Black Male Community College Students:

A Narrative Study

of their Success

A thesis presented

by

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Abstract

Black males tend to start their higher education at a community college. However, when it comes to the issue of retention, there are few studies concerning the success of Black men who attend this type of higher education institution. Therefore it is vital to learn from academically successful Black male community college students. The purpose of this doctoral thesis narrative was to discover the support systems that affected academic completion of Black men at a community college in the Midwest. Utilizing Uri Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, both on-campus and off-campus support systems were explored to find out how they influenced academic success. By using a qualitative narrative study, Six Black male participants from the same community college were interviewed, and the data revealed three major themes. These themes were Relationships, Internal motivation, and External motivation. Support systems directly or indirectly interconnected with each other and positively assisted with these students’ academic success during their first 24 credit hours of college-level work. Based on the findings recommendations for practice, such as a peer mentoring program and family appreciation events were recommended. Also, suggestions, such topics as successful Black female community college students, were given as future research topics.

*Keywords:* Black male community college student, retention, community college, on-campus support systems, off-campus support systems,
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Dedication

I dedicated this thesis to my parents, Gita and Stanley Funston. My incredible parents have been my educational and emotional support system since the day I entered kindergarten. My parents encouraged me throughout my education to look beyond the grades and see learning as an amazing opportunity to understand the world around me. This doctorate is for you both for being the best support system I could ever have. To my late Uncle Jim (James Banks), who spent time years ago talking to me about this topic and who sparked an interest that led me to conduct this research. Finally, to the six men who sat down and spoke to me about their academic success. These men are incredible individuals and it was a privilege to get to know them and write about their experience.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 3
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................. 4
Dedication .................................................................................................................. 6

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................... 9
  Context and Background .................................................................................. 9
  Rationale and Significance ............................................................................. 14
  Research Problem and Research Questions ................................................. 18
  Positionality Statement .................................................................................. 20
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................... 22
  Summary ........................................................................................................... 27

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................. 29
  Retention .......................................................................................................... 29
  Community Colleges ......................................................................................... 31
  Black Male Community College Students ................................................... 32
  Bronfenbrenner’s Indirect Influences on Retention ......................................... 33
  On-campus Support Systems ......................................................................... 35
  Off-campus Support Systems ......................................................................... 46
  Summary ........................................................................................................... 55

Chapter 3: Research Design .............................................................................. 58
  Qualitative Research Approach ..................................................................... 58
  Participants ....................................................................................................... 61
  Procedures ......................................................................................................... 65
  Potential Research Bias ...................................................................................... 74
  Limitations ......................................................................................................... 75

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis .................................................................... 76
  Participants ....................................................................................................... 65
  Themes .............................................................................................................. 79
  Relationships ..................................................................................................... 80
  Internal Motivation ............................................................................................ 95
  External Motivation ............................................................................................ 108
  Summary .......................................................................................................... 124

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice ..................................... 126
  Relationships ..................................................................................................... 126
  Internal Motivation ............................................................................................ 130
  External Motivation ............................................................................................ 134
  Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 138
  Recommendations for Practice ....................................................................... 140
  Recommendations for Future Research ......................................................... 146
  Summary .......................................................................................................... 148
References

Appendix A: Interview Questions
Appendix B: Consent Form
Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study was to discover the support systems that affected Black men’s academic completion at a community college in the Midwest. Support systems that affected academic completion were defined as the on-campus and off-campus systems that contributed to the success of these students; success, in turn, was defined as remaining enrolled through the completion of 24 credit hours of college-level coursework. Knowledge generated was expected to inform ways to improve retention among this student population.

Context and Background

Former President Obama proclaimed that community colleges are one of America’s underappreciated educational assets because they allow anyone to obtain an education and earn a degree (Hagedorn, 2010). Community colleges are more affordable and less selective in their admissions process than four-year institutions (Strayhorn, 2012). They, therefore, attract a diverse population of students who have different levels of college readiness.

In 2014, 45% of all students attending post-secondary education were doing so at a community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Of the approximately 7.4 million undergraduate students enrolled in credited courses at community colleges, 49% were White, 22% were Hispanic, 14% were Black, 7% were Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American, and 7% classified themselves into other ethnic or racial categories; 57% were women, and 43% were men (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

Even though community colleges appear to be an excellent post-secondary educational option for most people, the average graduation rate at the 1,132 U.S. community colleges was 44% (K. Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). Approximately 400 community colleges’ graduation rates were lower than 15% (K. Martin et al., 2014). The 46% retention rate at
community colleges in 2008 was much lower than the 68% retention rate at four-year institutions (Jamelske, 2009). By 2013, the retention rate had dropped to 44% (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). This decline in retention rates at community colleges over those seven years is a concern for community colleges because low retention rates lead to lower graduation rates (Odom, 2013; Overocker, 2015; Talbert, 2012). Low retention rates and graduation rates are issues for community colleges because they are away for higher education professionals to measure student success (Cho & Karp, 2013; C. P. Smith, 2015). For the past 20 years, the national trend has been to connect federal and state financial resources to institutional retention and graduation rates (C. P. Smith, 2015). In addition, the private sector requires tangible measures for evaluating the return on its investments in community colleges (C. P. Smith, 2015). Therefore, community colleges moved their definition of student success away from just being enrolled to using persistence-to-degree rates (American College Testing, 2013). This change in how community colleges defined student success meant students not only needed to be enrolled, but they had to persist and graduate in a reasonable timeframe at their community college (American College Testing, 2013). Therefore, students and community colleges are both affected by low retention and graduation rates (American College Testing, 2013).

Community colleges have relied on scholarly writing, retention seminars, and campus retention committees for ideas on how to increase retention rates. Institutions with lower retention rates than their counterparts were inclined to investigate which student populations had the lowest retention rates so they could figure out which services, programs, policies, and resources improved their retention rates (J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014).

In 2010, Black men comprised less than 6% of all the undergraduates in post-secondary education in the United States (E. Kim & Hargrove, 2013). This percentage had been steady
since the 1950s (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Not only were Black men not attending college, but only 30% of these students completed a degree within six years, compared to 57% of overall undergraduates in higher education (E. Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Community colleges were the primary post-secondary entry point for Black male students because these institutions were more affordable and closer to home (T. P. Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). Unfortunately for these students, Black male community college students graduated at a rate of less than 16%, one of the lowest rates among males (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Odom, 2013).


Research has revealed that the first year of college is vital to retention (J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014). The research uses 24 credit hours completed as a proxy for the first year (J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014) because 60% of community college students are part-time students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

Researchers studying retention often have assumed that minority groups were similar and that what worked with one group would work with all groups (Aragon & Perez, 2006; Borgen & Borgen, 2016; Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Museus, 2008). This assumption is not accurate (Mertes & Hoover, 2014). There are similarities among various groups, but the reasons why each
group was successful may be different (Mertes & Hoover, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). For Black men, research has identified three areas appear to factor into their success more greatly than for the success of their minority counterparts. These factors are adequate college preparation, finances, and utilizing campus services and programs (Strayhorn, 2012).


Many studies concerning Black male college students have focused on four-year colleges, or studied both two-and four-year colleges together. For example, Harper (2012) conducted a general study on successful Black men in higher education that provided insight into on-campus academic excellence. R. T. Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) concentrated on four-year African American males who were successful because their families promoted academic success. They interviewed 11 African American male students from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), finding that the students relied on their families for encouragement and guidance (R. T. Palmer et al., 2011). Although these studies are important, it appears that studying Black male students attending community colleges is essential because, for a large majority of these students, this type of institution is their first experience in higher education (J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014). Therefore, this study examined the interconnections between on-campus and off-campus influences that contributed to the success of Black male college students at a two-year institution.
The community college where the participants were recruited was in a rural Midwest location. Although this institution is in a rural location, it is six miles west of a state university and 50 miles west of a major US Metropolitan City. In the fall of 2017, 3417 students were enrolled in college-level classes at the Community College. Their ethnic origins were the following: 13 American Indian, 64 Asian, 496 Black, 650 Hispanic, 112 Multi-Racial, 71 unknowns, and 2011 White (Fact Book, 2017). In the fall of 2017, there were 1862 female students and 1555 male students (Fact Book, 2017). The term persistence rate for the community college from Spring 2017 to fall 2017 was 53%. Although the completion rates were not available for fall 2017, the 2017 Stakeholder Report examined the proportion of entering full-time students at the Community College declaring a program of study and completing it over a three-year period. They found that the underrepresented students completed at a lower rate in most of the cohorts, but there was an increase in minority completion rates across the three years. The report also revealed that the female students at the Community College completed a program of study more frequently than the male students (Stakeholders Report, 2017). The report also discovered that over the three years of the study, the women’s completion rates increased while the male completion rates decreased (Stakeholders Report, 2017). The following table shows the persistence of students who took credited courses at the Community College from Fall 2015 to Fall 2016, which was a year before the study was conducted (M. Crull, personal communication, March 16, 2018).
Table 1

*Fall 2015 to Fall 2016 Persistence at Community College in Midwest*

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study was the researcher’s interest in improving retention rates among Black male community college students. Research on this student population had primarily used quantitative methods, focused on failure, or only examined on-campus influences or off-campus influences separately (Costner, Daniels, & Clark, 2010; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002; E. A. Jones & Yearwood, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012; J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2016). Although quantitative research has provided vital information concerning retention, it does not fully describe the issue. There still is a need for qualitative research that focuses on how the...
interconnection between on-campus and off-campus support systems promotes academic success. Quantitative research on these support systems has focused primarily on statistics: whether one influence affected this group as opposed to another, and relating variables in a predictable pattern (Creswell, 2015). Although quantitative research has obtained large amounts of information through surveys, the questionnaires have often provided ambiguous and limited information (Strayhorn, 2012). E. C. Bush and Bush (2010), used mixed methods, but unfortunately, their quantitative aspects overshadowed the qualitative.

Qualitative research was a good fit this study concerning Black male retention because the topic is contextual and needs examination through dialogue and observation (Quaye, 2012). A narrative study was the best qualitative method for this particular research because the men’s personal stories would give an accurate picture of successful Black male community college students’ experiences (H. J. Rubin, 2005; H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Narrative studies allow readers to hear the participants’ voices, which were often not captured in a quantitative study. The narrative approach created a relaxed, open-ended conversation that gave the participants a chance to explain their stories through interactive dialogue (Creswell, 2013; H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Narrative research examines how participants tell their stories and what they choose to emphasize (Creswell, 2013; H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The participants’ verbal information was the only primary source of information for this qualitative research study.

Quantitative studies over the past two decades have documented statistics on Black male students who drop out of community college (Feldman, 2015; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). Few such reports and studies have tried to examine why some students in this population to remain in school (Brooms, 2016; Esters & Mosby, 2007; Harper, 2012; T. P. Palmer et al., 2014). This study used a narrative, qualitative method and focused on how Black
male community college students were successful, based on both their on-and off-campus support systems. The study looked for themes that filled in the pieces missing from quantitative research.

The information gained from the participants’ stories is relevant for educational professionals across the United States. Quantitative retention research has found that students who complete 24 credits by the end of their freshman year have a higher probability of graduating from college (Tinto, 1987, 1988, 2007; Tinto & Ebrary 2012). However, what little research exists concerning Black male community college students specifically points out that these men often do not stay in college beyond their first year (M. Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013).

Even when research addressed Black male community college students, too often these studies focused on academic failures (Burley, Butner, & Cejda, 2001; E. C. Bush & Bush, 2010; Pope, 2006; J. L. Wood, 2012). However, understanding academic success is critical for learning how community colleges can improve their retention rates. Often when individuals want to be successful, they turn to successful people for advice. This situation is especially true for Black men (M. H. Jones, Mueller, Royal, Shim, & Hart, 2013). They need and pursue guidance from strong male figures (Harper, 2006). Harper (2012) wrote that Black male students’ success needed to be studied so educational professionals could have insight into how this student population managed to navigate through post-secondary education. Therefore, it was important for this study to ask successful Black men to share their experiences regarding how they succeeded.

Community colleges have tried to increase their graduation rates by creating programs, services, and resources in the hope of improving retention, which in turn they believed would improve their graduation rates (Hagedorn, 2010). One question that stood out when studying the
success of Black male community college students was: How did on-campus and off-campus support systems play an integral role in academic success? Most studies have tried to answer this question by concentrating on either off-campus or on-campus support systems, but not both. Toews and Yazedjian (2007) examined students’ adjustment and retention based on the resources they accessed while they were in school. L. J. Wood and Essien-Wood (2012) suggested that on-campus environmental factors played a vital role in influencing academic success among Black men. Their research was conducted from a negative vantage: they asked how a student’s background, academic, social, and environmental factors impeded academic success (L. J. Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012). Newton and Smith (2008) explained that community colleges were under pressure to account for what programs and services had the biggest effect on student success, which was why they examined the services and programs that provided academic assistance. This research focused on the interconnection between on-campus and off-campus support systems.

The significance of this study is its identification of how the interconnection between on- and off-campus support systems plays a role in student success. Several stakeholders will benefit from this investigation. Black men will be the first to benefit from this study because they will learn how their peers became academically successful students. The participants in the study provided ideas and knowledge that would aid future Black male students’ academic journeys. Community colleges are the next stakeholders that will benefit from this study. By hearing from these men, colleges can request and justify on-campus programs, resources, and services that have proven to be useful in improving retention. Information from the study gave both community colleges and four-year institutions insight concerning the effects that off-campus support systems have on academic success. This knowledge is essential for creating and
developing effective community partnerships between higher education institutions and local community leaders. Four-year institutions also will benefit from this research because many of its findings could also apply to their own on- and off-campus services and programs. The final stakeholders who will benefit from this study are primary and secondary educators. Primary and secondary educators could benefit knowing what support systems were successful in influencing academic success for Black male students at the higher education level.

**Research Problem and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the interconnection between on-campus and off-campus support systems contributed to the success of Black male community college students. The research question was: How did support systems affect Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of college coursework?

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Academic success.** Completing at least 24 credit hours of college-level coursework with a passing grade, equivalent to first-to-second year persistence (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

**Black.** Individuals of African descent living in the United States (Brooms, 2016).

**Bronfenbrenner’s contextual theory.** An ecological theory used in developmental psychology to study the relationships of individuals' contexts within communities (Feldman, 2015).

**Cocurricular activities.** College-sponsored activities that include intercollegiate sports, intramural sports, student government, student organizations, community service programs, college-sponsored programs and events, and campus publications (Ragle, 2016).

**Community college.** A traditionally open-access public two-year degree-granting institution (L. J. Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012).
**External motivation.** “External motivation is revealed by extrinsic forces and is not directly related to the duty itself” (Erdem and Cicekdemir, 2016, p. 159).

**Extrinsic support systems.** Outside support systems that influence a person (S. E. Wood, Wood, & Boyd, 2014).

**Financial assistance.** Federal programs that assist underrepresented populations with institutional aid, financial assistance, special programs, and professional training (L. S. Jones, 2011).

**Friends: A voluntary companion either on or off campus (Bronkema, 2014).**

**Internal motivation.** A way a person wants to succeed for self-satisfaction (Erdem & Cicekdemir, 2016).

**Intrinsic support systems.** Systems that are within a person that influenced that person (S. E. Wood et al., 2014).

**Learning communities.** Small cohorts where students are enrolled together in two or more linked courses (Wathington, Pretlow, & Mitchell (2011).

