BLACK MEN:
A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE RETENTION AND GRADUATION

A thesis
presented by
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Abstract

This interpretive case study sought to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College, a large, public community college in a suburban setting in the United States. Three research questions were investigated through student focus groups, graduate interviews, and field observations: (1) What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter? (2) How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence? (3) How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students? Data was analyzed using an inductive method that began with open coding, then using constant comparison transitioned to axial coding. Findings revealed the challenges participants experienced integrating into college courses, navigating the college system, waging the battle within, and balancing multiple roles. Participants overcame these barriers by finding their motivation, developing an understanding of college, and building a support system. Lakeview College supported these students by creating a positive social environment, enabling academic learning and growth, going the extra mile, and nurturing student success. The findings led to four conclusions. (1) Black men must come to a complete understanding of academic expectations and processes to persist to graduation. (2) The persistence of Black men requires that they successfully navigate a confluence of life events and experiences. (3) Taking initiative is important for persistence of Black men. (4) Relationships built both on campus and off campus are critical to the persistence of Black men to graduation.

*Keywords*: community college, persistence, retention, graduation, Black men, African American men, case study
DEDICATION

To my dad, Ed Dalton, who instilled in me the importance of education

and my mom, Karen Straitz, who taught me to believe that I could accomplish

anything I set my mind to
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No one completes an educational degree alone. In the words of my first professor at Northeastern University, Dr. Leslie Hitch, it takes three “p”s to complete your doctorate degree: passion, perseverance, and pals. For me, it was primarily my pals that got me though, especially those times when my passion and perseverance waivered.

First of all, my amazing family supported me throughout my journey. My husband, Yong Min, picked up all the pieces I dropped as I focused on this degree. He has done way more than his fair share of parenting, cooking, and cleaning. Our three children, Justin, Jeremy, and Janae, have also pitched in to do more around the house. They have eaten too much prepared foods, watched too much TV, and been on the computer/video games too much. I look forward to having more time to spend with my incredible family and turning my attention back to being a wife and mother.

I was also cheered on by my mom, her husband, and my sister. My dad was one of my biggest fans. When I started the doctoral program, he told everyone he met that he would have a doctor in the family soon. He passed away shortly after I finished my coursework and I am so glad to have fulfilled this promise to him.

My fabulous co-workers at the college were also instrumental in my success, as were my quixotic summer residency group, and the remarkable NEU Thesis Writers. One person who overlaps these groups is my NEU buddy, Michelle. We started this program together while working in adjoining offices and supported each other through the challenges of doctoral work and life in general. Now we can celebrate together.

Finally, my research project and final paper would not have been as rigorous if not for my committee. Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, my advisor pushed me to go beyond where I thought I
could go in each step of the process. Dr. Tova Sanders brought her wealth of knowledge about student services to the table. Dr. Debra Gilchrist pressed me to challenge my assumptions and look for interpretive bias.

I could not have done this alone. It took my very own “pack of people” to get me here. Thank you all!

Finally, this thesis would not have been possible if not for the 14 men who shared their stories with me. I am grateful that they generously gave their time and so openly related their college experiences to me. Their voices live inside my head and hopefully, they will live inside the heads of all who read this. I am confident that what I learned from them will be used to help more students persist to degree completion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bean and Metzner’s Model of Non-traditional Student Attrition</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason’s Model of African American Male Urban Community College Student Persistence</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Theoretical Models</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Purpose and Questions</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of Research Problem</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality Statement</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Purpose and Questions</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence of Black Men in Community Colleges</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Background Variables</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Variables</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Variables</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Variables</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Variables</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence of Black Men in Universities</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Background Variables</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Variables</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Variables</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Variables</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Variables</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Purpose and Questions</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Qualitative Research Design</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Approach: Case Study</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Access</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Graduate Recruitment Letter</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Informed Consent Form for Interviews</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Informed Consent Form for Focus Groups</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Focus Group Questionnaire</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Focus Group Guide</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Interview Guide</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Mean Earnings by Highest Degree Earned ........................................ 15
Figure 2. Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure .................................. 20
Figure 3. Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition ...................... 24
Figure 4. A Conceptual Model for African American Male Urban Community College Student Persistence............................................................... 26
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Theoretical Model Comparison</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Search Terms</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Maximum Variation Chart</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Focus Group Participants</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Interview Participants</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Overview of Findings</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

President Obama set a goal of doubling the number of college certificates and degrees earned by 2020 which would make the United States of America first in the world in degree completion again (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Robert Gibbs, the White House Press secretary, stated that:

In an increasingly competitive world economy, America’s economic strength depends upon the education and skills of its workers. In the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as those requiring no college experience. (Gibbs, 2009, para. 7)

As the U.S. continues to recover from a recession, a more skilled workforce is required. The global economy has created a more interdependent system. For the U.S. to compete, it must be able to provide needed commodities, which requires an educated workforce. In the words of President Obama, “time and again, when we have placed our bet for the future on education, we have prospered as a result – by tapping the incredible innovative and generative potential of a skilled American workforce” (Gibbs, 2009, para. 2). Furthermore, in a democratic society where the general population participates in governance, it is important to have an informed citizenry capable of critical thinking.

One barrier to increasing the percentage of U.S. citizens with degrees and certificates is that some populations are not succeeding proportionately on college campuses. Racial and gender disparities in degree attainment are present at the national level (Bush & Bush, 2010; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Harper, 2006a; Harper, 2012b; Strayhorn, 2012), at the state level (Prince & Stephens, 2009), and locally at the site of this study. In order to achieve the
President’s goal, colleges must ensure that both male and female students of all ethnicities are persisting to graduation.

At a time when Black men are more likely to be in prison than in college courses (Hart Research Associates, 2011), it is especially important that those who make it to a college campus succeed. College graduates are less likely to be unemployed and typically earn more than those with high school diplomas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). College completion offers a route out of poverty and into the middle class for many as evidenced in the correlation between education and income shown in Figure 1.

Even when Black men make it to campus, the percentage who persist to degree completion is low (Bush & Bush, 2010; Derby & Watson, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Harper, 2012b; Palmer & Young, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). The reasons for lack of completion are varied, but fall into five broad categories that will be explored in depth in the theoretical framework section and in the literature review: student background variables, psychological variables, academic variables, social variables, and environmental variables. Completion rates

*Figure 1 Mean Earnings by Highest Degree Earned*

for Black, males in U. S. undergraduate educational institutions are the lowest for all racial/ethnic groups and genders (Bush & Bush, 2010; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Harper, 2006a; Harper, 2012b; Strayhorn, 2012).

Despite the grim statistics on college completion, some Black men are persisting to earn their certificates and degrees (Harper, 2012a; Strayhorn, 2012). Literature on the persistence and retention of Black, male, community college students tends to highlight one or two factors that may predict departure or retention. Strayhorn (2012) studied how student satisfaction with the college experience and social integration on campus related to retention. Derby and Watson (2006) examined the impact of orientation courses. Sutherland (2011) explored how the relationships built on campus and off which he referred to as social networks supported the transfer process from community college to universities. Wood, Hilton, and Lewis (2011) researched the effect of employment on retention.

While these studies are helpful starting point, there has not been enough general research conducted to ascertain which specific factors are most salient for Black, male retention and graduation. To address this identified limitation, more research is needed to investigate Black, male students who succeed in order to determine how the field of higher education can increase graduation rates for this specific population. This necessary research must be conducted with a broad lens so as to not miss significant elements related to degree completion for this population. The best settings for the needed general studies are community college campuses. These settings are preferable because the majority of students of color, including Black men, begin their college experience at community colleges (Mullin, 2012). Because the percentage of the student body comprised of students of color is increasing each year (Mullin, 2012), this problem must be addressed now.
The body of literature encompassing the retention and persistence of Black, male students at community colleges is small (Bush & Bush, 2010; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001). Furthermore, the majority of the literature on undergraduate Black, males comes from a deficit perspective to determine why enrollment and completion rates are so low (Harper, 2012b; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Noble, 2011). This case study embraced a strengths-based approach and sought to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College, the pseudonym for a large community college in the United States. This study explored the barriers noted by the graduates and how they overcame them, as well as the supports they identified as important to their success. This strengths-based perspective is currently missing from the literature on persistence. For the purposes of this paper, and as is common practice in the extant literature, the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably. The study’s title uses the term Black which is the more inclusive term that encompasses all those with darker skin, including those who are American, who are immigrants, and/or who do not consider themselves African.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was concerned with the degree attainment of Black men. Therefore, persistence theory was the most relevant lens through which to view the literature and the data collected in this study. ‘Persistence’ refers to students who continue to enroll quarter after quarter in order to achieve their educational goals (Tinto, 2012). This term implies that students are making progress towards their goals which may happen at more than one educational institution. The term ‘retention’ is interwoven in the persistence literature. A student is retained when he enrolls in consecutive terms at the same institution (Tinto, 2012). ‘Attrition’ is another prevalent term within the persistence literature. This term is used to describe the loss of students
at an institution due to drop out, stop out, and/or transfer (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The majority of the studies focusing on Black, male community college and university students used critical race theory as a theoretical lens and the next most used theoretical framework was social capital theory. Both of these frameworks are appropriate given the social climate of college campuses and society in general. However, persistence theory allows for a broader perspective to be taken on this problem of practice.

The idea of persistence is not a new concept in post-secondary education; it has been studied for many years. Three theoretical models of persistence underpin this study. Tinto (1975; 1993; 2000) is the most widely cited author within persistence theory (Voorhees, 1987). His initial framework was based primarily on the experiences of traditional, White students. Tinto’s work will be explored first in this section. Bean and Metzner (1985) added a model of persistence addressing non-traditional students to the literature. Their work is the focus of the second part of this section. The models of both Tinto and Bean and Metzner were concerned with student attrition, or why students left their studies before earning a degree. The final persistence theorist used to frame this study was H. P. Mason (1998) who took the previous models one step further and created a model that specifically addressed the retention of African American men at a community college. Mason’s model is more strengths-based and sought to explain why students stayed in college to complete their degrees. In moving from general to specific models of college persistence, the researcher was able to begin with the seminal theory, Tinto’s, and then add pieces that are relevant to particular segments of the student body present at Lakeview College.
Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure

Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure is a seminal piece of persistence theory based on his earlier work (Tinto, 1975). While his earlier work was focused solely on traditional, primarily White students at universities, his 1993 model incorporated some data from community colleges and students of color (Metz, 2005) making it more relevant to Black men who are the focus of this study. Tinto charted the various factors that contribute to students leaving college prior to earning their degrees, which he termed departure. He noted that over time these various factors have different impacts. His model emphasized factors contributing to student attrition within an institution and honed in on both the social and academic experiences of students.

Tinto (1993) posited that the interactions between individuals within the social and academic systems of an institution, in addition to each individual’s unique characteristics, were what led them to depart from college prior to degree completion. For example, at the beginning of a student’s enrollment in higher education, their family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling were the factors that most predict departure. Students who came to college underprepared academically or who were first generation college students were more likely to depart. Next, students’ goals and commitments came into play. Persistence was dependent on a student’s purpose for attending college: degree attainment, increasing job skills, or pleasing family members. External commitments, such as family responsibilities and employment, were also important in this category. The next factors that influenced departure according to Tinto (1993) were the students’ experiences both academically and socially. A student’s ability to pass classes, build relationships with faculty, become involved in extracurricular activities and make friends on campus impacted departure. Considerations such as these determined whether or not
the student had integrated both academically and socially into college life. The less integrated a student was, the more likely the student would depart. Finally, goals and commitments were revisited. A minimally committed student with weak goals might still choose to depart college near the end of his or her degree.

Tinto’s (1993) model is longitudinal and interactional in nature. The strength of his model is that it sought to explain, as well as describe students who depart. All along the pathways, support structures such as a personal, positive relationship with a professor or family support that lowers the need for external commitments helped students stay in school. On the other hand, barriers such as struggling with remedial math, not being able to fit in with a peer group on campus, or an unfriendly interaction with a cashier contributed to a student’s decision to depart college. Barriers and supports could be present within each factor in the model which can be seen in Figure 2.

*Figure 2 Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure*

*V. Tinto, 1993, Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (2nd ed.), p. 114.*
What happens after a student departs from the college was not a part of Tinto’s (1993).

This limitation means that students who leave one college and continue on to earn their degree at another institution were not counted as persistent. Tinto was only concerned with students who were retained at one institution or who chose to leave that institution. In actuality, Tinto’s model prioritized retention. Retention differs from persistence in that a student may persevere to degree completion by attending several different institutions, but may not be retained by the first institution s/he enrolled in. Another limitation of Tinto’s model is that only voluntary withdrawal from college was addressed, not academic dismissal or administrative withdrawals. Thus, this model only applies to a student’s decision to depart. The most glaring limitation of this model is its failure to address cultural variables (Guiffrida, 2006). Guiffrida (2006) emphasized the need for Tinto’s model to be more culturally sensitive and suggested that the model be amended to recognize the importance of “cultural and familial connections” and the interconnectedness of “cultural norms, motivational orientation, and academic achievement and persistence” (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 409). The background variables in Tinto’s model were more general in nature and did not account for the nuances within and among cultural groups.

As depicted in Figure 2, during a student’s initial transition into college, family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling are important factors. Throughout a student’s mid-schooling, institutional experiences such as academic performance, faculty/staff interactions, extracurricular activities, and peer group interactions become important (Tinto, 1993). These contribute to a student’s overall integration into the institution both academically and socially. In Tinto’s research, a student’s intentions, goals, and outside commitments were strongly correlated with departure at the beginning and end of the college experience. Tinto (1993) theorized that a student’s experiences at college were a greater predictor of departure than
a student’s background characteristics, although these were important, too. He argued that retention was achieved when a student was both academically and socially integrated into the campus community.

There is some disagreement as to the relevance of his theory to students of color and to community college students since the majority of Tinto’s sample was comprised of White, traditional university students (Strayhorn, 2012). Many studies have sought to prove or disprove its relevance to these two populations or have used it as a starting place and then adapted it to various populations. While Tinto’s (1993) framework is a great starting place and there are important pieces of the retention puzzle that he put into place, his theory alone is not enough to address the research questions at the center of this study. The study required a model that focused on the experiences of non-traditional students rather than just the general college population to add pieces to the complete puzzle, due to the fact that non-traditional students make up the majority of the student body at Lakeview College.

**Bean and Metzner’s Model of Non-traditional Student Attrition**

Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a conceptual model of non-traditional student attrition to address some of the limitations of the models of persistence that predated their theory. They defined traditional students as those aged 18-24, who live on campus, and are full-time students. Non-traditional students were defined as students who do not meet one or more of these three criteria. Non-traditional students tend to be less involved in campus life so some of Tinto’s (1993) emphasis on campus experiences and integration is less relevant to this population (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model utilized the same variable categories as Tinto’s model, but they used more specific definitions that considered non-traditional students in their
subcategories. For example, in the background category, Bean and Metzner looked specifically at age, enrollment status, and residence since these three factors vary significantly for non-traditional students. The pair noted that there was a strong correlation between high school academic performance and college grade point average (Bean & Metzner, 1985). They added three factors in addition to those in Tinto’s model: utility, or how useful students think their degree will be; stress; and satisfaction, which they defined as how much the student enjoys being a student. Under academic variables, they listed study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, course availability, and grade point average (GPA). Finally, in environmental variables, they included many items non-traditional students grapple with such as finances, employment, and family responsibilities.

As with Tinto’s model, each variable could be seen as a barrier or a support depending on the individual students. For example, a student who meets with an advisor early on and maps out a quarter by quarter plan to obtain a degree would view the process as a support within academic variables. Alternately, a student who randomly picks classes that sound good and then does not have the classes needed to earn a degree after two years would certainly see that as a barrier in academic variables. The interplay between all Bean and Metzner’s variables is illustrated in Figure 3.
The model in Figure 3 was validated by an additional study conducted by Bean and Metzner in 1987 and has been used in several other studies since then. While Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model addressed non-traditional students, they did not differentiate between those who dropped
out never to return and those who stopped out of school briefly and then returned later to finish their degrees, a phenomenon not uncommon for community and technical college students (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). The model is quite general in that it was created based on data from all undergraduate non-traditional students. The sample included a great deal of intragroup variation in terms of age, ethnicity, type of institution, and so on. Bean and Metzner (1985) incorporated a broader and more diverse population than Tinto’s (1993) original model, yet even combined, their frameworks were insufficient for this case study’s population.

Mason’s Model of African American Male Urban Community College Student Persistence

H. P. Mason’s (1998) work is the best fit for this research as the population used to develop his model matched that of this study. In his study of African American men at a community college, H. P. Mason took into account background variables, academic variables, and environmental variables. He defined his categories similarly to Bean and Metzner (1985). However, he approached his study from a strengths-based perspective. H. P. Mason (1998) developed a model to determine why students persist rather than trying to determine why students leave college like Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985). He found that there were four variables that significantly affected retention:

1. a commitment to and the internalization of an educational goal
2. outside encouragement from family and friends
3. utility- the belief that education will positively affect the student’s life
4. the “helplessness/hopelessness factor” (H. P. Mason, 1998, p. 758), which is the belief that no matter what the student does, it will not make a difference in his life; that he has no power or control to change his destiny
This study is underpinned by the assertion that when studying a specific ethnicity or gender, it cannot be assumed that a generic framework is appropriate. Whenever possible, it is preferable to use a model created for the targeted population. Only H. P. Mason’s (1998) model addressed a factor specifically related to minority students, the helplessness/hopelessness factor which can be a byproduct of internalized oppression.
However, because his model concentrated on such a particular subset of college students, using his work as the only model would be inadvisable. Layering the models on top of each other helps to ensure that all potential supports and barriers that might affect a student’s choice to drop out or persist are considered by taking into account the variables identified in each model.

**Summary of Theoretical Models**

When comparing these three models within persistence theory, many similarities can be found. The easiest way to see the similarities and differences is by charting their purposes and variables in the table below.

Table 1  
*Theoretical Model Comparison*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model based on</strong></td>
<td>All students</td>
<td>Non-traditional students</td>
<td>Black, male, community college students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model predicts</strong></td>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td>Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student background variables</strong></td>
<td>Family background Skills and abilities Prior schooling</td>
<td>Age Enrollment status Residence High school performance Ethnicity Gender</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological variables</strong></td>
<td>Intentions Goals and institutional commitments Educational Goals Intent to leave Utility Stress Satisfaction</td>
<td>Educational Goals Utility Helplessness/hopelessness factor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Academic variables</strong></td>
<td>Academic performance Faculty staff interactions Academic integration Study habits Academic advising Absenteeism Major certainty Course availability Academic outcome/GPA</td>
<td>Study habits Academic advising Absenteeism Major certainty Course availability</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social variables</strong></td>
<td>Extra-curricular activities Peer group interactions Social integration</td>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Using a combination of these three models is most appropriate for the scope of this study. Tinto’s (1993) work focused on the breadth of post-secondary experiences and is the most widely utilized. Bean and Metzer (1985) narrowed the scope to non-traditional students which make up the majority of the students at Lakeview College. Finally, H. P. Mason (1998) concentrated on the same population as this study and is the narrowest in scope. Taking all three models into consideration ensures that the theoretical lens is broad enough that relevant themes are not missed, yet precise enough to make certain that themes germane to this specific population are included. All five categories of variables from Table 1 interact in the student body at Lakeview College. Keeping the scope of this study general allowed all data to be collected that was pertinent to all the categories within the overlapping models. This research design ensured that important components of Lakeview College’s Black, male population’s experiences affecting persistence were not overlooked. This choice was supported by the literature review. The variables these three models found to be significant provided the organizational structure for the literature review. Furthermore, the interview questions asked participants about their experiences at Lakeview College and gave participants the opportunity to specifically address the relevant variables in persistence theory to determine which served as supports and which served as barriers for individual students. While all three models are fifteen to twenty years old, they each represent a seminal work on their populations and their relevance.
is affirmed by their continued use in the literature. Due to their datedness, the researcher remained open to other factors not represented in the theories throughout the research process.

**Problem Statement**

Given the national goal to double the number of Americans with certificates and degrees by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and the number of students that begin at community colleges (Mullin, 2012), student persistence has become a leading topic in undergraduate education. Furthermore, given that the literature consistently shows a disparity in the achievement of Black, male students (Bush & Bush, 2010; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Harper, 2006a; Harper, 2012b; Strayhorn, 2012), the need for degreed individuals is a key element of the country’s economic future, and the inherent injustice of this disparity, it is time to shed light on this inequity. Persistence theory can be used to explain why students do not graduate and is a starting place to explore factors related to student success. Given the current focus on departure and drop out and the lack of literature exploring why Black, male students stay in college and earn certificates and degrees (Harper, 2012b; Noble, 2011), this case study centering on recent community college graduates was needed. The recent graduates and students in their final term who participated in this study shed light on the barriers they faced, how they overcame them, and the support structures in place at Lakeview College that helped them succeed. The factors contributing to Black, male student success at Lakeview College identified as a result of this study can be used to help other Black, male students succeed. Practices, procedures, and programs can be maintained, modified, or created based on the findings of this study that will enable the college to work towards equity in degree obtainment for Black, male students.
In order to address the national goal of increased degree and certificate attainment and to ensure equity of college success, this study was needed to determine how barriers were overcome and what support structures were in place to support Black, male students at Lakeview College. Local data clearly showed that there was a significant gap between Black, male students and the college average. The findings from this initial study can be used to develop further studies on the themes that emerged, including quantitative studies that can determine correlation and perhaps even causation between different factors. In addition, interventions based on the findings can be implemented to help more students complete their degrees and certificates at Lakeview College. The methodology used in this study could be replicated at other community colleges to determine how best to serve the Black, male population on their campuses. Additionally, similar studies can be undertaken at Lakeview College and like institutions to investigate other populations of students with low certificate and degree attainment rates.

Context

Lakeview College is a pseudonym for a large, public, community college in a suburban area of the United States. It operates on a quarter system that includes four terms: summer, fall, winter, and spring. In the 2009-10 academic year, the college served over 27,000 students at three campuses and several off-site locations. The average student age was just over 29 years old. Men made up 48 percent of the student body and ethnic minorities comprised 32 percent. It is one of the largest community colleges in the state. The majority of students are served on one of three campuses. Campus A is very diverse. Campus B serves a more traditional student body. Campus C enrolls active duty military personnel and their dependents on a large military installation. In the fall of 2010, 1,245 new students enrolled at Lakeview College, 58 of whom
were Black men. By spring of 2011, 711 of these new students were retained, about 57 percent. Of the new Black, male students, only 29, which was 50 percent, remained enrolled for spring quarter. Only 323 or 15.8 percent of the 2,046 students who enrolled at Lakeview College for the first time in the fall of 2007 earned a certificate or two-year degree by the spring of 2011. For the 73 Black men in this cohort, the statistics are even more dire; 7 or 9.6 percent earned a certificate or degree within 4 years of beginning.

In 2011, Lakeview College joined the Achieving the Dream network. The goal of this organization is to increase the number of students who are earning certificates and degrees (Achieving the Dream, 2012). The organization works with member colleges to reform policies and practices using a three-pronged focus: “1) a student-centered vision, 2) equity & excellence, and 3) evidence-based decision-making” (Achieving the Dream, 2012). All three foci were relevant to this study. There recommendations for practice proposed in chapter 5 come from the students’ and graduates’ experiences and are student-centered. The goal of equity was inherent in this study that sought to address a disparity in certificate and degree attainment. Finally, this study can provide some of the evidence upon which decisions can be made at Lakeview College. At the time of the study, the college was implementing retention strategies based on research conducted at other institutions. The decision makers now have access to findings based on the experiences of students at their institution.

The theoretical frameworks and the literature reviewed describe factors that are unique to individual colleges and impact student persistence; however, much is still unknown. It was not known how the Lakeview College model of using faculty members, most of whom are White, as academic advisors impacted Black, male retention. It was not known how the campus environment from the art hanging on the walls, to the plays put on in the campus theatre, to the
music played in the cafeteria, to the guest speakers brought in to lecture affected the persistence of Black, male students at Lakeview College. It was not known how the intentional student gathering spaces in various locations on the campuses of Lakeview College factored in to Black, male students’ decision to continue or drop out. Underlying the research study was a hope that this work could identify ways that would enable Lakeview College to support Black, male students on their path to degree completion.

This study provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. They could then use their experiences earning a degree or certificate at Lakeview College to enable their further success, should they decide to pursue additional certificates or degrees. The Black, male students who come after these graduates may benefit from this study as well. Lakeview College can implement changes to their policies, procedures, and practices based on the findings of this study to support more Black, male students to persist to graduation. The student body as a whole at Lakeview will benefit from having a more diverse student body throughout the college as more Black men are retained from quarter to quarter. The strategies that would be employed to support Black, male students might prove to be helpful to other groups of students as well. Lakeview College itself could benefit from an increase in retention and completion which impacts both funding and standing. Other community colleges could benefit from this study by using the relevant findings to effect change on their campuses. Finally, society as a whole benefits from a more equitable educational system.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. This study sought to answer the following research questions:
1. What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter?

2. How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence?

3. How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students?

**Significance of Research Problem**

As part of the Achieving the Dream implementation process, student data was analyzed at Lakeview College and presented to the faculty and staff. The data revealed that the group of students at Lakeview College least likely to be retained was Black men over the age of 25. In fact, baseline data from the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) showed that for the 2006 and 2007 cohorts, the overall four year graduation rate at Lakeview College (Campus A, Campus C, and online students; Campus B is reported separately) was 18.5 percent which was slightly below the state average of 22.7 percent. For African American men, the rate was only 11.2 percent. For African American men over 25, the rate dropped to a dismal 8.2 percent which means that only 4 of the 49 students who enrolled completed a degree or certificate within four years. Statewide, the graduation rate for this group was 17 percent. The combined graduation rate for the two technical colleges in the same county was 27 percent, or exactly 27 out of 100 students. The good news was that while only 6.7 percent of the population in the county was African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), 9.5 percent of the students at Lakeview College were African American which demonstrated that recruitment strategies were working well. The bad news was that these students were not graduating. Clearly, this is a problem that must be addressed.

