasm for leadership, evidencing his motivation to succeed. He noted,

> Leadership is very great on this campus. Leadership involvement is awesome. It's perfect. It's what you want. It's what you need. You know, there's all types of leadership involvement that [city deleted] has in general if you wanna be a leader. I've been in leadership . . . freshman mentoring. But there's a lot more opportunities to come.

The level of involvement and networking on the part of both participants is likely to promote their persistence in college. Strayhorn (2008) noted that involvement provides the social and cultural capital that African American male students need to succeed on any college campus. Therefore, relationship building and the accumulation of cultural knowledge are the means for African American men to earn a college degree.

Engagement with minority faculty is of particular importance for both participants in their academic experiences. GQ reported having two minority professors during the period of data collection, whom he maintains contact with on a regular basis. He described how the interaction with his minority professors continues to influence his desire to be successful:

> You know . . . when you see [or] associate a minority with a college degree, or any type of higher experience, it kind of gives you a little signal. They know what they're doing. They have their head
on straight. It kind of gives you hope that ok, yeah, this is why I need to finish. They're at where they're at [because] they have a college degree.

Jordan also reported regular contact with minority professors, and described how this interaction continues to influence his achievement as a college student:

They just make sure they hear me out. And if I need to do something, they're there to let me know what I should do, what I could do. They let me know really what I need to be on, how I need to think. So I do like that . . . the fact that they’re on me . . . in a good way. Making sure I’m doing what I do [to] graduate.

Jordan’s statement suggests that some of his professors are supporting of his academic persistence. This is in relative contrast to Jordan’s high school experience, where his teachers ostensibly failed to prepare him to transition into the higher education pipeline. Both participants reveal that peer and minority faculty connections support the value of participating in higher education, and earning a degree.

Theme 4—Growth through Student Organizational Commitment

The young men in this study view their participation in student organizations as important to their academic experience. Many scholars regard student involvement as positively related to persistence and degree attainment (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Involved college students have opportunities to serve their institution, grow academically, and establish lasting networks. PE is the epitome of these opportunities, with the specific goal of enhancing retention among African American men. GQ and Jordan described how they became involved with PE, and how they remain committed to the organization. GQ noted,

When I was in frosh camp [transition program for first year students], they talked about it. I went to the first [PE] meeting, paid my membership, and I became involved with the organization. And I did certain things with them. They’ve asked me to work the career fair, and be an ambassador representing the organization. To represent the school or to raise money for [hospital name deleted]. Just different events that PE supports.

Jordan noted,

I got involved by hearing about it. Seeing posters over the school. [Hearing] you should get in PE if you tryna [sic] get more involved with school. So I seen one of the guys that had been in it for a while, and I let him know that I was interested. He was telling me to come to it. I was telling him that I’ll do it next year when I got my suit game up. So I did exactly what I told him I was gonna do.

Jordan reportedly attended meetings regularly after joining, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to PE. The researcher witnessed more than 100 African American men attending the first PE meeting. Successive meetings revealed lower attendance, perhaps suggesting that many men chose to discontinue their participation in PE. Low attendance supports the notion that African American male participation in student organizations is low on college campuses. This may suggest poor strategic institutional effort to invite and encourage participation among these men (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek 2004; Harper & Wolley, 2002).

PE empowers its members and fosters their personal growth. GQ shared how committing to the organization helps him to stay on task and develop as a student:

It keeps me on track with everything I have going on while I’m in college. [PE] was founded to help increase the retention rate. The organization helps me keep focused. If I don’t feel like studying, I go to the meeting to help empower me for the next week or semester. PE also helps you to become very open and opinionated . . . and has helped me to mature as a man.
Jordan’s participation in the PE sponsored men’s conference empowered him to understand the realities of African American men in life and in education. An excerpt of how the conference shaped his thinking is noted:

They had some inspiring people come to speak. They asked, ‘Who do you think, is more people in college or jail?’ And most people would feel like there’s more black men in jail, but really, it’s more black men in college. It just gave me a different look . . . like, on like . . . don’t listen to folks man. So you got to know who to listen to.

This PE event not only influenced Jordan to think critically, it likely inspired him to stay committed to his education.