**Mesosystem.** The second layer of Bronfenbrenner’s contextual theory. It provides the connections between microsystems.

**Microsystem.** The first layer of Bronfenbrenner’s contextual theory. It examines the various structures that have direct contact with an individual.

**Off-campus support systems.** Microsystems such as family, peers, friends, work, spirituality, and religion that contribute to academic success (Latz, 2012).

**On-campus support systems.** Microsystems such as counseling, first-year experience course, tutoring, TRIO Student Support Services, mentoring, financial assistance, peers, and faculty-student interaction that contribute to academic success (T. P. Palmer et al., 2014).
Peers: Associates and friends who are similar in age, status, or interests (Bronkema, 2014).

Retention rate. The percentage of a college’s undergraduate students who continue each term in pursuit of their academic goals (Tinto, 1987, 2012).

Self-concept. The idea or the mental image one has of one’s strengths, weaknesses, and self-image (S. E. Wood et al., 2014).

Self-esteem. The value judgment persons pass on themselves (S. E. Wood et al., 2014).

Self-efficacy. A person’s confidence in his or her ability to control emotions, behavior, and actions (Bandura, 2012).

TRIO Student Support Services (SSS). A program designed and funded by U.S. Department of Education grants (Wallingford, 2008) and created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which provides additional support to college students who meet any one of three criteria: low-income, first-generation, or disabled (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2015; Wallingford, 2008).

Twenty-four credit hours of coursework. An equivalence to the number of courses taken in a full-time first year in college, which is the critical period for academic success (Bumphus, 2016; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yarnitz, 2007; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

Positionality Statement

I am neither Black nor male. Therefore, it might not have made any sense to someone else that I would be interested in studying this student population. I knew there might be people who believe a Black male researcher should have conducted this study rather than me (Bricoe, 2005). However, there were two reasons why I was interested in this research.
My first reason is due to my cousins. Four of my six male cousins are Black. All but one graduated from college. Over 20 years ago, I spent time with their father, my late uncle who was Black, talking about how no one talks about Black male college students’ success. Our conversations stayed with me, and as I started my coursework for my doctoral program, I kept thinking I wanted to conduct research about the academic success of Black males. I still was not convinced; I was the right person do this research since I am White and female. However, I changed my mind in the summer of 2015 when I attended the Institute for doctoral students and heard Dr. Sean Harper explain that there needed to be more positive studies concerning Black male college students. His speech made me realize that none of my concerns matter. All that mattered was making sure this research was conducted.

The second reason was that I have an interest in community colleges because I have worked in higher education for over 19 years. During that time, my occupation as both a psychology professor and counselor allowed me to work closely with this student population. I have witnessed firsthand how amazingly Black male students were succeeding in my classroom and was shocked to discover that Black men had one of the lowest retentions in my school, state, and country. For me, the question became how higher education could assist these students by having them learn from their peers who were successful. I believed that since I was a scholar-practitioner, I could use the information from this study to improve the success of future Black male community college students.

The last reason I wanted to conduct this study was that I realized that educators, including myself, did not do a sufficient job seeking input from this student population when making plans concerning their education. As a scholar-practitioner, I adopted a critical view of what was going on and realized that input from successful Black males was greatly needed if educators were to
make proper decisions (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002). Most decisions concerning this student population were based on quantitative data drawn from multiple-choice questionnaire forms and institutional records. The questionnaires and the records were all concerned with figuring out why students were not successful. It was then that I realized the importance of the word “how,” and saw a need to ask successful Black male students how they were successful.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized Uri Bronfenbrenner’s ecological contextual theory of development. Bronfenbrenner was a developmental psychologist who showed how interdisciplinary areas influence human development (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). His ecological approach was a contextual method that looked at quality of life (Bethell, 2013). It was derived from the ideas of social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who thought human behavior is a function of the interactions that a person has with his or her environment (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009).

When Bronfenbrenner (1974, 1977) first proposed his ecological contextual theory, he was concerned with how a developing person and her or his environment interacted with each other. He believed human behavior changed because of numerous intersecting influences that affect a person throughout her or his lifespan (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Later, Bronfenbrenner’s theory showed the significant role the environment has in educational success. Research based on his theory led him to cofound the federal program Head Start and to address studying in school and at home (Tegaskis, 2015).

Bronfenbrenner found that as individuals develop cognitively and physically, their interactions became more complex (Bethell, 2013). He described this complexity as five interconnecting levels that either directly or indirectly affect a person’s judgment and behavior:
microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977).

The microsystem is at the foundation of all the levels. This level includes the immediate support systems that directly influence someone’s decision-making process (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Therefore, this level is considered the most influential of the systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). A person has numerous intrinsic and extrinsic support systems, such as family, friends, faculty, work, school, self-esteem, and religion (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977).

The mesosystem is the next level, and it is concerned with all the various microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977). This level is where various social settings start to interconnect to form the attitudes and beliefs that will affect one’s behavior (Lomas, 2015). It is also at this level that a person is motivated or unmotivated to attain a goal. When microsystems are working together, a person will reach a goal. However, when microsystems are working against each other, a person will not be able to meet the goal.

The third level is the exosystem, which indirectly affects a person. Bronfenbrenner viewed this level as an extension of the mesosystem because its impact is more related to the indirect context that affects the microsystems that interact at the mesosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Although there is no direct involvement, it affects persons. Decisions made without the person’s input include such things as customs, still laws, and values (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; P. C. Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, & Bagley, 2014).

The fourth level is the macrosystem, and it also has an indirect impact on persons. This level is concerned with the cultural environment of the individual, which involves how a person’s socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race will indirectly affect her or him. Like the exosystem, it may have either a positive or negative effect on a person (Feldman, 2015).
The final level is the chronosystem, which has both direct and indirect effects on persons. This level deals with the dimension of time in relation to a person’s development (Feldman, 2015). An example of a direct effect would be an event that directly influences a person during her or his development, such as the death of a family member. An indirect effect would be an event that occurred during a person’s development, such as growing up during the Vietnam War.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) realized that this theory applied to any age. He specifically believed this theory worked well with underrepresented populations (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). He was not alone in his views. Over the last 20 years, other researchers have used Bronfenbrenner’s theory. Some researchers applied his entire theory, or parts of it, to study Black students (Bethall, 2013; Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2010).


Robinson and Werblow (2013) used Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of development to study the influence of Black single mothers on their sons. They used the theory to explore three assumptions: individuals were continuously interacting with their environment, which causes them to influence their environment directly; the powers within their environment influenced individuals; and changes in the environment had varying effects on individuals. They found that Bronfenbrenner’s theory gave them an understanding of how single Black mothers were involved in their sons’ emotional, academic, and social development (Robinson & Werblow, 2013).
Bronfenbrenner’s theory served as the theoretical framework for P. C. Harris et al.’s (2014) qualitative study that focused on the academic achievement and success of Black male student-athletes in high school. They used the systems to explore the interconnection between academic and behavioral achievement. Lomas (2015) argued that the only way positive change could occur was to use a contextual theory such as Bronfenbrenner’s. Lomas (2015) was particularly interested in how the different microsystems worked together at the mesosystem level.

Knight (2014) took Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of development on a different path by studying the contextual coping patterns of young Latino and Black males. He believed Bronfenbrenner’s work was very versatile and could be applied in a variety of ways to study different populations because it was not particular to any one gender or age range (Knight, 2014). He found that a contextual theory allowed a researcher to find patterns within a social group’s activities, routines, and practices (Knight, 2014). Studying successful Black men through Bronfenbrenner’s theory is an example of a contextual layer.

Critics

Even though there appears to be very little criticism of Bronfenbrenner’s theory, there are a few issues that need to be addressed. The first issue is that Bronfenbrenner spent most of his career applying his theory to children’s social issues, not adults (Lomas, 2015). Critics of his theory, such as Lin and Bates (2010), believed the theory was more suitable for studying children. Another criticism is more concerned with his views of nurture over nature (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016). Bronfenbrenner did not consider biological features that affected a person (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016). Although L. V. Bush and Bush (2013) used Bronfenbrenner's theory as a foundation for AAMT, they believed his theory was culturally insufficient for what they felt
needed to be addressed for this population. They, therefore, added a focus on pre- and post-enslavement experiences that considerate educational development, station in life, and spiritual, social, and psychological factors. Finally, Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, and Karnik (2009) worried that using only part of the theory was a problem. They felt a researcher must fully embrace and use the entire theory for it to work properly (Tudge et al., 2009).

**Rationale for Using this Theory**

When it comes to studying Black men’s academic success, Bronfenbrenner’s theory was a better fit than any other approach because it allowed research to address the interconnection of on- and off-campus factors that influenced academic development. Bronfenbrenner’s theory fills in the gaps left from other studies (Harper & Gasman, 2008). Most studies solely focused on either off-campus or on-campus support systems. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) used Tinto’s (1975) explanatory, theoretical mode of student persistence/withdrawal in their investigation of on-campus academic and nonacademic systems that support students’ persistence. However, they did not consider any off-campus support systems. Flowers (2004, 2006) studied the ideas of Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) and examined how student involvement both within the classroom and outside of it factored into Black student success. Although he did not conduct the same study as Pascarella and Terenzini (1983), he also only examined on-campus factors. These two studies were examples of investigations that concentrated on one area but did not provide the full picture. Exploring both types of environments creates a more complete understanding of academic success.

Knowing people who were successful was a popular tool for recruitment and retention among other student populations. This study’s findings are a powerful tool for retention because it focused on positive support systems that affected their academic success. Except for Harper
(2006), most studies, like Pascarella and Terenini (1983), focused on failure rather than success. In fact, many of the studies conducted on Black men during the last two decades have been concerned with why this student population was not academically successful (Costner et al., 2010; Cross & Slater, 2000; Iverson & Jaggers, 2015; Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007). These types of studies created a negative perception of the participants. This study solely focused on the success of this student population: The stories of these men should be heard so future students and educators can learn from them.

**Applying Theory to this Study**

Although most of this research focused on the levels that play a direct role in influencing academic success; the indirect levels were also examined because a couple of participants did bring up influences that came from them. The interview questions were primarily focused on microsystems that might have directly affected a person. The mesosystem level was where the researcher looked for patterns of interconnection. However, even though the other levels of Bronfenbrenner’s theory did not have a direct effect on a person, these levels did appear in some of the participants’ answers.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological contextual theory will be the driving force of Chapters 2 and 3. All of the topics covered in the literature review focus on the microsystems and mesosystems, for example, peers, mentors, and faculty interactions.

**Summary**

Chapter 1 set the stage for learning about successful Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of coursework. There is a need to improve retention rates at community colleges, particularly among this student population. Therefore, this narrative study, using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological contextual theory, has confirmed past studies
and provided new and useful insights into how some Black men have been successful in completing 24 credit hours at a community college.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Studies have shown that Black males have lower graduation rates than their White counterparts at most community colleges (E. C. Bush & Bush, 2010; Freeman & Huggans, 2009; Hagedorn et al., 2002; T. P. Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Studies of Black male students have usually focused on failure rather than success (Cross, 2009; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; E. Kim & Hargrove, 2013; J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2013). Studies have also tended to focus on either on-campus or off-campus support systems, but have rarely examined both areas together (Cross, 2009; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; E. Kim & Hargrove, 2013; J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2013). This study focused on understanding on-campus and off-campus support systems and how they contributed to Black male college students’ successful completion of 24 academic credit hours at a community college. This literature review examines retention, community colleges, Black male students, and on-campus and off-campus support systems.

Retention

As costs have risen and the focus of higher education has transformed, retention among Black male community college students has become an important issue (Borgen & Borgen, 2016; Friedman & Mandel, 2011). Over the past 40 years, more students have attended these institutions to gain skills for future employment, and the cost of higher education has risen dramatically during this time as well (Borgen & Borgen, 2016). Originally, higher education’s role was to shape a person’s character; over time, it shifted to teaching the job skills needed for various occupations (Borgen & Borgen, 2016). Because the cost of educating students has risen, retention has been correlated to money spent (Borgen & Borgen, 2016, p. 506). When students stay on schedule towards timely graduation, institutions spend less money. This matters because higher education is funded primarily by students, taxpayers, state and federal governments, and
the private sector (Borgen & Borgen, 2016). Retention information has often served as a recruitment tool for parents, guardians, and future students who wanted to attend colleges with high graduation rates (Jamelske, 2009). Therefore, during the past 40 years, researchers have examined various factors affecting student retention (Friedman & Mandel, 2011). Bumphus (2016) emphasized that retention improves when various factors are woven together to build a strong support system for students.

The first 24 credit hours of higher education coursework is a critical time in regards to retention (Bumphus, 2016; Pritchard et al., 2007; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Pritchard et al. (2007) found that the dropout rate in post-secondary education was highest during the first six weeks of a student's first semester. Drew (1990) and K. Martin et al. (2014) discovered that an individual’s goals and commitment to the institution were factors in deciding whether to stay in school. Drew (1990) noticed that students’ retention increased when they had direct involvement in extracurricular activities, clubs, and cultural events at their institution. Her study was validated by Habley and McClanahan (2004), Goodman and Pascarella (2006), and Kuh (2007), who all found that first-year programs and services had a positive effect on students’ academic success and retention.

Although retention has been studied since 1962, by Summerskill (Wallingford, 2008), for the past 30 years research on four-year institutions has primarily used the theories of John Bean, Alexander Astin, and Vincent Tinto (Mertes, 2013; Wallingford, 2008). Similar to Bean and Eaton (2001) and Astin (1975), many of Tinto’s (2007) studies used quantitative research. However, Tinto (2007) acknowledged that two- and four-year institutions had different needs and issues and that their retention should be studied separately.
Limited retention studies have indicated that community colleges’ issues are different than those of their four-year counterparts (Bailey, 2005; Flores & Park, 2013; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010). Mertes and Hoover’s (2014) quantitative study focused on whether or not retention models designed for four-year institutions were effectively used at community colleges. Their study surveyed 5,000 students at two community colleges, but applied retention models that were designed for four-year institutions (Mertes & Hoover, 2014). Mertes and Hoover (2014) found that four-year institution retention models do not work well for community colleges. In addition, they found that students who were actively engaged in some way with the institution were more likely to stay in school (Mertes & Hoover, 2014).

**Community Colleges**

“Community colleges had long been distinguished by efforts to put students first with the emphasis on teaching and learning” (Ragle, 2016, p. 5). Unlike four-year institutions, community colleges have open-accession admission policies (Shierling, 2015; Ragle, 2016). This open-door policy makes community colleges’ student populations more diverse than those at any other institutions of higher education (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Bragg, 2001; Park, 2015). Due to the importance of increasing retention rates at community colleges nationwide, strategies have examined ways to aid retention efforts (Mertes, 2013). Unfortunately, there have been very few retention studies that focused on just community colleges (Mertes, 2013).

One community college study conducted by Klein (2013) investigated the factors that influenced academic and social integration and eventually played a role in student retention. Klein (2013) used the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) to survey 266 community college students of various races and ages and both genders. The survey examined the students’ sense of connection with the community college. Klein (2013) checked the
students’ persistence to the next term and discovered that students who felt a connection with the institution were more likely to return the following semester.