Until the time when achievement gaps no longer exist in post-secondary education, steps must be taken to address them. Society at large loses not when all of its citizens are able to
realize their potential. As more Black men persist to earn degrees, they benefit as individuals, and society as a whole benefits from their increased contributions. Black, male success is important to society because, practically, each individual brings a different perspective to the table which leads to additional discoveries and solutions to problems. Ethically, it is important because this country holds to the ideals proposed in the Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” (Jefferson, 1776, para 2).

Therefore, every individual regardless of gender or race, all persons, should be able to earn a college degree if that is what is needed to pursue their own happiness. By understanding the factors involved in their retention and graduation, strategies can be put in place to enable more Black, male students to complete their degrees and certificates at Lakeview College, and ultimately at similar institutions nationwide.

**Positionality Statement**

Personally, social justice has always been important to me. One of my favorite quotes is attributed to Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Bullock, 2007). Until equity has been achieved in our society, all of us are affected. The achievement gap is just one symptom of an unjust system. It is my hope that this study will contribute to a treatment plan for this symptom.

I chose a qualitative approach because I was interested in discovering people’s stories. Each individual has different life experiences and a unique perspective of those experiences. It is important to me to honor those differences while looking for common themes. I chose to
approach this problem of practice from a strengths-based model because that is also a core value of mine. I wanted to determine what is working and build on that.

Practically, I wanted to help increase the retention and graduation rates for Black, male students at my college. There are many Black men enrolling at my college who are not earning certificates or degrees within four years. As an Achieving the Dream college, we must show increases in our graduation rates. I can contribute to this goal by focusing on one particular group of students. Then, my findings can be used to create interventions aimed at increasing graduation rates for Black men.

Intellectually, I aspired to understand the meaning of community college as perceived by my participants. Meaning is defined by Maxwell (2005) as including “cognition, affect, intentions and anything else that be encompassed in…the ‘participants’ perspective’” (p. 22). I wanted to discover what Lakeview College is like for those Black men who persisted to graduation and understand the factors both within and outside of the college that contributed to their retention.

As an employee of this college, it was important not to let my affiliation affect how I collected and interpreted data. Whether the data painted the college experience in a way similar to or different from my understanding of our processes and climate was irrelevant. The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of Black, male students on our campus and the pathways they followed to earn certificates or degrees which were different than my experiences as a White, female professor at this college or a White, female student during my undergraduate education. I guarded against allowing any preconceived notions to influence how I collected and analyzed the data so that the voices of my participants could shine though.
Definition of Terms

**African American**- term used interchangeable with Black to define ethnicity; Participants in this study will have self-selected African American in response to the question about their race on admissions and/or registration paperwork.

**Attrition**- broad term used to describe the loss of students at an institution due to drop out, stop out, and/or transfer (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Black**- term used interchangeable with African American to define ethnicity.

**Completion**- is used to describe the point at which students accomplish the goals they set for themselves during the admissions process, typically to earn a particular certificate or degree. This could happen at several institutions (Tinto, 2012).

**Drop out**- term used for students who is enrolled in courses at an institution and does not enroll in classes the following term and has not completed the certificate or degree that was the student’s declared intent (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Graduation**- refers to the point at which a student who enters a particular educational institution earns a degree or certificate from that same institution (Tinto, 2012).

**Non-traditional students**- are defined as students who do not meet one or more of the three criteria for traditional students: aged 18-24, live on campus, full-time students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Persistence**- refers to students who continue to enroll quarter after quarter in order to achieve their educational goals. It is implied in this term that students are making progress towards their goals. This may happen at more than one educational institution (Tinto, 2012).

**Retention**- describes when a student continues to enroll in courses at the institution he or she originally enrolled in (Tinto, 2012).
Stop out-term used to describe the experience of a student who attends an institution, leaves for a period of time, and then returns to further his studies (Bean & Metzner, 1987).

Strengths-based model- approaches a problem from the positive point of view. It seeks to understand what is working in order to maintain those strategies that are successful and perhaps expand them. This is sometimes referred to as an anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2010).

Traditional students- aged 18-24, live on campus, and are full-time students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).
CHAPTER 2

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter?
2. How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence?
3. How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students?

Introduction

Two bodies of literature informed this study: the experiences of Black, male students at universities and the experiences of Black, male students at community colleges. The theoretical framework, persistence theory, discussed in the previous chapter was the guiding organizational and analytical structure for the review of all relevant journal articles and dissertations. Persistence theory is concerned with why students leave college and/or why they stay to earn degrees. Tinto’s (1993) model is based on the experiences of all students, particularly traditional students in traditional settings. Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model was based on non-traditional students. H. P. Mason’s (1998) theory includes the nuances that are particular to Black men at community colleges. These frameworks were used to organize the literature and illustrate the similarities and differences between Black, male community college students and university students.

There are five categories within the models of persistence theory presented in Chapter 1: student background variables, psychological variables, academic variables, social variables, and environmental variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Mason, 1998; Tinto, 1993). As previously
discussed, each theorist had some slight variation in what they included in these categories. In general, student background variables included all of the things a student comes to college with, such as family background, personal skills and abilities, prior schooling experiences, enrollment status (full-time, part-time), as well as demographic information like age, gender, and ethnicity. Psychological variables have to do with the internal motivations and feelings of the student. This category included items like the student’s intention, goals, commitment, stress, satisfaction, and the helplessness/hopelessness factor. The category of academic variables was comprised of grades/GPA, study habits, advising, major certainty, course availability, interactions with faculty and staff, absenteeism, and advising. Next, social variables are concerned with how well the student integrates into the social climate of the campus, peer interactions, and extracurricular activities. The final category is environmental variables. Included in this category are all a student’s commitments outside of college such as work, finances, family responsibilities, outside encouragement, and transfer opportunities. All of the findings and results in the literature fit into one of these five categories.

All studies included in this review were published in peer-reviewed journals or were published doctoral dissertations/theses. The search for relevant and appropriate materials was conducted primarily using databases available in the Northeastern University library, primarily Education Research Complete, ERIC, JSTPR, Web of Science, Academic Search Premier, SAGE Journals Online, and ProQuest. The most helpful key words searches included a combination of ethnicity, gender, institution, and outcome as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Key words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Men, Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Community Colleges, Junior Colleges,</td>
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Persistence of Black Men in Community Colleges

The literature on Black men in community colleges is small, but growing. About half of the community college studies published in peer-reviewed journals were conducted at a single college setting (Derby & Watson, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; James, 1991; H. P. Mason, 1998; Sutherland, 2011; Weis, 1992; Weissman, Bulakowski, & Jumisko, 1998). In addition, sample sizes tended to be small in these studies which limit their generalizability.

Small sample sizes were also typical of the dissertations included in this review. To present the extant literature on the persistence of Black men in community colleges, this section is organized by the five categories associated with persistence theory (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Mason, 1998; Tinto, 1993).

Student Background Variables

The attributes a student comes to college with influence their persistence to degree completion. For example, social background or demographics appeared to play a part in the academic success of Black, male community college students (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006). Specifically, higher parental socio-economic status (SES) increased the likelihood of transferring from a community college to a university (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006).

Several studies found that younger students were more likely to persist than older students (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Perrakis, 2008). Age was also a factor when assessing the likelihood of a student to transfer to a four-year college (Dougherty & Kienzel,
and when assessing student satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2012). The younger the student, the more likely he was to transfer and to report satisfaction with the community college experience (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006). However, Luke and Ireland (2014) found that the older the student, the more likely he was to engage with faculty.

High school GPA was found to be a significant factor for retention in two studies (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Perrakis, 2008). Glenn (2004) pointed out that high school preparation varied significantly from school to school and Black students often attended schools that left them less prepared for college than their White peers. College students were often surprised that they were placed in basic education courses or developmental education courses, which are designed to provide remediation and bring a student’s reading, writing, and/or math skills up to college level (Harvey, 2010). While placement in these courses does not preclude success, it made a student’s path to graduation longer, increasing the likelihood of dropping out (Harvey, 2010). Harvey (2010) interviewed 11 students who began in basic education courses, graduated from community college with an associate degree, and transferred to a four-year institution. She did not provide information about what percentage of students who entered the college requiring basic education persisted to graduation. Generally for students of all ethnicities and both genders, the more remediation a student required, the less likely they were to persist and the longer it took them to achieve their educational goal (Radford, Pearson, Ho, Chambers, & Ferlazzo, 2012).

The literature suggests that the number of courses a student enrolls in also affects persistence. Full-time students were more likely to be retained than their part-time peers (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Voorhees, 1987). This finding poses a challenge for community colleges since many of their students attend part-time.
Finally, it was noted that White students are more likely than Black students to persist to degree completion (Perrakis, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). However, when considering transfer rates, race did not seem to be a strong indicator once gender, age, and SES were controlled (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006). Still, the gap between races became statistically significant when Black and White students with equivalent educational goals and high school preparation were compared (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006).

Based on these studies linking background variables to student persistence, data was collected on socio-economic status, age, high school preparation, college remediation experiences, and enrollment status for this research project. The final characteristic, race, is an inherent part of this study since Black men were the focus of this research.

**Academic Variables**

There is also support in the literature for the influence of academic variables on student persistence. Enrollment in an orientation course was found to be inconclusive in affecting student retention and completion in one study (Derby & Watson, 2006) and beneficial in two others (Glenn, 2004; James, 1991). Ensuring that the transition into college goes smoothly was important (Derby & Watson, 2006; Glenn, 2004; James, 1991). Black students reported more challenges with the initial transition to community college than students of other races (Weissman, Bulakowski, & Jumisko, 1998). Wood and Ireland (2014) found that enrollment in an orientation course increased faculty-student interaction which they cited as a predictor of college success. Programs developed in the last few years at Lakewood College, including a mandatory orientation session and a college success course targeting students who require developmental education, were points of discussion that the researcher anticipated may be significant for some participants prior to beginning data collection.
Academic integration, such as a student’s grades, had little effect on a student’s satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2012). However, a retention program that included mentoring, academic monitoring multiple times throughout the semester, orientation programs, tutoring, and career planning did increase retention at one community college (James, 1991). Glenn (2004) found that identifying at-risk students and carefully monitoring their academic progress increased retention as well. In fact, he noted that this was the most important retention strategy employed by the top quartile in Black, male graduation rates within the Texas community college system. Lakeview College has a system in place in which faculty can report concerns during the quarter to inform a student’s academic advisor who is often a faculty member in the student’s major. There are also several programs on campus that monitor their students closely such as Opportunity Grant, a funding source for certain professional technical programs; TRIO, a support program for first generation or low income transfer students; student government; and athletics.

A study of 111 Black men who successfully completed developmental math and/or English courses at Los Angeles Community College District found that 100 percent of them accessed advising or counseling services (Gebru, 2009). Additionally, at least 50 percent accessed learning communities, supplemental instruction, and/or tutoring. Learning communities were created by enrolling a cohort of students in several courses linked by a common theme. Supplemental instruction involved a coach who attended a course with students and led study groups in addition to the coursework. Tutoring provided one-on-one assistance to students. Successful developmental education students found learning communities and supplemental instruction to be beneficial when completing English courses, while tutoring was most useful for math courses (Gebru, 2009). Luke and Ireland (2014) also recommend the use of
learning communities, noting that enrollment in these communities is positively correlated with student-faculty interactions. Lakeview College has a tutoring center, a Writer’s Studio, and Supplemental Instruction for some English and math courses.

Helpful faculty who were culturally sensitive also increased retention rates (Bush & Bush, 2010; Glenn, 2004; James, 1991). While the make-up of the faculty at many community colleges, including Lakeview College, is predominantly White, faculty sensitivity varies from college to college and professor to professor. Mentoring was also found to increase student persistence (Beckles, 2008; Dickens, 2012). In one study, graduates reported only interacting with faculty in class unless they were struggling with the academic content (Harvey, 2010), but the limited scope of student-teacher interactions did not appear to hinder students’ persistence. Another study found that the availability of faculty and the relationships between students and their professors, especially the casual interactions, contributed positively to student persistence (Myers, 2012). Full-time professors at Lakeview College are expected to teach 15 credits per quarter, hold 10 office hours per week, and advise 30-50 students. It seems like given these requirements at Lakeview College and the support for faculty-student interactions in the literature, students in the study will have things to say about their relationships with the faculty.

Curriculum that was inclusive of African American contributions to the field of study has been linked to Black student persistence (Roberts, 2009). The limited course offerings at the 100 and 200 levels that define community colleges often limit the availability of specialized race and gender study courses. Lakeview College does offer a Black Thought and Culture course. The inclusion or exclusion of African American contributions may vary widely from campus to campus, course to course, and between professors teaching the same course. Hearing from
students about their experiences with the curriculum at the college might support Roberts’s (2009) assertion that inclusive curriculum increases persistence.

**Environmental Variables**

There was also support for the effect of environmental variables on student persistence in the literature. When family responsibilities caused students to leave college, it typically occurred early in student’s academic career (Wood, 2012). Several studies revealed that family support was important to Black student academic achievement (Dickens, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Myers, 2012), particularly for immigrant students (Sutherland, 2011). The literature seems to suggest that when students had the support of their family members, they were much more likely to persist. Conversely, without familial support, students were more likely to drop-out.

Dowd and Coury (2006) found that paying for community college courses with student loans had a negative effect on persistence for all ethnic groups including African Americans. However, they also determined that the use of grants had no effect on persistence. Since a large percentage of Black community college students come from lower SES, these financial aid factors play an important role in retention, according to the literature.

Some researchers found that employment was correlated with persistence, especially when students were working in fields with some connection to their career goals (Wood, Hilton, & Lewis, 2011) while another found no correlation between employment and academic success (Perrakis, 2008). Wood, Hilton, and Lewis (2011) suggested that when employment interfered with a student’s course schedule, particularly when a student had to drop below full-time status in school to maintain employment, there was a negative effect on persistence.

Environmental factors appear to be the most important category when it comes to the persistence of Black, male community college students (Wood, 2012). Unfortunately, these are
the factors a college has the least amount of control over. To gain a clear understanding of these factors within the study, students and graduates were given the opportunity to talk about their families, their jobs, and their experiences with financial aid during the focus groups and interviews.

**Psychological Variables**

The literature clearly links psychological variables and student persistence. Reasons for enrollment and commitment to persistence were significant for both White and Black students (Perrakis, 2008). Certainty of their chosen major increased retention; it was positively correlated with goal commitment which also increased retention (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001). Having personal goals outside of school such as being a community leader, being financially well off, and being able to live close to relatives served as motivating factors for student persistence (Wood & Palmer, 2013). Successful students regarded school as a priority and were willing to make sacrifices to earn their degrees (Dickens, 2012).

Men who felt academically capable were more likely to be retained (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001), whether they actually were highly capable or not. This finding is supported by Strayhorn’s (2012) assertion that student satisfaction increased retention. Students who felt capable were more satisfied and this made them more likely to persist.

An external source of validation contributed to student persistence (Harvey, 2010). Black men who transferred from a community college to four-year institutions recalled specific conversations with college faculty and staff that made them feel capable (Harvey, 2010). Furthermore, both African American students and immigrant African students who persisted through their first year at a community college had positive self-concepts (Adams-Mahaley, 2012).
Finally, Beckles (2008) supported H. P. Mason’s helplessness/hopelessness factor in his work. Beckles (2008) found that successful students were able to articulate their goals, had a clear plan in place to reach them, and saw the benefits that would come from achieving their goals. It is the final component of Beckels’s findings, that the degree would make a difference that supports the helplessness/hopelessness factor.

When interviewing participants for this study, the researcher strove to create a safe environment so the men could share about these very personal, internal motivations and their own sense of self-worth and ability since psychological variables were strongly connected to persistence in the literature.

Social Variables

As with all the other categories within persistence theory, social variables have been found to affect persistence in a number of studies of Black, male community college students. A feeling of belonging was related to retention for male community college students (Myers, 2012; Perrakis, 2008). In one study, community college graduates recalled feeling welcomed into a diverse campus community (Harvey, 2010). In another study, Black immigrants and African American students who persisted were experienced with living in a multicultural society (Adams-Mahaley, 2012). The community college was not the first time they had regular interactions with people who were different from them. When students experienced stereotyping on campus, they reported it was a barrier that had to be overcome to achieve their academic goals (Dickens, 2012). However, Myers (2012) reported that some students were able to use negative stereotyping experiences to spur their success. A positive campus climate has been linked to student persistence for Black men (Roberts, 2009) and for both male and female students of color (Hurtado, 1992). Social networks both on and off campus helped immigrants persist through
their first year (Adams-Mahaley, 2012) and transfer to universities (Sutherland, 2011). Furthermore, students reported that programs supportive of the needs and interests of Black, male students on campus contributed to their success (Beckles, 2008). However, Bush and Bush (2010) found that involvement in campus activities did not increase academic success in California community colleges.

Interestingly, Strayhorn (2012) found a negative correlation between student social integration and student satisfaction. He posited that this could have been due to negative campus interactions with students who were significantly different from them. Weis (1992) noted that racism on one urban community college campus was rarely challenged, finding that Black students’ anger was often directed at others of their own race. This negative climate had an adverse effect on persistence.

From this final section of findings and results on social variables, the researcher ensured that students and graduates in the study had the opportunity to share their experiences fitting in to the college community. As discussed in the positionality section of Chapter 1, their experiences were often different from the researcher’s and it was important to allow their voices to be heard. The campus climates at the three main sites of Lakeview College are all quite different. Campus A reflects its very diverse community. This campus has been able to engage a portion of the student body in campus activities, but many students come to class and then go home or to work. Campus B is more traditional in terms of younger students and is predominately White in student body. This campus has a very active student life department. Campus C is on a large military installation and serves active duty and their dependents in a mostly online environment. Data was collected from the participants about which campus they attended to see if there were any differences in the students’ experiences between the campuses.
A survey of the literature revealed that the retention of African American community college students is a complex issue. Throughout the extant literature, there is support for all five categories in persistence theory. Overall, the quantity of research surrounding Black men in community college settings is sparse. This study was informed by a broader review of the literature, which follows.

**Persistence of Black Men in Universities**

To supplement data from community colleges, studies from universities were also reviewed to provide further insight into the issue of Black, male persistence in higher education. Shaun Harper, an Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has written and researched extensively on the issue of men in higher education, in particular on Black men in university settings (Harper, 2004; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper, 2006a; Harper, 2006b; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harper, 2008; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Harper, 2010; Harper, Davis, Jones, & McGowan, 2011; Harper & Davis, 2012; Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010). He was awarded a $649,000 research grant to study Black, male college achievement over a four year period ending in 2012. While he is not the only person conducting research at the university level, his work will be prominent in this section of the proposal due to his prolific research on this subject matter. After initial searches on EbscoHost, this reviewer used a bibliography created by Harper (2012a) to further ensure that all studies concerning Black men in community colleges were included in this paper.

**Student Background Variables**

There is support for the influence of student background variables on the persistence of Black men in universities settings. However, some of the findings and results reviewed in the literature are not relevant to community college settings. More Black women than Black men
enrolled in college; but more women than men graduated ("Black students show," 2008; Washington & Newman, 1991). While this disparity is not in dispute, the reasons why it exists have yet to be determined (Washington & Newman, 1991). Black, males at highly selective college and universities had higher graduation rates than those at other institutions ("Black students show," 2008), which may be attributed to the overall low acceptance rates at these colleges. Students enrolled would have demonstrated academic success in their high school years. Conversely, Lakeview College, like most community colleges, had an open enrollment policy, so all students are accepted. Simmons (2013) found that the university students in his study felt well prepared academically for college and credited that preparedness as contributing to their persistence.

Harper and Nichols (Harper & Nichols, 2008) remarked that while Black, male undergraduates are treated as a homogeneous group in many studies that there is a good deal of intra-group variability. Black, male undergraduates come from a variety of socio-economic classes, vary in age, include students with disabilities, are gay and straight…they represent the spectrum of demographic diversity. It was expected that the students in this study would also have intragroup diversity, and this was the case. In fact, purposeful sampling and a maximum variation strategy will be used to help ensure diversity of study participants.

Considering this intra-group diversity, it is important to note that race was the most significant social group identified among Black men who had sex with men (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). The men in Goode-Cross and Good’s (2009) study reported that race was the aspect of their identity that most affected their daily lives. In fact, only one of the seven participants in this study identified as gay. Lakeview College has only asked students to identify their sexual orientation since the spring of 2013. No specific question about sexual orientation
was included on the questionnaire or in the interview guide as it was unlikely for a student in the study to self-disclose a gay identity.

**Academic Variables**

Several characteristics that fall into the academic variables category have been found to impact university persistence of Black men. Mathematical self-efficacy seemed to contribute to student success (Noble, 2011). Students developed this self-efficacy primarily through vicarious experiences and enactive attainment. The vicarious experiences were drawn from both teachers/professors and peers in Noble's work (2011). A sense of math self-efficacy came from students’ grades earned, course enrollment, and the effortlessness of understanding/learning a new mathematical skill (Noble, 2011).

The relationships that were developed between faculty and students on campus were also found to have contributed to student success (Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012; Palmer & Young, 2009). Students who felt connected to their professors did better academically which increased retention (Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012; Palmer & Young, 2009). Furthermore, while faculty sometimes expected less from their Black, male students, holding these students accountable to the same high expectations that are the standard for the rest of the students body contributed to their success (Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). Lower expectations can cause lower self-esteem which decreased the probability of persistence (Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). While Lakeview College has practices in place that support student-faculty relationships, faculty expectations are not specifically addressed in existing policies. Students in the study did have some insights to share about how expectations influenced their persistence.

In a survey of 250 students at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) conducted by Hickson (2002), students reported that a faculty mentor contributed to their success.
In fact, 88 percent believed mentors were important for students; and 73 percent thought having a faculty mentor on campus improved their likelihood of graduating (Hickson, 2002). Hickson’s (2002) study was not gender or race specific, but it can be assumed that the majority of respondents were Black since the study was conducted at an HBCU in Texas and that a significant portion of those surveyed were men. Driggers (2007) and Beale (2010) both found that mentors were beneficial for Black, male students. Participants in Driggers’s study noted that their mentors came from a variety of sources both on campus: faculty, upperclassman, coaches, counselors, and off campus: family members and church members. While in Beale’s study, each participant credited a faculty mentor as a motivating factor. These mentor relationships were informal, but found to be highly beneficial to the students (Beale, 2010; Driggers, 2007). While Lakeview College does not have a formal mentoring program in place, using faculty members as advisors encourages this practice.

The academic transition into a university proved to be a challenge for some students in Driggers's work (2007). Most of the students Driggers interviewed found college work more difficult than high school work, and they had to adjust their behaviors and expectations in order to succeed. Opportunities for students and graduates to reflect on their expectations of college when they began compared to their experiences while they were enrolled at Lakeview College were provided.

**Environmental Variables**

The literature suggests that environmental variables, those factors outside of the institution, influence persistence. Academic support alone did not seem to be enough to overcome significant socio-economic barriers (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Programs like Upward Bound must coordinate their academic support programs with social supports to be more
effective (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Providing students with various student services increased retention and graduation rates.

Family support was consistently reported by as contributing to the success of Black, male students (Beale, 2010; Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012). This seemed to be true for both Black men and Black women (Brooks, 2011). Family support did not necessarily mean parental support. Family support could have come from parents or siblings as Yates, Pelphrey, and Smith (2008) reported. They found that there was a correlation between family support and student persistence. Students in the study had an opportunity to discuss the support they receive from their families: financial, logistical, and emotional. It was anticipated that since all the students in this study had graduated that they would share how their families supported them. However, the questions were worded in a way so as not to bias the results with this assumption.

In two separate studies conducted at HBCUs, study participants noted the influence of faith and/or religion to their academic success (Brooks, 2011; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). One of these studies was conducted with both male and female participants (Brooks, 2011). Several students who participated in a study of persistence at a Predominantly While Institution (PWI) also gave credit to a higher power for their success (Gilkey, 2012). The interview questions for this study were worded in such a way as to allow graduates to discuss the impact of faith on their success if that was a factor for them.

**Psychological Variables**

The psychological variables described in the literature as significant in university setting were different than those in community college settings. For example, high achieving Black, male students were able to develop “conflict-free masculine identities, despite their unconventional views and the ways in which their out of class time was spent” (Harper, 2004,
Harper (2004) opined that the development of a healthy, conflict-free masculine identity contributed to student retention and increased graduation rates.

Harper and Davis (2012) reported that it is sometimes assumed in American society that Black, males do not care about education (Harper & Davis, 2012). They believed that this stereotype is often reinforced in the media. In fact, they found that this is not the case with high achieving Black, male students. In their counternarrative study, they postulated that these men are aware of the educational inequalities, but see education as “the great equalizer” (Harper & Davis, 2012, p. 111).

One factor what was similar to findings of community college students was that successful university students are motivated by intrinsic factors (Palmer & Young, 2009). Students must find the internal drive in order to complete college (Palmer & Young, 2009; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). However, the motivation not to disappoint an important person in a student’s life was also a motivating factor which enabled students to persist (Driggers, 2007). Simmons (2013) found that high motivation and setting goals positively contributed to persistence. This interpretive case study was informed by these works and provided students an opportunity to discuss their motivations for succeeding in college during the interviews in response to the question, what kept you coming to school when you thought about quitting?