Intellectual Empowerment Sessions (IES) and the Educational Support Program (ESP) are PE components that foster academic development and success for members. IES purports to improve academic skills through group study. GQ noted that during IES, “everybody will get together and study, [and] help others.” ESP offers free academic assistance and tutoring to current students. GQ and Jordan are generally satisfied with ESP. GQ noted that tutoring “was very beneficial,” while Jordan perceives ESP as helpful in improving his Spanish and writing skills.

DISCUSSION

In this study, participants credited their personal backgrounds, social relations, and the components of their higher education institution as factors of their persistence. The findings led to several general conclusions around each theme. First, pre-college and background factors were perceived as important to college persistence. Interactionalist theory is the supporting framework for relating background factors to persistence. For example, GQ recognized early how his private school experience prepared him, and influenced his commitment to remain in college. Jordan relied on self-determination and his grandmother’s support in transitioning from high school to college. Second, intent to earn a graduate degree was influential to retention and the potential to achieve occupational goals. According to Strayhorn (2008), African American men who maintain graduate school aspirations are more likely to persist toward a bachelor’s degree. Both participants verbalized early their aspirations to earn a post-bachelor’s degree that may eventually lead to a position in their desired careers. Third, developing relationships with minority faculty was strong in the “social connections and relationships” theme. The students’ interaction with minority faculty was a way for the participants to stay focused on earning their degree. GQ was inspired to achieve by witnessing the success and position of his minority professors. Jordan felt academically supported by his minority professors, which was in contrast to his high school experiences. Finally, the participants viewed involvement in student organizations as significant to their persistence. Of particular importance to their socialization and academic persistence is being involved in ethnic-based student support organizations such as PE. The components of PE seem to provide both participants with the tools and resources to cope in their higher education environments. The participants are likely to persist toward their degree as long as they remain committed to the organization.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this study suggest several implications. For instance, higher education institutions must be strategic in involving African American men early in ethnic-based student organizations. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) contend that African American men who are early engaged in the social context of campus life are more likely to persist toward graduation. Predominantly White institutions, in particular, must support early organization engagement by offering an array of ethnic-based venues for its relatively few enrolled African American men (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hyak, 2004).
In this study, Jordan discussed how his high school failed to prepare him for college. This implicates the need for higher education institutions to engage at-risk African American males in a program such as Summer Bridge or other early intervention programs (Kezar, 2003-2004). These programs help students transition from high school to college by offering academic classes, mentoring, and relationship building during the summer before college. Although program goals vary, the aim is usually to enhance college readiness and improve retention through academic and social enrichment programs (Kezar, 2003-2004). These participants did not report involvement in early intervention programs that would assist their transition. Mainly, their acumen for academic achievement guided their entry and transition into the college environment.

Data were collected from two participants in this study. Although the information was insightful, a larger sample of African American men involved in PE should be studied to explore their perceptions of persistence. Having more participants potentially diversifies the findings and research literature, which might inform restructuring of PE in a way that enhances African American male retention. Finally, PE and its program components should be routinely evaluated. This “best practice” in research would demonstrate sustained effectiveness of PE on retaining African American men. Evidence of positive outcomes might spark other institutions to revise retention policies, or implement PE to address their own retention issues.

In conclusion, the fundamental purpose of this research was to examine the factors of persistence for African American men involved in the Project Empowerment (PE) student support organization. The participants seemed to have formulated their perceptions of persistence from personal background experiences, relationship building with peers and faculty, and engagement with the institution on several levels. Importantly, the participants are determined to succeed, and continue to demonstrate a steadfast attitude toward achieving their goals. Their active engagement with PE illustrates how the organization fosters their persistence toward graduation. In addition, their reflective stories exemplify significant insights about what it takes to navigate successfully their college environments. While these insights were important to the study, the findings and conclusions should be viewed with some caution. This qualitative study was primarily based on the participants' responses. The responses best reflect the participants' perceptions of persistence, as expressed through their own voices. In addition, the study was conducted within a single institutional context and organization. Therefore, any generalization of the findings from this study should be limited to the parameters of PE at the focal institution.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR

LAMONT D. SIMMONS is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Work at the University of Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to ldsimmons@memphis.edu

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