Another community college retention study focused on the psychological factor of self-efficacy and retention (Luke, Redekop, & Burgin, 2015). The study found that students who had high self-efficacy were more likely to return to school the next semester (Luke et al., 2015). The study also revealed that students who made a connection with a career program were more likely to stay in school (Luke et al., 2015). Although a person’s race and age did not show any influence on retention, the study did find that females scored significantly higher than males on the survey when it came to self-efficacy, which indicated they would be more likely to return to school (Luke et al., 2015).

**Black Male Community College Students**

The National Collegiate Athletic Association, United States Department of Education, and the United States Department of Justice constructed a portrait of Black male community college students using data that depicted problematic behavioral patterns that were often viewed in a negative way (Harper & Harris, 2012). Their research described Black male students as being disengaged and low performing (Harper & Harris, 2012). Although Harper and Harris (2012) suggested that there were reasons why these men were failing, they did not offer any details except that the causes came from both on-campus and off-campus support systems. Other studies have focused on why this student population does not perform well and leaves college.

One quantitative study on why students were not succeeding came from Vasquez and Wood (2014), who used Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data from 646 community colleges to find out what institutional characteristics played a role in influencing Black men’s retention. The study found that individual community colleges made a difference in
the retention of Black male students, which indicates that an institution’s location, policies, and size could influence retention (Vasquez & Wood, 2014).

Another study of why Black men were dropping out of community college was L. S. Jones’s (2011) phonological qualitative research, in which she interviewed 10 Black men who dropped out of community college. The common theme discovered from the interviews was that the men in the study had low self-esteem, did not feel any connection to the college, and had academic challenges and off-campus issues (L. S. Jones, 2011).

Finally, E. C. Bush and Bush’s (2010) six-year mixed-method study focused on community college institutional academic achievement factors that affected Black male students’ perception of their college experience. The study used California’s community college system, and the researchers obtained the academic records of the students who completed a survey. The students also participated in focus groups to clearly identify any issues from the quantitative data (E.C. Bush & Bush, 2010). The study revealed that retention decreased among Black male students who had a negative perception of the roadblocks facing them in college.

These studies supported F. Harris and Wood (2013): even though higher education professionals had increased awareness of the obstacles these students faced in pursuing a degree in higher education, Black male retention remained unchanged from 1997-2012. The studies provided various insights into why some Black men were not succeeding, but they still did not explain why other Black male community college students were successful.

**Bronfenbrenner’s Indirect Influences on Retention**

Although the current study was mainly interested in direct influences, indirect influence levels also played a factor in how Black male students viewed success. Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem all had indirect implications that affected the
success of Black male community college students because those systems deal with issues such as race, customs, laws, values, socioeconomic status, and world events. Even though there do not appear to be studies on these types of issues concerning retention of Black male community college students, studies of Black men in both secondary and postsecondary institutions have illustrated how these indirect influences can affect retention.

An ethnographic study examined how secondary teachers viewed Black male students based on race and socioeconomic status. Six teachers from a large suburban high school participated in the study, along with 10 middle-class Black male students and their families (Allen, 2015). Allen (2015) found that each of the teachers made racist comments concerning Black male students. Allen (2015) also found that when it came to socioeconomic status, the teachers often discussed race as a barrier for their Black male students.

W. A. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) studied racial battle fatigue among Black male college students. The 36 focus group participants were enrolled in six major universities across the United States. W. A. Smith et al. (2007) found that the participants felt their campuses had an anti-Black male stereotyping climate and that they were hyper-surveilled and controlled.

Robertson and Mason (2008) focused on how Black men attending a mid-size predominantly White university in the southern United States believed their retention stemmed from a sense of belongingness. Robertson and Mason (2008) found that Black male participants often felt alienated in class, no real connection with their instructors or social gatherings at their university, and a sense of prejudice on campus. They believed these barriers negatively affected wanting to stay at the institution (Robetson & Mason, 2008).

Community colleges across the United States have changed to meet the needs of students and stakeholders by linking retention to student success (Illinois Community College Board,
2017; Juszkiewicz, 2015). Therefore, community colleges must figure out ways to improve the retention of Black male students, whose rate is one of the lowest at community colleges (Crull, 2017; Illinois Community College Board, 2017; Juszkiewicz, 2015). Indirect influences seem to be issues that have been slightly studied at the four-year institutional level, and not at the community college level. Thus, it is imperative to learn from successful Black male community college students.

**On-campus Support Systems**

On-campus support systems are a critical part of higher education retention. Black male students’ perception of their on-campus support systems can provide insight into their academic success (Harper, 2009; J. L. Wood, 2014). Kuh (2001) and T. P. Palmer et al. (2014) found two general types of support systems that could influence persistence for this student population: services and programs and on-campus relationships.

**Services and Programs**

Over the past 40 years, post-secondary education has created an array of services and programs designed to improve students’ scholastic achievement (M. Brooks et al., 2013). Some programs are federal, while others are institutional. Higher education institutions offer some or all of the following programs: financial assistance, counseling, tutoring, TRIO learning communities, student support services, mentoring programs, orientations, first-year experiences, and cocurricular activities.

**Financial assistance.** While financial assistance gives all students who meet the federal academic requirements for postsecondary education an equal opportunity to participate (Downing, 2008), there has been surprisingly little research on community college retention and financial aid. Much of the research about financial aid focuses on all higher education students.
One study concerning retention in higher education and financial aid was Bettinger (2004), which gathered data since 1998 on students across the country using the information obtained by the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR). His study examined need-based aid in relation to student retention at four-year and two-year institutions and found that first-year students who received the Pell Grant were more likely to return the next year (Bettinger, 2004).

One study that only focused on community colleges was Dowd and Coury (2006). It examined public policies related to the use of subsidized loans as financial aid for community college students. For over five years, they studied students’ persistence from their first year to their second year and degree completion. Dowd and Coury (2006) used two surveys created by the National Center for Education Statistics to obtain their data. The surveys revealed that loans had a negative effect on student persistence (Dowd & Coury, 2006). Students who had to take out more loans were less likely to return to college, which in turn lowered the institution's graduation rate (Dowd & Coury, 2006).

Counseling and advising. Counseling and advising services at community colleges were a resource not often considered with respect to Black male students, but they have helped some such students during their first year (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009).

Glenn’s (2004) mixed-method study was one of the few that revealed the importance of counseling. His study indicated that retention improved among students who met with an advisor or counselor. In fact, Glenn (2004) found that the community colleges that required their students to meet with advisors had the highest Black male graduation rate.

For Black students, some of the challenges that affected their persistence were overcome with support from a professional counselor or advisor (W. S. Williams & Chung, 2013). Counseling and advising centers have created a positive atmosphere and provided ways to
address challenges – such as academic adjustment, financial difficulty, living conditions, and study skill issues – that have caused Black male students to drop out (W. S. Williams & Chung, 2013). Although very little research has shown correlation between seeing a counselor and retention rates, it has shown that Black students who utilized a counseling center early in their college career were more successful because they could tackle pre-existing fears that affected their self-concept and self-esteem (W. S. Williams & Chung, 20). 

Chiteng Kot’s (2014) experimental study specifically looked at how central advising affected retention. Central advising is when advisors help students choose appropriate courses, advice on majors, suggest campus resources, and develop individual student success strategies. The study examined the first-year grade point average (GPA) of 2,745 full-time college students who utilized advising. Although not everyone benefited from this type of advising, Chiteng Kot (2014) found that Black students were more academically successful if they took advantage of it.

**Tutoring.** Tutoring was a service that was helpful to Black male students. Tutors resemble mentors in many ways, because they provide encouragement, guide students academically, and address problems (McLean, 2004). Often, tutors have specific academic areas and can be employed in either group or individual settings (McLean, 2004).

Tutoring and retention research has shown mixed results. Pruett (2015) showed that there was some improvement in retention and developmental education among community college students who sought tutoring. Loyd and Eckhardt (2010) found an increase in community college retention rates when tutoring was immersed in courses. They also found that tutoring sessions led by peers correlated with an increase in retention rates (Loyd & Eckhardt, 2010).

**Learning communities.** Not all community colleges had learning communities, but the research on them indicates there could be a need for this type of program among Black male
community college students. Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts’s (2006) five-year quantitative study looked at retention among 28,000 first-year students who attended two major universities in the South. They found a significant positive correlation between retention and being in a learning community during their first year (Hotchkiss et al., 2006). They particularly saw this correlation among Black men and women (Hotchkiss et al., 2006).

Barnes and Piland (2011) focused on retention and the effects learning communities had on developmental English in community college. The four-semester case study compared students who were in developmental English learning communities with students who were also in developmental English but not in learning communities. The research found that even though retention was higher for students in the learning communities than for those who were not, it was not significantly higher (Barnes & Piland, 2011).

Although Washington et al. (2011) did not study retention, they compared the success of developmental community college students who were in learning communities to those who were not. They used five community colleges across the United States where teachers and students participated in focus groups. Washington et al. (2011) found that students and faculty who were involved in learning communities felt they had a more supportive relationship than the students and teachers who were not in any such cohort.

**TRIO student support services.** National research on this program indicates that it was effective because participants earned degrees (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2015). However, when L. S. Jones (2011) was studying why students dropped out of community college, she found that a significant number of Black male SSS participants at community colleges were unable to complete their college degrees. In her qualitative study of why students leave, her 10 Black community college dropouts had all been SSS participants (L. S. Jones,
2011). She learned from these men that even though they were in SSS, they did not effectively utilize the program (L. S. Jones, 2011).

Wallingford (2008) used correlational and multiple regression analysis to focus her research on 209 SSS directors who completed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and a survey concerning each program’s first-to-second-year retention rates. The research found that students who were involved in the various SSS programs during their first year were more likely to return the next year (Wallingford, 2008). The study also revealed that program leadership played a factor in students wanting to be involved and use the SSS services on campus (Wallingford, 2008).

**Mentoring programs.** Mentoring programs are another initiative that some community college campuses use to assist Black male students. Mentors work with students to establish a sense of belonging to the institution and college in general (Phillip, 2011) and to connect them with positive academic role models (M. Brooks et al., 2013; Gibson, 2014).

Crisp (2010) studied the influence of mentoring on community college persistence. The study examined 320 community college students’ academic records and compared the information to the students’ surveys (Crisp, 2010). The results showed some correlation between the mentoring experience and academic performance.

Brown (2007) used a mixed-method case study to examine retention among Black male students who were part of a collective mentoring program in community college, Mentoring Our Male African American and Hispanic Students (MOMAHS). Twenty mentees who also mentored their peers were studied. The findings linked Black community college male students’ success to their program goal setting, goal-attainment, and academic, emotional, and social
support. Brown found the participants felt more of a connection and social commitment when they were both mentored and mentor (Brown, 2007).

**Orientations.** Along with reducing stress, it appears that orientations create a positive perception of future college experiences (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011; Drew, 1990; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This type of program works with students before their first year starts by informing them about the college’s services and programs (Duggan & Williams, 2011; Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kim, 2010). Orientations also show students the differences between high school and college and find ways to improve students’ interest (Bonfiglio, 2006; Mosser, 2002).

Derby and Smith (2004) studied 7,466 community college students from the fall of 1999 through the spring of 2002 to find out whether there was a correlation between orientations and retention. The students either participated in an orientation course or not. The gender in the study was almost equal, with 53% of the students being female, but only 1.1% of the students were Black (Derby & Smith, 2004). All of the students were working towards a transfer degree (Derby & Smith, 2004). Derby and Smith’s (2004) results showed a significant positive correlation between orientation and retention. The students who attended an orientation program were more likely to return for their next semester and even graduate than the students who did not participate in one (Derby & Smith, 2004).

**First-year experiences (FYE).** First-year students must figure out how to adjust to their new academic and social environment, which can be particularly challenging for minority students. Mandatory FYE assists students with career decision-making, educational planning, goal setting, and being involved in their school’s activities; the programs also demonstrate the college’s commitment to students’ well-being (Drew, 1990; Karp, 2012). Some research indicated clear short-term benefits, such as improved academic performance and greater
persistence to the sophomore year (Karp, 2012; O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009). Over the past 10 years, educators and policymakers have been trying to improve Black male student retention by creating initiatives and campaigns (R. A. Williams, 2014). Organizations such as the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and New York City Young Men’s Initiative created campaigns that focused on college achievement for Black male students (R. A. Williams, 2014). Some two-year and four-year institutions have created specific mentorships, first-year experience courses, and orientations to help Black male students (R. A. Williams, 2014). The Community College of Philadelphia created the Center for Male Engagement on campus, which helps students with personal, career, and legal issues that could prevent them from academically succeeding (Brooms, 2016; Phillip, 2011).

Despite the various on-campus programs, Black men still were not academically succeeding. Harper (2012) believed that nonacademic and academic factors had not been evaluated simultaneously. Harper (2012) found that Black men were less engaged in the overall campus experience. An FYE course could have a role in retention because students could connect issues with college success (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Barton and Donahue (2009) used a quasiexperimental assessment to find that students who were obliged to choose the format of the course had a stronger physical and emotional connection to their college (Barton & Donahue, 2009). Both Howard and Jones (2000) and N. K. Martin and Dixon (1994) documented similar findings. However, they did not believe that students should pick topics that interested them. Instead, they recommended that students choose the FYE format that matched their needs and interests (Howard & Jones, 2000; N. K. Martin & Dixon, 1994).

A quantitative study by Mertes and Hoover (2014) offered retention information concerning FYE. Of the 1,740 students in their study, 329 took the FYE course and 1,411 did
not. Of the 329 students who took the course, 200 passed. The researchers also found that retention was higher among students who completed an FYE. Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh, and Tincher-Ladner (2014) also found that the 129 students who did not pass FYE were 66.6% less likely to remain in school by the end of their first year, and the 1,411 students who did not even take the course were 81% less likely to stay in school after their first year.

**Cocurricular activities.** Cocurricular activities help Black students see the advantages of participation and social integration (E. A. Jones & Yearwood, 2012). Flowers (2004) examined how belonging to organizations and participating in campus events would affect Black students. From 1999 to 2000, Flowers (2004) used the Revised 3rd Edition of the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) as the primary source for his data on 7,923 African American students (5,150 females and 2,773 males) from 192 postsecondary institutions. His study concluded that engagement in cocurricular activities had a positive effect on student development and retention (Flowers, 2004).

Mertes’s (2015) research examined community college students’ social integration into campus activities through a survey completed by 308 community college students (133 of whom were male) who had completed one semester at that institution (Mertes, 2015). Although Mertes (2005) found a correlation between social integration into campus activities and retention, he discovered that the positive correlation was stronger for females than males.

**On-campus relationships**

Interactions between students and higher education professionals have proven to be a valuable retention tool. On-campus relationships create a connection to the institution and provide a sense of community (M. Brooks et al., 2013). The biggest groups that influence student retention on-campus are friendships, peers, and faculty.
**On-campus friendships.** One group of individuals who may have a direct influence on Black male students is their on-campus friends. In a study by M. Rubin and Wright (2015) of 376 participants from a university in New South Wales, Australia, on-campus friendships were investigated to find out how they might be connected to retention. The participants filled out an online survey titled “Making Friends at Unit” (M. Rubin & Wright, 2015, p. 430). The survey had the students identify the number of on-campus friendships and the quality of those friendships. The surveys showed little evidence that on-campus friendships improved their desire to stay in school (M. Rubin & Wright, 2015).