Social Variables

Two main factors within the social variable category were present in the university-based literature: belonging and peer relationships. A sense of belonging was a salient factor in the success and retention of Black, male students (Palmer & Young, 2009; Simmons, 2013; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008), especially at the beginning of a student’s academic career (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Palmer & Young, 2009). Yet many men reported a lack of
involvement of other Black, males in campus activities (Palmer & Young, 2009). Students who did not feel connected to the campus community were often less likely to get involved. Quality social environments led to student persistence (Beale, 2010). Strategies implemented by universities that increased a sense of belonging included small gifts with the university logo and written communication from multiple sources at the university which reinforced membership in the campus community (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). These strategies did increase a sense of belonging in some students, especially the communication strategies. There are currently no specific strategies in place to foster a sense of belonging at Lakeview College.

High achieving Black men at PWIs consistently reported that relationships with same race peers contributed to their academic success (Gilkey, 2012; Harper, 2006b). Many were involved in student organizations, especially Black student organizations. Connections with Black, male, student leaders early in their academic career contributed to their accomplishments according to Harper (2006b; 2008). Several students in Gilkey’s (2012) study reported that their same race peers created a support system that enabled them to succeed at a PWI. This support was academic, emotional, and financial. Friendships were cited by both male and female Black students at an HBCU as contributing to their academic persistence (Brooks, 2011). Ensuring that students create connections with peers seems to increase their prospects for retention. The emphasis on same-race peer relationships was limited in the literature and confined to university settings, therefore the impact in community college settings is unclear.

Summary

While the settings are different, there is considerable overlap in the results and findings in the literature on Black, male university students and Black, male community college students. The models of persistence theory in the theoretical framework are supported by data from both
universities and community colleges in the extant literature. Many researchers limited the scope of their research to one particular factor related to persistence such as employment (Wood, Hilton, & Lewis, 2011), engagement (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), student loans (Dowd & Coury, 2006), orientation courses (Derby & Watson, 2006), student satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2012), mathematic self-efficacy (Noble, 2011), student-faculty interactions (Wood & Ireland, 2014), and family factors (Brooks, 2011). Other studies have been more global in nature (Beale, 2010; Beckles, 2008; Bush & Bush, 2010; Glenn, 2004; Myers, 2012; Palmer & Young, 2009). Often, the theoretical framework driving the study, most frequently critical theories (race, gender, pedagogy) or social capital theory, shifted the focus to a particular set of factors related to the theoretical lens. Studies that considered all five categories and the inter-relationships among them were rare.

While older studies honed in on the reasons why students left college, several newer studies, especially the doctoral research, have shifted to strengths-based perspectives and examined success. Success has been defined in a variety of ways in these studies such as achieving a particular GPA, passing a certain course, transferring from a community college to a university, or graduating.

No matter the setting, several variable categories from the theoretical framework were found to strongly contribute to student persistence. The literature suggested that within academic variables, a mentor seemed to be an important component of persistence (Beale, 2010; Beckles, 2008; Dickens, 2012; Driggers, 2007; Hickson, 2002). Further, the importance of faculty student relationships cannot be underestimated (Bush & Bush, 2010; Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012; Glenn, 2004; James, 1991; Palmer & Young, 2009; Wood & Ireland, 2014). The literature showed that within social variables, a sense of belonging increased the probability of persistence
at both community colleges and universities (Harvey, 2010; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Myers, 2012; Palmer & Young, 2009; Perrakis, 2008; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). Within Environmental variables, many studies reflected on the significance of family support to student success (Beale, 2010; Brooks, 2011; Dickens, 2012; Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Myers, 2012; Sutherland, 2011). There was minimal overlap in the remaining categories of student background and psychological variables. The social and academic factors found to be relevant in many studies would be impacted by the policies, practices, and overall culture of an institution. This lends further support for conducting this case study at one college, Lakeview College, where all the study participants will have shared similar experiences.

The themes that emerged from the literature review informed the creation of the interview guide, operationalizing the broad categories suggested by the theoretical frameworks. The significance of religion for some students (Brooks, 2011; Gilkey, 2012; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008) was unanticipated based on the frameworks. While not every facet of the theoretical frameworks were supported in the literature review, such as attendance and course availability, the research advanced with a solid framework based on all five categories from persistence theory and the findings from previous research, informing the research design.
CHAPTER 3

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter?
2. How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence?
3. How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students?

Methodology

A qualitative case study was undertaken to best answer the research questions and shed light on how to solve the problem of practice concerning the disparity of graduation rates between Black men and the general student body at Lakeview College. This chapter presents the rationale for a qualitative research design, as well as a description of the research tradition, focusing on the appropriateness of a case study approach. Detailed information regarding participants, recruitment and access follows. Further information regarding data collection, storage, and analysis are then addressed. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the factors included in the research design to assure trustworthiness.

A Qualitative Research Design

The majority of the studies in the literature concerning the persistence of Black, male undergraduates were quantitative in nature, as were the theoretical frameworks. The greatest dearth in the literature was in the qualitative realm. Due to the researcher’s belief in the multiple realities experienced by different individuals as describe in the positionality section, a need to understand the experience from the participant’s point of view, and a desire to allow the research
process to emerge, a qualitative design was determined to be the best fit for this study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). A qualitative study was an especially apt place to start at Lakeview College, since data were available pertaining to who was being retained and who was not, although primary research studies had yet to be conducted on this topic. The research questions are broad which afforded a good starting point for understanding how Black men persisted to graduation at this community college. When beginning an exploration of a topic, it is important to collect comprehensive data so as not to accidentally exclude important findings. Merriam (2009) listed the defining characteristics of qualitative research as:

- a search for understanding from the participants’ perspective
- the role of the researcher as “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 15)
- the utilization of an inductive process
- an exceedingly descriptive product

Creswell (2007) added an emphasis on transformation and social change to Merriam’s list. In addition, he asserted that qualitative studies are emergent in nature. The researcher must be flexible enough to follow leads as they develop during the interviewing process.

This qualitative study was conducted from an interpretive or constructivist perspective. The purpose of studies undertaken from this perspective is to describe, understand, or interpret a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) explained that the topic is approached with the understanding that there are multiple realities and that experiences are context-bound. In fact, from this perspective, “researchers do not ‘find’ knowledge, they construct it” (Merriam, 2009, p. 9). An interpretive approach was chosen to ensure that the
datedness of the theoretical frameworks did not bias data analysis. Additionally, this approach best fit the researcher’s world view as evidenced in the positionality statement.

Methodological Approach: Case Study

A case study was selected as the best approach to answer the research questions, which focus on the experiences a group of students and graduates at a particular college. Case studies provide an opportunity to study a phenomenon thoroughly in a specific context that is particularly germane to the phenomenon (Yin, 2009). In exploring the experiences of successful Black students, the underlying question sought to understand how these men were able to stay and complete their studies at Lakeview College. The context of the college was integral to understanding the phenomenon of degree completion. Each college has a unique culture. Additionally, programs and services available to students vary from college to college. This study examined the strategies and resources used by these Lakeview College students that enabled them to graduate. After the completion of this single site study, a multi-site study could be undertaken to determine similarities and differences across colleges. However, understanding the practices, procedures, and programs that Black men experienced at Lakeview College that enabled them to persist to graduation was the necessary first step.

An important characteristic of case studies is that they provide a clear methodology for investigating a topic, prioritizing investigation until a depth of understanding is achieved (Cousin, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). This depth is accomplished through paying attention to all of the details participants share (Cousin, 2005; Kyburz-Graber, 2004; Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006). Depth is also achieved by seeking out multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995).
In this case study, nine graduates representing all three campuses and a variety of academic programs were interviewed. Two focus groups were facilitated with students who were in their last quarter before degree completion. Six field observations were conducted in public settings at Campus A. No information that would identify specific individuals was collected during these observations. College documents and the college website were reviewed to shed light on issues raised by the student interviews. The purpose of this document and website review was to gather additional information about a specific programs and procedures that were brought up by students and give readers of this study a complete picture of the context of this particular college.

Case study research concentrates on stories that are interesting and unique enough to address through narrative form and yet can be generalized to a theoretical framework (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006). A case study approach provides an opportunity to learn from the success of others (Stevenson, 2004). Finally, case studies allow readers to develop their own interpretations of the study from a rich narrative (Stake, 1988; Stake, 2000). The story of Black, male students’ persistence to graduation at Lakeview College meets all these criteria.

The case study conducted was an intrinsic (Cousin, 2005; Stake, 2000) or interpretive (Stevenson, 2004) case study. The purpose of this type of case study is to gain a better understanding of a particular case (Cousin, 2005; Stake, 2000; Stevenson, 2004). In this research study, the researcher sought to understand the success of Black men at Lakeview College. Case studies define the spatial, temporal, and physical boundaries of the case (Cousin, 2005; Yin, 2009); they focus on a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). This case study was bound by the Lakeview College setting where the Black men participating in the study had both individual and
shared experiences. The unit of analysis was Black men who persisted to graduation at Lakeview College within the last three years.

**Setting**

A basic understanding of Lakeview College is essential to make sense of this case study. Stake (1995) advocated for a rich description of the context of a case study so that readers have the opportunity to “develop vicarious experiences” (p. 63). Lakeview College is an example of the traditional three pronged mission of community colleges: adult basic education/English as a Second Language/remediation (25%), transfer students (50%), and work force development (25%). There are 24 professional technical programs offered ranging from construction management to dental hygiene to digital design.

Lakeview College is made up of three main campuses. The original campus, Campus A, is located on a hill overlooking the city park. The campus is comprised of seven buildings. It serves a diverse, mostly non-traditional student body. This campus houses the Veteran’s Center which provides support to active duty, retired, and former military personnel; TRIO, a support program for first generation and low income students; and a growing international program which served almost 300 students last year. About a 40 minute drive west is Campus B. This campus serves a large Running Start population. Running Start is a program that allows high school students to enroll in college courses for duel credit during their junior and senior years. They have a younger, more traditional student body that is very active and are a predominantly White campus. There are six buildings in a very green, park-like setting on this suburban campus. About 40 minutes south of Campus A, is Campus C which is located on a large military installation. This site serves mostly active duty military and their dependents. There are a limited number of face-to-face offerings at the base education center. The majority of students at
Campus C take classes online which are offered in a continuous enrollment cycle to accommodate active duty military life.

**Participants**

The primary participants for this research study were graduates who responded to a solicitation letter sent from the Institutional Research office of Lakewood College to Black, males who graduated between spring 2010 and spring 2013. These participants had self-selected African American and male on their admissions forms. Lakeview College made the initial contact with graduates asking for permission to release their contact information to the researcher of this study to ensure compliance with the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Purposeful sampling, a method that relies on the researcher’s judgment to create a representative sample of the population under study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009), was sampling strategy planned for this study. This method is typically utilized when the researcher wants to “discover, understand, or gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). However, due to the limited response from graduates, the pool from which the sample was drawn was small. Lakeview College sent out 190 letters to Black, males who had earned a certificate or degree within the last three year. All 18 graduates who agree to release their information to the researcher were contacted and asked to fill out the questionnaire in Appendix A. Everyone who returned the questionnaire was interviewed. Fortunately, both professional-technical and transfer graduates responded so that two of the three populations enrolled in the college were represented in the sample. This added diversity to the sample and ensured that these two key populations on campus and their potentially different experiences were included in the study. Basic skills students, the third key community college
population, were excluded from this study because their focus is not degree completion. However, one of the participants interviewed started out as a basic skills student.

The goal of the sample was maximum variation, selecting participants who represented the widest possible range of characteristics relevant to the research question (Merriam, 2009). Every effort was made to include students who differed in age, employment status, college engagement levels, number of credits taken per quarter, and primary instructional delivery method (online or face to face courses taken) to ensure the study capture the greatest diversity of student experiences. As students responded and were interviewed or participated in a focus group, their characteristics at the time of their enrollment at Lakeview College were noted on the maximum variation chart which is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional-Technical student</strong> F1, I4, I5, I8, F2, F2, I9</td>
<td><strong>Transfer Student</strong> F1, F1, I1, I2, I3, I4, I6, I7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Under 25 years old</strong> I3, I6, F2</td>
<td><strong>Over 25 years old</strong> F1, F1, I1, I2, I4, I5, I7, I8, F2, I9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working while attending college</strong> I2, I3, I4, I6, I7, I8, F2</td>
<td><strong>Unemployed while attending college</strong> F1, F1, I1, I4, I5, F2, I9</td>
<td><strong>Did not answer</strong> F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Married/Partnered</strong> F1, F1, I1, I2, I6, I7, I8, F2, I9</td>
<td><strong>Single</strong> F1, I3, I4, I5, F2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cumulative GPA over 3.0</strong> F1, F1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, F2, F2, I9</td>
<td><strong>Cumulative GPA under 3.0</strong> F1, I9</td>
<td><strong>Did not answer</strong> I1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Has children</strong> F1, F1, I1, I2, I4, I8, F2, I9</td>
<td><strong>Is not a parent</strong> F1, I3, I6, I5, F2</td>
<td><strong>Did not answer</strong> I7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Began at college level coursework</td>
<td>Enrolled in remedial coursework</td>
<td>Was not actively engaged in campus life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1, F2</td>
<td>F1, F1, I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, F2, I9</td>
<td>F1, F1, I1, I2, I4, I6, I8, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in at least one: club/organization, student government, athletic team, or arts performance/event</td>
<td>F1, I3, I5, I7, F2, I9</td>
<td>F1, F1, I1, I2, I4, I6, I8, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time student (less than 12 credits per term)</td>
<td>Full-time student (at least 12 credits per term)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2, I6</td>
<td>F1, F1, F1, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, F2, F2, I9</td>
<td>I1, I8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primarily an on campus student</td>
<td>Primarily an online student</td>
<td>Did not answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1, F1, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, F2, F2, I9</td>
<td>I2</td>
<td>I9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using financial aid</td>
<td>Self-paying for classes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1, F1, I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, F2</td>
<td>I4, F2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus A</td>
<td>Campus B</td>
<td>Campus C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1, F1, I3, I4, I5, F2, I9</td>
<td>I3, I4, F2</td>
<td>I1, I2, I6, I7, I8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the research design phase, it was hoped that there would be participants who represented each criterion in column A and each in column B. Fortunately, while there were only 18 questionnaires returned, this goal was still accomplished.

Students from all three campuses were included to ensure that this study is representative of Lakeview College as a whole. The demographic data from Campus B showed few Black men enrolled, therefore the researcher anticipated difficulty recruiting participants from this campus. However, two of the graduates interviewed attended some classes on Campus B and some on Campus A. One of the focus group members attended classes exclusively at Campus A. It was originally thought that since many of the students on Campus C were active duty military, they would be difficult to include as well. One of the reasons why this campus offers primarily online
classes is to accommodate active duty students who could be transferred mid-quarter to anywhere in the world, temporarily or permanently. Surprisingly, five of the nine graduates interviewed were enrolled at Campus C. One graduate was interviewed over the phone since he was transferred and was stationed in a different state at the time of the study.

All in all, contact information for 18 graduates who self-identified as African American and male was provided to the researcher by Lakeview College after receiving consent from the graduates to release their contact information to the researcher for the purposes of this study. The researcher then sent the questionnaire in Appendix A to the graduate’s email addresses that were provided. As the questionnaires were returned, graduates were invited to an interview provided their responses on the questionnaire allow for a new box to be checked on the maximum variation chart (Table 3). This is a form of criterion sampling using the answers on the initial questionnaire as the criteria for inclusion (Creswell, 2007). Saturation was reached after the first focus group and eight interviews were conducted. Saturation occurs when no new information is provided by participants to add to the understanding of the issue being studied (M. Mason, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). One final interview was conducted after the analysis of all the previous interview data and field observation data to confirm the findings and ensure that saturation had indeed occurred. No tangible incentives were offered to the participants of this study.

All current students that were in their final term of study at Lakeview College and had self-identified as African American and male were invited to take part in a focus group through emails to their student accounts and fliers posted on campus. Four men agreed to participate in the first focus group summer quarter. Three of those men actually participated. Six men agreed to participate in the second focus group. Only two attended. Inclement weather may have
contributed to the low turnout for this fall quarter focus group. The first focus group provided some initial data. The second group was used to confirm saturation and ensure that no relevant factors were missing from the data.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher had access to Lakeview College where the study took place due to a previously established relationship. Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study was obtained at both Northeastern University and Lakeview College, Lakeview College contacted graduates who met the study criteria using their administrative records. The recruitment letter in Appendix B was sent with the college’s request to release the contact information of recent graduates to the researcher. When the college received a response from a graduate, that form was sent to the researcher who created a list of graduates interested in participating in the study. The researcher then contact the graduates by phone to solicit their participation in the research study and emailed them the questionnaire in Appendix A and the informed consent form in Appendix C. As questionnaires were returned, data was entered on the maximum variation chart and participants were contacted to schedule an interview. When participants were interviewed, the researcher took them through the information in the informed consent form in Appendix C, answered any questions they had, and ensured that they understand the process and their rights. Participants signed two copies of the consent form, one of which they kept and one of which was retained by the researcher. In total, nine graduates were interviewed.

Lakeview College also provided a list of Black, male students thought to be in their last quarter for potential inclusion in focus groups. There were 45 students on the list for the summer quarter and 55 on the list for the fall quarter. The researcher contacted all the students on these
lists, except for two who were known to her personally, by phone to invite them to a focus group conducted on campus. An email was also sent to their college email accounts. Those who consented to participate were sent the questionnaire in Appendix E and the informed consent form in Appendix D. Since only four students agreed to participate summer quarter, all four were invited to participate. Eleven students were interested in participating in the fall quarter focus group. Two focus group times were arranged to accommodate everyone who wanted to participate. Two of the six scheduled students showed up for the first fall focus group. Only one of the five students showed up for the second group scheduled during finals week. The student who showed up was interviewed since he had completed his final exams and was for all intents a graduate at that point. The focus group participants were also walked through the informed consent process using the document in Appendix D. Any questions they had were answered to ensure that they understood the process and their rights. Participants signed two copies of the consent form, one of which they kept and one of which was retained by the researcher.

Several steps were taken to ensure confidentiality of the participants in this study. All documents with participants’ names and personal information were stored in a locked filing cabinet. All electronic files with participants’ names, personal information, digitally recorded interviews, and other sensitive data were password protected on the researcher’s personal computer. Other than a professional transcriber, the researcher was the only person to have access to the data. Furthermore, each participant was given a pseudonym, and the recordings were identified by pseudonym when sent for transcription. The names of any individuals mentioned by participants in interviews and focus groups were removed in any excerpts used. The college that served as the research site was also assigned a pseudonym.
Questionnaires received from individuals who did not attend a focus group were shredded and not analyzed as a part of this study.

The Belmont Report (1979) identified three ethical principles that must be taken into consideration prior to the start of any research project involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. All participants in this study were capable of self-determination and could choose to participate or not through the process of informed consent. There were no vulnerable populations. Participants could withdraw from the study at any point. There was minimal risk to students or graduates associated with participation in this study. Care was taken by the interviewer to be a respectful listener. Follow-up questions and reflective listening techniques were employed to ensure that an accurate understanding of the participants’ perceptions is recorded. Furthermore, steps were taken to ensure confidentiality as previously discussed. In terms of justice, this study is attempting to address an inequity. So while the burden of participation fell on Black men, it is hoped that the results decrease the achievement gap for them as well.

**Data Procedures**

**Data Collection**

In alignment with case study best practices, this study utilized multiple sources of data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Specifically, a three pronged approach to data collection was undertaken. The primary data came from in-depth interviews with Black, male graduates. Secondary data was collected from focus groups, field observations, college documents, and the college website. Additionally, field notes were written throughout the data collection and analysis processes. An initial focus group was facilitated with Black, male students in their final quarter at Lakeview College. Then, in-depth interviews were arranged individually with Black,
male graduates. At the same time, observations were conducted on Campus A in public locations that the focus groups and graduates identified as important to their success or as a barrier. Observations were done at the following locations: the Tutoring Center, the cafeteria, the library, the Veteran’s Center, the athletic center, and the Welcome Center which includes financial aid, registration, TRIO, Access and Disabilities Services (ADS), and a variety of student services. Lastly, an additional focus group and a final interview were conducted to check for saturation and confirm initial findings.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups were conducted with students in their final quarter at Lakeview College. The size of each focus group was limited to 4-6 students. Merrian (2009) noted that six to ten participants is the commonly recommended size for focus groups. The researcher chose a lower number of focus group participants due to her limited experience facilitating focus groups. Current students were invited to participate via an initial telephone call. A flier was also posted around the campuses. A conference room was reserved in the Welcome Center for the focus groups to meet and pizza and non-alcoholic beverages were offered as an incentive to participate. As students arrived, they were engaged by the researcher in the informed consent process using the form in Appendix D. As the students ate their pizza, they were invited to fill out the questionnaire in Appendix E if they had not already returned it. The interview guide in Appendix F was used for the focus group. Some follow-up questioning was a part of the focus group process and the interview guide was created with the intention to allow for this. Approximately 15 minutes was allotted for eating and filling out the questionnaire and then one hour for the facilitated discussion using the interview guide.

The initial focus group was conducted summer quarter 2013. The purpose of this group was to collect some initial data, flesh out the case description, and identify important issues to
ensure they were included in the in-depth interviews. Two of the three men in this initial focus group knew each other previously. The three members had good synergy and confirmed each other’s experiences and added to their own stories based off of what others said. It was expected that the interviews, observations, and initial data analysis would take some time. During the subsequent quarter another group of students in their final quarter was brought together. This final focus group provided an opportunity for triangulation of the emerging categories and was more confirmatory in nature.

The focus groups were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcribed focus group document as well as initial findings supported by quotes from their interviews to ensure the work captured their experiences accurately, a process Stake (1995) called member checking.

**In-depth interviews.** In depth interviews were conducted with Black, male students who had graduated with a certificate or degree within the past three years. Phone calls were made by the researcher to invite potential research subjects to participate and explain the study using the contact information provided by the graduates. Email was used for any follow-up communication that was needed, such as the questionnaire in Appendix A. Six interviews took place on Campus A. One interview was held over the phone to accommodate the spouse of an active duty soldier who had been transferred to another state. Skype was proposed so that the interviewer could see body language, but the participant preferred the telephone. Two interviews held at a public library, a mutually agreed-upon location.

The interviews were informal and open-ended; see interview guide in Appendix G. While a list of questions was generated in advance, the researcher let the conversation flow naturally in a semi-structured interview type as described by Merriam (2009). She noted that this
type of interview is guided by a set of questions or topics to be discussed and involves some specific data that is collected from all participants. However, there is flexibility in the order of topics and wording of questions. Seidman (2006) stressed the importance of letting the interview unfold in an organic way and not being tied to an interview guide. Once rapport was established and the informed consent process was finished, the remaining audio recorded portions of the interviews ranged from 30-75 minutes. The average length of the question and answer portion of the interviews was 47 minutes.

Like the focus groups, all interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Participants were given the same opportunity to engage in member checking as the focus group members: an opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and initial findings featuring their words to ensure it accurately captured their experiences.

Field observations. Observations were conducted by the researcher in common social areas of Campus A, the most diverse campus. The researcher conducted 30 to 45 minute observations in the cafeteria, athletic center, library, tutoring center, Veteran’s Center, and the Welcome Center. The researcher had hoped to conduct an observation at Campus C since five of the graduates were enrolled there, but was denied the opportunity. Notes were taken during these observations which were used to write field notes directly after the observation took place. The researcher tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible as recommended by Stake (1995), so as not to influence the behavior of those being observed. Merriam (2009) stated that it is crucial that these notes are transcribed immediately after the observation to obtain the most accurate and detailed data. She also noted that these field notes should be very detailed and that a separate
section should be included for the more subjective commentary about the observation. The researcher’s notes complied with all three of these suggestions.

All observations were done in public settings and no information that would identify individuals was collected. Thus, there was no need for informed consent for field observations. All information was collected anonymously.

The observation in the library was particularly rich in terms of data collection. There were students using this space in a variety of ways confirming the participants experiences related in their interviews. During the observation, every computer was in use by a student. Small groups of students were clustered in various areas throughout the library working together on schoolwork, although it appeared that a couple of groups near the library doors were doing more socializing than studying. There were Black, male students interspersed throughout the library, mostly working independently. Two of the small groups included Black men in a group of racially diverse men; one of the small groups was made up of both men and women. One trio consisted of only Black men.

**Field notes.** Field notes were written throughout the data collection and analysis process. The field notes included an audit trail. An audit trail “describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). Accordingly, these notes detail the entire process of the study, including the researchers initial thoughts about the data collected. The field notes were both descriptive, capturing what the researcher saw during interviews including the setting, people, and actions in as much detail as possible; and reflective, the researcher’s subjective thoughts and feelings about the process (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). These notes helped to provide triangulation for the study
(Stake, 1995) by providing an additional source of information to confirm or repudiate the findings.

One of the first entries in the audit log after coding began documented the thought process of differentiating how to code data for research question two about overcoming barriers and research question three about supports. At first, it seemed that there was a lot of overlap between the two questions. The researcher made a decision to code all data that described things the individuals in the study did to overcome barriers in question two. Everything the participants said about what the college did to help them was put into question three. This decision allowed for conceptually distinct categories to emerge. The audit log also allowed for tracking codes as they changed during data analysis. For example, after the first three transcripts were coded, one of the codes for barriers was math. As more transcripts were coded, it became clear that within math there were more nuanced pieces. The initial code of math was broken into several other codes. Some participants talked about their fear of failing math, math anxiety, and math self-efficacy. Others reflected on their math skills and abilities, or lack thereof and the need for remediation. Math help was not available for all math courses, and some students found that the available help was ineffective. Still others struggled to find relevance in the required math courses. Breaking the initial code of math down into the academic barrier that math posed, the value or relevance of the required courses, and the psychological barrier within math proved to be more useful than having all math barriers lumped together in a single code.

**Data Storage**

The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and included a second recording as a back-up. Digital recordings were stored on a personal, password protected hard drive and on a personal, password protected external hard drive for back-up. Transcribed interviews were
stored on a password protected, personal, private computer and backed up to a password protected, personal, private external hard drive. Memos and field notes files were stored on a password protected, personal, private computer and backed up to a password protected, personal, private external hard drive. The external hard drive was offline unless a backup was in progress. Backups occurred each time data was added. Transcribed data files were also protected using a document password. All handwritten materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by the researcher. Recorded data was destroyed after participants checked the transcript sent to them. Signed consent documents were stored in a locked file cabinet accessible only by the researcher for the required three years and then will be destroyed. Transcription was performed by a professional transcription service following industry standards regarding security of data.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using an inductive approach. The researcher chose an inductive approach to compensate for the older theoretical frameworks being utilized which ensured that any data that was outside of the theoretical frameworks was not missed. Accordingly, a general inductive method as described by Thomas (2006) and Merriam (2009) was used for data analysis in this case study. Thomas (2006) described this approach as the “use of detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher” (p. 238). While the findings were eventually compared with those in the theoretical framework, the purpose of this study was not to confirm or refute those frameworks. Rather, the researcher allowed the findings to emerge from the data. An inductive approach also helped to ensure that the participants’ experiences, which were often quite different than those of the researcher, drove the data analysis and creation of categories.
Once the interviews were transcribed using the same formatting (Thomas, 2006), they were compared to the digital recordings and edited for accuracy. After corrections were made, they were read at least three times to identify themes. The richly descriptive data that is inherent in qualitative research presented some challenges for analysis. Thomas (2006) stated that analysis in a general inductive study is guided by the question, “What are the core meanings evident in the text, relevant to evaluation or research objective?” (p.241). As transcripts were read, open coding was conducted. Open coding consists of writing notes in the margins of the transcript that are descriptive in nature and help identify segments of text related to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). After the summer focus group and the first two interviews were conducted, the data were analyzed and coded in this manner. The immediacy of data analysis allowed the inductive nature of this approach to occur. The emerging data guided the study as it continued. Simultaneous data collection and analysis was highly recommended by Merriam (2009) and was practiced in this study. Data was collected and analyzed in these small batches of two to three interviews at a time.

A process of constant comparison was utilized in this study from the beginning of data analysis through the end. Constant comparison “involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 30) with the ultimate objective of finding patterns in the data. For example, one of the initial codes creating during the first round of coding the first focus group and the first two interviews was ‘transfer help.’ After more interviews were conducted and the transcripts were analyzed, this code ‘transfer help’ morphed into a code ‘creating pathways.’ As more stories were heard and the data were compared, it became clear that while some students were talking about the help they received in terms of transferring to a university, the bigger idea was that they were helped to see pathways
both to educational goals and career goals. The code ‘creating pathways’ eventually became part of the category of ‘Nurturing Student Success’ which answered the third research question about supports available at Lakeview College.

As additional interviews were conducted and six transcripts had been open coded, axial or analytic coding took place. This is the process of grouping open codes into broader categories and is interpretive and reflective (Merriam, 2009). The next step was category creation. All the text segments relating to a particular category were exported into an excel spreadsheet document, which led to defining and refining each category to ensure it accurately captured the data (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) proposed the following criteria for categories:

- responsive- categories address purpose of research and research questions
- exhaustive- all selected data fits into a category
- mutually exclusive-each piece of data fits into only one category
- sensitizing-names of categories capture idea behind category accurately/intuitively
- conceptually congruent- categories make sense together and are at the same level of abstraction

These criteria were utilized for the purposes of this study.

When no new categories emerged, no further interviews had to be conducted as saturation had occurred (M. Mason, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). As the study neared saturation, the analysis became more deductive in nature. The researcher used the final focus group and interview to determine if the categories created from the previous interviews were supported (Merriam, 2009). Finally, quotations were chosen that best reflected the central idea or meaning behind each category (Thomas, 2006). These categories and quotations were sent to the participants in the second round of member checking.
Once the data had been analyzed inductively, the categories that emerged were compared to the theoretical framework to determine similarities and differences in findings, a process Yin (2009) called pattern matching. It was expected that findings induced from the data in this study would match the categories posited by the persistence theorists in Table 1; however, the research remained open to alternative outcomes. This expectation was mostly confirmed as discussed in Chapter 5.

**Limitations**

As with any research tradition, there are some inherent strengths and limitations of case studies. The greatest strength of this approach is that it provides rich data derived from a holistic perspective (Cousin, 2005; Kyburz-Graber, 2004; Merriam, 2009). Because of the scope of case studies, generalizability is a concern. The specific context is the center of the case; therefore, the findings cannot be separated from that context (Stake, 1995). This does not mean that there is no meaning for those not affiliated with the site of the case. As Merriam (2009) stated the reader decides what aspects of the study might be applicable to another situation. Time is also a limitation: both the time it takes to produce a good case study, and the time it takes to read a richly detailed account of the participants’ experiences in the finished study (Merriam, 2009). Since the researcher is the primary investigative tool, case studies are limited by the skills of the researcher (Cousin, 2005; Merriam, 2009).

The sample of this study created a limitation. There were only two participants with cumulative grade point averages under 3.0. Based on this fact, it appears that not only were the participants successful in their educational endeavors, they did significantly better than average, which is defined in the Lakewood College catalog as earning a grade of 2.0. Also, only two part-time students participated in the study. The experiences of part-time student might be the same
as full-time students or could be substantially different. There were not enough part-time students in the study to accurately represent that perspective. Finally, a large portion of the sample was comprised of veterans and active duty service members. This also skewed the data collected. Local residents not affiliated with the military might have a different view of their time at Lakeview College and different strategies they used to succeed. Also, those participants who were service members might have developed skills and mindsets that better enabled them to persist to degree completion.

The agreement with the study site requiring graduate consent to release contact information to the researcher also created a limitation. Graduates who agreed to participate in the study may have done so because they either had overwhelmingly positive or overwhelmingly negative experiences that they want to share. Looking at the transcripts from the interviews, the former seems to be more accurate.

Another limitation was the study setting. The first level of sampling, choosing a site for this case study out of all the community colleges was omitted. Because this researcher was most interested in affecting change as a result of this study, she chose the setting in which she could most likely implement the recommendations suggested by the findings, Lakeview College, where she is employed. Other community colleges were not considered for this study. The fact that all participants were students at Lakeview College may limit the ability to generalize the findings of this study to other community colleges. However, because the goal of this study was to increase retention and graduation rates at this particular college and because the setting was a boundary of the case, the researcher believed it was best to limit participants to just Lakeview College students. Additionally, while the findings of this study are not generalizable, the
experiences of the graduates in this study have legitimacy in their own right and could be used to foster discussion on other college campuses that lead to change.

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher is employed by the college at which the study took place as the Director of Education Programs. The majority of the students in the education department are enrolled in a professional-technical early childhood education program or an elementary education transfer program. There are few men in these programs and even fewer Black men. It is unlikely that the researcher’s role as a faculty member and director of this department would have biased data collection since all of the participants were unknown to her. In fact, the two men who were on the focus group lists who were known to her were intentionally excluded so as not to introduce bias into the data.

Several strategies were implemented to ensure validity in this study as outlined by Creswell (2007). First, participants were added to the study and interviewed until saturation was achieved which means no new insights were provided by participants (Creswell, 2007). Second, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews to confirm that the data collected accurately captured their experiences. Third, observations were conducted by the researcher and information was gathered from college documents and the college website in addition to the interviews and focus group(s) to provide some triangulation, the use of multiple sources to provide corroboration (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). Fourth, respondent validation, a process through which emerging findings were presented to the participants to see if the researcher’s interpretations and categories seemed accurate (Merriam, 2009), was employed. Finally, a peer review process was undertaken using other students in the doctoral program at Northeastern University to check the research processes utilized.
Yin (2009) recommended pattern matching to check for internal validity in case study research. Pattern matching was part of the data analysis process. This process helped validate the findings of the study by comparing them to the theoretical models of persistence theory presented in Chapter 1.

One additional technique to ensure reliability was employed: the creation of an audit trail. The researcher kept a log detailing the data collection and analysis portions of this study to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

While eliminating all bias and subjectivity on the part of the researcher was not possible, every effort was made to minimize them. The researcher engaged in a self-reflective process to identify assumptions about the educational experience in general and her study participants in particular. She committed to letting the data speak for itself. Care was taken to afford each participant the opportunity to fully share his story. Seidman (2006) stated that differences in race, gender, age, and social class between the interviewer and the participants can make the process more challenging. In this study, at least two of these four differences existed in each interview. Seidman (2006) suggested ways for the interviewer to bridge these gaps: being aware of potentially sensitive issues, showing respect, having a genuine interest, being conscious of racism/sexism/ageism/classism, and being committed to equity. These suggestions were followed. Additionally, because the researcher is employed by Lakeview College, she was very familiar with this setting. Again, it must be said that she was committed to allowing the data to tell the story and made every effort to not make inferences, but rather ask what evidence supported each finding.
CHAPTER 4

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter?
2. How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence?
3. How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students?

The answers these questions were discovered through observations at Lakeview College, focus groups with students in their final quarter before graduating, and interviews with graduates. As the data were collected, coding of transcripts, field observations, and the researcher’s field notes/audit log was completed. The process of constant comparison pushed the researcher to refine codes and look at the bigger ideas in the data. Then, the codes were combined, forming eleven conceptually distinct categories, one of which contained two properties, and answering the research questions. A brief overview of the study participants is provided, followed by an outline of the findings and the case description. Each research question is answered in its own section using the categories that emerged from the data. Every effort was made to allow the voices of the participants to be clearly represented in this chapter. The categories were induced from the data and each stands on its own. In the final chapter, conclusions and connections back to the literature and theoretical framework are presented. However, in this chapter the focus is the unit of analysis for this case study: Black men who persisted to graduation at Lakeview College within the last three years.
Study Participants

Five students in their final quarter before earning a certificate or degree at Lakeview College participated in two focus groups. Turner, Kenny and Rodney were in the first focus group. Brycen and Raymond were in the second. Additionally, nine graduates were interviewed individually. The participants were all Black, males, but otherwise represented a wide range of the student body as exhibited in Tables 4 and 5 below. The reader will get to know the participants through their words and experiences in this chapter.

Table 4
Focus Group Participants

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<th>Pseudonym</th>
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Findings

The data collected from the focus groups and interviews, in addition to the field observations conducted by the researcher, were analyzed and synthesized into eleven categories and two properties that answered the research questions. Addressing the first research question, the barriers to persistence that Black, male students at Lakeview College encountered were grouped into four categories: ‘Integrating into College Courses’, ‘Navigating the College System’, ‘Waging the Battle Within’, and ‘Balancing Multiple Roles’. The category of ‘Integrating into College Courses’ is about the struggles faced in college classes such as the
curriculum not being a good fit, the challenges of remedial math, figuring out the grading system and assignment expectations, and the failure of tutoring for some students. 'Navigating the College System’ speaks to all the policies and procedures of the college outside of classes. Many of the participants were unaware of college processes, especially registration and advising procedures. The majority of the participants spoke of not having role models who graduated from college, so they had to blaze the trail. The internal strife experienced by participants such as fear, lack of self-confidence, racism, and being unsure of why they are attending college makes up the category of ‘Waging the Battle Within’. Finally, almost every participant spoke about the juggling act of college, balancing their roles as students with those of family member, friend, and/or employee. Most students were balancing at least two of these responsibilities discussed in the category ‘Balancing Multiple Roles’.

Questions two and three asked how students prevailed over these barriers. Question two approached this from a personal angle: What did each student do to overcome these barriers? While question three tackled the barriers from an institutional approach: What did the college do to enable student persistence? From the students’ perspectives, there were three categories described the way they overcame the barriers that they encountered: ‘Finding Their Motivation’, ‘Developing an Understanding of College’, and ‘Building a Support System’. Students found their motivation in two main places. The first was living up to expectations, both of others and of themselves. The second was in goal setting. Participants set both short and long term goals for their education and/or their careers. Students also developed an understanding of college by taking advantage of college resources, making the time for school and schoolwork, using their knowledge of their own strengths and challenges to plan for success, finding alternatives when something is not working, and getting financial aid in place. Lastly,
the participants created a support system. They found a pack of people to support them academically and socially on campus and participated in study groups. They asked for help from peers, professors, staff, and family members. They found role models who were further along in their education to show them the way. They also relied on the support of family members at home.

Participants noted four ways the college supported them to persist to degree completion: ‘Creating a Positive Social Environment’, ‘Enabling Academic Learning and Growth’, ‘Going the Extra Mile’, and ‘Nurturing Student Success’. They mentioned seeing others like them on campus, having small class sizes, feeling connected to faculty and staff, being treated fairly, and feeling like the people on campus were friendly. All of these contributed to a welcoming campus atmosphere and most of them were the result of strategic actions taken by the college. There were many things that happened in the classroom that enabled academic learning and growth. Participants spoke highly of their time in classes. They shared many examples of teaching strategies used that were effective for them, of active involvement during class times, and of the value of critical feedback to their academic growth. The students had many anecdotes of faculty and staff ‘Going the Extra Mile’. This is when employees go beyond their job description or what students can reasonably expect from them. Finally, students recognized many ways that the college nurtured their success. This category speaks to the role of a community college in higher education: open access, creating pathways, designed for student success, the variety of student support programs available, and meeting the needs of the community. The students enrolled in courses on the military installation, Campus C, spoke about how those classes are designed specifically for military personnel with shorter terms and more flexibility. The findings are summarized in Table 6 for ease of reference.
### Table 6  
**Overview of Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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| **1. What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter?** | **Integrating into College Courses**  
This category is defined as a lack of accurate expectations, knowledge, and resources for engaging in classwork.  
**Navigating the College System**  
This category is defined as not understanding the degree pathways and the rules of college administrative processes.  
**Waging the Battle Within**  
This category is defined as wrestling internally with fear, self-confidence, racism, and the reasons for attending college.  
**Balancing Multiple Roles**  
This category is defined as the competing responsibilities at school, home, and work. |
| **2. How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence?** | **Finding Their Motivation**  
This category is defined as determining the personal meaning and purpose of a certificate or degree.  
**Property 1: Living Up to Expectations**  
This property is defined as realizing the aspirations that others have for them and those they have for themselves.  
**Property 2: Setting Goals**  
This property is defined as establishing short and long term objectives for their education and careers.  
**Developing an Understanding of College**  
This category is defined as learning what it means to be a college student and how institutional processes work.  
**Building a Support System**  
This category is defined as constructing academic and social networks comprised of classmates, college employees, family members, friends, and/or co-workers. |
| **3. How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students?** | **Creating a Positive Social Environment**  
This category is defined as establishing a welcoming atmosphere that supports the building of relationships among the diverse, yet representative student body, staff, and faculty.  
**Enabling Academic Learning and Growth**  
This category is defined as utilizing effective instructional strategies in college courses.  
**Going the Extra Mile**  
This category is defined as the willingness of faculty and staff to do whatever is necessary to enable student success. |
Nurturing Student Success
This category is defined as meeting the students where they are and providing a plethora of services to support students as whole human beings while they work towards their educational goals.

Case Description

A description of the context of this case study was provided in Chapter 1 and the setting explained in Chapter 3. This chapter presents Lakeview College through the eyes of the fourteen participants in the study. Lakeview College is a large, comprehensive community college consisting of three campuses. Each campus has its own culture and serves a slightly different community. As part of a national community college achievement initiative called Achieving the Dream, data have been collected and analyzed to discover inequities in completion rates. The college discovered that one group that is not graduating proportionately is Black men. The researcher took on the task of determining what barriers to graduation existed for Black men and how they overcame them using both their own strategies and those within the college system. This case study is bound by the Lakeview College setting where the Black men participating in the study have both individual and shared experiences. The unit of analysis is Black men who persisted to graduation at Lakeview College within the last three years.

Barriers to Persistence

The first research question sought to determine what barriers to persistence Black, male students faced at Lakeview College. The barriers students encountered fell into four conceptually distinct categories: ‘Integrating into College Courses’, ‘Navigating the College System’, ‘Waging the Battle Within’, and ‘Balancing Multiple Roles’. This section defines each category, and then provides data to support the category.
Integrating into College Courses

Many of the participants experienced challenges integrating into college courses. This category is defined as a lack of accurate expectations, knowledge, and resources for engaging in classwork. Participants had to learn what it meant to be a community college student enrolled in courses. Figuring out how to learn in this environment and what the expectations were in their courses was a challenge for most at first. This category consists of all the struggles to be successful in college classes.

Math was mentioned specifically as a barrier for eight of the fourteen participants. All eight of these participants began in remedial math courses. There did not have the needed mathematical knowledge for college level work. Tony explained how college math was different than high school math,

It was a lot of formulas that I had to remember. In high school or other math courses it goes by chapters and you just learn that chapter and you go from there and once you take the test you go to the next chapter. You temporary learn it…

When asked if college math was more cumulative in nature, he agreed. Telvis shared his frustration at failing math:

It took me three times to get Math98, pass Math98, so when you’re so frustrated in passing that math class, I know that even forces a lot of people to quit because one thing pre-reqs in math is hard for a lot of people. I know a lot of people that just can’t get through it. That was probably one of the biggest issues I had when I did fail the math class. I’m not used to failing anything, so I failed the math class twice… if I would have failed that math the third time, I don’t know would I have passed. I don’t know if I’d have continued.
Walter summed up one of the main problems with math, “I had to start with remedial math because, you know, math is a perishable skill and I wasn't school for over ten years.” The ‘use it or lose it’ component of math forced so many of the participants into remedial math. There, they had to relearn the math they used to know and sometimes learn some new math. As Rodney pointed out, the expectations for math skills and knowledge have changed over the years.

Figuring out and meeting the expectations of a college class was another challenge for students. Imhotep, who completed his bachelor’s degree and is currently enrolled in a master’s program, felt like his first two years at Lakeview College were the most demanding of his academic career. He cited longer reading assignments, stricter grading, and having to learn the language of his field as what made it demanding. Tony found the attendance policies frustrating and didn’t feel like they were fair for adult students who could demonstrate mastery of content without consistent attendance. Telvis explained how he struggled to understand college grading and expectations:

I was doing so good, I thought. Had an 83% which in high school percentage of grades… college, you think they’re higher than they are. In high school, you get an 83, you’re good. You got a B; you’re probably going to pass even if you do fail a final. But here, they put so much weight at like 40% into that final that if you don’t, you’ve got to be precise. Every single test you’ve have to know, you have to be precise on what you take, and know that you’re going pass and have to pass it to actually pass. They’re not just letting people slide by and stuff like the important classes like math and English and stuff, you really have to-. They want you to know what they taught for the quarter for you to pass.

Zapp stated simply that he “wasn’t really aware how the GPA system worked.”
While academic help was available, these resources were not always effective for students. Sometimes the problem was with the subject matter or explanation, while other times it was social such as a personality conflict. Joe explained how his math professor offered tutoring sessions in the building, but Joe struggled to understand the professor due to his accent. Telvis found that there were not tutors available for Finite Math, a specialized math course required for his degree. Zapp and Turner both accessed tutoring, but the tutors could not explain things in a way that made sense to them. All of the tables in the tutoring center had at least two people at them when the field observation was conducted. It appeared that tutors were helping multiple individuals at a time. It was difficult to determine if students were getting the help they needed while remaining unobtrusive. From the body language observed, some students were really struggling while others had an easier time.

Finally, several students had trouble with the curriculum in general. Imhotep found the curriculum to be very Eurocentric. He provided the following example:

… the textbooks. I could probably grab my textbook anywhere, especially in business, that’s my field, when they talk about the history of business and its evolution they never mentioned African slavery. What happens is when I read this stuff I’m like, if I don’t study on my own to get it, I could become an immoral business professional when I come out of school if I don’t have the whole picture, the whole story. I understand society is uncomfortable acknowledging its past and taking responsibility, but it’s creating irresponsible graduates and there’s crazy people in the business world. I’m not even impressed by the business field because it’s producing I think mental deficiency because it’s not giving us the whole story…
He shared that a lot of Black, males do not connect to the curriculum, that it is not practical for them. Brycen also did not see contributions from Africans or African Americans in his curriculum. Bob was not aware of any ethnic classes offered and felt that they might “open minds up a little bit more.” Campus C’s schedule posted on their website showed one Ethnic Thought and Culture course available on the military campus, but none available online. The eSchedules for Campus A and B also listed an Ethnic Thought and Culture course. Additionally, a Latin American Thought and Culture course was offered, as well as two cultural anthropology courses. The college catalog showed a Black Thought and Culture class, but it was not offered on the eSchedule for the current term online or at any location. Rodney’s concern with the curriculum was a bit different. He wanted his curriculum to be immediately relevant and practical in his field. One of the courses he struggled with was math because he did not see how the math he was being asked to do for his degree would help him in his life or career.

Navigating the College System

While the previous category centered on barriers to success in college classes, the category of ‘Navigating the College System’ is concerned with all the other components of college success. This category is defined as not understanding the degree pathways and the rules of college administrative processes. There is more to college than just showing up for classes. Students need to know which classes to register for, how to pursue a degree, what to do about placement tests, how to register for classes, and different college deadlines. To further complicate things, many of the participants did not have role models of college graduates in their lives to help them navigate the system.

Some participants saw college as an unknown. Tony summed up this feeling, stating, “When it comes to college, I was just oblivious, I didn’t really…I dropped out at the high school
and I just did like a half a semester…it was just all too confusing.” Raymond concurred, “I don’t know if I knew what to expect…when I walked through those doors.” Brycen also felt uncertain about college. Without role models, about half of the participants were blazing the trail. Joe thought about the examples of educated people in his life and wondered if they were there and he just was not seeing them. When asked specifically who his examples were, he responded, “That’s a good question. I really don’t…I don’t even know that I had any.” Bob related that he was the only one out of his siblings to have earned an associate degree. Telvis honed in on this even further:

I didn’t know anything about anything…because a lot of Black people … before I came to college, before I came to [Lakeview]…pretty much I didn’t know anybody to ever graduate from college. My friend’s mom graduated from college, but she’s like so to herself you really can’t get no advice, but she’s the only person I know that grew up in my neighborhood actually graduated from college. Most of us don’t even have dads so going to college … and even … I know when I was … I mean the generation now, hopefully they’re a little more well-educated about the benefits of going to college. But with us, I didn’t see nobody.

It is difficult to be the first one to do anything. Those who come first do not have anyone in their immediate circle to ask for help navigating the system. Some of the participants who did have role models in their families, like Tony, had to get the support via phone because those they knew who graduated from college lived far away.

Getting placed into the right classes and registering for them also proved to be a challenge for many. Joe felt like the placement test was “not a good snapshot” of his math abilities because the classes expected different things than the test. Richard also felt like he was
put into the wrong math class. As he explained, “When I got to the actual class and I received that 1,250 page book and what we would be studying is the last 250 pages, I realized I didn’t know much of the previous 1,000 pages.” Telvis was able to register for the second part of a two-quarter anatomy and physiology course his very first quarter. Without having taken the prerequisite, he said, “I was trying to catch up with everybody, and the knowledge they already had. I didn’t have no knowledge.” To compound matters, he didn’t have the textbook either. Due to a lack of proper advising, he did not take all the classes at Lakeview College that he needed to take before transferring to his university program which meant that he had to take additional classes at the university which were significantly more expensive that the community college. He estimates that it held him back a whole year. Rodney had the opposite issue; he took a lot of classes that were not needed for his degree. Laughingly, he related his experience:

   I’ve taken sociology, psychology, acting, speech, you know all of this, I’ve been here for three years… And so basically, I was taking all these classes, but then I didn’t really realize the concept of being here. You have to take these prerequisites and stuff. And so this last year I talked to a counselor and he said well, you didn’t have to take this and you didn’t have to take that, electives like the college success courses and stuff like that. I’ve taken almost every course we have here except for economics.

Tony spoke of his confusion around registration time. He struggled with the process of getting the code he needed to register online each quarter, selecting the courses, figuring out the credit hours, and trying to decide which of the worksheets with certificates and degrees he was given that he should follow. Richard also had a difficult time in that he was put into a professional technical program for his first two quarters and then learned that the professional technical degree was not transferable. So, he switched to the transferable Associate of Arts degree.
Telvis, too, began in a professional technical program until he realized it was not a transferable degree. He also had difficulty getting his registration code in a timely manner so that by the time he could register all that was left were “throwaway classes” that no one else wanted.

Walter talked about the challenges of all the required online tools: logging into the student email system, navigating the websites, deciphering the learning management system for online courses. For Tony some of the terms used on campus such as duel enrollment with an on-site university partner were confusing. As he described:

They got [a university partner] upstairs and they're promoting like you can do a dual, which is a great deal, but like me not knowing anything about college and I'm like dual? It's hard enough doing just, not knowing what dual admission meant at the time, why would I do two? I was struggling with… It's just information is out there but I think lot of people just get so overwhelmed.

Joseph struggled at first, “You think you can just go and sign up, but there are the steps you have to go through, the five steps for admissions.” He noted that even after the five steps, there was still more to do, “and then, not knowing that once you sign up, that you need to go meet with your academic advisor. Then, trying to meet them at their scheduled time and locations. As a new student, it was a little difficult.”