Swenson Goguen, Hiester, and Nordstrom (2011) were concerned with on-campus friendships and academic outcomes. The participants in their study were 271 first-year students (173 females and 98 males) from two universities (Swenson Goguen et al., 2011). The participants were only allowed to list new friends they already felt close to and then use the Intimate Friendship Scale (IFS) and the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI). Then the students’ Grade Point Average (GPA) was checked each semester of their first year. The study showed that loyalty and trust between friends showed an increase in GPA and shared common interests among campus friends corresponded with a greater likelihood of returning to school the next year (Swenson Goguen et al., 2011).

**On-campus peers.** Spurgeon and Myers’ (2010) study showed how Black male students might need the support of their peers in college because they can relate to similar issues. Tinto and Astin had suggested in the 1980s that peers played a part in retention. Harper (2006) examined the effects of peers on Black male students in regards to leadership and achievement. Harper understood that peers were essential for retention of Black men because they countered ideas offered by celebrities such as Kanye West, who in *The College Dropout* album urged Black
men to quit college because it was overrated and worthless (Harper, 2006). Instead of seeking advice from celebrities, students can rely on peers to promote a positive, supportive atmosphere (Harper, 2006).

M. H. Jones et al. (2013) found that peers help Black male students remain focused on their academic goals. Strayhorn (2008) found that Black male students who felt a greater sense of belonging with on-campus peers were more likely to remain in school. Poole (2006) found in her quantitative research that peers were indirectly related to the retention of Black male community college students in Mississippi. Students who completed her survey identified peers as a key factor in their academic success and social integration, which led them to stay in school.

**Faculty.** Turner and Thompson (2014) stated that the “instructor-student relationship was an essential element in retention because students formed a bond with their instructors” (p. 101). Also, connections students make with faculty members can help reduce student stress and enable them to adjust more quickly to their academic life (Pritchard et al., 2007). J. L. Wood (2014) found that faculty who monitored and aided student progress created a deeper connection and better class retention.

This personal attention affected student achievement and success (E. A. Jones & Yearwood, 2012). E. A. Jones and Yearwood (2012) noticed that students who were guided by faculty members became lifelong learners because they viewed knowledge from a different perspective. Often teacher and student engagement before and during class resulted in students seeking assistance from instructors outside of class time (Hargrave, Tyler, Thompson, & Danner, 2016; Ullah & Wilson, 2007). Research has discovered that faculty members could influence students’ engagement and learning and contribute to a higher level of cognitive skills (Hargrave et al., 2016; Ullah & Wilson, 2007).
Faculty members’ influence on Black male students was necessary because, for these men, their experiences working closely with college professionals could play a factor in their wanting to stay in school or dropping out (Price, 1999; J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014; J. L. Wood & Turner, 2010). Researchers concluded that Black male students benefited from instructor-student interaction because it reduced their fear concerning misconceptions about who they were as students (J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Thompson, 2001). It also developed constructive interpersonal relationships, which strengthened their higher academic skills (Thompson, 2001; M. M. Kim & Conrad, 2006). M. M. Kim and Conrad (2006) did not find significant differences in student success based on the skin color of faculty members. Instead, what mattered were the personal connections between students and the faculty (M. M. Kim & Conrad, 2006; J. L. Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015), which produced better grades for Black male students.

T. P. Palmer et al. (2014) concluded that faculty interaction with Black men created multiple educational gains for this student population. Tinto (2007) and Astin (1975), based on their early retention research from the 1960s through 1990s, believed that most postsecondary education students would perform better academically as a result of faculty-student interaction that created a welcoming and nurturing educational environment (T. P. Palmer et al., 2014; Reason, 2009). J. L. Wood and Turner’s (2011) qualitative study of 28 Black male students also showed that high-quality faculty interaction with this population created an academic environment that promoted retention.

Conclusion

There are a variety of on-campus support systems that could directly affect student success. Research has shown a correlation between on-campus services and programs and
retention. However, some services and programs did not have as much evidence of success, based on quantitative research. There seems to be more research conducted on students’ success due to on-campus relationships than due to services and programs. Although there are a variety of on-campus support systems, these are not the only microsystems that could directly influence student success. Off-campus support systems must also be examined to see how they directly affect students’ academic success.

**Off-campus Support Systems**

For Black male community college students, their lives take place off campus as much or more than it does on campus (Anders, Frazier, & Shallcross, 2012; Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005). Off-campus support systems are not related to students’ socioeconomic status, their GPA, or college preparedness, which was why those factors were not included in this literature review. This research was concerned with microsystems that promoted success. Although research has shown that the more students were on campus, the more likely they were to be successful, this may not have been an option for commuter students (V. Tinto, personal communication, September 25, 2015 because community college students do not typically live on campus. Therefore, it is important to learn about the off-campus support systems that could have a positive impact on academic success (Latz, 2012). For Black male students, off-campus issues play a deciding factor in their success. Off-campus support systems include both extrinsic and intrinsic microsystems. External microsystems consist of outward conditions and relationships, while intrinsic microsystems are internalized within the individual.

**Extrinsic Support Systems**

Extrinsic support systems directly and indirectly affect student success (L. J. Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012). They include situational microsystems, such as work, family, community,

**Work.** Of the students who attend community college, approximately 60 percent work at least 20 hours a week and 25 percent work 35 or more hours a week (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Rajeeve, 2014). Hillman and Orians (2013) showed that elasticity in community college enrollment came from local labor market conditions. When job markets dwindled, community college students attended full time (Hillman & Orians, 2013). However, when job markets were fierce, students stopped attending community colleges in favor of full-time employment (Hillman & Orians, 2013).

There were benefits to working while in college. Work taught time management, communication, and problem-solving skills (Light, 2001; Rajeev, 2014; Triventi, 2014). However, Mounsey, Vandehey, and Diekhoff (2013) found that students who worked reported having more stress than their nonworking peers, and they displayed more signs of anxiety.

J. L. Wood’s (2011) quantitative study concluded that work could have either a positive or negative influence on retention. His survey revealed that students who studied at work or whose workplace encouraged college had better retention than students who did not have a positive work and school relationship (J. L. Wood, 2011). J. L. Wood’s research matched evidence from T. P. Palmer et al. (2014), that employers indirectly influenced retention through how they emotionally supported students. They found that on-campus employment created an automatic connection to the college and encouraged students to study (T. P. Palmer et al., 2014).

**Relationships with family.** College students’ families were studied over the decades to learn how they affected student success. During the past 30 years, studies have revealed that the
quality of these relationships influences student success (Dotterer, Lowe, & McHale, 2013). The quality of family support may be either financial or emotional, or both.

The family sometimes is a source of financial support for Black male students. Although Tinto’s (1988) early work did not specifically study Black community college men, he concluded that postsecondary students sometimes asked their parents for college funds, especially when there were unexpected monetary changes. L. S. Jones (2011) noticed how families’ socioeconomic status played a role in students’ academic persistence. If the parents never attended college, they did not always see the need for their sons to attend school (L. S. Jones, 2011; Lindholm, 2006).

Emotional support was essential for student success. Families who offered emotional support yielded better student success (Hargrave et al., 2016; Robinson & Werblow, 2013). Robinson and Werblow (2013) found that Black men were strongly influenced by their mothers. Their research found that mothers, who had the dominant role in the family, tended to value education (Robinson & Werblow, 2013). They also provided leadership, guidance, and a strong sense of focus for their sons (Robinson & Werblow, 2013). The sons in the study commented that their mothers were their confidence-boosters and gave them the intrinsic motivation to perform well in college (Robinson & Werblow, 2013).

Research on family support confirms the notion that family has either a positive or negative influence on retention. Herndon and Hirt’s (2004) qualitative study of 10 four-year university students and their families found evidence that families’ emotional support helped students’ persistence and success in college. T. P. Palmer et al. (2014) found that, for Black men, the family played a key role in persistence by decreasing stress through emotional support.
T. P. Palmer et al. (2014) supported the earlier work of J. L. Wood (2012), finding that strong parents, especially mothers, gave Black males motivation to stay in school.

**Off-campus friendships.** Friends of Black male community college students who did not have any affiliation with the college have influenced this student population’s views concerning a college education and completion. For example, Cherng, Calarco, and Kao (2013) conducted a longitudinal study on the influence of friendship on college completion. Although they did not specifically look at Black men, they did study 3,309 individuals from a variety of backgrounds in two phases of their life. In the first phase, the participants were monitored from the ages 12-17, and during this period participants were asked about their closest friends (Cherng et al., 2013). The first phase revealed that students who had more academic goals in common were more likely to stay friends (Cherng et al., 2013). In the second phase of the research, the participants were interviewed again between the ages 24 to 32 about how their childhood friends had influenced their college goals. The research found that students whose friends had strong educational goals or whose friends’ parents had strong educational beliefs did influence the participants’ views on education and completing a college degree (Cherng et al., 2013).

**Off-campus peers.** For Black male community college students, some persons who influenced them outside of the college were classified as peers rather than friends. A peer was someone from work or the neighborhood (Lentz, 2013). Although studies of peers from outside a college campus were limited, one study conducted by Lundberg (2014) used the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ) with 239 community college students to see what affected their college experience and found that their peers did influence them in their learning. Unfortunately, the questionnaire was vague and did not ask whether the peers were students on campus or people off campus who influenced their learning.
Adams-Mahaley (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study of 26 community college students; 16 were African-American and 10 were African immigrants. The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence of nonacademic factors and other factors on Black community college students (Adams-Mahaley, 2012, p. 86). Although the research was not specifically focused on off-campus peers, some of the participants did mention support from people they knew away from the college.

Community. Over the years, in some communities a nonempathetic, even toxic, environment gave students an adverse reaction to the idea of education (Banks & Banks, 2004; McMahon, Felix, & Nagarajan, 2011). Even so, J. Brooks and Allen (2016) found these communities mattered because Black students’ peers from the community contributed to the academic persistence of several participants in their study.

Although there was very little research on whether communities played a role in retention, qualitative scholarship such as Waters (2015) showed how it had an indirect effect on Black male college students. Waters (2015) investigated mothers in several Chicago neighborhoods and found these women not only took care of their families, but they also raised and nurtured other children who lived in their community. These women encouraged Black men to attend and persist in college (Waters, 2015).

Location. Students whose college was in a rural area had to adjust to the location during their first year (Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). Woldoff et al. (2011) held that geographic location was a significant factor in Black graduation rates. They concluded that retention among this student population was affected because they not only needed to adjust to college, they also had to adapt to a new type of living, which caused feelings of isolation and alienation (Woldoff et al., 2011).
**Commuting.** Commuting has been a retention issue because some students must drive some distance to attend their school. E. A. Jones and Yearwood (2012) found that students who commuted were less engaged than students who lived on campus. They found that schools that engaged Black commuter students had a better retention rate. Quaye and Harper (2015) found higher retention levels at commuter schools that had intensive orientation, early alert systems, engaging activities, and academic planning.

**Religious engagement.** Religious engagement played an important part in student success for some Black men (Baruth et al., 2013). For Black men who attended a religious congregation while in college, the organization guided the students with various types of support (Giger, Appel, SDavidhizar, & Davis, 2008).

A quantitative study revealed that Black male students who were actively involved in their church and influenced by their Black leaders daily had a stronger feeling of empowerment (Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). This sense of empowerment gave the students strength and support to enhance their persistence in continuing in and graduating from college (Weddle-West et al., 2013). J. Brooks and Allen (2016) found in their qualitative study that the church was a place of emotional support for their participants. Several said that support from their church and church family played an integral role in their college persistence (J. Brooks & Allen, 2016).

**Intrinsic Support Systems**

As Black male community college students start their postsecondary journey, they bring with them an internal support system that is very influential to their decision making. Intrinsic support systems are the only system that comes from within the person (S. E. Wood et al., 2014). The types of intrinsic support are spirituality, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.
Spirituality. Spirituality was an intrinsic and extrinsic strength for some Black men (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Jett (2010) explored the effects of spirituality on the academic achievement of Black male college students and discovered that some of this student population prayed as a relaxation technique to cope with stress. Dancy (2010) also learned that spiritual Black male students had a stronger sense of cooperation, creativity, balance, and harmony. Strayhorn (2013) stressed that spirituality helped Black students cope with different cultural norms and expectations.

Spirituality sometimes played a part in the decision-making process for this student population in such areas as career choice and persistence in college (Dancy, 2010). Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis (2002) learned that Black college students used religious problem-solving styles as coping skills to handle the stress of college. These students turned to their religious organization for guidance, social support, and coping support instead of turning to on-campus resources like college counselors (Constantine et al., 2002). A qualitative study by Riggins et al. (2008) examined spirituality and academic performance among Black male students. They found that Black male students held on to their spirituality regardless of the type of college they attended (Riggins et al., 2008). Their study revealed that the more spiritual they were, the more likely they were to stay in school (Riggins et al., 2008).

Self-concept. The idea that there is a link between self-concept and academic success is not new to higher education (W. S. Williams & Chung, 2013). Ezeofor and Lent (2014) learned that students’ personal views about themselves affected their emotions and behavior and indirectly played a role in academic success. For Black male community college students, their self-concept may be one of the influences that affects their success.
Although Orehovec’s (2015) quantitative study was not just of Black male students nor community college students, it did give insight into how self-concept influenced academic success and failure. Orehovec (2015) studied college students’ self-concept and how it influenced not returning after their first year of college. From fall 2010 to fall 2012, 3,841 students completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey (Orehovec, 2015). Orehovec (2015) also obtained the participants’ SAT scores, high school GPA, residency status, gender, race/ethnicity, major declaration, and financial aid status. Finally, Orehovec (2015) obtained the students’ GPA after each spring semester and their enrollment status the following fall term. Orehovec (2015) found that students with lower high school grades or SAT scores had a lower self-concept and did not perform academically as well during their first year as students who had higher high school grades or SAT scores. There were 307 students from the research who withdrew from the university, and their average college GPA was a 2.1 (Orehovec, 2015).

Self-esteem. Self-esteem influenced Black male community college students’ vision and future goals (D. J. Jones, 1994; J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2013). Although self-esteem was not related to any person’s academic achievement, there were a couple of researchers who were curious to find out whether self-esteem would influence academic achievement. Rivera (2016) examined correlation between academic achievement and self-esteem for students of color at a predominately White four-year institution. There were 54 students who participated (25 male, 29 female) (Rivera, 2016). The research compared records from 2001-2016 with the participants’ scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and a Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (Rivera, 2016). The results found a weak correlation between the students’ academic records and their answers from the questionnaires (Rivera, 2016).
Although it is over 25 years old, Nieves (1991) published the only study that specifically examined self-esteem and retention among underrepresented students at an urban community college. Nieves (1991) used The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) to measure self-esteem and The New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test with 306 participants (260 Black students and 46 Hispanic students; 174 students were female, and 132 were male). Nieves’s (1991) research found that underrepresented students who had high self-esteem were more likely to continue, particularly if they could define their educational goals.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy indirectly affects college success (J. L. Wood et al., 2015). Self-efficacy is a person’s confidence in his or her ability to control emotions, behavior, and actions (Bandura, 2012). It appears there is a direct connection between self-efficacy and academic achievement (Bandura, 2012; J. L. Wood et al., 2015). J. L. Wood et al. (2015) found evidence that self-efficacy affected Black male community college students’ goals. Their longitudinal quantitative research found that the first year of college or the first 30 college-level course credits was a critical time for these students’ self-efficacy (J. L. Wood et al., 2015).

Self-efficacy factored into personal goals, which are conscious individual objectives (J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2013). Goal setting is a complex task that includes personal goals and encompasses many areas, such as friendships, religion, academia, and family (Roberts, O’Donnell, & Robins, 2004; J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2013). J. L. Wood and Palmer (2013) learned that personal goals motivated students towards achieving their goals. J. L. Wood and Palmer’s longitudinal quantitative study revealed that goal-setting influenced Black male community college students. Their findings also showed that nonacademic factors were more significant than academic factors (J. L. Wood & Palmer, 2013). Strayhorn (2013) discovered that when Black men had stronger self-efficacy, they were more resilient to pressures that face college students.
J. L. Wood et al. (2015) used Bean and Eaton’s (2001) study to guide their research on the effects of self-efficacy on first-year Black male students who attended community college. Their quantitative study found that the greater the self-efficacy, the more likely the student would stay in college. They also found that strong self-efficacy gave students confidence to seek out faculty and be involved in school functions. J. L. Wood and Palmer’s (2016) qualitative research that involved 28 Black community college male students found through the participants’ stories that strong self-efficacy helped them keep focus and guided them to academic success.

**Conclusion**

Off-campus support systems are complex because they entail two types of support systems, extrinsic and intrinsic. Work, family, friends, and the community are extrinsic because they deal with the outer world. Intrinsic, on the other hand, are internal and include how self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concept influence success. Spiritually and religion are both internal and external because a place of worship provides a variety of support systems and yet one does not have to belong to an institution to have a spiritual connection that influences success.

**Summary**

Both on-campus and off-campus support systems need to be examined to find out how they influence students’ academic success. Unfortunately, much of the literature focuses only on one individual aspect of each support system and not a combination of topics interwoven to provide a more holistic picture. Therefore, this research examined how the interwoven support systems together produce academic success.

The literature also focuses primarily on why this population has a low retention rate. Thus, future research needs to concentrate on the various support systems that encourage
successful Black male community college students. Also, much of the research uses quantitative methods to obtain data. Very few of the open or semi-open questioning techniques employed in qualitative studies were used, which shows a need for understanding how the support systems influenced this student population. The literature review also showed that even though there were not many studies that dealt with indirect issues concerning Black male community college students, the participants in this study did bring issues that indirectly influenced them.

Research that was concerned with retention and its connection with various on-campus support systems appears to be limited. Most institutions have some volunteer or mandatory orientation because they believe it supports retention. However, there are very few studies on this topic. The same can be said with regard to counseling and advising. Although educational professionals assume that counseling and advising are important for retention, there is little evidence of a direct link between the two (McClenney & Waiwiole, 2005; T. P. Palmer et al., 2014). In fact, McClenney and Waiwiole (2005) ranked advising as the third most significant piece in successful retention. A significant number of studies focus on off-campus support systems, including English (2015), Hyatt (2016), and J. L. Wood et al. (2015), but very little of the research links these systems with retention, particularly with community involvement. Family is the most-studied of all the off-campus support systems, but most of that research addresses high school or four-year college students.

This study not only explored success, but it also examined patterns that should help future Black male community college students. By using a qualitative approach, this research complemented and built on previous research. This research used semi structured open-ended questions that allowed the participants to think and give their perspectives on student success.
This study thereby provided a missing perspective on what was needed to improve retention among Black male community college students.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this narrative study was to examine how Black male community college students described the on-campus and off-campus support systems that strengthened their ability to complete 24 credit hours of college coursework. This research used Uri Bronfenbrenner’s contextual ecological system theory to explore which microsystems worked well for these men on the mesosystem level so future Black male community college students and educators could learn from their success.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

A qualitative research approach was best suited for this study on how Black male community college students’ academic success was influenced by support systems. Qualitative research is derived from anthropology and sociology, which emphasize the need to understand why and how participants’ experiences and perceptions affect their choices (Creswell, 2013). This approach is aligned with the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm is characterized by the principle that reality is relative and subject to individual interpretation. Therefore, truth is revealed through hermeneutics, and meaning is exposed through interactions and dialogue between researcher and participants (Creswell, 2015). Because the aim is to understand rather than to know, a researcher does not attempt to resolve competing claims to determine the one best answer, but instead accurately and thoroughly documents the perspective being investigated (Butin, 2010, p. 60). Constructivism-interpretivism aims for meaning and truthfulness rather than finding truth itself (Ponterotto, 2005).

This study worked well with the constructivist-interpretive stance. The study needed to be contextualized with the acknowledgment that there were many interconnected influences on academic success. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm says each participant constructs his
personal view of the reality of a given situation (Altman, 2009). For this type of study, the researcher did not try to find knowledge, but instead tried to construct it (Poterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretive paradigm examines the contexts of topics from multiple perspectives. It does this by using four philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (Creswell, 2013).

The ontological assumption looks at the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), “reality was multiple as seen through many views,” which goes well with the ideas of qualitative researchers, whose assumptions embrace the idea of multiple subjective realities (p. 21). This assumption differs from quantitative researchers, whose assumptions hold on to the idea of a single objective reality (Creswell, 2013). This research investigated multiple realities by using more than one participant. The researcher took each subjective story and looked for ideas across all the responses.

The second assumption, epistemological, is concerned with the degree of proximity researchers establish with participants (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers suggest that a researcher is not impartial about what is being researched: knowledge is contextual and time-dependent. Quantitative researchers, in contrast, suggest that researchers need to be neutral from what is being researched; therefore, they distance themselves in order to create an objective separateness between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used a qualitative instead of quantitative method and developed questions based on her assumptions. She built a relationship on trust and honesty by explaining the study and its importance before asking questions.

The third assumption is axiological, which looks at the role of values in research (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers welcome the fact that research is influenced in some
way by the values of a researcher (Creswell, 2013). In fact, Creswell (2013) wrote that a “researcher openly discusses values that shape the narrative and includes his or her personal interpretation in conjunction with the interpretation of participants” (p. 21). Quantitative researchers, however, view a researcher as being impartial about the research and therefore there is no concern about axiology (Creswell, 2013). This research was influenced by the values of the researcher, who believes that positive information concerning how support systems influence academic success will help future Black male students. The participants’ responses to the questions came from the broad questions she asked.

The last assumption is methodological, which looks at the procedures researchers use to study what they think is known, as well as the rationales behind these procedures (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research tends to be inductive and is usually shaped by researchers’ use of such reasoning throughout the study (Creswell, 2013). After interviews, the details of the data are analyzed. Quantitative researchers, on the other hand, start with a hypothesis and participants answer fixed-choice questionnaires or scales (Creswell, 2013). Quantitative researchers use statistics to represent the results of their objective instruments. In this study, the researcher examined the details of each specific piece of information to reach general conclusions.

Narrative research inquiry was the best fit for this research because it is concerned with how “humans experience the world” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p. 2). Words, not numbers, were the type of data used. These words came from the stories the participants shared with the researcher. Instead of providing just bits and pieces of information, narrative research presents an entire view of an issue, experience, or situation (Cruse, 2015). Narrative reiterates the personal accounts of participants’ experiences with a situation or issue (Creswell, 2015).
The two types of narrative are called narrative inquiry and narrative research. Sweeney (2013) described narrative inquiry as the lived stories of participants told through the study. Narrative inquiry does not rely only on interviews; it also utilizes field notes, photographs, articles, journals, and media to obtain its findings (Sweeney, 2013). Since there is a plethora of data collected from these various sources, the sample size of the participants must remain small (Sweeney, 2013). The other type of narrative, and the one used in this study, is narrative research, which investigates the lived experiences of the participants (Mahler, 2008). Mahler (2008) explained that instead of accumulating a lot of information from various types of data, narrative research concentrates on reflecting the information given in participant interviews. In narrative research, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of the experiences the participants describe. Instead of looking for the why, which involves studying more general elements of data, narrative research wants the data to focus on the how. Due to its nature, narrative research is an exploratory type of inquiry. Researchers using narrative research must be active participants because they need to listen, reflect, and analyze the stories to understand the “how” of a study.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were Black men who attended a small community college in the Midwest. The 120-acre campus was surrounded by farmland and was six miles west of a major state university. The nearest major US city was 50 miles away (Factbook, 2017). The district, which houses the college, had a population of 100,000 people (Midwest Factbook, 2017). The community college was 50 years old and offered five transfer degrees and about 70 occupational degrees and certificates (Factbook, 2017).
All through the college is in a rural part of the Midwest; it is unique because it is two hours from a metropolitan city and ten minutes from a state university. Over the past 15 years, Black students from the city have moved to the town where the university is located (M. Crull, personal communication, January 31, 2018). While some of these students begin their higher education at the university, many start their education and the nearby community college (M. Crull, personal communication, January 31, 2018). For four of the men chose for the study, were not originally from the community college district. One of the four participants moved to the district in his sophomore year of high school. Two of the participants were originally from the district, but one of the two men had left the district after high school to attend another community college and then moved back to the district after one semester. All of the men in the study had completed a minimum of 24 credit hours of college-level course work, equivalent to the amount of coursework someone would complete during the first year of college. However, since these men attended a community college, the researcher had to take into consideration that some of the participants might have been part-time students who had attended college for years. Other students could have taken developmental courses that did not count towards college-level credit and had finally completed college-level work, while other participants might have taken a full credit load during their first year of college. Successful Black male community college students were chosen for this study because this student population has often been overlooked. This type of research was vital for assisting future Black male students’ success in community college. The students chosen had completed 24 credits of college-level coursework with a GPA of 2.0 or higher (Moore, 2006).
Recruitment

The participants were recruited using flyers for two reasons. First, the researcher did not have access to students’ emails or addresses. The researcher had only a list from the Research Department at the community college available to her. The list gave just the names of all eligible participants from the approximately 228 Black male students who would attend that semester, and 53 Black men who were eligible (M. Crull, personal communication, January 31, 2018). Second, the researcher wanted to reduce any potential selection bias by having a variety of ways that the students could find out about the study and sign up to participate. By being recruited in person and through flyers, the men who signed up had freely consented, meaning that no one told them to be in the study: They were chosen to participate after hearing about the research (Smythe & Murray, 2000). A variety of options was used to find potential participants. First, flyers were distributed throughout the campus. The flyers had the researcher’s name and Northeastern University email address. Second, the researcher provided flyers to two sociology instructors, spoke to their classes, and explained the significance of her research project. Sociology was selected because it was part of the general education requirement for graduation and it was also a popular department among this targeted population. In addition, the sociology courses dealt with this topic, so speaking about the research during those classes made sense to the students. Although many psychology courses also addressed this topic and fulfilled the same general education requirement, those courses were not considered for recruitment because the researcher taught upper-level psychology courses and believed it would be a conflict of interest to recruit students in her classes. The third target for recruitment was all the campus clubs and services, athletics, and the TRIO Student Support Services. The researcher visited all the advisors for
these clubs and services and provided them with recruitment flyers. When students volunteered, the researcher checked their eligibility and picked the first six students who met the criteria.

**Participant Age**

The participants were at least 18 years old. The age range was broad because students of all ages attend community colleges due to their open enrollment policy. Some of these students might have taken a dual-credit program that allowed them to take college-level courses while still in high school. It was unlikely that students who went through the dual-credit program would have had 24 hours of college credit when they graduated from high school. These students would still have had at least six credits at the college to meet the 24-credit minimum. Therefore, their information could be useful. Besides the traditional college-age student, some students might have spent years in the workforce.

**Size of the Study**

Narrative studies often have relatively small numbers of participants because in-depth interviews take time. Creswell (2013) suggested that three to five participants were enough for a narrative study. This study used six men to get a better picture of how support systems affected their academic success. The participants offered their story on how they were academically successful. It took each person some time to think and answer each question carefully.

**Time, Place, and Duration of the Interviews**

The researcher scheduled all interviews and meetings with the participants at their convenience. The interviews took place off campus at a location that the participant had chosen. The participants were required to meet with the researcher twice. At the first meeting the researcher and participant went over the consent form, the researcher answered any questions the participant had about the study and his role in it, and interviewed him. The first meeting lasted
around 60 minutes because narrative research requires a lengthy interview to obtain as much data as possible. This initial meeting was a face-to-face interview. The second meeting, which had each participant go over his transcript and answered any additional questions needed for clarification, used different means due to the busy lives of these men: face-to-face for one, Skype for three, and telephone for the other two. There was no mention of any of the participant’s names during the research study. Instead, each person was provided a pseudonym: James, David, Frank, Peter, Val, or Phil.

Participants signed consent forms. The consent form included the following: the purpose of the study; description of the study process, which would include audio recording the interviews; any potential discomfort that might come from the questions; the benefits of being involved in the study; confidentiality; a gift certificate of $20 as a token of gratitude after the second meeting; the right to refuse or withdraw from the study; the right to ask questions and report concerns; and the consent signature. The researcher reviewed the consent form and explained each item, and encouraged the participants to ask her any questions before signing it. She also told them where the forms would be locked and kept safe, as the forms would include the pseudonyms.

During member-checking, these men had the opportunity to clarify, change, or delete information from their stories. Each of the participants was given a copy of his transcript to make sure that what was written down was what he said. The participants also were asked to review the synopsis of their stories that would be in the thesis.

**Procedures**

This section explains how data was collected based on the research questions. It also includes data analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and potential research bias.
Data Collection

The participants and interviewer met twice. The initial interviews were conducted face-to-face off campus and lasted between 60 minutes. During the first interview, the participants reflected on questions that pertained to on-campus and off-campus microsystems. The semi-structured interview questions touched on various on- or off-campus support systems that affected their academic success. The questions were not too narrow, so the interviewees provided in-depth descriptions of their experiences.

The first interview was more than just asking questions. It was also a time to observe body language, voice tone, gestures, and emotions (Seidman, 2013). The researcher listened more and talked less (Seidman, 2013). To build trust, the researcher showed the participant that she cared about what they said by engaging in active listening and questioning techniques; at times she asked follow-up questions, but only after the participant finished his response (Seidman, 2013). It was not appropriate for the researcher to offer an opinion, but rather to show through appropriate body language that she was listening and respected what each person said. The researcher did not take notes while interviewing in order to maintain good eye contact. She wrote down her notes after each interview was completed. The researcher also tolerated silence after asking a question. Often each participant had to think for a few minutes about the question and how it applied to him (Seidman, 2013). Once each initial interview was completed, the researcher explained what would happen with his data and reminded him that she might have follow-up questions later. At the end of each first meeting, the researcher set up how and when the second interview would take place.

The second meeting was a member-checking meeting. Each participant looked over his transcript, which had been sent to him by email, and at the second meeting the researcher went
over the transcripts with each participant to ensure accuracy and clear up any confusing elements from the initial interview. The researcher sent each participant a thank-you card with a gift certificate after the second meeting.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher used H. J. Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) seven steps as a blueprint to analyze the participant responses: transcribe and summarize; define, find, and mark the text; find experts to mark with the same code; sort the material to compare the experts’ information; weigh the different versions; combine themes; and generalize beyond individual cases.