**Waging the Battle Within**

The category of ‘Waging the Battle Within’ is defined as wrestling internally with fear, self-confidence, racism, and the reasons for attending college. These were the things each participant struggled with internally that were barriers to their success.

Math proved to be a hurdle for many participants. There are several components that made math challenging for students. While the academic components of math and value of math
were discussed in earlier categories, the math component in this category is more psychological. Richard shared that he has struggled with math anxiety since he was a child. A fear or anxiety around math was evident in about half of the interviews. Telvis was afraid of what would happen to his financial aid if he failed math for a third time. Fear also cropped up in other ways. Raymond discussed his fear of commitment, both to school and to a course of study at the school, while Brycen was afraid of not being understood due to his accent. The overwhelming majority of participants had been out of school for a long time before coming to Lakeview College and had some fear around returning to school and being successful. Kenny articulated this fear well:

The barrier was just, I would say, being scared, of not being in school for 17 years and having to go back… The fear was just failing, feeling that I was going to fail because school, 17 years away from school. I didn’t graduate with my high school diploma. I actually got expelled from high school for fighting, and I ended up losing my scholarship to WSU, and I ended up having two kids right before I turned 18, so I just went to work…For me, school was something important; something I always wanted to do. The scare was that I didn’t complete school, or high school. I did get my GED right away. Just not knowing what my capability of education was. I never had a problem in high school, but I just, I was afraid of failing.

When students return to school, they bring with them all of their prior history and experiences with school. These prior experiences were not always positive.

Racism, both overt and covert, played a role in the participants’ college experiences as well. While no specific incidents were witnessed during the field observations, the participants provided some examples. Telvis went to Campus B expecting some racism due to the history of the town’s development that his mom had shared with him, “When I first started going there I
was already in defense and already thinking I might have to be attacked.” The reality was not as bad as he anticipated, but, “there was a couple of ignorant people at [Campus B].” When asked about these experiences, he said:

It actually happened a couple of times, both on campus, all on campus. In the library I had an issue with somebody before and they were just-. I mean, I can’t sit here and say it was because I was Black and be definite about it, but I do have an intuition that it was because of that because there’s not too many Black kids on campus. A lot of the Black kids on that campus probably went to high school over there. There was probably not a lot from the [other city] or elsewhere. There is some, but most of the Black kids over there are from that area so they know everybody that goes to school with them just like I know everybody here. Being an outsider basically, it was … some people I didn’t know. Some people I could tell, and I did get into a confrontation with one person. I mean, like I said, I can’t be 100% sure it was because I was Black but I’m pretty sure that racial underlies something that was going on there.

A few of other participants shared that they heard racist comments on campus occasionally from other students, but that it was not too bad. Brycen felt a need to “twist” his accent to make himself more understandable to students in his classes. Brandon experienced some uneasiness during class discussions about the prison system and the law due to the statistics noting the large percentage of Black people incarcerated and feeling like people were looking at him. Only one participant, Zapp, had any experiences with employees of the college and overt racism. He recommended that about ten percent of the staff attend …sensitivity training, maybe, I would say, yeah. I would say they need to look at themselves in the mirror and think about, you need to be dealing with all kinds of people, different education
level, and be mindful not to say anything that might be considered disrespectful or insulting. Actually, you made me think back to way back, maybe, I think, the second or third class. It was the interaction I had with an instructor. She ended up crying, and I wasn’t mean, but I told her, “You know you got to think about how that would make you feel if you was my ethnicity and how a lot of times when you stereotype as a certain way, you say that in the classroom,” and people look around at me like … it was just inappropriate. Anyway, I think maybe that person understood the error in their ways, and I’m hoping that she corrected the situation someday.

In addition to the overt incidences of racism, several students identified aspects of overt racism that impacted them. Tony gave voice to the role of covert racism in his education:

To be a Black, male, to be Black or/and a Black, male in the country is different in general whether at the college or not, but I didn't have any issues directly. I feel that you do have to try harder than the average college students that's not Black, because you have so much built in from childhood, from your upbringing. That could be, not to say that every Black person is raised like a certain way or somebody is not Black who couldn’t have been raised at that way. I think subconsciously, we as Black, males, we are taught not to finish college… It's just I just feel like sometimes Black people get looked down upon or something.

While Kenny articulated the internalized racism at play, Imhotep honed in on the other covert racism present in the college curriculum:

Because in a normal community you get your history and you get yourself in the educational process, but since it’s not happening in a Eurocentric environment or like I would say, in the environment is not happening. In order for me to develop as a person I have to do it on my own and I don’t mind taking the responsibility. Because right now
I’m in a community that doesn’t provide that piece of the community for me, which
normally it does.

These findings suggest that both covert and overt racism were present on the college campuses.

Participants also struggled with their own self-confidence. Math also cropped up here in
yet a different way. Joe said about his math class, “I found it too difficult…I just couldn’t do it.”
Telvis said that after failing his math course twice, if he had failed it again, he did not know if he
would continue because he lost his confidence. Failing that second time, he stated, “ended up
crushing my self-confidence.” For Walter, it was English that shook his self-confidence. He
wrote how he spoke, which he joked being from New Jersey was not the “right” way to begin
with. He received his lowest grade in English. Brycen had to build his confidence in his spoken
English. An associate degree was a “lofty goal” for Zapp. Because of his prior experiences in
high school, he said, “I didn’t know if I had it in me.” Kenny stated this barrier succinctly, “My
barrier really was myself. Like I said, the self-confidence within myself.” He also noted that in
his role as a peer mentor, he saw other students struggle with this as well.

The final internal battle for participants centered on why they came to college. Tony
shared, “I didn’t really see the big point [of college] even though I came from an educated
family.” He had to try harder because, in his words, “I didn’t really believe a college education
would give me, will make all my dreams come true so I really had to fight within myself to
continue to come.” Joe, a first generation college graduate, said “[his family] never pounded
home the importance of education.” He shared that when things got hard or another opportunity
came up, there was a desire to drop out and pursue other avenues. Bob was not sure what he
wanted to do when he started his college education at another institution and went to school to
“hang out.” Raymond also attended a previous college and attributed dropping out there to not
having a goal. Telvis went through three different majors at Lakeview College before settling on business. Several participants shared that they had friends that were just there for the financial aid checks and had no intention of earning degrees. An exchange during the first focus group clearly illustrates the men’s idea of the important of purpose:

Kenny: I think also, one thing people forget about what can make it difficult for you to get your degree, is also your mindset.

Rodney: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Kenny: If your mindset is not really set to complete or do it, and that’s just where everything starts there. Everything is going to falling downhill. I think you got to come here with a purpose, stick with that purpose, believe in that purpose, and then you will achieve that purpose. I see a lot of kids come here, you know, I see them more in the halls than I see in their classrooms.

Rodney: Yeah.

Turner: Yeah.

Kenny: I see them hanging out instead of doing studying. I was wondering, “What is their purpose, why they’re here, and where is their mindset at, and why are they here?” And so I was thinking mindset is very, very important as well.

Balancing Multiple Roles

Participants brought up the challenges of balancing multiple roles more than any other barrier. This category is defined as the competing responsibilities at school, home, and work. Participants had duties as employees, family members and/or friends in addition to their responsibilities as students vying for their attention. All but one participant spoke at least once about the challenges of juggling their varied roles in the different aspects of their lives.
Although some only had two roles, many had more. Beyond their identity as students, study participants were sons, husbands, and fathers. They were part-time employees and full-time employees; some were active duty soldiers which can be more than full-time. Participants’ lives were full before they added school to the mix.

For many students, work was the commitment that had to go when they had to choose between obligations. Richard made the decision to quit working during his last year of school so he could finish his degree. Raymond was enrolled in the Corrections Program which required him to be on campus from 7:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. He decided to quit his job to start the program. Gerald and Brycen both ran into problems when certain classes they needed to complete their degrees were only offered during their work hours. Telvis’s employer wanted him to work full-time, but part-time work was all he could manage with school. Joe took an alternative approach and put off math until his work responsibilities were lighter. On active duty in the military, he was a manager and was getting four or five calls every day, and sometimes at night, to take care of problems that arose at work. He also worked weekends. As he put it, “I need to wait at least unit I get closer [to retirement]…then I could get back to [math].”

Several participants felt overwhelmed with so much on their plates. As Bob put it, “You know most of us are in the Army and we’re all trying to juggle school, and the Army, and home, and all that stuff.” Walter, who was also in the Army, shared a similar sentiment about feeling overwhelmed with all of the pulls on his time. Brycen would have liked to participate in some extracurricular activities, but just couldn’t fit any in his schedule. He described his life during school in his interview:

I started going to school. By then, I was the only one working. My wife wasn't working, and I had a family. I had to work. I had to do everything at home. I had to pay the bills, I
had to do everything, yet the money wasn't enough. I couldn't live working, and I had to go full time. I had to go full time school and full time work… I did that for almost one year and eight months. In between one year and eight month, we got our second child. By then, it was a baby and was so challenging. My wife decided to work, and she had to go working at night. Then I go school, and then when she comes back in the morning, I go to work, and then she remains with the kids. When I come back from school, I had to do my homework. By then, I was taking 15 credits. I had a baby who was maybe a month, who didn't sleep the whole night, so I had to make her sleep. I think I did that for six month, when she wasn't sleeping, then there I was. I think I slept for maybe two hours to three hours for six months… All that stressed me a lot until six months, when he decided, he started to sleep at night. That's when I get some gap, so I did that one hour when I started my second year, which was when I started my second year at school. I decided that let me quit work because I was really, really, really going crazy, and then I said let me quit work, so I quitted work.

Brycen described a typical day:

I got off work at 4:30, and then I had to drive from [from work to school]… In between I had to first go home, then shower, because I was doing manual work. I had to go first and shower, then in between there, between one hour that shower, I had to beat traffic. I have to do that, so I had to come home first, shower, then got in class… I used to get here at 5:30, and then I come at 10, and then I have to go back home, and then my wife goes. Mostly she works before even I reach home because we had to get our padmate to go out near school. By the time I leave because I leave school at 10, and then going back home,
then she can leave [the children] for five minutes. Then she actually drives up to her work.

Then I find our kids inside.

And then he would do it all over again the next day. Zapp was unable to take advantage of tutoring that was available on the weekends because he needed to spend time with his family after focusing on school throughout the week.

Joe equated success in school with sacrifice. He felt like he needed to trade off some of those short term fun things such as clubbing or buying a new car to attain longer term goals like a college education. Imhotep also felt a need to curb his socializing in order to focus on schoolwork. In his words:

I tried not to get distracted, because it’s easy to get distracted when you look in the cafeteria…when I look in the cafeteria, I’d see some students were like this, they’re the focused. They’re learning and growing. Other students are playing games or something, they’re hanging out. This is not a time to hang out, not in the training environment. I try to do my hanging out productively.

Telvis, too, had to focus to stay on track and not allow his friends to influence him. He said, “You do get off track sometimes because you know so many people so it’s so easy to go different ways and not go to class, and not do your work, and see okay, he’s doing that and so I’m not going to do work up here.” When it came down to it, participants came to the conclusion that schoolwork took time. As Bob said:

Work load…you know, it’s college. So you expect it at some point in time to be rough. I’ve experienced rough cuz that’s what you’re doing here in college. The work load…it’s college so that’s what you expect. You don’t give up cuz you get a lot of homework or whatever and in class work.
The sole participant with only school responsibilities, Rodney, shared that just juggling multiple classes could be challenging when one was math. He found that he spent so much time and energy on math that he fell behind in other courses.

**Overcoming Barriers**

Research question two asked how Black, male students overcame these barriers to persistence. The participants in this study utilized three strategies to overcome the barriers they encountered. These were categorized as: ‘Finding Their Motivation’, ‘Developing an Understanding of College’, and ‘Building a Support System’. Each category is defined in the sections that follow, and evidence is presented which supports the categories.

**Finding Their Motivation**

One of the ways participants overcame barriers was by finding their motivation. This category is defined as determining the personal meaning and purpose of a certificate or degree. Participants overcame the barriers they encountered by answered the “why” question. Their motivation came from a variety of places. This category is comprised of two properties, ‘Living Up to Expectations’ and ‘Setting Goals’. Motivation is personal, and each participant was motivated to overcome their barriers in a unique manner. Accordingly, this section is organized by participant within each category. Due to the personal nature of motivation, field observations did not yield any supporting evidence for this category.

**Living up to expectations.**

The men in this study had both external and internal expectations they strove to meet. The property of ‘Living Up to Expectations’ is defined as realizing the aspirations that others have for them and those they have for themselves. Kenny stated repeatedly during the focus group that “failure was not an option.” His family, including his four children, was one of his
primary motivating factors to succeed. He wanted to set an example for them. Turner, who was injured on the job, came back to school using Labor and Industry funding at the urging of his wife so that they could maintain their standard of living. When he thought about quitting, it was his children who pushed him, saying, “No Daddy, I go to school and you can go to school.”

Rodney began attending Lakeview College when he got out of prison. He wanted others to see him as he saw himself. He described this motivating factor during the focus group:

So when I got out, I already knew who I was, so I wasn’t proving it to myself. I want to prove it to this judge and the community that they can trust me, right? So every time I completed class, or I do this in here, I think about what she said. Matter of fact, I’m still on community custody. It’s been three and a half years. I’m supposed to be up in December, but I’m getting ready to go see her September 20th and talk to her. I’m going to say, “Thank you,” because I think she probably saved my life, for one thing, if I would kept doing the thing that I was doing. And basically, she gave me a chance to reset my life. So that’s the thing that made me complete my degree…It’s just I have to prove to them that I wasn’t the person that they thought I was. You know what I mean?...It wasn’t their program. It was just me going through that, which I had to go through that to prove it’s not what you say, it’s what you do. I can say, “Hey do this on this.” So I’ve proved to them three years I’ve been on this, have to pee in a cup every month. And it was like, well, it’s easy to me. Because I’m not that person that they thought I was.

While living up to his own expectations for himself, Rodney also worked on changing the expectations others had of him. He wanted to make sure everyone else saw him the way he saw himself.
Similarly, Brycen did not see failure as an option. He said, “I won't stop until I get what I want.” He cited his positive attitude, even when interacting with those who exhibited some racism, as something that helped make things better. He thought “maybe [one of his classmates] was thinking different, maybe some assumptions. I think that's it. I'm like this, I'm like this, when it's not like that. Then you do something different. It makes someone change.” Brycen wanted to meet his self-expectations, and felt further obligations to those in his home country who did not get the chance to come study in the United States:

I grew up in a developing country, so when I came, it was like a chance. It was like a privilege. So many people want to come here, but they couldn't, so I could. That's what kept on pushing me, that I'm really privileged to be here, to go to school, because it was my goal. I got a chance. I got a grant for going to school, so that really kept me pushing me, that I'm really privileged to be here, to go to school, because it was my goal. I got a chance. I got a grant for going to school, so that really kept me pushing…So many people in my country really want to be where I am, but they can't. It kept me pushing.

It was important to Brycen that he took full advantage of the opportunity that was provided to him.

Raymond did not have children of his own, but he wanted to be an example for his nephews. However, this was not his main motivating factor. Once he made a commitment by enrolling in the Corrections program, he felt a need to honor that commitment and keep his word to himself by completing the program.

Zapp wanted to be an example for his nine year old daughter. He wanted her to see him as more than a soldier. He also wanted her to see him earn his degree and hoped it would eventually lead to her earning an even higher one. It was also personal for Zapp. “It’s something
that, when I take my last breath, I can say, ‘What a life...’ I pushed myself to something that I never thought.’”

Walter wanted to set a good example for his kids, to show them through his actions that school is important. Additionally, his wife wanted him to get promoted, so she pushed him to go back to school. He wanted to be able to give his wife positive reports when she checked in with him about how his schoolwork was going.

Telvis’s best moment was commencement. Although he graduated from high school, he had gotten in trouble and was not able to participate in the graduation ceremony. He said, “It kind of was like I re-justified myself basically walking when I got to [Lakeview College]… and [his mom] finally got to see me walk.” He also lived up to his self-expectations by ignoring racist comments. He did not think they were worth his time, nor the trouble it could cause.

Gerald grew up in a household in which education was valued. He felt disappointed that it took him this long to obtain his associate degree. When asked why he never thought about quitting he said:

I know it’s because that was instilled at me younger. I feel disappointed that it’s taking me so long that I’ve disappointed others that it’s taking so long, mainly, I’d say my parents. Then also being an example for my kids because their mother and I, we push education as well but when they see, “Okay, well you both don’t have it...” Of course, we went back later, once again, but at least they saw that and they know we’re going, but no, I never thought about quitting because I can’t quit and then expect my kids to go.

These sources of external motivation were strong for him.

Imhotep echoed Gerald’s experience growing up in a family that valued education, and he felt like he needed to catch up to his sister. He related that he was not consciously aware of
how his mom fostered educational expectations in him growing up, but that he heard her in his head pushing him on. He said, “She’s my inner voice. She says, ‘You can do what you want if you apply yourself.’ …When I choose to do something I’m hearing that voice and I’m trying to confirm it, because that’s what I believe.”

Bob credited his success to internal motivation. He stated, “You still know what kind of person you are. I mean…you’ve just got to do it. You have to go out there and get it because there’s nothing else out there but to go out there and be successful. That’s the only thing I see.” He believed he could do it and lived up to his own expectations.

When asked if he ever considered dropping out, Joe said firmly:

No. Absolutely not. There is no way. I would not have done it. I would have ridden my bike to get to school if I don’t have gas or I would’ve just done what a soldier would've done and started walking. I would have gotten to school, period.

While he and his wife do not have children, he has over 30 nieces and nephews. His mother, sisters, and sisters-in-law, all pointed to Joe as an example for the children to emulate. These were huge expectations to live up to, and Joe did not let them down. In fact, he recalled graduating. “The first thing my wife did was kick that picture straight to my parents like, ‘Hey, see. See, look at all of this and this is how he did it.” In addition to feeling a need to set an example, Joe said he had “a very high internal locus of control.” He explained, “Whatever happens to me, I make the best of it. That’s it. I’m responsible for doing that, to make sure I get through the program, not anybody else. My wife’s not responsible. The instructors aren’t responsible, I am.”

Tony’s mother valued education. She told him that he needed college to be successful, although he defined success a bit differently than she did. He did not feel like he needed to earn
a degree to please his mother because, “she has always been pleased with me.” She was a motivating factor because she had earned a couple of degrees already and would go back to school for more if she could afford it. However, what Tony believed he owed himself was more of a factor. After serving in the Army for 13 years, he felt like he deserved an education. He wanted to take advantage of the GI Bill since he put in all that time as active duty. In his words:

I believe in education, I believe in knowledge and by me being a vet I feel like I earned the right to the government paying my education and I wasn’t gonna waste it. Lots of people die for education, people who take out loans and go 50, 60, 70, $100,000 in debt for education and I was afforded the opportunity to serve the country and now I can have my education paid for, I just didn't, it would be foolish of me not to complete my education.

Tony saw his education as something he earned through his military service and, his degree as something he owed to himself.

**Setting goals.**

The property of ‘Setting Goals’ is defined as establishing short and long term objectives for their education and careers. Participants used goals to motivate themselves in a variety of ways. Sometimes they broke down larger tasks into smaller, easier to accomplish goals. Other times, they looked ahead to long term educational or career goals. Participants both implicitly inferred and explicitly stated the idea that achieving their educational goals would make a difference in their lives.

Goal setting helped Kenny persevere to degree completion. When considering what advice he would give to a new student, he said, “Know that it’s not going to be easy, but you know what it's going to take to get there. Know the steps, like I said, just really have goals, short
and long-term goals with those steps in there to complete your education.” He used this strategy by looking ahead to the career that he wanted, researching how much it paid and what qualification were required, and then working backwards to set goals. He implied that as he accomplished each short term goal, it reduced his fear and gave him the confidence he needed to tackle the next goal. He gave himself five years to earn a master’s degree and then planned to get a job in his chosen field of social services. He saw education as the key to success.

Education is a key for us because we have to work twice as harder [sic], we have to have the degrees because they’re only going to skip over us for promotions and things for so long. They can’t keep denying you, but if you don’t have education, that is one reason, that is one thing that will hold us back. I’ve seen, and not in all cases, but I’ve seen a lot in military. I’m not gonna name the place I worked at, but in a corporate business as well, you will see that a lot. And so that’s just one less thing that they will have an excuse not to help us as young African-American males to move up the chain or move in the direction you want to go in to. But education is going to be the key to a lot of success for you because it just opens doors and it gives you knowledge that you didn’t have. And so I think it’s good.

It seems knowing that education would open doors for him and allow him to achieve his career goals was another motivating factor for Kenny.

Rodney also set an educational goal beyond his associate degree. While he planned to transfer to a local university after graduating, his career goals were a bit uncertain. He laughed as he explained, “I am gonna be one of the people … I didn’t know what I wanted to be until I wrote my dissertation, okay? So that’s going to be like, maybe seven years from now.” Aligning with Kenny’s assertion that education was the key, Rodney stated “My life has just flipped right
around and turned over” since he came to college. He believed he became a more responsible person and saw a bright future ahead. He offered the following advice to new students:

I’ll tell them to look at themselves right now, what status that they are right now. If they're not satisfied with that, then they have to come up with a reason why they're coming to college. If they want to better their lifestyles, they have to do the research as to what they actually want to do in the next four or five years, you know. Then go into, look at the job market, look at some projections of what jobs are rising now and stuff, and then take a focus on that. Basically, if they don’t like their life right now, if they want to change it, think about that all while they're going here. Because if they drop out, they’re not going to change it.

Change proved to be a powerful motivator for Rodney. It appears he is succeeding in his transformation.

Brycen, too, looked a step ahead of his associate degree. He planned to transfer to a university to earn a bachelor’s degree. Raymond, on the other hand, was primarily motivated by career goals rather than educational ones. He said he was:

Tired of being broke. Looking for a career. Like I said, I just turned 25, and having a job is fun. I love having a job, but I want a title. I just wanted more. That's really it. I need money, so I figured I'd start chasing my career or honestly, I didn't have a career in mind, so I guess just to finally find a career, I want that career now.

This desire for a career led him to the Corrections Program at Lakeview College. The short two quarter program was a goal he felt he could meet. As he neared completion of that goal, he decided to continue on to earn an associate’s degree in Criminal Justice, and looked even further
ahead to a local university for a bachelor’s degree. Reflecting back on starting the short-term certificate program, he said:

Now I have other goals. It has just opened my eyes. I feel as a Black guy, just to have, you know, it goes back to that title. I want to at least put my time to use… I'm trying to get into juvenile court, kind of be a mentor, set the bar a little bit. Like I said, just joining a little CPO program, just gave me opportunity, and you don't know until you try. You've got to try somewhere. It's just fitting me, so I just want to do a little more. I feel like I can do a little more instead of just pass time… I have to get like [Brycen] to get my AA first. I've got a real goal, so I'm going to take my time.

By starting with a short-term achievable goal, Raymond built on his success and set more goals to achieve.

Zapp, a retiree from the Army, came back to school as part of his transition to civilian life. He wanted to be able to help veterans, but was told to “come back and see me when you have your bachelor’s.” At that point, he did not even have an associate’s degree. He felt like it would be a challenge for him to earn a degree after being out of school for so long. As he worked towards that AA, he realized he did not want to be a “worker bee” and would need a higher level of education so he could be the one setting policy. He said, “I definitely need to have the credentials, the tools, the know-how, to be able to perform well. I feel in my heart that a master’s degree will get me there.” Zapp was enrolled in a BA program at the time of his interview.

Walter, an active duty soldier, was also enrolled in a BA program at the time of the study. He saw his education as a way to forward his career, explaining “without me going to [Lakeview
College] ... without them being the way that they are, I would have never made Sergeant First Class in the Army. I had to have that education to put me over my peers to get promoted.”

Telvis, who was enrolled in a local university as a business major at the time of the study, was able to succeed by building on each of his successes. When he registered for a class without the prerequisite, he focused on the small successes each day and eventually caught up to his peers. Even when he failed math, he did well enough in his other classes to maintain the GPA goal he had set for himself. The cumulative successes allowed him to try math again. He also used long term goals to motivate himself. He earned his real estate license right before the economy crashed, so he ended up working at a retail store until that store closed. He was “tired of trying to move around to job-to-job and I was trying to find a career,” and he came back to school to find that career.

Gerald repeatedly said education was the key; that it was important. When asked what education was the key to, he said:

Well, it’s the key to a better life and when I say better life, better life is defined differently for different people. If it’s in business or I believe even if it’s just staying home, stay-at-home dad, stay-at-home mother. Education is the key because you want to learn as far as the things that you do not know. That’s not necessarily the definition of education but that’s my definition… We need to learn the things that we don’t know to make ourselves better… Obviously we need money to live in this world but also going back to that personal enrichment. Okay it may not be to go and get a job. You may be a stay-at-home mom, stay-at-home father. You may be very well off where you don’t need to work but going to get that personal enrichment to learn the things that you don’t know is going to help.
While he set the goal of obtaining a master’s degree, the link between education and his career goals was not the sole purpose. He believed education helped improve a person’s situation in life beyond a job, too. Additionally, he focused on the steps along the way to the master’s degree. Getting his associate degree was just one step on the path to that master’s degree. He planned to continue his educational journey to earn a bachelor’s degree, then that master’s.

Imhotep, who was enrolled in a master’s program at the time of the study, articulated that his ultimate goal was education; although he attributed being educated to learning not necessarily obtaining a degree. Formal college education was just one part of his vision of self-education. He believed that his formal schooling served a purpose. “I’ll never be a White guy,” he explained, “but my master’s degree program has taught me how to think like one and how to communicate like one. That may make me effective in the business world that is dominated by that culture… if I get the opportunity.” An avid reader, he chose a degree program that matched his personal interests. When his educational goals were not being met by the school curriculum, he sought out additional resources on his own.