For Step 1, the interviews were audio recorded using Rev audio recording software. The combined total of hours for the first interviews were proximally 60 hours. Each interview recording was sent directly to the Rev Transcription services after the first interview was completed. Rev transcript turnaround was usually 24 hours for each interview. The transcripts were then forwarded as an attachment to the researcher’s graduate school email address. To protect the participants’ identities, Rev did not have any of the men’s names, only their pseudonyms.

After each participant’s transcript was returned to the researcher, she emailed the participants, using her graduate school email, their transcripts so they could read and edit their interview. Each participant was given two to three weeks to review their transcripts. A second meeting date was conducted by Skype, phone or in-person with each participant. The total number of hours for the second meeting was 155 hours. During the second meeting was where member checking occurred and additional follow up questions were asked.

In Step 2, the researcher's hand-coded each transcript using a variety of highlighters. As a concept appeared, it was given a color, and a key was created to link the color to each theme.
The key was also used as a flow chart which had three columns. Each column was labeled on-campus support systems, off-campus support systems, and both on and off-campus support systems. When the hand-coding was completed, it revealed the following the participants identified nine on-campus support systems, eight off-campus support systems, and three support systems that were both on and off-campus support systems. Nine on-campus support systems identified by the hand-coding were Trio SSS, relationships with instructors, co-curricular activities, tutoring, financial assistance, Advisors of organizations and clubs, first-year-experience course, library, and other college courses. Eight off-campus support systems that were identified were blood relations, moms, self-concept/self-esteem/self-efficacy, spiritual, obstacles they overcame, wanting to set the example for someone younger, community, location, and informal mentors. The three support systems that were found in both on and off campus were peers, friends, and work. The hand-coding took approximately 250 hours, and 1,471 lines of dialogue were reviewed from the first meeting.

Step 3 dealt with ensuring quality control. The researcher gave the volunteer auditor the hand-coded transcripts of each participant along with the key to the coding and asked him to double-check her work to ensure she did not miss any themes. The auditor was chosen because he was a trained researcher and understood hand-coding. The auditor was also selected because he did not have any direct contact with students, and he did not know the true identities of the participants. His auditing was a means of reducing researcher bias. The researcher gave the auditor two weeks to review her findings.

Step 4 occurred when the auditor finished his review of the hand-coded transcripts and returned them to the researcher. Before the auditor returned the hand-coded transcripts, he met with the researcher for about one hour to go over each of the themes from her hand-coding. The
auditor agreed with the themes and how they fit in the on-campus and off-campus categories. He had two suggestions which were to change the coding name of "obstacles they overcome" to "moving forward." His second suggestion was to rename self-concept/self-esteem/self-efficacy to self-awareness.

The fifth step weighed and integrated the information. This coding tasks used a software program called MAXQDA12 to organize and re-examine the coding to help the researcher view the data from another perspective and examine any potential new themes. This software was specifically designed for qualitative and mixed-method data (MAXQDA, 2017). It is compatible with both Windows and Mac computers, and the results could be exported into text and Excel (MAXQDA, 2017). The software program took key concepts and found keywords or phrases that the participants used for explaining their success. The MAXQDA12 allowed for color coding as well. By color coding, the researcher not only visualized the themes but also saw the overlapping of themes and patterns that took place at Bronfenbrenner’s various level. Recognizing themes and patterns was an essential part of the narrative research. Themes not only showed up in one person’s story but also with multiple participants’ stories.

The researcher uploaded each transcript with the coding information into MAXQDA12. Then she generated a variety of visual reports to conceptualize how the various themes were interconnecting. For example, the report showed the interconnection between peers and friends and how the participants the support systems of friends and peers were from both on and off-campus. These interconnections display also revealed a new way to categorize the support systems. The visuals showed how some of the various on and off-campus support systems fit under what the researcher labeled relationships, internal motivation, and external motivation. These three new categories presented a way to see the interacting of on-campus and off-campus
working together. Under relationships, blood relations, on and off-campus friends and peers, on
and off-campus informal mentors, and campus personnel all seemed to fit. Under internal
motivation, the support systems dealing with spiritual, an internal desire of setting the example,
self-awareness, and moving forward fit well in this category. Finally, external motivation, the
themes of on and off-campus employment, policies, programs, course, extracurricular activities
and community, and location seem to suit this category. The new categories also help place
support systems in groups. Under external motivation, instead of programs, services, and college
courses being separate subthemes, it appeared that these three separate themes worked well
together under one subtheme. Also under external motivation, the information that was provided
concerning community and location made it clear that these two areas needed to be combined as
one subtheme. The area of relations also saw some combinations. Originally mothers were a
separate was a theme and it did not make sense to have it standalone, and it was placed in blood
relations. Due to the fact, much of the information concerning peers and friends was the same;
the two themes became one subtheme. Finally, faculty, administrators, and staff themes
combined into one subtheme that was labeled campus personnel. This entire process coding
process using MAXQDA12 was approximately 120 hours.

The sixth step combined the concepts. This step happened once the data had been
thoroughly analyzed. The researcher examined all the various layers of themes and ideas and
began to write out the findings from the research. The use of hand and computer coding and
analysis brought a stronger case for the reliability of the research because there were a variety of
ways the information was reviewed. This step took place right after the three new major themes
were revealed using MAXQDA12. The researcher made notes concerning each new theme and
subtheme. For each theme and subtheme, she wrote out information concerning each participant
and the quotes that fit the themes. While writing out each participants’ information about the major themes and subthemes, she kept a chart listing each participants’ subthemes. Once her notes were completed, the researcher wrote out her findings and used quotations from the participants with each theme. The researcher used the chart in chapter four and placed the brief biography of each participant in chapter 4.

The seventh and final step generalized the results. This step involved writing out the findings and how they applied to the information already known about Black male community college students’ academic success. The findings confirmed several pieces of information that had been learned from previous studies. After the researcher wrote out her findings, she went back and re-read her literature review and used her study to review past studies to see if her data was consistent or differed from previous studies.

**Ethical Considerations**

It was important that participants and the community college that hosted the research remained anonymous to encourage openness and honesty during the entire research process (Creswell, 2013; H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher provided appropriate consent forms for all participants to sign. No participant was interviewed until he reviewed the consent form, signed it, and returned it to the researcher. The consent form explained that participation was strictly voluntary. Each participant knew from the consent form that he could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any reason. Their material would have been removed and destroyed if they withdrew from the study.

The transcripts and the summaries were shared with the participants and edited for accuracy. The participants had full disclosure on every part of the research and the research materials (Creswell, 2013; H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher assured the participants
that all of their personal information was kept confidential and anonymous throughout the entire study process and even after the completion of the research. The researcher protected the participants’ identity by only using their pseudonyms in the transcribed interviews, data, and the final paper (Creswell, 2013, 2015). Since the researcher was the person responsible for collecting the data, she was also in charge of storing all the data. All digital recordings were deleted at the end of the research. The electronic transcripts will be kept in a file in her secure Northeastern email for three years. All paper transcripts, notes, summaries, and questions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet that only the researcher has access to for three years after the completion of the study, then destroyed by the researcher.

Finally, participants were informed that the researcher had passed and possessed a certificate of completion from the National Institute of Health on “Protecting Human Research Participants.” The community college where the research was conducted already had copies of the certificate on file in its Human Resource Office, with the director of research, and in a file with the vice-president of instruction. In her files at home, the researcher kept copies of the permission granted by the president of the community college the participants attended and from Northeastern University’s IRB that followed the required process for consent.

Trustworthiness

Building trust between participant and researcher is an essential component of all research (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2002). The participants did not know her and therefore, at the beginning of the first meeting, the researcher created a welcoming environment to get to know each participant before starting the interview. During this time, the researcher created a balance of power between the participants and herself by answering any questions or concerns they might have had concerning the study. The participants learned why she believed their voices were
important to be heard by educational professionals. The participants learned the purpose of obtaining their information and how their stories would make a difference in helping future community college Black male students succeed academically.

Validity of research is concerned with the accuracy of the information collected. Each participant had a unique personal story, and the researcher reviewed all the pieces to find the larger picture. The researcher, however, could not fact-check each participant’s story by interviewing other people who knew the participants to see whether each story was accurate, which was why triangulation does not work well with narrative research inquiry. Triangulation relies on different data sources to collect information concerning the participants (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the validity of the research needed to be enhanced at the face-to-face meeting and after the interview transcripts were finished, by having each participant check the accuracy of his transcript to ensure that the information presented about him faithfully represented what he said (Creswell, 2015). This process was called member-checking and was “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252) because the participants played a major role in ensuring their stories were correctly transcribed. Another verification of accuracy happened when the participants were asked to read the “rough draft of the researcher’s work to ensure accuracy” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). These different checks were a way to ensure the researcher correctly told their story. Validity also increased every time the researcher asked follow up questions and for clarification from participants.

The final aspect of trustworthiness is reliability, which deals with the credibility of the interpretation. The researcher used a five-step process to ensure trustworthiness. The first two steps of the process had a volunteer auditor check the researcher’s hand coding to make sure she had correctly identified themes and patterns from the data. The third step was when the
volunteer’s notes were sent back to the researcher, who reviewed his comments and suggestions. In the fourth step of the process, the researcher met and discussed the auditor’s information. Having a second person review the researcher’s coding kept the study from being too subjective. The researcher wrote notes and used this information in her findings (Creswell, 2013). The final step was to present the findings using direct quotations from the participants for each theme found. Showing evidence through direct quotes prevented the researcher from being too subjective. Also, the researcher kept a journal with data concerning each interview, which she used to help write her findings. Journaling kept the conversations about the data fresh in the researcher’s mind when she wrote her findings.

**Potential Research Bias**

The researcher’s potential bias appeared for several reasons. First, the researcher not only attended a community college, her primary work experience has been at community colleges as either a professor or counselor. She, therefore, was more interested in knowing about students who attended community colleges rather than four-year institutions. Although she realized that the research could be useful to all post-secondary Black male students, she only focused on community college students.

The researcher had chosen Black male students because this student population had one of the lowest retention rates in higher education (Odom, 2013; Overrocker, 2015; Talbert, 2012). However, from her teaching experience, many of her Black male students were often some of her best students. She believed that learning how these men were successful would help future students succeed. However, she did not include other underrepresented populations that could also benefit from this study.
Limitations

Narrative research was a flexible way to collect data because the research involved listening to the participants tell their stories about how various support systems influenced their academic success. However, there were some limitations that needed to be addressed. These men told personal stories, but they did not speak for every Black male community college student. Therefore, the first limitation was that the sample size was small, and so the generalized information was no more than broad findings. J. A. Maxwell (2005) believed that definite conclusions could not be determined when the participant size was small. The second limitation was the location of the community college. Although this community college was located 50 miles from a major metropolitan area, it was considered a small community college in a rural area of the state. If this study had been conducted at a larger city and institution, the information might have been different. Third, this research only examined the participants’ post-secondary level support systems. It did not consider primary and secondary school as support systems. This study only focused on the participants’ current support systems. Finally, it did not examine these men’s upbringing or primary and secondary educational background.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how support systems affected the academic success of Black male community college students. By using Uri Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, the research found three themes and 11 subthemes that answered the research question, which was: How did support systems affect Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of college coursework?

The study included six Black male community college students who had completed 24 credit hours of college-level coursework with at least a 2.0 grade point average. Interviews with each of the six participants lasted approximately 60 minutes. They were audio-recorded, transcribed by Rev.com, and analyzed by the interviewer using hand coding and MAXQDA qualitative software analysis software. Follow-up interviews allowed participants to review their interview transcripts and answer any follow-up questions by phone, Skype, or in person. The researcher also had a volunteer research auditor double-check the researcher’s hand-coding to make sure she did not miss any themes.

Participants

The subjects, who were given the pseudonyms of James, David, Frank, Peter, Val, and Phil, were all current Black male community college students who attended the same Midwest community college. All of the participants were born and raised in the Midwest and identified themselves as Black men. Their ages ranged from 19 to 24. There were eight people who were interested in volunteering for the research. Three of the participants found out about the study from the flyers posted around the community college. Four participants told their sociology instructors they were interested in volunteering after attending the researcher’s guest lesson on the scientific method and how her research was an example of that process. One person was
recruited by a female student from one of the sociology lectures who suggested that her friend volunteer. The participants were selected on a first-come-first-serve basis if they met the criteria, which was that they had to be Black male community college students who had taken 24 credit hours of college-level work with at least a 2.0 GPA. There was a waiting list, and two of the six participants were originally on the waiting list, but were selected after two people pulled out of the study before the first interviews.

The six participants met the criteria for the study, but their experiences were all unique. Four of the six participants were originally from other areas in the state. One of the participants was initially from the area, had moved away for a little while, and was now back in the area. One participant had lived within the community college district all of his life.

**James**

James, who was 19 years old and a sports management major, grew up in a suburban area. James’s neighborhood where he grew up and started high school was a volatile environment. Although he said the high school he attended for his first two years was adequate, James did not feel intellectually comfortable attending it. Before starting his junior year of high school, he asked his mother whether he could change to a school in a different area of the city. Although she did not want him to go to school there, she allowed him to transfer to another school where the emphasis was on education rather than sports. This event was a turning point in his education. At his new high school, his classmates pushed him to excel on-campus and off-campus. Some of his classmates from high school were still pushing him to excel in college.

**David**

David, who was 20 years old and an undeclared major, was the only participant who did not grow up with his biological family. His only relatives were a grandmother who could not
take care of him and two older brothers who were in prison; therefore, he ended up in the foster care system as a child. David was close to his brothers, but because he could not visit them often, his close friends became his surrogate family. David’s childhood gave him a strong sense of who he thought he was as a person and what he wanted in life. He described to the interviewer that he had always felt an internal force that guided him over the years.

Frank

Frank, who was 24 years old and a counseling major, grew up in a university town two hours south of the community college. Frank’s parents and friends always encouraged him in his academic pursuits. A man who worked at the town recreation center where Frank played basketball also offered significant academic support. He spent time chatting with Frank about the importance of a college education. When Frank was a senior in high school, he turned to this man for guidance on how to decide where to go to college and how to apply to schools.

Peter

Peter, who was 21 years old and an undeclared major, grew up in a rough area of the same metropolitan city as James. He did not have a carefree childhood. At age 10, Peter took adult responsibilities for his family. He believed that the events he witnessed in his neighborhood growing up shaped him as a person. Although he grew up in a rough neighborhood, he felt lucky because he had both of his parents living at home; they loved him and pushed him to excel in school. He only went to college to please them. However, within his first year of college, something inside him changed, and he realized that he wanted to go to school for himself.

Phil

Phil, who was 19 and a business management major, grew up in the same major metropolitan city as James and Frank. His family saw the value of higher education and
pressured him to go to college. Phil realized that if he was going to attend college someday, he needed a change in his academic support. He had to find a place where higher education was promoted. Prior to his sophomore year in high school, Phil moved 50 miles west of the city to the rural area where the community college is located. Being in a new area and school gave him a sense of feeling safe and a chance for him to improve his grades and attend college.

**Val**

Val, who was 21 years old and a sociology major, hoped to go on to law school someday. He had a positive academic role model for higher education. His mother was a doctoral student at the nearby state university and encouraged him to work hard in college. Val, unlike the other five participants, did not start at the community college where the research was conducted. He transferred from the largest community college in the state. When he was interviewed, he was in his second semester at his current school. To him, transferring to his new school after one semester at the other college made all the difference in wanting to do well in school. Small class sizes at his new community college made him feel less like a number, and he liked how his new faculty members made him feel welcome and appreciated.