Bob, another active duty soldier, set his sights on the bigger picture when things got tough. When asked what kept him in school during those rough patches, he said:

If you set an alternate goal for that goal, then that alternate goal will motivate you to complete that first goal, more like if I don’t do this, I can’t do this. You see what I’m saying? If I don’t complete this, then I can’t complete this. I can’t be this. What I was trying to do… they had a Green to Gold program within the Army. That’s a program that allows enlisted people to go from enlisted to officers so I’d have a gold bar. In order to do that, I would have to have my associate’s degree. That’s one of the reasons why I was kind of hurrying up to finish… I was trying to hurry up so I could turn my packet in.
He knew that school was the way to advance in rank, so he focused on what his degree would get him. At the time of the study, he was researching bachelor’s degree programs and planned on earning a Master’s in International Affairs.

Richard’s goal was a bachelor’s degree, and he had just completed that degree at a local university at the time of his interview. When he retired from the military, he knew he wanted a government position and understood that he would need a degree in order to be qualified. He was glad he chose to start at a community college because it made the degree seem more attainable. As he described:

It was great. I'm happy I did that because I wanted to go… straight into a bachelor's degree, but I'm so happy and I don't think people realize this that it's a good idea to really get an associate’s first …It gives a self of a completion of something, self-satisfaction. I got the Phi Theta Kappa, I was appreciative of that. That really helped me to move on because I could have stopped if maybe I was just going for the Bachelors. I said, ”Maybe this is just taking too long,” or some people would. Getting to a certain goal or say a halfway point first. I think it was helpful.

While a bachelor’s degree seemed far off, the short term goal of an associate degree appeared more feasible to him. In fact, Richard mused that he might have dropped out of a bachelor’s program part way because it might have seemed to be taking too long.

Joe, too, was transitioning to the civilian workforce after retiring from active duty service. As he looked at job postings, it became clear that to sustain his family’s standard of living, he would need a degree. He was enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program at the time of the interview with 23 other students who were prior military. They had all heard the same message in the labor market, “Yep, resume looks great. You don’t have that bachelor’s degree, don’t
qualify.” He continued to ponder, “I don't know how long it’s going to take, finally, for the Black, male to realize that they have to stay in school, but will it change any time soon? Who knows? But it’s got to hit them at some point, you would think.” He spoke of having to trade some short term wants in order to achieve long term goals. “They want it all right now. I think there can be something said for instant gratification in this. It just doesn’t work. It just doesn’t work that way.” He believed that “You have to get education or you can’t progress in life.” He found it helpful to focus on the short term goal of passing each class rather than focusing on getting his degree while attending Lakeview College. He stated, “The way I saw it is, if I pass each individual class, that’s coming anyway…so that’s all I had to do was concentrate on the work that you were doing.” So while he kept his “eye on the target,” he concentrated on …those little ones you have to knock down before you get to that final one. And that’s the way I took it…Get that one done first and move it out of the way. That gets you closer to the end of it. It worked for me.

Breaking the larger goal into smaller manageable pieces was how Joe succeeded in earning his associate degree.

Tony always wanted to be a psychologist or therapist. When he got out of the military, to take full advantage of his unemployment benefits, he had to enroll in a professional technical program. Because of his interests, he was directed to the social service/mental health program. At first, he was not sure about it, but once he completed his internship, he realized it was indeed what he wanted to do. He could envision himself as a member of that profession which motivated him to complete school. In addition to obtaining a degree to get a job, Tony saw more to education. He said:
I do believe in education. It has been a huge key to success, I guess depending on what kind of success. To be able to deal with certain people…College is a great place to network, to meet new people, people from all different types of backgrounds and to learn how to associate with different people and be able to conversate about different things. Most people that have never been to college they can't converse with, the conversation is very limited. I believe in education that's one of the main reasons why I'm here”

Tony believed that becoming educated would open up social doors as well as career ones for him.

**Developing an Understanding of College**

The second way graduates overcame the barriers they encountered on their pathways to earning a degree was by developing an understanding of college. This category is defined as learning what it means to be a college student and how institutional processes work. Participants had to figure out how the college worked and what it meant to be a college student. Many achieved balance in their lives by securing financial aid so that work was less of a factor in their lives. Several worked within the system to find alternatives when something did not work for them. They learned about the resources available at the college and took advantage of them. Finally, they realized that college required work and subsequently put in the necessary time both inside and outside of class to be successful.

Several students planned for their own success by using their knowledge about themselves and what they learned about the college. Turner remembered a teacher in one of his first quarters saying, “Fail to plan; plan to fail.” He took that message to heart and applied it throughout his time at Lakeview College. Kenny knew that English would be a challenge for him. So, when he started the English class, he arranged for a tutor right way. Joe talked to people and learned which classes where easier and which were more difficult so that he could
“find a way to ease into the system.” His advice to new students reflects this planning, suggesting they “start with something that you’re familiar with, as you progress through those, you can increase in difficulty. That’ll increase your chances of success.” Kenny used this strategy as well. Joe knew he would need to devote a significant amount of time to an intensive math course required for his degree. Thus, he waited until things were not as hectic at work, about six months before he got out of the service, to take the math course. Telvis took time to regroup after failing his remedial math course twice. He purposefully retook it during a quarter when he had easier electives planned. Because Telvis was taking classes on Campus B and his advisor was on Campus A, he used the tools on the college website to create his own educational plan to pursue his degree. He believed that learning to do this at Lakeview College made it easier for him to figure out how to get his bachelor’s degree when he transferred to a university. The flexibility of the classes offered online at Campus C, allowed Walter to plan ahead. He could cram in schoolwork on the weekends, especially on those when his children went to sleepovers.

Making time for schoolwork and attending classes was another thing many of these successful students had in common. An appreciation for the amount of time needed for schoolwork was frequently stated. Gerald noted that it was why “when people get their degree, you hear them say, ‘Oh, you made it through,’ you know through the challenges, through the difficulties…that’s just part of obtaining a degree.” Tony was blunt, “You have to put in the time and effort.” The commitment to school was underscored in other ways. When Richard hit his math barrier, he said “I made up charts and cheat-sheets for myself and I really worked hard at it every single day, without fail.” Even though his math course only covered the last fifth of the book, with a tutor he started at the beginning of the book and worked all the way through it.
Imhotep’s funding gave him the time needed to be successful in school. He was able to attend class to get the instruction, and then could spend the rest of the day completing his assignments to the best of his ability which he acknowledged was associate degree quality at that time. He said he could “read whole chapters and enjoy it and try to take in as much as I can.” Telvis learned to become disciplined. He said his experiences at Lakeview “got me in the flow of training myself to do work, turn in on deadline, to papers right.” Zapp, who did not consider himself to be studious, echoed Telvis. He said, “I just had to be disciplined and dedicate myself to the coursework…pushing myself to do a 20 page report, pushing myself to do 4 or 5 hours of math homework.” In the first focus group, Rodney and Turner both confirmed Kenny’s assertion that to succeed in college “you need attendance; you need to be at school all the time. That’s the key.”

Additionally, the participants took full advantage of college resources. Every participant shared at least one, and often more than one, resource he used at the college. The Veteran’s Center on campus was a resource many used. During a field observation, all three computers in the Veteran’s Center were in use by student, one by a White man, one by a Black man, and one by a White woman. They were all working quietly and independently. Tony described the center as “really friendly and real open to vets and I felt at home.” Tony also took advantage of the unemployment representative housed on campus to help him learn to navigate that complex process. Many students also mentioned using the tutoring center and the Writer’s Studio. Several students mentioned the library and the advising center as being useful resources for them as well. Quite a few students were actively involved in the TRIO program. Four mentioned qualifying for accommodations and took advantage of the supports available through Access and Disabilities Services. Only a couple of the participants took advantage of campus clubs or
student life events that focused on the more social aspects of college rather than the academic ones.

Having their finances in order took a huge burden off of many of the participants. Due to the close proximity of the college to a large military installation, almost all of the participants interviewed and one from the focus groups had access to the GI Bill or some other form of military funding for educational endeavors. These participants expressed how much easier school was because of the support they received from their military funding sources. Because the Veteran’s Administration paid for Joe’s school, he treated it like a job. “If the VA is going to pay me…I’m going to give them what they are supposed to get.” He was able to devote his time to schoolwork without having to worry about working. Imhotep expressed this sentiment well, saying:

I had funding from the military. That helped me. That gave me time to study…A lot of people don’t succeed or they struggle because of money…I didn’t have the financial burden to bring about that kind of frustration…it was really huge for me…I had the money because of my military service. I had the time to question all this stuff and I had the money to get other resources.

Telvis was only able to afford one class his first quarter, then he applied for financial aid. Once he received the aid, he was able to “get serious” about his classes and getting a degree. Qualifying for additional aid allowed Brycen to quit his job and take the last classes he needed to earn his degree.

There were times when the way things were at Lakeview College did not work well for some of the students. In such cases, the graduates were able to find alternatives. Three students found a different path regarding their math requirements. Joe turned to a technical degree rather
than an associate in arts degree so he would not need to complete a quantitative math course. Rodney discovered that there was one local university he could transfer to without a quantitative math course. Telvis used a non-math course to meet the quantitative reasoning requirement for his associate degree, and then took a math course related to his major at the university. Other perceived problems were met with similar alternative strategies. For example, Imhotep supplemented the Eurocentric curriculum with his own self-study. Gerald found a way to flex his schedule and work from the college library so that he could take a required morning class and still keep his employer happy.

Building a Support System

The category of ‘Building a Support Network’ is defined as constructing academic and social networks comprised of classmates, college employees, family members, friends, and/or co-workers. The participants in this study took full advantage of the social supports built into Lakeview College and created additional support systems to meet their own needs. These successful students were not afraid to speak up and ask for help when needed. The graduates utilized their families as a source of support and sought out role models for college success when they were not available in their lives. They identified people on campus and sometimes off-campus to help get them through their degrees by providing academic and social support. It was clear that these men did not succeed all on their own, but rather by making connections.

As Rodney so powerfully put it, “A closed mouth doesn’t get fed, right?” Overall, the graduates reported that when they asked for help it was available, but they did have to speak up to get it. Raymond described entering his corrections program and not knowing what to expect. He said, “I just walked through those doors. I just asked a lot of questions.” Kenny sought out resources on campus. He was not afraid go up to people and ask “Well, what do you do here?...I
really ask a lot of questions because I wanted to know. That’s how I get to know everybody. And everybody knows me because I talk to everybody.”

In classes, students have to use their voices to get their needs met. Kenny suggested, “If you’re afraid to ask, I always recommend go to the teacher and ask the teacher if he will address it to the class.” Even as an online student, Walter emailed his questions to his professors. The participants asked professors, staff, peers, co-workers, friends, and family members for help along their journey. Tony underscored the importance of this trait, even though it was in conflict with his personality, saying “I was really shy, but I knew that I had to ask questions.” These persistent students did not silently pretend to understand; they took matters in their own hands, asked for help, and got the answers they needed.

All of the participants in this study shared at least one way that their families provided support while they were in school. For some it was emotional support: checking in on them, asking how it was going, and cheering them on. For others, the support was more practical. For example, Walter’s wife took care of the kids, freeing up him up to focus on schoolwork. Brycen’s cousins and brothers provided child care from time to time in support of his studies. Telvis’s girlfriend was a student at a local university. She taught him how to fill out the financial aid forms so that he could attend school full-time. Turner’s wife had a bachelor’s degree and was good at math, so she tutored him at home when he had trouble in math.

While there is no evidence of formal mentoring programs on campus, in the catalog, or on the website, five students sought out mentors to serve as role models and helped them figure out college. Tony had a life coach that he connected with prior to getting out of the military. The life coach pushed him to go to college and helped him set goals and reach them. He described the relationship as follows:
Being a man, I never really looked up to another man or respected…I didn’t disrespect, but I never really respected anybody enough to like get personal and invite them into my world, but I respect him, his advice. He’s been in the business world for a long time, you know, corporate America. He is a private investigator for a while and he’s a stay-at-home Dad now and he had fruit on the tree. I want to be a stay-at-home dad something like how can I do that. He is…crime scene investigation so he is college educated, but he also is ambitious and entrepreneurial, so I was like I want to be a stay-at-home dad and I want to be able to afford to do that. I moved from there and then I found that… I'm a Christian, and I found out that he was a Christian too, so he wanted to take time to spend with me, so I took him up on the opportunity.

Tony found someone who had the things he wanted and was willing to help him get there. Gerald knew several Black men who had degrees and were available for him to talk with. He spoke of one in particular, “a young man, we went to school together. He has his own business and so forth, doing very well and he encourages me. He’s like, ‘[Gerald], you got to keep getting your degree, you’re just gotta keep going and make that a priority’” He believed that as Black men begin their associate’s degrees, it is important for them to have other Black men to talk with about the process, specifically those who are further along in their education. Gerald explained, I believe starting off early in your educational career, I think it’s very important to have someone mirror you. Especially for African-American males because of that stigma…and it’s not a stigma, because of the statistics, the data is real so I believe that it’s critical in the beginning.
Telvis’s girlfriend and another friend from high school served as his role models in higher education. Kenny attended the Students of Color Conference with a contingent of other students and staff from Lakeview College where he found a role model. He said of his role model:

He teaches at [another community college] and he’s a Black doctor and he was one of the keynote speakers. He was so amazing. I talk to him from time to time just to pick his mind and learn more. He opened that door for me. I’m pretty sure he did it for other students too, but for Black, males, from my experience, certain leaders that I’ve seen they really want to help other Black, males. It’s just a point you going and ask, and they seeing that you’re sincere about it. I would say gravitate to those who’s been there, who’s done it, who’s in that position that can help guide you and tell you…He’s been through a lot of things that we’re going through, that we experience as well, but he didn’t let that hold him back.

This conference was a transformational experience for Kenny, so much so that he became an outspoken proponent of the conference and highly encouraged others to go.

The final strategy participants used to build their support systems was finding a “pack of people.” Turner used this term to describe what he did his first quarter at the college. He explained how he first got his “pack of people” together:

We’d all just got here and no one really knew each other and I was handing gum (laughter) And I said, well, since we’re all pretty much in the same classes together, let’s just kind of hang out together. And that became a real big thing because it helped me get stuff done cuz, “Hey did you get this?” “You need that done.” Cuz a lot of stuff if you don’t really have someone to kind of help you and guide you, cuz basically you got four classes or whatever, you forget stuff and you miss stuff.
This idea of a “pack of people” resonated in that first focus group. Turner later said:

In the Black community, you know, you try to tell kids, you got to be with kids who wants to have something the right way. Anybody can move the wrong way. But yeah, you just got to surround your people with the right people.

Kenny concurred. “I think for a lot of young, and I say this all the time to young African-American males, surround yourself with people who’s doing the same things that you’re doing.”

Rodney chimed in:

All I know is the elders in my family, they used to say, “If you want to do something go hang around somebody that’s doing what you want to do.” If you want to be successful, and getting past the first year of college, hang out with somebody that’s passed the first year of college, you know. Hang around people that are doing the things that you want to do. It’s not really a set, I think it’s not really a set thing that they need to do because we all, we knew that when we got here. But up here, what you're saying and what you’re saying, it helps to have support. It helps. It can’t hurt, you know, to have people around you that have the same goals that you have.

Turner and Kenny used email, the telephone, face to face conversations, and informal study groups with their packs of people. Kenny was required to participate in a study group in his math class and after seeing how helpful that was for him, he often formed study groups on his own in other classes, especially those that required a lot of memorization, like biology and economics. Rodney described himself as an introvert who did not engage with others much. He recognized that, “Knowledge is in people, when you’re talking with people.” In fact, all three participants in the first focus group learned about the resources available on campus in conversations with others, as did most of the other interviewees. Brycen was surprised at how
helpful the other students in his classes were, explaining that in his home country, that was not the norm. He said his classmates played a big role in his success. In addition to the academic support Raymond got from his “pack of people,” a fellow student picked him up and brought him to school each morning when transportation become a challenge for him. Walter reached out to a soldier he worked with who explained to him how the classes at Campus C worked. Because so many of his fellow soldiers were enrolled in college, even if it was a different college, they provided a source of support and information for him. In Tony’s professional technical program, much like Turner’s, he saw many of the same students from class to class and they helped each other along. Tony said:

   In the social service program, most of us that took a lot of classes together we kind of have study groups and we kind of like love on each other, we pep each other up, you know what to do about this test or this right here, or papers we had to write, we would share notes and just encourage each other through it. I remember at graduation it was like “We did it, we did it,” even though some of us still had to finish another quarter, but it was just encouraging one another throughout the whole thing.

He found it comforting to see the same faces from quarter to quarter:

   …for this program we knew we had to take those classes so we would see each other, couple of new faces, but we knew we would see somebody in the class that we knew, some people. That was a real good feeling to walk into classes in the quarter to see, oh, you know this is the old gang.

   While Tony used his classmates for academic support, he often hung out at the Veteran’s Center on campus to get social support. In addition to the academic support from some of his peers, Imhotep remembered someone throwing him a birthday party. Gerald went to a
professional football game with some classmates. Telvis drew support from his co-workers in the media center on campus. He said those co-worker will “probably be friends for life.” He also drew on the knowledge and support of his friends who attended surrounding colleges and universities. Most of the students who attended Campus C had experiences similar to Joe stated that he and his classmates “leaned on each other,” but they did not socialize outside of school.

Groups of students were visible many places on Campus A during field observations. They were seen sitting together talking and laughing on the semi-circle couches in the lobby of the Welcome Center. While there were a few students sitting alone and eating or studying, most were seated in groups and engaged in conversation with each other. In the athletic center, a group of students was working out together. The remaining students present were working out separately, but smiled occasionally as they passed each other moving around the equipment. Students were also found congregating together in various places throughout the library.

**College Supports**

Data collected to research question three focused on how the study participants described strategies that Lakeview College used that helped them overcome barriers and persist to degree completion. The types of supports graduates described and researcher’s observations and document review fell into four categories: ‘Creating a Positive Social Environment’, ‘Enabling Academic Learning and Growth’, ‘Going the Extra Mile’, and ‘Nurturing Student Success’.

**Creating a Positive Social Environment**

Lakeview College created a positive social environment as evidenced by the data presented in this section. This category is defined as establishing a welcoming atmosphere that supports the building of relationships among the diverse, yet representative student body, staff, and faculty. The college seems to have strategies and practices in place to provide a friendly
environment for students who come to campus, better enabling them to connect with faculty, staff, and other students. The participants noticed a diverse population on campus both in terms of students and employees. The overall feel of the college was described as warm, and people on campus were thought to be approachable. Graduates built relationships with faculty and staff both in and out of the classroom. The participants felt like they were treated fairly.

The first place student often go on campus is the Welcome Center. The name itself conveys the college’s intention. Students were observed in this area as they approached from front desk to access the services in this area. These services include admissions, registration, cashiering, campus safety, evaluations, financial aid, the testing center, TRIO, access and disabilities services, and Running Start. As students spoke with staff in this area, all but one employee smiled regularly at the students. The students sitting in the waiting area did not interact with each other.

As a community college, Lakeview is charged by the state to serve its community which is diverse. Lakeview College’s mission statement supports this mandate, stating that the college “creates quality educational opportunities for a diverse community of learners to thrive in an evolving world.” In fact, two of Lakewood College’s five core themes are access and a positive and diverse college environment. According to the participants, the diversity on campus allowed students to find others “like them.” The facts and stats page on the college website, the combined ethnic demographic for student enrollment at all campuses as of fall 2013 was 54 percent White; 14 percent Hispanic; 11 percent Black; and 10 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. The remaining 11 percent of students were Native American, International students, and other/blank. Students were almost evenly split between full and part time student status. The pictures of the student ambassadors hanging in the Welcome Center showed five young,
traditional aged students. Three were woman: two Asian, one who could not be easily classified by race. The remaining two were White men.

There appeared to be ample opportunities for students to connect with those that they deemed to be “like them,” although how they defined “like them” differed from participant to participant. Tony noted that many of the instructors were prior military like him. Richard noted all of the military or military affiliated students in his classes. Brycen appreciated that they were people in his classes who were his age, “grown-ups” as he called them. Gerald found students like him, around age 45, on Campus A but noted that Campus B had a younger crowd. He was especially impressed by the diversity in upper leadership, something that really stood out to him. All three of the highest administrators at the time he attended were female and one was Black. The pictures of the Board of Trustees hanging in the Welcome Center showed that the board consisted of two women, one Black and one White, and three men, one Black, one White, and one Asian. Gerald also remarked that the head of the campus child development center was male. Telvis explained that the campus’s diversity helped him make friends. However, he observed that Campus B was not as diverse as Campus A. Raymond and Tony mentioned seeing Black faculty and staff on campus. As Zapp put it, “people were from all walks of life.” Conversely, one participant, Joe, noted that during his time on Campus C, he only had one other Black student in a class with him, and that student was female.

How the students interacted with others like them and different from them seemed to vary by purpose. Field observations noted that when students gathered for academic purposes such as in the tutoring center or study rooms in the library, they were typically diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity. In contrast, when students gathered for more social purposes in the cafeteria, the
sitting areas of lobbies and breezeways, and the social areas of the library, they were typically segregated by ethnicity and age.

Participants also commented frequently about the welcoming and friendly environment they encountered on campus. Tony repeatedly mentioned how friendly the campus was. When asked for an example, he described walking into the Veteran’s Center for the first time:

I took my first two quarters on post and I wanted to branch out and I come to the actual campus and they had Veteran’s Center that was real friendly and real open to vets and I felt at home. When I first walked into the vet center… [the person who runs the Veteran’s Center] was there and she was always happy, always smiling, I didn't have to stare around and like look around…she approached me and she helped me with everything I needed help with and she let me know I could come there any time.

Imhotep shared a similar experience walking into TRIO for the first time:

I can tell you about the feeling. I don’t remember exactly which staff members were there, but the feeling was like … it was just inclusive. Like, “Come on in, let’s see what we can do to help here, help you to succeed here.”

Tony, Joe, Bob, Imhotep, Telvis and Zapp all remarked that the students they interacted with on campus were friendly. In Bob’s words:

My experiences at [Lakeview College] have been like floating on a cloud with ice cream and candy and everything you can imagine that makes you happy. You’re happy. Whatever makes anybody happy, that makes me happy. That’s been my experiences. They’ve been great. The teachers have been great, outstanding. They work with the students, the military. They smile. They say hi. There’s no attitude.
He went on to say that the people on Campus C felt “like family.” Joe was on a first name basis with most of the Campus C staff and they knew his name as well. He reported:

When you go in there and you walk in, “Can I help you?” is the first thing you hear. If you stand there for as second, the moment someone sees you, they’re helping you. You don’t have to, “Hello. Can I get some help in here?” That doesn’t happen in there. When you walk through that door, if someone sees you and you have one, two, three I think receptionists in the front that are helping you. You are going to get it instantly.

Walter, who attempted to complete his degree at several other colleges, compared his experienced at Lakeview College with those at other colleges. He stated, “It was like nowhere near as friendly as [Lakeview]. So I just didn't want to deal with them.” Imhotep described walking down the hallway where the business classes were held and hearing laughter which made him think, “They’re enjoying learning” and made him appreciative of the atmosphere created in his program. Gerald summed it up, saying “I really enjoy the environment here. I feel this is just a good friendly environment, a learning environment.”

Over and over, participants discussed relationships built with students, staff, and professors. College policies such as assigning students to faculty members for advising and mentoring and small class sizes seemed to help facilitate these relationships. Many graduates shared stories of interaction with their professors and program staff that demonstrated caring relationships. Tony said that he and his advisor “always had talks…She always pushed me and encouraged me.” In fact, he said he “had lots of talk with most of [his] professors outside of class time…and all of them seems to have really cared.” Zapp concurred. He said that 90 percent of his professors “really cared. They gave a damn.” Richard described feeling “more in-tuned with the teacher… You felt a connectedness with the teacher at any time.” He continued,
“I had a good relationship with the teachers so we would just talk informally and after class too.”

When asked what they talked about, he replied, “not even just school, just life, personal experiences, military, where I’ve been in the world, got to know them on an-other-than school basis.” Telvis spoke of visiting his professors during their office hours frequently to chat. He spent long hours with his journalism professor in particular. He said:

She has an office, and everybody works in there and so they’re coming and going and you get a lot of different side conversations. It’s pretty much you’re open to write about what you’re going to write about so a lot of topics about the world issues and stuff you start talking about.

Telvis also stated that his advisor was one of his biggest supporters. Conversely, Brycen connected more with the coordinator of his program than his advisor. Each participant mentioned a relationship with at least one employee on campus and many spoke of connections to multiple members of the faculty and staff.

Overall, participants felt like they were treated fairly on campus. Zapp reported having experienced issues on other college campuses, but at Lakeview College, he said, “I felt like it was fair and impartial, deeply across the board.” He went on to state:

I felt like I was on the same playing field that the Asian person that was sitting to the left of me, and the Caucasian sitting to the right of me, and the female that were sitting in front of me. I never felt like there were any different tiers in the way … there were different levels or different circumstances, that anybody around me was getting a better shot at getting an A, of getting extra work. I always felt everything just seemed on an even playing field. I never felt like that. Every time I’d go to ask a question, it seems like that they’re ignoring me, what I’m asking for. They see my hand up. They’re
answering that person’s question. I’m sort of a furniture fixture in the class. I never felt that way. I always felt like, “Hey, I’m getting the same opportunities to get the 4.0 as my classmates.”