**Themes**

Analysis of the six participants’ transcripts yielded three superordinate themes and 12 subthemes. The three superordinate themes are: *Relationships, Internal motivation, and External motivation*. Each of the themes was supported by subthemes. The four subthemes for *Relationships* that influenced the men’s success are: *Blood relations, Peers and friends, Informal mentors,* and *Campus personnel*. The three subthemes for *Internal motivation* are: *Self-awareness, Moving forward,* and *Spirituality*. Finally, the five subthemes for *External motivation* are: *Programs, services, and courses, Extracurricular activities, Employment, Community* and
location, and Setting the example. Table 1 identifies which superordinate themes and subthemes were associated with each participant.

Table 2

Superordinate Themes, Subthemes, and Where the Participants Placed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate themes and subthemes</th>
<th>James</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Frank</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Val</th>
<th>Phil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal mentors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campus personnel</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal motivation</td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>Moving forward</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting the example</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Relationships

Each of the six participants identified a variety of Relationships that were support systems. Each person spoke about people who mentored, encouraged, and motivated them during their first 24 credit hours of college. None of the participants talked about only a single person who had influenced him. Instead, each person gave several examples of numerous people who were there for them. These individuals, who were the participants’ support systems, may never have met each other, but when it came time for the participants to make decisions, their various inputs worked together to influence the participants’ decision process. The research also revealed the participants did not all have the same types of people supporting them. Four patterns emerged
from the data. These four subthemes are *Blood relations, Peers and friends, Informal mentors,* and *Campus personnel.*

**Blood Relations**

The first subtheme in *Relationships* is *Blood relations.* It is important to distinguish this term from the term *family.* All of the participants included friends in their definition of who was considered family, so *Blood relations* only deals with the persons who were direct relatives of the participants. While all of the participants discussed *Blood relations,* David, Phil, and Peter talked more about them than others. David, Phil, and Peter’s *Blood relations* encouraged them to think for themselves and value an education. They reminded the participants that they were intelligent and could succeed if they worked hard. Although David grew up in foster care, he had two older brothers who cheered him on and reminded him how amazing a student he was and that he could succeed. David said:

> Ever since I was little, they always just told me, I don't know, something different about you. You’re just a good kid, and you’ve always been smart, so use them brains and put them to use for something good, not just be a knucklehead like us. My brothers always just keep my head in the right spot, always make sure for the most part, I’m doing well with my grades and stuff. So they just reassure, for the most part.

David’s brothers might not have graduated high school, but they valued education and wanted him to go to college.

Phil’s family also saw the value of education. Besides Phil’s mother, his grandmother also encouraged him to go to college. He said, “Even from a young age, my grandmother who I grew up with her always pushed me to go to college. She always expected me to, as well as my mother.” For him, college was never an option. Phil explained, “It was always something that I
was supposed to do. Never did I even have a thought that I wasn’t going to do it anyway, but still, it was always expected of me.” Therefore, he knew that he needed to learn how to study to earn good grades.

Peter’s family, like David’s and Phil’s, instilled in him the value of a college education. However, they wanted Peter to want education for himself and take responsibility for his learning in college. While David’s and Phil’s families gave emotional support, Peter’s family taught him how to accomplish a task on his own. Peter explained:

My family helped me by giving me tough love, not spoiling me, but at the same time giving me just the right amount of care and attention to make sure that when I’m on my own, I can be successful.

Of all of the Blood relations, mothers had one of the biggest influences as a support system. Five of the six participants mentioned their mothers. For Val, Frank, and Peter, their mothers were often the person they could talk with about their academic success and failure. It seemed that their mothers were not judgmental. Peter stated:

We talk about everything. If I got a bad grade, I feel very comfortable telling her I did it. I know she’s not going to be happy, but I just feel comfortable telling her about it, because she’s going to tell me that exact truth about what she feels, and what she thinks. So pretty much everything I do revolves around my mom.

It was not just talking to their mothers about anything; it was also how their mothers checked up on their schooling. Val, Frank, and Peter’s mothers often called them to find out about their academic progress. For Frank, his mother provided emotional support by checking in on him every day. Frank said:
My mom calls me every day to make sure that I’m staying on top of things. That’s why I give the most credit to my mom. She always makes sure that I’m doing well in classes and she just tries to stay on me to keep going to classes. Because she knows that in college you don’t have to go to class. She just stays on me about that.

Frank’s mother checking in on him was an example of the type of emotional support the participants spoke about during their interviews. Their mothers’ love allowed them to talk about their studies in a caring environment. It was this type of emotional support that gave both Phil’s and James’s mothers the strength to allow their sons to transfer to high schools away from their homes in order to increase their chances of attending college. For Val, his mother’s loving support helped him when he was his own worst critic. He explained that he could tell his mother anything about school and she would listen and tell him not to criticize himself too much. Val said:

She does a magnificent job of being a mother and very emotionally supportive for me ... sometimes I’m very down to myself, even if my grades are really good. There's just times when I'm “All right, I could’ve done better. I could’ve did this.” And she’s “You did well. Just take that A grade and go about your day.”

In summary, participants’ Blood relations appeared to support them through providing caring support, high expectations, and even at times tough love. These men did not just talk about their parents, but they also brought up their grandmothers and siblings. Mothers were a crucial support system for five participants. The term Blood relations had to be used instead of the family because the participants included friends in their definition of family. Therefore, relationships with friends and peers is the next subtheme under Relationships.
Peers and Friends

The second subtheme of Relationships is concerned with Peers and friends. When the participants referred to peers, they were referring to a person who is either a classmate, colleague, neighbor, or member of a club or organization that they knew and wanted to spend time with that person for personal or academic support. For the participants, race and gender were not a consideration in the criteria for whom they labeled as a peer. Instead, they were looking for like-minded individuals who had similar academic goals. According to Peter and Frank, peers were people with similar interests, experiences, goals, and struggles. Peter said, “We have a lot of the same struggles, so we connect with each other. We’re kind of like on the same level. I think they motivate me… They’re going to school, and they’re working, and they’re managing everything.” He further explained how his peers’ support came from how they motivated him with their stories about their own struggles and how they overcame them and did well in school. He said, “When hearing about other people’s stories that may be worse, or just like mine, it makes me level things out a bit. It evens things out because I get a different perspective, and it helps me stay the course.”

Frank also looked for peers who had similar goals, people who also wanted to better their education and improve the lives of their family and themselves. Frank looked for peers in his class who would motivate him to attend class and work harder on the subject. Frank said:

I try to find at least two people that know a lot, as not as much as me about the class. Some that I developed a good, close relationship with outside of class, as well, they also motivate me to go to class and make sure that I come to class. They always text me, make sure I’m in school and everything like that. I think that’s a good thing. Like I said, just
studying. I also like group projects because everyone can actually check on everyone and make sure everyone’s doing their part and everything like this.

This type of support from peers influenced them to succeed in school. They stayed away from people who might not provide the academic support they needed to do well. They searched for individuals who helped them in areas where they needed assistance and provided help in return. James explained that the assistance his peers brought him helped to become successful. His goal was similar to their goals, and their strengths benefited each other. He said:

My regular peers, my college peer, peers who’re going to help me with my class, and we can do this together to be successful. We’re very devoted in what we wanted to do, successful. So, if I don’t know something, I’m not good at a subject, I go to them for help. If they’re not good at something, they come to me for help… My friend D. was an account major. And he's really, really, he’s like really brilliant in that. He’s not good with the talking standpoint. But I’m great with the talking. And I’m not good with the accountant stuff. So, we just … “What you got to do?” “Alright, alright, we switching now. Let me help you out.” So, we just helping each my regular peers, my college peer, peers who’re going to help me with my class, and we can do this together to be successful. We’re very devoted in what we wanted to do, successful. So, if I don't know something, I’m not good at a subject, I go to them for help. If they’re not good at something, they come to me for help other out all the time. He’s going through a little thing with school right now. So, I’m trying to see what I can do to help him be in school right now. So academically we always keep each other motivated. When we want to stop ... And it's so many ways that we can just stop and derail cos there’s so many things out in this world that’s just so easy to grasp. The easy stuff that’s grasped was not the things
that’s good for you. So, we just keep each other away from that. And keep each other in the books.

Peter believed that peers sometimes become friends. He viewed some of his peers as friends. The peers who ended up becoming friends were people he liked to hang around with who he found nice. For him, “Nice people aren’t here to hurt me, they’re here to help me, and I’m here to help them. They tell me things they know, and I listen, and vice versa. So, I view them as friends.”

Friends, however, were not simply acquaintances. There was a deeper relationship that took time to develop, according to David, Phil, Val, and James. For these participants, many of their friendships started before college and their friends continued to motivate them. Phil explained that he had a “pretty good friend group” who were all attending the same community college. According to Phil, “We all motivate each other. I’ll tell them to make sure they know you got to stay in. You got to do it. You can’t skip that class. They help me out too.”

However, not all of the participants’ friends attended the same college. Val, David, and James’s childhood friends did not attend the same school, but were still a strong support system for them. Even though Val’s friends attended other colleges across the country, they helped each other by phone, face-to-face, and online with his homework. Val said:

I have friends who are at some of the top colleges in the world. I got a friend at Princeton.
I have a friend that’s in Notre Dame. I have a friend in Minnesota. I need help with calculus or something like that, I can call them up easy and they’ll help me right away.

While Val’s friends were from across the country helping him study, David’s support systems were providing him more emotional support. There were few people in David’s life whom he classified as his friends, but the ones he did were people who had always been there for
him over the years. In his group of close friends, there were two people who had consistently provided him with emotional support. David stated:

My friend C., she’s just one of my good friends who’s always been around… She’s been one of those people that in my life, I don’t have a lot of them, who consistently been there and tried to be there for me. People like that, I try to keep close to me, because it means a lot to my heart, you know? K., that's just my best friend. I talk to him every day. He’s like my little brother.

For James, one peer who became his friend was a person he called D. F., with whom he played football in high school. James and D. F. were competitive with each other both on and off the field. It was D. F. who urged James to do better in school. Over the years, their relationship became one of friendship because it was built on honesty, trust, and confidence in each other. James talked about how D. F. still pushed him today:

As a peer, even now, we go through things, and we always have the right things to say to each other. And we won’t let neither one of us stale at all. So, their failure was not an option in between us two. So, whenever we talking stuff like, “Oh man, I can't do this.” And we just like, “Dude, what you are talking about? What you mean you can't do this? You have no other choice.”

Some of the participants classified friends like D. F. as family. James, Phil, Peter, and Frank considered friends to be as strong a support system as many of their family members. They explained that many times they counted on a friend more than anyone else when they needed someone to be straightforward concerning their academic pursuits. For example, James explained that a person did not have to be a Blood relative for him to call them family. Instead
family was people who were truly there for him no matter the circumstances. According to James:

> We don’t have to be from the same family tree or nothing like that. Or same blood line. But I feel like if you were there for me and when times that I really needed you to be there for me. And I’m there for you. I feel like you’re my family. Blood couldn’t make us any closer. I feel like in this world you’re going to have a lot of additions on to your immediate family. And those send me out ... Those people might be more tangible than your family that you have now. They might be able to help you out better.

These friends provided a level of trust, love, and commitment to the participants that was similar to Blood relations. Phil and Peter did not bestow this type of friendship on people who they had just met, but on people who had been there for them for years and really knew them. Peter explained that blood did not always make a person family. He said that he had people in his life who provided him with the same or even more support than his own Blood relations. Phil explained:

> Well, me, I would consider family blood related as well as those people who’ve been there for you. My friends are part of my family too. I call them my friends just for reference that way you know who I’m talking about and I don’t just keep saying family the entire time. But, I consider my friends my family as well. What I consider friends, that level was not too big. That’s a small group of people who have been there for a long time, been through a lot and things like that. Not people I just meet. Those are not friends. Those are associates.

Frank, however, did think of Blood relations as family. His perspective viewed friends as a subcategory of family. He said, “When I think of family, I think of my intermediate family first
and foremost. I think of my friends, you know.” He saw similarities between friends and family members. He said:

Some people don't consider friends as family, but I do. Especially the ones that’s close to me. I can count on them when I’m in a time of need, or vice versa, you know. Someone that can count on me as well. Family also was someone that’s helpful, motivational, and they just want to see you do better for yourself, not for them or anyone else. Just for yourself. That’s what I think of when I think of family,

In summary, whether the participants were discussing peers or friends, they explained how these people played a supportive role in their success. Depending on the participant, there were times Peers and friends meant the same group of people, while other participants separated such people into two different groups. Unexpectedly, some of the participants viewed their friends as family because of the amount of support these people had shown them over time. Some of the Peers and friends not only provided emotional support, but were some of the people who could be considered Informal mentors.

Informal Mentors

The notion of Informal mentors came from two participants, James and Frank. They spoke about people in their lives whose characteristics were similar to trained mentors because these people guided them with their knowledge and experience. Informal mentors could be both on- and off-campus support systems.

Both James and Frank had off-campus Informal mentor support systems. James’s off-campus Informal mentors were people from his internship with a professional hockey team. The people he worked with spent time guiding James in his career choices and giving him real work
experience to build up his resume. Along with giving him faith that he would be good at a career in sports management, their stories and advice shaped his educational goals. James stated:

I was fortunate to come across some people that worked for a professional hockey team. I was able to work up there in my senior year as an internship. And then the last couple years I been just working up there. So, the people that I met up there, J. B., J. M., M., are amazing people. They're really amazing. Just their stories about what they go through. And their stories not so much as different as mine. It's just a fact that you're up there, and they overcome some of that and still successful. That's huge. That's really crazy, what you can see and what you can do. Stuff like that. They really helped me. Those are the type of factors. Just meeting people that’s experienced.

Unlike James, Frank’s off-campus Informal mentors were students from the nearby state university. Frank met these students when he moved to the area, and they took him under their wings. He had many questions concerning his role as a college student, and they were more than happy to supply him with answers based on their own experiences. Frank said, “I had a great opportunity of meeting some people at the university. They just took me under their wing, and they just helped me with classes and everything.” Although they tried to persuade him to skip the community college and go right to the university, Frank said, “I kind of want to make my own decision and make my own path.”

When it came to on-campus Informal mentors, James found informal talks in the hall and cafeteria with an assistant professor and a former vice president of student services extremely rewarding. The two college personnel both just started having conversations with him during his first 24 credit hours. Over time, he would seek out their advice and guidance on a variety of
topics. The simple connection with these two men made him feel less like a number, and more as a person. When James spoke of these two men, he said the following:

Oh, okay. Well, Mr. E. and Mr. C. are just really brilliant. And they’re really strong in the field and they’re pushing. You can just see what they want from you. It’s nothing but a helping hand, honestly. It’s nothing but a helping hand. And they ... Honestly, I can say if I didn’t meet those guys I’d probably be just another number, you feel me? It’d just ... It’d be really weird.

In summary, the idea of *Informal mentors* was derived from the notion that the participants talked about people who met the qualifications of a mentor without having formal training. These people were not from one specific area. Some of the mentors were in the same age group as the participants, while others were much older. While *Informal mentors* came from on-campus and off-campus settings, *Campus personnel* were people on-campus who also were a support system for some of the participants.