When an issue arose with a faculty member, Zapp spoke with the faculty member as related in the previous section addressing barriers. After the conversation, he reported, “I think it resolved as far as I got a decent grade out of the class. There was no retribution…There was no repercussions…It was pretty much a done deal after that point.” Telvis also recounted that the situation regarding his ‘no contact order’ was handled in a way that felt fair. He could only attend Campus B one year while the other student involved attended Campus A. The next year, they switched. Joe, Richard, Gerald, and Walter all agreed that they were treated the same as other students on campus.

**Enabling Academic Learning and Growth**

The data suggests that Lakeview College enabled academic learning and growth which is defined as utilizing effective instructional strategies in college courses. When participants spoke of their classes, they found them to be effective. They described active involvement in their classes, lessons that stuck with them, and receiving critical feedback that helped them to improve.

Students believed they were expected to actively participate in class. The participants shared different examples of the requirement. Tony recalled that in “a lot of courses they make you share, you have to do different interviews, I took ‘Interview and Assessment’ where you have to interview each other and you got know little bit about each other.” Imhotep noted:

Faculty was very helpful. They were very good at getting people to share … they were very good at facilitating the learning experiences. I noticed that quiet people or people that needed to be called upon were called upon oftentimes and people that did not need to
be called upon were allowed to speak also. And at the same time the classes were kept on a direction and the faculty was always really helpful. It was overall a positive experience… [the faculty] were very open-minded and dynamic… not rigid and not dogmatic.

Telvis also found the required active participation to be helpful. He gave a brief example of a history teacher who got everyone involved. He then shared the following reflection about his public speaking professor:

Public speaking was my best class I ever took in my life, hands down, because it was just-. He gets you so … he … so much participation in class, and he makes the whole class participate. He makes you be friends with everybody – well, not friends – but he makes you talk to everybody in class. You gotta work with everybody so it was … he was real supportive I believe. I mean I wasn’t so much on a one-on-one basis with him. We talked a few times one-on-one, but I mean out of class, in class we talked a lot, but out of class talked a few one-on-one times but I felt in class though, he was real supportive of what everybody was doing. He actually made me love school. That class, that class did it for me.

Brandon found the required group work to be beneficial. Zapp countered that occasionally “students could be a little rude” and sometimes wanted all the professors’ attention for themselves. However for the most part, Zapp believed that the instructors were able to manage class participation well.

Participants spoke highly of their courses, their instructors, and of particular lessons that stuck with them. Recalling his psychology class on the military installation, Joe shared:
Sometimes… you could see [the professor] kind of slide back in his chair and let us talk to each other about [soldiering]…It is easier to talk about it with somebody you know has had the same experience or close to it…We just talked to each other about it and helped us get through the class and helped everybody personal, lifewise, too. We know why better than we did before and we have somebody we can talk to about it in a classroom environment…Now, things are different in a better manner. I can understand better why this is happening, why this did happen or why this took place… I’m a combat vet just like a lot of people on post, probably the majority of them right now, after 13 years of this stuff, but I wanted to know why we act the way we do. Why we react to the things we do and I wanted to verify some of the things I learned about that.

Joe was able to relate what he was learning in his psychology classes directly to his life in the military. For Tony, it was the internship required in his professional-technical program that made a difference. Being able to put what he learned during his classes into practice in a work environment allowed him to see himself as a member of that field. Richard recollected how an instructor went over math problems one by one with him, enabling him to finally get it.

Bob recalled “a field trip to go watch the salmon jump upstream so they can go spawn for the season and have their babies and stuff.” He also shared that his math teacher had him do a report on who the first Black mathematician. This assignment was very motivating for him and allowed him to see himself in the math curriculum. Gerald recalled an inspirational lesson from one of his classes:

[the professor] split the room up into two and challenged us and had everyone stand arm length, stretch your arms out and so we stretched our arms out. Okay, it was measured to see how long it was and then he said, “Okay, now let’s do it again.” He goes, “Really
stretch. Let’s see how far you can stretch.” As we stretched further, each person inside
stretched, it was amazing. It was …. I don’t recall but I know it was at least over a foot long that all of us together …It’s like well, if I live life and go through life stretching and going as far as I can, how is that really going to impact other people that’s going to let others to even do better and stretch? And that’s what I try to do now, in different areas in the community, things of that nature so that really for some reason, that simple exercise that really made me think, am I really stretching or am I just relaxing?

Telvis remembered participating in a service learning opportunity in which he volunteered with a non-profit organization, giving out canned food in the neighborhood he grew up in. He shared how good it felt to get involved and give back to his old community. Brycen found the lessons about American workplace culture in his human relations course especially helpful. He learned rules regarding eye contact here which were quite different from the expectations in his home country. Kenny valued all the speakers brought into his classes to share their real world experience in social services and mental health occupations. For Brandon, the mock labs done in class really helped him understand the way corrections programs worked. As an online student, Walter appreciated that his instructors were able to give alternative explanations by email when he did not understand a concept.

The participants noted that critical feedback was vital to student growth, especially on their writing skills. Telvis believed that repeated practice and the feedback on his writing assignments enabled him to raise his skills to college level. He said:

I don’t think I was college level writing before I came to [Lakeview], but after taking English 101, that really … we had wrote like a paper every week so by the first paper I got like a C or D, and by the last one I was getting a B or A. So it was a progress of
working you up with the Writing Center and the people in there. They help you out, they assist you, and they tell you about common mistakes you make… I like [my English professor’s] teaching style. She’s like tough love type teacher. She’s so honest with you just because she likes you or anything like she’s not going to give you a better grade than what you deserve. She helps you and she has a lot of office hours. Her office hours are pretty open as long as she’s not teaching. I would go in there and she would help me out a lot and tell me what I need to work on and stuff like that.

He continued to speak of several other professors stating, “They give you a lot of support and make you … they give you a lot of positive criticism too that you could use.” Walter also found the feedback on his papers beneficial. He spoke of how his professors used the track changes and comments features within Microsoft Word to provide electronic feedback in his online courses. Kenny stated that when it came to English, “getting people to really evaluate my writings so I can get better at it” was what helped him. Brandon summed it up well, saying “I feel like [Lakeview] has exposed my weaknesses and they build on those, and I don't like that a lot. I mean, I don't like it, but it makes me better, so I really can't complain.”

**Going the Extra Mile**

The category of ‘Going the Extra Mile’ is defined as the willingness of faculty and staff to do whatever is necessary to enable student success. Campus culture at Lakeview College is infused with this idea. A quarterly award is given at each campus for employee excellence and one person is honored each year with an award called “Going the Extra Mile.” The participants picked up on this attitude and shared examples of things faculty and staff had done for them that were unexpected or extra special. Tony and Joe both had professors who gave out their home phone numbers or personal cell phone numbers so students could call to help when they needed
it. Joe said one of his professors was in the building most of the day and available for students, explaining:

Class was from about … I want to say 9:00 to 11:00, 11:30. You could go back at 2:00 he was still there. If you walked by at 3:00, he was still there. By the end of the day, he would take off, but he was always there. There were some of our students being military probably had some issues that they probably should have talked about. He was there for that. He was a psychologist. He said, “If you need something, just let me know. I’ll be right here in the classroom.” And he was. They all did the same thing.

Joe also found staff members willing to make accommodations for military personal who were out of the area when things were due. They told him, “You can fax it, you can email it. I’ll kick it back out to you if you get it to me by this time. We’ll have you registered. We have your VA Benefit paperwork. Everything.” He continued, “They work with you all the way through.”

Twice, Bob was sent across the state for training in the middle of the quarter. His instructor worked with him to provide accommodations and alternatives that enabled him to pass all of his classes both quarters. He also appreciated that the bookstore staff would share online resources where students could purchase textbooks for less money when they heard students struggling with textbook costs. Telvis had great experiences with financial aid staff. He recalled an experience with one financial aid counselor:

I was late filling out my financial aid in 2011, and he expedited my financial aid papers. I was going to miss the whole summer quarter because I didn’t turn it in on time. I was going to have to wait until fall, and that would have pushed me back from graduating. He expedited me and said go ahead, just sign up for my classes and he got me in there for summer quarter so that was good.
In his last quarter, another financial aid staff member got him a waiver to take the one final class he needed for his degree. The waiver enabled him to keep more of his financial benefits for use at the university where he planned to transfer. Telvis also described his experience with his journalism teacher who scheduled every student for a weekly 30 minute chat. He said often his 30 minute chats with her went on for an hour and a half. Walter reported that the typical response time for emails to his online instructors was less than 24 hours. Even when an instructor had a family emergency and had to fly across the country, he replied within two days and apologized for the late response. Brandon felt the corrections program assistant made the difference for him. After calling for initial information, the program assistant kept calling him back to check in with him and answer his questions. In his words, “She wouldn’t leave me alone, and so I kind of feel comfortable.” Zapp captured this sentiment as well, saying:

I feel like all the professors, all of the instructors, all of the doctors that I dealt with, they would go the extra mile to give me any help if they saw any areas that I was weak in. I would bring it to their attention. They would come in on their own time, or time they wouldn’t necessarily have to be [in the building] to assist me.

The other participants included staff to Zapp’s description of those who were helpful, evidenced in the previous anecdotes from Brandon, Joe, Telvis, and Bob.

‘Going the Extra Mile’ also included the hard-to-name factor that inspired students and allowed them to substitute another’s belief in them when they struggled to believe in themselves. Gerald, for example, spoke highly of one particular professor who he said

…really inspired me and put the spark back in me with just the things that he would say in class and just feeding us those little nuggets of inspiration and then so forth and having us challenge ourselves really, really make me think and I enjoyed it, great business
program. I think it was a great business program and the professors that I had were all
good but … there was one … who really helped me get to the next level.

Telvis noted one of his professors “actually made me love school. That class, that class did it for
me.” Zapp’s math professors gave him the inspiration he needed to complete the math
requirements for his degree. Brycen said his fellow students and the coordinator of his program
“never discourage me, that you couldn't do it. No, you can do it, so they held me up.” Tony
asserted that his faculty advisor “always believed in me.” As participants shared stories of their
experiences at Lakeview College, the admiration and affection for college faculty and staff was
clearly evident in their words and body language.

Nurturing Student Success

Participants felt like the college nurtured student success. The definition of this category
is meeting the students where they are and providing a plethora of services to support students as
whole human beings while they work towards their educational goals. It appears that Lakeview
College nurtured student success by providing a variety of support services to help students
throughout their educational journey and ensuring access to college courses. Reflected in this
second category is another theme that arose time and again, the idea that Lakeview College was
living the community college mission. As an open access institution, the goal of the college was
to serve all members of the community and help them get to degree completion. Because of the
students’ wide range of academic preparation, Lakeview College had a variety of academic help
available. The college also ensured that faculty and staff were readily available and that courses
were offered at convenient times and locations for both traditional and non-traditional students.
The programs on Campus C were designed with the needs of military personnel in mind to meet
the needs of that unique community. Due to the large population of first generation college
students served at the study site, there were procedures in place to help students discover
different educational and career pathways and choose the one that is the best fit for them. An
assortment of support services were also available on campus to assistance students will the
various aspects of their lives, including services to help those struggling with the financial
demands of college. Data in support of these assertions is presented throughout this section.

Many of the participants believed that Lakewood College’s goal was to help them
succeed in the community college environment. Tony noted that “they understood that you've
been out of school for long time and they kind of not really catered to that, but they took into
consideration.” Joe echoed this sentiment, saying “if you put the effort into what you do, there’s
no reason to fail.” While he said he had to “work his butt off,” success was obtainable. Bob
conceded. He thought that the college did its part, saying:

They do what they’re supposed to do. It’s not necessarily … I don’t want to call it easy. I
didn’t expect easy. I don’t want to give them that [Lakeview College] is easy. I think
they’re doing their jobs but like I said before they’re doing it to the best of their ability.
You know what I mean? It’s not about being easy. It’s just this is what we have to offer
students. It’s either you can take this or leave it. You know what I mean? If you don’t
want to take what [Lakeview College] has to offer, then you’re crazy. It’s just as simple
as that. I sound like I’m on a debate team or something for [Lakeview College] but
they’re good though.

Telvis agreed:

They make it ease-, they don’t make it easy but they make it … uh … they make the goal
reachable for you to pass and for you to get a good grade passing. Not just for you to
pass with like 2.0, the bare minimum to pass, but they make it where as long as you do
your work, you don’t have to be the smartest kid. You don’t have to be the most gifted kid, but you can still reach a 3.0 or somewhere around there and still get a decent grade. Maybe not a 4.0, but you get a decent grade with whatever kind of knowledge you want as long as you work hard and try.

Zapp’s comments captured the same idea:

I don’t think Lakeview is designed to fail people. I feel like it was definitely military-friendly. It’s there to…If the student is willing to show initiative…I thought the classes were set up for students to succeed. They are not set up to throw curve balls or trick you. I think a lot of them were challenging. English and math were the most challenging. Most of the classes, if you applied yourself, you’re going to get 3.-something. If you excel, you get what you deserve, a 4.0.

In the first focus group, Turner said, “You really can’t beat it, you just gotta not want to do anything in order not to succeed here, I guess.” The other two participants agreed with him.

Because of the distinctive population served on the military installation, Campus C had some unique characteristics mentioned by the participants. The quarters were condensed to an eight week format, rather than a ten week quarter. Joe described that this was challenging, but helped him get through his degree program more quickly:

If you fall behind one week, you… That’s the equivalent of almost two or three weeks in a regular class. So you have to pay attention. Just that helped me progress through it faster because you could see the end coming, but you knew you still had things to do to get there, but that light at the end of the tunnel is what you kept looking for.

Bob and Zapp also valued the shortened quarters, which reduced the time they needed to earn a degree. Richard appreciated the small class size, typically only six or eight students, he said.
Walter and Richard both commented about how easy registration was. Walter also loved that his online courses were user-friendly. He noted how the content was organized the same from course to course. Thus, once he figured out the first class, he was good to go for the rest of them despite being what he called “technologically challenged.” Walter found the flexibility offered by the military online classes to be helpful, describing how “you kind of did it on your time. There really was no set deadline for certain assignments for the majority of the classes that I took. It's like as long as it all was done.” Zapp summed up the benefits of the military program stating, “I think the biggest thing to my success was, it was geared to help people who had conflict in schedule that had lives outside of [Campus C].”

A variety of academic supports were offered to students enrolled at Lakeview College. Participants mentioned meeting with professors during their office hours for help or connecting with them via phone or email. In fact, the phone directory on the college’s website provides an alphabetized, searchable list of college employees. When the employee’s name is clicked on, the employee’s office location, email address, phone number, and office hour times (if applicable) are shown.

Many participants used the tutoring centers. They took advantage of drop-in tutoring and scheduled appointments with specific tutors. The wall in the tutoring center listed specific drop in tutoring times for math, chemistry, English, biology, accounting, economics, and physics. Other subjects were available by appointment, although students could sometimes be helped on a drop-in basis if a tutor qualified to help with the subject was present. Some of the participants on Campus A reported that the Writer’s Studio in the library helped them with grammar and mechanics.
For the most part, participants reported that faculty and staff were easily accessible. The students found their professors in the halls, in their offices, and met with them before and after class. Walter even mentioned a chat option used in his online classes to interact with professors. Even though Campus C is the smallest, students reported that faculty and staff were available on campus for them as well. That was very important for Bob, even though he was an online student. He said:

I don’t feel comfortable going somewhere where I can’t interact with the people that are giving me my education and the people that…the administrative people. You know what I mean? I don’t feel comfortable… Being on-post with that physical presence matters.

Walter also mentioned the importance of a location that he could go to and get help face to face.

Because so many students juggled work, home, and school, multiple options available for class times and locations helped them succeed. Some students needed online options in order to fit classes into their schedule, while others preferred face to face classes. Three campuses provided flexibility for students so they could attend college courses close to their homes or workplaces. With two exceptions, among the participants class times worked out well. The eSchedule on the college website listed morning, afternoon, evening, and Saturday options for face to face classes. A few very early (7 a.m.) and very late (8 p.m.) classes were listed.

Participants mentioned many programs on campus as sources of support on their educational journey. The college’s website listed the following resources available for students: library, computer labs, support services, tutoring, and workforce. The library, computer labs, and tutoring all had evening and weekend hours in addition to the traditional daytime hours. The page for support services showed a variety of options: advising, access and disability services, counseling, student success and retention, TRIO, multicultural services, the Veteran’s Center,
service learning, and the emerging leaders academy. There was also a Student Life tab which provided information about athletics, the athletic center, counseling, music and arts, the student newspaper, student leadership, child care, the dental hygiene clinic, food services, and conversation partners.

As previously described, the Veteran’s Center on Campus A was a large source of support for the military students on that campus. Tony took advantage of a textbook loan program they offered. Having a Veteran’s Administration (VA) counselor on campus was helpful for Richard. He could come to campus to fill out the forms and then it was “smooth sailing.” Several students took advantage of accommodations and support services available to them through Access and Disability Services such as special chairs to make sitting in class less painful for students with bad backs, to being able to leave the classroom for short breaks when feeling anxious. A few participants used the meeting spaces in the library for social and academic purposes. Gerald mentioned how beneficial it was that the library was open late. He also noted how the layout of the library made things easy to find. Telvis utilized the Media Center within the library to complete class assignments while others appreciated the availability of the library computers. During the field observation in the library, it was noted that all the computers were in use. Telvis also noted that students could rented out cameras and calculators from the library. Kenny was especially appreciative of the TRIO program. He said:

The TRIO program is amazing. Most African-American males, since that’s one of your study groups, the thing is that they don’t go get the resources they need and TRIO is designed to help you transfer to a four-year college. Your advisor doesn’t really stay on you on every quarter or whatnot. They just meet with you once and then you go and see them when you need them. Well, TRIO will follow-up with you every single quarter.
You have to do a quarterly meeting with them, follow-up with them. They help you with your transition from community college to going to a four-year college. Some of the barriers is disabilities, not growing up in a home with a family, a mother and father who have a bachelor’s degree, and you have to meet some educational needs like, you know, struggling in math. Those were one of those needs for TRIO, which a lot of people struggling. So TRIO was a great resource for me.

Several other participants were involved in the TRIO program as well, and they all spoke highly of the program. Telvis benefitted from TRIO’s textbook loan program which enabled him to be successful in his classes when he could not afford to purchase the books. A scholarship from the college foundation helped Brycen during tough times. He also appreciated that most of the software needed for his classes was available for free through a website his professor shared with the students.

Most students needed help figuring out which classes they needed and what their options were. Their faculty advisors were often the source of this support. Tony described how his advisor helped him find a transfer university that would be a good match for him:

She actually encouraged me to go to [a local state university] because she actually noticed my learning style and me not really being a typical… I don't think I'm a typical college student because my beliefs about the outcome so she was like [a local state university] would perfect for you and you should do it this, and she kind of helped guide me throughout my college career.

Joe received college credit for some of the training he did in the military, shortening his path to degree completion. Counselors on Campus C were able to help Joe determine that a general
degree was the best program for him and let him know which classes he need to take to complete that degree. He said:

…what they did is help me find a way to ease into the system… But they set up my classes to make it easier to transition into them. Start with something that you’re familiar with, as you progress through those, you can increase in difficulty.

This strategy was successful for him. Bob also relied heavily on counselors at Campus C as he planned his schedule each quarter. He said,

I was always in there asking them a question about my degree plan and asking them, “When are these credits going to be on there,” or “When is that going to happen,” or “What should I take next,” or “Do you suggest this?” [the counselor] really sat down and worked with me on what I should take. We sat down, I told her my schedule with the Army. She sat down. You know how the class are Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. I mean Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday or Tuesday, Thursday type of thing. We sat down. She worked that out with me.

Imhotep was directed to an advisor in the business program who answered all his questions and created an educational plan with him when he first came to Campus A. Kenny worked closely with his advisor to understand the requirements for his degree. He said because of that planning, “I had no difficulties. I went straight through. Didn’t take any classes that I didn’t need, that were gonna be a waste.”

Conversely, Telvis took classes for over a year before he met with an advisor. He used the online tools to figure out how to pursue a degree as did Richard. The college website had a page for the associate degree and included a worksheet outlining the requirements for the general associate of arts degree. Another page included worksheets for several specialized university
transfer degrees: business, biology, elementary education, math education, and pre-nursing.

Finally, a page for professional-technical students provided a link to a page with the 24 professional-technical programs offered at Lakeview College. Students could click on the program to access information about each program and worksheets with the requirements for each certificate and degree in that major.

**Conclusion**

The participants in this study, all of whom persisted to degree or certificate completion, faced barriers in four conceptually distinct categories: ‘Integrating into College Courses’, ‘Navigating the College System’, ‘Waging the Battle Within’, and ‘Balancing Multiple Roles’. They overcame those barriers using personal strategies from three discrete categories: ‘Finding Their Motivation’, ‘Developing an Understanding of College’, and ‘Building a Support System’. Furthermore, Lakeview College provided supports in four different categories that enabled them to overcome barriers to persistence: ‘Creating a Positive Social Environment’, ‘Enabling Academic Learning and Growth’, ‘Going the Extra Mile’, and ‘Nurturing Student Success’.

One theme interwoven throughout the findings was taking initiative. Lakeview College had many supports in place for students to take advantage of, but it was up to each participant to find and use what they needed. Many of the supports in place were only successful because the men in the study took the initiative to seek them out and use them. Each man created his own support system that enabled him to succeed. It was the challenge of each individual student to discover their motivation for persisting to degree completion. Without taking control of their college experience and seeking out resources as needed, it is less likely that these men would
have succeeded. This theme was present in each participant’s interview and spans several of the categories in the findings.

A second theme prevalent throughout the findings was the importance of relationships. The participants in the study built relationships with students on campus that were a source of both academic and social support. Their relationships with family members served as sources of support and motivation. The positive social environment on campus fostered an atmosphere conducive to building relationships. Often, established relationships made faculty and staff willing to go the extra mile for students providing the assistance students needed. Overall, a variety of relationships enabled students to persist to degree completion. The next chapter presents conclusions based on the findings presented in this chapter and offers recommendations for practice and further research.
CHAPTER 5

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What barriers to persistence did Black, male students at Lakeview College encounter?

2. How did Black, male students overcome these barriers to persistence?

3. How did Lakeview College support the persistence of Black, male students?

This case study utilized interviews, focus groups, field observations, and information found on the college’s website to determine what barriers Black men faced at Lakeview College and how they overcame those barriers to persist to graduation. Persistence theory was used as a theoretical lens to review the literature and frame the research study. Once data was collected a general inductive approach to analysis was utilized to determine categories that answered each of the three research questions. These findings led to four conclusions and several implications for practice presented in this chapter. It was vitally important that the findings led to conclusions and suggestions for community college practice as this research was conducted as a part of a Doctorate of Education program with a focus on scholar practitioners. This chapter concludes with recommendations for additional research projects and some closing thoughts.

Conclusions

The findings presented in the previous chapter led to four conclusions which help explain how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College:

1. Black men must come to a complete understanding of academic expectations and processes to persist to graduation.
2. The persistence of Black men requires that they successfully navigate a confluence of life events and experiences.

3. Taking initiative is important for persistence of Black men.

4. Relationships built both on campus and off campus are critical to the persistence of Black men to graduation.

It is hoped that these conclusions and the subsequent recommendations for practice will improve the retention rates of Black men who enroll at Lakeview College. These increases would help close the gap in degree completion and allow for more parity in graduation rates by race and gender.

**Conclusion 1: Black men must come to a complete understanding of the academic expectations and college processes to persist to graduation.**

The first conclusion, Black men must come to a complete understanding of academic expectations and processes to persist to graduation, addresses both a barrier to persistence and how graduates overcame that barrier. There is a culture of college, both a general college culture and a specific college culture that is developed at each campus. The men in this study came to Lakeview College with an incomplete knowledge of the culture of college in general and of this college in particular. As described in Chapter 4, there are terms and vocabulary that are used differently within the college setting that participants had to decipher exemplified by Tony’s misunderstanding of the duel enrollment program. College campuses are full of acronyms and abbreviations that have to be learned: ADS, TRIO, RAC, FAFSA, et cetera. Telvis registering for a second quarter biology class his first term due to not understanding the term prerequisite. Raymond summarized the initial experience well, saying, “I don’t know if I knew what to expect…when I walked through those doors”
Some students encountered challenges when they used their understanding of educational settings from their high school days in this new educational environment. The rules and norms were different, particularly around grading. Telvis failed his math course due to his misunderstanding of how the final exam was weighted. Rodney discovered that the requirements concerning math skills had changed significantly since he last attended school.

Many of the participants were first generation college students and did not have friends or family members who attended college that they could turn to for help navigating the college system. They were at a disadvantage. Joe could not name a single role model who had graduated from college. Even those who had parents or siblings who had attended college struggled with understanding college processes like which classes were needed to earn a degree. Raymond’s sister graduated with a degree in criminal justice, which is a related field to his corrections program, yet he still felt lost when he first came to campus. This lack of knowledge of college resulted in students taking classes that did not meet their degree requirements. Additionally, some students had to take prerequisites at their transfer institution although it would have been more economical to take them at the community college as part of their associate degree.

While all three theories presented in the theoretical framework, referenced in Table 1, included background variables such as high school performance, none ventured into how those past experiences outside of academic preparation affected departure or persistence. Only Tinto’s (1993) theory discussed academic integration which is where this conclusion would fit. Bean and Metzner (1985; 1987) and H. P. Mason (1998) focused on more practical aspects in their academic variable category such as study habits and advising.
It could be that Black men come to college with an incomplete understanding of academic expectations because they often attend high schools that leave them underprepared for college (Glenn, 2004). They may be surprised to learn that they are not reading, writing, and/or doing math at college levels (Harvey, 2010). Weissman, Bulakowski, and Jumisko’s (1998) study supports this idea that Black men face challenges during the initial transition period to community college. They found that Black students reported more challenges during this time than did students of other races. Driggers (2007) stated that academic transition was also a challenge for Black men enrolled in universities. He discussed how the strategies students used successfully in high school did not always allow students to meet the college level expectations.

Conclusion 2: The persistence of Black men requires that they successfully navigate a confluence of life events and experiences.

This second conclusion, the persistence of Black men requires that they successfully navigate a confluence of life events and experiences, seems obvious, but it is easy to forget in academia that students are more than their intellect. Black men who attend Lakeview College have lives outside of school that include work, family, and friends. In order to be successful in a community college setting, they must manage all the converging aspects of their lives at any given point in time. Brycen’s typical school day, shared in the previous chapter illustrates this well. He worked during the day, rushed home to shower after his manual labor job, then drove to class. After class, he hurried home so his wife could go to work while he took care of their two children, including a newborn, all night. The next day, the cycle began again.

The findings suggest that students bring with them their insecurities as well as their hopes. Kenny struggled with is fear of failing since it had been so long since he had been in school. Some students are also managing physical, intellectual, or psychological disabilities. Imhotep
was issued a locker so he did not have to carry his heavy books so far due to a bad back. This
disability was easily accommodated for, but others are more challenging. Because this college is
located near a large military installation, there are many students who are active duty personnel,
retirees, and others who once served. In fact, 8 of the 14 participants in this study were veterans.
Well over a decade of war has left its mark on veterans, particularly those with multiple
deployments to war zones (Lighthall, 2012).

The psychological variables described in the theoretical frameworks do not thoroughly
capture all of the psychological issues that may affect college students, though Bean and Metzner
(1985; 1987) did bring up stress. There seemed to be no studies that focused on stress and the
persistence of Black, male students. All three theoretical models also addressed commitments
students have outside of school in the environmental variables category, without taking into
consideration the stress that multiple commitments may trigger.

Family and work were also a part of many participants’ lives. Wood’s (2012) study
supported Tinto’s model in that Wood found that family responsibilities could cause students to
leave college within their first terms. One study of community college students found that
employment aided their persistence (Wood, Hilton, & Lewis, 2011), while another found
employment to be irrelevant to persistence (Perrakis, 2008). The effect of employment on
persistence could be different for individual students based on what other areas of their lives are
converging around the time they are attending college. Overall, this is another underrepresented
area of study in the literature. It is not known how the interrelated pieces of a student’s life work
together to help him succeed in college or against him to force him to drop out.
Conclusion 3: Taking initiative is important for the persistence of Black men.

The third conclusion, taking initiative is important for the persistence of Black men, was a theme that frequently came up throughout the interviews, and was a strategy the men in this study repeatedly used to overcome obstacles. They asked questions of family members, coworkers, classmates, professors, other college employees. Kenny, Tony, and Raymond all articulated the power of asking questions in their interviews. Chapter 4 cites numerous examples of graduates asking for and receiving help from a variety of sources. Participants also created study groups and informal “packs of people,” as Turner referred to them, to support themselves throughout their educational journeys. They sought out resources on campus and off, from Kenny walking up to the TRIO counter to ask what they do, to Walter reaching out to get help from his fellow soldiers, to Imhotep seeking answers in a bookstore when his needs were not met in his classes. They took charge of their college experience. The men that persisted to degree spoke up and got their needs met. As Rodney recounted, “A closed mouth doesn’t get fed.”

This idea of taking initiative was not present in any of the three theoretical frameworks. It also represents a gap in the literature surrounding Black, male student persistence.

From anecdotal experience, it appears that many students hide when they run into difficulties. They pretend to understand until the exam or assignment makes it clear that they do not ‘get it.’ They stop coming to class, or arrive late and leave early to avoid conversations with the professor. They do not respond to email or phone messages. The men in this study took the opposite approach; they confronted their problems head on by contacting their professors, going to the tutoring center, creating a study group, et cetera, which contributed to their persistence to graduation. Accordingly, it appears that successful students get the help they need in a timely manner. This is critical when a ten week quarter system is utilized, like at the site of this study.
Conclusion 4: Relationships built both on campus and off campus are critical to the persistence of Black men to graduation.

Relationships built both on campus and off campus are critical to the persistence of Black men to graduation is the fourth conclusion elicited from the findings of this case study. It was another reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. The men in this study used the relationships they built in a variety of ways to get them through to their degrees. Many wanted to live up to the expectations of loved ones such as their parents, wives, and children as described in the section on Finding Their Motivation: living up to expectations in Chapter 4. They relied on their classmates for academic and social support. Walter pulled together a group of classmates who met at Starbucks to provide support for each other. Gerald and Imhotep both shared stories of socializing with classmates, one at a football game and the other at a birthday party. The relationships Black men built with their professors and other college employees enabled them to seek out help, have someone on campus who believed in them, and have a source for academic and career advice. Tony’s relationship with the Veteran’s Center coordinator and Kenny’s relationship with his program coordinator and advisor gave them people to turn to on campus. It was often in the context of these relationships that the participants found people who were willing to go the extra mile for them. For example, Bob was sent to the other side of the state mid-quarter, yet he was still able to complete his classes with the help and accommodations provided by his instructors.

The importance of the social connections described by the study participants supports the category of social variables in the theoretical frameworks of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985; 1987). Bean and Metzner (1985; 1987) focused exclusively on social integration while Tinto (1993) broaden the scope to incorporate social integration, peer interactions, and extra-
curricular activities. H. P. Mason (1998) did not address this category. Tinto’s (1993) theory also included faculty and staff interactions in his academic variables category while the other two theories did not.

For the most part, the men in this study were not very involved in campus life in the traditional way: student clubs, activities, sports, et cetera. However, they did rely on the relationships they built to support them as they worked towards their degrees. The category of social variables was strongly related to student persistence in many studies conducted at community colleges (Adams-Mahaley, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Myers, 2012; Perrakis, 2008; Roberts, 2009; Sutherland, 2011). Meyers (2012) found that strong relationships between community college students and their professors increased retention. This was also true in university settings (Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012; Palmer & Young, 2009). There were a variety of variables which increased student-faculty interactions which was a predictor of community college success (Wood & Ireland, 2014). Mentoring increased student persistence on community college campuses (Beckles, 2008; Dickens, 2012) and on university campuses (Beale, 2010; Driggers, 2007; Hickson, 2002). The support students received from familial relationship was very important to a student’s completion of community college (Dickens, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Myers, 2012; Sutherland, 2011) and of universities (Beale, 2010; Brooks, 2011; Driggers, 2007; Gilkey, 2012; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). The creation of social networks helped student succeed in community colleges (Adams-Mahaley, 2012; Sutherland, 2011). A sense of belonging, one characteristic of which includes relationships, was beneficial for university completion (Palmer & Young, 2009; Simmons, 2013; Yates, Pelphrey, & Smith, 2008). Peer relationships in general (Brooks, 2011) and with other Black students (Gilkey, 2012; Harper, 2006b) was beneficial to students in university settings. The findings in the extant literature and
those of this study clearly support the idea that positive interactions and relationships on campus and off campus increase a student’s likelihood of graduation.

**Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations for practice are proposed. The implications range from personal changes in practice to campus recommendations. At the personal level, this researcher will include conversations with students about their motivation, particularly around goal setting, during advising appointments. Since goal setting was an important component of the ‘Finding Their Motivation’ category, it seems important to make goal setting an explicit part of each advising session. Further, keeping a holistic picture of each student in mind during advising sessions may lead referrals to support services to help students deal with the confluence of life events that could impact retention. Finally, the importance of relationship building during the teaching of courses and advising was affirmed. The researcher will continue spending time and energy to get to know her students and build strong relationships with them. The same recommendations are applicable for the other faculty advisors at Lakeview College.

At the institutional level, there are also implications for practice. The men in this study were able to learn the culture of college, but it is unknown how many students could not figure out the college culture on their own and simply dropped out. Based on the conclusion that Black men must come to a complete understanding of academic expectations and processes to persist to graduation, it would make sense to include information on common college procedures and terminology in the college orientation session offered at Lakewood College to new students. Additionally, it could be helpful to have a frequently asked question page on the college website that could be referenced after orientation to assist students as they learn to navigate the college
system. Having somewhere to go to get questions answered discretely could prove beneficial for some students.

The second conclusion, that the persistence of Black men requires that they successfully navigate a confluence of life events and experiences, suggests that there must be resources on campus for all the aspects of a student’s life that impact his schoolwork. The Veteran’s Center, Access and Disabilities Services (ADS), and the on-campus counselors address some of these needs that are not academic in nature. Their continued funding is vital. Moreover, faculty must be made aware of the resources that are available so that they can refer students to those resources as needs arise. It would also be helpful for the staff operating such programs to increase awareness of their services within the student population through outreach programs.

Beginning in 2013, a college success class became a requirement for all students at Lakeview College who test into two or more remedial level classes and a recommendation for all students. Perhaps students could be introduced to the support services available to them on campus in these college success classes. First quarter college orientation courses were found to positively impact retention and completion in two studies (Glenn, 2004; James, 1991); although another study determined that the impact was inconclusive (Derby & Watson, 2006). Lighthall (2012) presented some insights into the veteran population in her article, asserting that veterans can feel isolated and often lack awareness of the effects of mild traumatic brain injuries (TBI) that they might have experienced. This is where the support services on campus have an obligation to step in and address these issues. None of the participants in the study disclosed having experiences a TBI, but several shared that they were supported by ADS without explicitly stating the disability that qualified them for services.
Lakeview College has implemented several strategies to support struggling students such as an online reporting system that sends an email to the student and the student’s advisor when an academic concern arises. While a good start, this places the responsibility on the professor and advisor. An environment must be created in which students are expected to seek out help when needed. They must be explicitly taught how to identify when help is needed and to seek it out. Again, this content could be incorporated into the required college success course and is supported by the third conclusion, taking initiative is important for persistence of Black men. Students who are given the tools to seek their own solutions to barriers appear to be more persistent, and the orientation course is the most logical place to acquire and hone these skills.

The fourth conclusion, relationships built both on campus and off campus are critical to the persistence of Black men to graduation, supports the current practice at Lakeview College of professors serving as academic advisors. This practice helps forge relationships between students and faculty. Peer relationships were also found to be critical to the participants’ success. An additional recommendation is to create a mentoring program on campus. Mentoring was found to be an effective retention strategy in two other studies of Black, male community college students (Beckles, 2008; Dickens, 2012). Establishing a mentoring program on campus was the number one suggestion that came out of the interviews and focus groups. It was mentioned or affirmed by every participant. There was not clear consensus among between the participants about the important of race in the mentor assignments. Some felt strongly that Black students should be paired with Black mentors, especially at the beginning of their academic career. Others did not think that race mattered in mentor assignments. In all cases, the participants wanted to be mentored by someone “like me.” However, they sometimes defined “like me” differently. For some, it was someone who was Black like me. To others, “like me” meant:
someone who had the same major; someone who was raised in a similar environment; someone who was the same age; or someone who was in the military. These ideas of what “like me” means should be factored into mentor assignments: age, military experience, academic major, and where a student was raised (country versus city). Ideally, new students could complete a questionnaire to rank the characteristics they think are important in a mentor and then be matched with one best suiting their preferences. A mentoring program would not only address this conclusion, allowing student to form another relationship on campus, but would also address the first conclusion, that Black men come to college without a complete understanding of the academic expectations and college processes, giving them access to someone who has successfully navigated college as a role model.

Finally, to assist with degree completion, it is recommended that goal setting and tracking be institutionalized at Lakeview College. Students can set goals as an assignment in their college success course. These goals can be shared with the students’ academic advisor. During the quarterly advising appointments, advisors can reinforce these goals and help the students track their progress towards goal completion.

The suggestions presented in this section for implementation at Lakeview College might also be applicable to other community colleges. Given that goal setting helped Black men persist at Lakeview College, it seems reasonable to posit that this strategy would be effective at other community colleges as well. Mentoring programs could also be universally beneficial. While life events converge for students no matter what college they attend, the particular support services that would prove helpful may vary from college to college depending on the populations being served. A survey of the student body might help identify the most advantageous support services. Orientation sessions and a required college success course are also strategies that could
be applied at different institutions. The recommendations for content included in the Lakeview College offerings could serve as a starting point at other community colleges. Eventually, research would have to be conducted at each institution to see what is working for their particular population and the content could be adjusted accordingly.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored how successful Black, male graduates persisted to earn their degree or certificate at Lakeview College. The findings led to conclusions and suggestions for practice that may enable more students to persist to degree completion. While this study addressed a gap in the literature, there are a number of recommendations for new research projects that would further address racial and gender inequality of degree obtainment. The first five are specific to Lakeview College, although most could also be conducted at other community colleges. The remaining five are more general in nature.

1. This study intentionally took a strengths-based approach, focusing on the students who persisted to graduation. To have a holistic view of the experiences of Black men at Lakeview College, student attrition must also be explored. It could be that students who leave are not using any of the strategies students who persisted used. It could also be that students who leave encounter different barriers or that they try other strategies to overcome these barriers that are not successful. To fully address the problem of disparity in degree obtainment, the experiences of those who depart from the college prior to earning a degree or certificate must be explored.

2. This study addressed one of the inequities in graduation rates at Lakeview College. Other inequities exist. Further research focusing on the retention and attrition of other under-performing student populations, such as students who are parents, students under
25, part-time students, and Native American students should be conducted. Then, a meta-analysis should be conducted to find similarities between the studies to implement strategies that will have the greatest impact across student groups.

3. It was surprising that 8 of the 14 participants were veterans. A collaborative research study between the Veteran’s Center on campus and the Institutional Research office is another recommendation. It would be valuable to learn more about the population at the college beginning with a qualitative study, perhaps a phenomenological study to understand the veteran experience at Lakeview College. Then a more in-depth study could follow-up on any initial findings to see if they apply to the broader Veteran population. It would also be interesting to explore if strategies learned in the military that contribute to being a successful soldier transferred to the college campus, or not.

4. Only 2 of the 14 participants had cumulative GPAs that were under 3.0. In order to earn a degree a cumulative GPA of at least 2.0 is required. It is unknown how many students graduate with degrees having earned a GPA between 2.0 and 3.0 or how many graduate with a GPA between 3.0 and 4.0. A mixed methods study that determines what correlation, if any, exists between GPA and graduation. It would also be beneficial to know if the strategies used to persist to graduation vary by a student’s GPA.

5. Lakeview College implemented two new requirements for new students in the past two years: new student orientation and a three credit College Success course. Most of the participants in the study did not have the benefit of these interventions. It is important to determine what impact to student persistence and retention, if any, these two changes have made. Additionally, determining which components of these two requirements are the most beneficial and which are ineffective should also be explored in future research.
6. There are other community and technical colleges in the same county and in the same state as Lakeview College. While qualitative studies are not typically generalizable, a study could be undertaken to determine if the findings at Lakeview College are similar to or different from those at other colleges. Determining which findings are college specific and which are more universal could enable institutions across the state to improve the completion rates of Black men at their colleges.

7. There are a variety of academic support and student support services on community college campuses. A study could be conducted to ascertain if both types of services are accessed equally and which has more influence on completion of college courses and degrees.

8. The men in this study often sought out help. A cross-cultural/cross-gender examination of help seeking behaviors on college campuses could provide suggestions for how to best support students as they pursue degree. Some of this work has been done in the counseling field, but more work is needed within the community college system.

9. The impact of taking initiative on student persistence is another area of study for future study. Research has been conducted on self-efficacy in certain subject areas, such as math, but initiative is different from self-efficacy. Where self-efficacy is concerned with the belief a person has in their own abilities to accomplish a task, taking initiative is the action that follows the belief. A study linking individual perceptions and actions on a community college campus could allow for deeper insights.

10. Persistence theories have not been updated in over a decade. Many researchers have moved to resilience theory to discuss student persistence and attrition. However, resilience theory originated in psychology rather than education. Ideally, a newer model...
of persistence theory should be developed using a strengths-based approach and incorporating the aspects of resilience theory that are applicable in an educational setting.

**Closing Thoughts**

Maya Angelou is often quoted as stating, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.” Black, male students come to Lakeview College doing the best they know how to do. Lakeview College addresses the needs of its students the best it knows how to do. This study discovered the barriers encountered by some Black, male graduates at Lakeview College and how they persisted to earn their degrees. With this information, the college can “know better,” and thus “do better.” Furthermore, strategies can be implemented that will help new Black, male students to “know better,” and “do better,” as well. Someday, there will no longer be a need for studies like this one focusing on a specific gender and racial group to address disparity of degree obtainment. Until then, colleges have a moral obligation to address inequities so that society as a whole can benefit from the perspectives of college graduates who proportionately represent the society.
References


Harvey, M. D. (2010). *The ”lost boys” of higher education: African American males from basic skills through university transfer (Doctoral dissertation).* Retrieved from ProQuest LLC. (UMI No. 3403577).


Hickson, M. G. (2002). What role does the race of professors have on the retention of students attending historically Black colleges and universities? *Education, 123*(1), 186-189.


Appendix A

Graduate Questionnaire

Please provide the following information to help ensure a wide spectrum of students are interviewed. This information will be confidential.

Age:_____

While attending Lakeview College were you:

□ Full time student    □ Part time student

□ Employed full-time  □ Employed part-time    □ Unemployed

□ Single             □ Married/Partnered    Children: □ Yes  □ No

What degree or certificate did you earn?:

□ AA transferable degree

□ Associate in _____________________________

□ Certificate in _____________________________

GPA____________________

When did you begin at Lakeview College?_____________

Many students begin at Lakeview College in some remedial courses. Did you take any below 100 level math, reading, or English courses □ Yes  □ No

Is Lakeview the only college you have attended? □ Yes  □ No

How did you pay for classes? □ Loans    □ Grants/Scholarships    □ Self-pay

Did you take classes □ Mostly online    □ Mostly face to face on campus

Did you participate in any campus activities (clubs, organizations, student government, athletics, performances, etc)? □ Yes  □ No

If yes, which ones___________________________________________________
These questions are to help you begin reflecting on your experiences at Lakeview College. You may write in your answers if you like or just think about them in preparation for our interview.

What has Lakeview College done well to support your success?

How did Lakeview College make it difficult to complete your degree or certificate?
Appendix B

Graduate Recruitment Letter

Dear ____________,

My name is Krissy Kim and I am the Director of Education Programs at Lakeview College. I teach mostly early childhood education courses. I am also a student at Northeastern University in their Doctorate of Education program under the advisement of Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. I am in the research stage of my studies and am seeking participants for my research study.

At Lakeview College, we have been taking an in-depth look at student retention and completion. We noticed that some groups of students are not graduating proportionately. One of the groups of students that we are the least successful at getting to graduation is Black, males. This is where my research study comes in. The purpose of my study is to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. While this study will benefit Lakeview College, I am conducting the study as a student at Northeastern University and not as an employee of Lakeview College.

As a graduate of Lakeview College, I would like to interview you about your experiences pursuing your certificate or degree. You will have the opportunity to tell your story and help increase the completion rates of Black men at Lakeview College. It is my hope that this study will lead to more equitable graduation rates not only at Lakeview College, but at other community colleges throughout the country.

Interviews will take approximately one hour and will be conducted in a study room at the Lakeview College library or another mutually agreeable location.
If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions that would help you make a decision about participating, please contact me either by phone or by email: 253-964-6542 or kim.kri@husky.neu.edu

I look forward to hearing from you!

Best,

Krissy Kim
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form for Interviews

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Krissy Kim, Doctoral Student, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, Principle Investigator

Title of Project: Black Men: A Case Study of Community College Retention and Graduation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. I am conducting this study as a part of my Doctorate of Education at Northeastern University where I have been focusing on student persistence and retention. The goal of this case study is to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. Specifically, this study will provide an opportunity for Black, male students to share what made them successful at Lakeview College. The results of this study will be shared with Lakeview College and others interested in community colleges to allow them to better respond to the needs of students, specifically Black men. Your participation will contribute to closing the achievement gap both at Lakeview College and in the wider community college system.

This letter will explain what participation in the study means; however, I will also explain it to you. Please ask me any questions that you may have. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. You may also request that your data be withdrawn from the study up until data analysis is complete. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you have completed a certificate or degree at Lakeview College in the last three years. Participation in this study includes: (1) Completing a short questionnaire. (2) Participating in an in-depth interview exploring your
college experience. This interview will last approximately one hour and will be digitally recorded. You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. (3) After the interview is transcribed, a written copy will be sent to you for review. This is to ensure that I have accurately represented your point of view. (4) In addition, I may send you some early findings to see if these represent your experience.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data analysis. There is minimal risk to graduates associated with participation in this study. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study aside from the opportunity to reflect on your experiences. However, by doing so you may help us learn more about the student experience which will hopefully lead to improved retention and graduation rates in the future.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated. While your experiences will be part of the final research paper, you will not be identified by name in any reports, presentations, or publications based on this research. The digital recordings of your interview will be destroyed once you have confirmed that the transcription accurately reflects your experiences.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact Krissy Kim at 253-651-4733 (voice mail is confidential) or by email at kim.kri@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at el.bennett@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern
University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                      Date

_________________________________________  __________________________
Printed name of person above

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent                      Date

_________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form for Focus Groups

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Krissy Kim, Doctoral Student, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, Principle Investigator

Title of Project: Black Men: A Case Study of Community College Retention and Graduation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. I am conducting this study as a part of my Doctorate of Education at Northeastern University where I have been focusing on student persistence and retention. The goal of this case study is to understand how Black men persisted to graduation at Lakeview College. Specifically, this study will provide an opportunity for Black, male students to share what made them successful at Lakeview College. The results of this study will be shared with Lakeview College and others interested in community colleges to allow them to better respond to the needs of students, specifically Black men. Your participation will contribute to closing the achievement gap both at Lakeview College and in the wider community college system.

This letter will explain what participation in the study means; however, I will also explain it to you. Please ask me any questions that you may have. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. You may also request that your data be withdrawn from the study up until data analysis is complete. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are in your final quarter prior to earning your certificate or degree at Lakeview College. Participation in this study includes:

1. Participating in a focus group exploring your college experience. This group interview will
last approximately one hour and will be digitally recorded. The focus group will take place in a study room in the Lakeview library and pizza and beverages will be provided free of cost. (2) You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire. This questionnaire can be submitted anonymously. (3) After the focus group interview is transcribed, a written copy may be sent to you for review. This is to ensure that I have accurately represented your point of view. (4) In addition, I may send you some early findings to see if these represent your experience.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data analysis. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study except for the pizza and beverages. However, by doing so you may help us learn more about the student experience which may lead to improved retention and graduation rates in the future.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated. While your experiences will be part of the final research paper, you will not be identified by name in any reports, presentations, or publications based on this research. The digital recordings of your interview will be destroyed once you have confirmed that the transcription accurately reflects your experiences.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact Krissy Kim at 253-651-4733 (voice mail is confidential) or by email at kim.kri@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at el.bennett@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern
University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date

_________________________________________
Printed name of person above

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent  Date

                                      __________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E

Focus Group Questionnaire

All responses are confidential and anonymous, no names required.

Age: ______

☐ Full time student ☐ Part time student

☐ Employed full-time  ☐ Employed part-time  ☐ Unemployed

☐ Single  ☐ Married/Partnered  Children: ☐ Yes  ☐ No

Goal:

☐ AA transferable degree

☐ Associate in _____________________________

☐ Certificate in _____________________________

GPA______________

When did you begin at Lakeview College? ___________

Many students begin at Lakeview College in some remedial courses. Did you take any below 100 level math, reading, or English courses ☐ Yes  ☐ No

Is Lakeview the only college you have attended? ☐ Yes  ☐ No

How are you paying for classes? ☐ Loans  ☐ Grants/Scholarships  ☐ Self-pay

Do you take classes ☐ Mostly online  ☐ Mostly face to face on campus

Have you participated in any campus activities (clubs, organizations, student government, athletics, performances, etc)? ☐ Yes  ☐ No

    If yes, which ones___________________________________________________________________________
What has Lakeview College done well to support your success?

How did Lakeview College make it difficult to complete your degree or certificate?
Appendix F

Focus Group Guide

1. Tell me about your experiences studying at Lakeview College.

2. What, if anything, made it difficult for you to complete your certificate or degree? (if answers are all general, ask about Lakeview College specifically)

3. How did you overcome these barriers?

4. What, if anything, helped you complete your degree? (if answers are all general, ask about Lakeview College specifically)

5. What advice would you give to a new student to help him be successful here?

6. What needs to be done to help more Black, males graduate from Lakeview College?
Appendix G

Interview Guide

| Ice breaker | Tell me about yourself.  
|             | Tell me about your degree/certificate and why you chose that? What was it like completing the degree/certificate? Follow-up: Can you tell more about that? |
| R1/R2       | Tell me about your experiences here at Lakeview College. (classes, faculty, fellow students, support services, student government, student services, athletics, clubs, etc.) |
| R1          | It is not uncommon for students to consider quitting college at some point. Did you ever consider quitting? If yes, tell me about this experience. (at Lakeview or other institutions)  
<p>|             | What kept you coming to school when you thought about quitting? (repeat until all relevant experiences are shared) |
| R1          | Were there any experiences you had at the college related to being Black or male that made your experience more difficult than other students might experience? Follow-up: Tell me about them. How did you overcome these experiences? |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R1</th>
<th>What did Lakeview College do to make earning your degree difficult? (policies, procedures, experiences)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Were there people who supported you as you worked on your degree? If yes, tell me about them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>What did Lakeview College do to make earning your degree easier?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrap up</td>
<td>What needs to be done to help more Black, males graduate from Lakeview College? Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven’t talked about?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>