**Campus Personnel**

The six participants identified various *Campus personnel* whose support influenced their academic success. These individuals from their community college were their faculty, advisors, and a former director of student activities. In addition to their daily careers, these individuals took the time to provide the participants with academic and emotional support.

David, James, Val, Peter, and Frank all discussed how instructors were major support systems for them. They felt the assistant professors at the community college they attended cared about them. According to Val, who started at a different community college, the faculty at this school created a better on-campus environment that provided more emotional support. As he put it:
I went to a different community college before I went here, and the big difference between that school and here, the teachers here actually tell you ahead of time when something was due. The other college, it’s like all right next week, you have a five-page paper due. Here, it’s in the syllabus. It’s this and that.

This nurturing, supportive environment that the faculty provided made a difference to David. His psychology and sociology professors were more than his instructors; they provided him with encouragement and academic guidance on a variety of issues. David explained that his psychology instructor provided him emotional support, while his sociology instructor offered life skill guidance and even legal advice:

One thing I like about my former psychology teacher was even outside of the classroom, she kind of care more about your kids. They’re not just like her average students to her. She always, I don't know how, but she just knew that I got something in me that probably not a lot of kids have, and she always just tell me to keep going, keep doing what you're doing. I remember the little things like that. That’s the type of stuff that keeps me going a lot. That's why I always come back to her classes when I can, so I appreciate it. My sociology instructor tried to help keep my head straight, because last year, I got in a little altercation. He helped me out, just to tell me it wasn’t the right thing to do and I was a good kid and keep doing what I’m doing.

Like David, James also had two instructors whom he called “really brilliant.” These two people provided him with all kinds of support and guidance. Like Val, James felt his instructors went beyond their teaching responsibilities to offer him extra help with academic and nonacademic issues. He commented:
They were really helpful, pushed me in the right direction and make me meet people. Make me do the extra mile that I don’t want to do. They’re really strong in the field and they’re pushing. You can just see what they want from you. It’s nothing but a helping hand, honestly.

While David, James, and Val talked about the instructor’s compassion for students, Peter talked about how he liked how his professors provided tough love. They urged him to excel and have higher standards for his education. Peter said:

They help me by not taking excuses. A lot of times a student I know, he got a bunch of excuses, but at the end of the day when people hold him to a higher standard, I don’t take that as a knock. I take that as I like that, and it keeps me going forward. The faculty members here tend to challenge you more, because I’m the kind of person you have to challenge me, because if you don’t challenge me then I get distracted.

Frank, like Peter, appreciated how his professors set high standards and would not allow excuses for anything less than performing at one’s highest level. Frank also appreciated being able to go to meet with his instructors. He enjoyed during to talking to them, asking for assistance, or obtaining advice. He said, "They're very helpful and kind and their office hours are great because you can just go in." For him, he believed it was better to go directly for help because it gave him a chance to learn the material better in a one-on-one environment.

Not every participant talked about instructors. Phil and Peter discussed two people who worked in the student services division who were support systems for them. The first person was the former student activities director, who oversaw the extracurricular activities and clubs on campus. Phil explained how she was a support system for him when he took a club officer
position. Phil stated, “If there needed to be some redirecting, she would always do the redirecting to keep us on task.”

Phil was not alone in finding support from student services. Peter believed his academic advisor prepared him for college by giving him a variety of information about how to be a successful student. According to Peter, “She gave you know that you may not have, especially for me because I don’t know a lot of things about college, especially when I first started.

In summary, some people employed at the college played a positive role for all six of the men. These employees were not just faculty members, but were also people who worked in various areas of the college. Campus personnel provided academic support and offered career and life-skills advice and emotional support.

Conclusion

Various types of on- and off-campus Relationships supported all six men. The people who had been in their lives who provided emotional support, tough love, advice, motivation, or a firm reason to get to class made a difference. However, the research also revealed that this support did not just come from one kind of person. All of the men described multiple supports from numerous people. It appeared that the combination of people influenced the participants.

One combination that was interesting was family and friends. Often the students referred to their friends as their family even though they were not Blood relations. However, all six mentioned Blood relations, which were the reason it was important to distinguish between relatives and friends. It also appeared that peers were friends. Only two participants made a distinction between those two groups.

It was surprising that the Campus personnel who influenced the six participants were not just instructors. This group of people could be considered Informal mentors; however, their
training and position made them stand out as being involved formally. These people were doing their jobs by guiding the students. However, they were not the only type of support systems for the participants. All of the participants showed two types of motivation: Internal motivation and External motivation. The word motivation has often been viewed as the action of individuals whose behavior is based on their wishes and desires in order to reach some type of goal (Kocel, 1995). Motivation can come from within oneself or from the environment and it is used to encourage an individual to act in a specific way (Erdem & Cicekdemir, 2016). According to the findings from Erdem and Cicekdemir (2016), there is a connection between these two types of motivation and student success.

**Internal Motivation**

As each of the six participants presented his story of how he was academically successful, a theme emerged. Although their stories spoke of people who affected their choices, a second theme also emerged that was equally strong, which was Internal motivation. Internal motivation can be viewed as a way a person wants to succeed for self-satisfaction (Erdem & Cicekdemir, 2016). Internal motivation often comes from the individuals own self-beliefs and values (Fehr & Sassenberg, 2010). For each of these men displayed Internal motivation not only from the words that they used but from the tone of their voices, their facial expressions and body language. Five of the six participants spoke about who they were as a person and how this knowledge about themselves played a factor in their success. Some of the participants believed that they needed to move forward and away from negative forces to be academically successful. Two participants wished to set an example for their younger relatives. Five of the six participants spoke about how being spiritual guided them in academic decisions. Based on information
concerning Internal motivation that the participants shared, three subthemes emerged: Self-awareness, Moving forward, and Spirituality.

Self-awareness

One type of Internal motivation that the participants seemed to share was Self-awareness. All six participants described strengths that they believed played a role in their academic success. The participants not only could recognize their strengths, but they were able to explain how they effectively utilized their strengths to be successful. Having a solid understanding of Self-awareness was an internal quality that guided them through their first 24 credit hours of college-level work. Although each participant spoke about his strengths, they varied among the students. Even though each participant’s Self-awareness was exclusive to that person, there was a common view that their strengths could be used to better their education.

Frank’s Self-awareness was that he was a helpful and social person. He noticed how he enjoyed helping his classmates and realized he could make a living helping people with their problems. Having this insight into about himself led him to the idea that he should choose a career in counseling. He realized he was a social person, which he also thought would be a good quality in a counselor. Once he realized he could use his strength to pursue a career, he used this knowledge to pursue his academic goal. Frank spoke about his strengths:

I think my personal strengths were one, I’m very helpful. If I was in class and I got something that another student didn’t, I’m more than happy to help them understand what that was. I just like helping people. I like putting smiles on people’s faces and everything. I just think me being a helpful, happy person can also help the next person and whatever they got going on. Like I said, well I’m very social, too. I think that helps with my academics because I get to meet new people and they can teach me something that I
haven’t learned before, too. The one thing I learned to do was be confidential about whatever that person’s telling me. I think that plays a factor, so that maybe a lot of people would like me just for my personality. I never try to fit in or anything like that.

While Frank’s Self-awareness revealed a sense to help and to be social, Phil’s Self-awareness was that of being a natural leader. He explained that he never sought out any leadership positions, it just happened because when he wanted something to be done, he would find a way to make it happen. He discovered people were always turning to him for guidance. Since he was a natural leader, he thought he could use this insight to select a major. He decided to major in business management. Phil explained:

   When I decide I want something, it gets done. I find a way to do it. Not too afraid to take risks. I see myself more as an entrepreneur sort of leader type. I’m not scared to lead people. I’m not scared to be the bossy person that tells everyone what to do. That’s me naturally. People naturally listen to me and I can’t help it. I wasn’t raised to herd sheep or herd cattle, but when I come around, people just tend to listen. I can’t help it. People always see me as a leader type role. I’ve never chased it. It just happens. I just decided I want to take control. With my old team, when I was in sports I wasn’t the captain, but I was at the same time. Even my coach would look to me about what I think should happen right now and I’ll give the answer.

David’s Self-awareness did not bring about an idea for a major as it did for Frank and Phil. Instead, he used his Self-awareness to guide him in his decision-making process. David explained that he was a serious, wise person. It was this insight into who he was as a person that helped him make important decisions concerning his life. David explained his Self-awareness:
I believe I’m kind of wise beyond my years. I think I’m responsible. I think I’m versatile. I know how to talk to a lot of people. I think I carry myself the right way. I might come off as really quiet or serious, but I’m real genuine. I do things for the right purpose. Not because I want somebody to think of me a certain way or anything like that. I’m caring. I’m there when you need me.

Similar to David, Peter felt *Self-awareness* was one of the qualities that guided him in his education. Peter viewed himself as a confident, good thinker, and as a hard-working individual who did not believe in giving up on his studies. These qualities were important in Internal motivation because they acted as support systems when making decisions. Peter saw how these qualities could counterbalance his underdeveloped social skills. Phil explained:

My person strengths were being hard working, being very confident, because I’m not a social person, so my confidence helps me. Eventually, I have to go out and do something so my confidence pushes me. Like I said, I think I said hard working already. I am hard working, confident, being a good thinker. I think a lot, so I have to internalize a lot of things. The fact that I think a lot helps me. I think being well rounded. If somebody came up and had a conversation about anything, I can talk about that thing, or I try to put myself in other people’s shoes as much as possible. That helps my spirit a lot, because being able to do those things, and learn from others.

James’s *Self-awareness* was similar to David and Peter’s in that it was more of an idea about why decisions were made. James’s *Self-awareness* came from the fact that he loved to learn. Learning for him was not about the grade; instead, it was a thirst for knowledge. James was the type of person who watched and absorbed information. His thirst for knowledge drove
him to learn as much as he could to master a subject. James’s Self-awareness moved beyond wanting a degree. James explained:

I’m not the type of person that talk at first. I’m very ... I observe at first and then just, okay, soak all that stuff in. My mom calls me a sponge. And I just take that and run with it. So every little thing, I feel like that contributed in my success in college and just helped me out this period. I can be outside and I can just look at the wind blowing this way, like “Okay, well I don’t want to go that way because the wind’s blowing it through away.” ... The fact I am never a person that feel like they can’t be taught. I feel like the day that you feel like you can’t be taught was the day that you lose any hope in life. If you know everything, there’s no reason to live, honestly. To me you can’t know everything. You’re never able to experience new things. “Oh, I didn't know that.” ... I will definitely say that’s my strength, because I always want to learn something new. I always want to know something that somebody else didn’t know so I can teach them, pretty much.

Val’s Self-awareness was different from the other participants because he did not have a few specific qualities that he would use to keep him on track. Instead, for him, it was a strong cognitive understanding of what issues could derail his education. Val’s life experience gave him a Self-awareness that provided him with insight into ways to prevent any maladaptive behavior. He used this knowledge of prior experience to help him be a good student. He explained:

I had a lot of self-findings… I don’t let the outside factors play a role in my grades. I don’t let outside people play a role in my academics. I make sure I stay on top of things, because if I don’t, I am going to look up and fall behind.
In summary, based on the discussions from the six men, it appeared that most of them had a good understanding of who they were as a person. They could not only identify their strengths, but they applied their strengths as tools to help them succeed in college. It was this use of knowledge about their own Self-awareness that stood out in all six of the men. Having Self-awareness brought on another support system, which was concern with Moving forward.

Moving Forward

The six participants indirectly indicated a sense of wanting to move forward in their lives that helped support them in how they made decisions during their first 24 credit hours of college-level work. Some of the participants discussed times during their lives when they had to make major decisions that either positively influenced their academic success or caused them to hurt their futures. During those moments, their Internal motivation brought with them a need to want to move forward in a positive direction. For some of the participants, Moving forward was not brought on by moments in their lives, but instead from a more gradual Internal motivation that persuaded them over time to move forward.

David, Peter, Val, and Phil all said events in their lives had been turning points in their success. Their environments and experiences became support systems that helped shape their academic decisions. Some events, like Phil’s and Val’s, were internal wake-up calls about which direction they needed to take. Peter’s and David’s realizations, on the other hand, came from a sudden insight into how they viewed their education.

David’s life experience, as well as the life experiences of people he knew, made him realize that people had two paths to choose from when making decisions. It was these moments in his life when his Internal motivation wanted to move forward. Since David was a serious person, he was cautious of the decisions he made. Except for his brothers, he did not have people
to guide him at home; he had to learn to trust himself to make decisions. Because he was about to graduate from the community college, he reflected on all of his decisions he made to get him to his academic goal. David described his *Moving forward:*

> Everything I’ve seen in my life, people take two routes. They either go along with everything, the bad they’ve seen, or they want to run away from it, and I want to run away from all of it. I don’t want nothing to do with it. I just try to live the right way for me and just go about doing things the right way. I think that’s just the chip I got on my shoulder. I walk around with a chip on my shoulder like I got something to prove. Like I was saying earlier, just not having nobody there consistently in my life, always on the move. For a while, for once in my life, I’ve been standing still and not moving a lot. I don’t know, it feels kind of good for once. I never took the time to sit back and appreciate what I’ve done. I don’t know how to open up, man. It’s hard. Just not having nothing, nobody there. It’s so much of a push that I don’t know how to not work hard. I don’t know. I couldn’t not work hard if I tried. It just makes me keep going.

David also had a moment where he realized that he had to want to move towards a positive academic goal and away from negative influences. During his first semester in college, he started to understand that a person must want to learn for himself. This was a turning point in how he viewed college. It was at that moment that he started to take college seriously. In turn, he became successful in his academics. David explained this moment:

> By taking it seriously, I actually read the books and learn. I didn’t just wait till the last minute to just get by. Instead of trying to retain information, I just did it just so I could get an A on the test. Now I do it because I want to learn it. I now know the direction I
want to go. I don’t want to just go after an Associate’s Degree. It’s time to get serious and keep going.

Peter also had a sudden internal realization about college that changed his views and provided him with internal support. His parents always wanted him to go to college, and he never really thought much about it. When he started school, it was to please his parents. They wanted him in college, so he enrolled. Then one day he realized that he should want to go to college not because his family wanted him to go, but because he himself wanted to be in school. After this insight, his view of college changed. He became focused and had an internal need to succeed. He described his change regarding how he viewed attending college:

At one point in my life I used to do it ... When I first started going to school, I used to go to school to make my parent happy. That didn’t work out so well because once you don’t care about your parents think, you know you’re a teenager, and you tend to start to not care about what they think, and that did hurt me, so I had to start doing everything in my life for me, instead of doing things for other people. I realized that going to college for somebody else won’t turn out so well.

Although Val did not wish to discuss his past in detail, he did mention a turning point for him about education was when he got into trouble with the law. He was not in college at the time and did not have any future goals. Being in trouble with the law was a wake-up call for him to either keep getting into trouble or do something in his life. At this moment he realized he had to stop hanging out with people who were a bad influence and find like-minded individuals who saw the value of an education. Val explained how this was a turning point in his life:

I got in trouble with the law a little bit ago, and that was just my turning point. Just at the point where I was all right, turn the jets on and you get up and get out. Time to get myself
together and get everything together. People in the same spot as me. Same area, trying to
go the same place that I’m going.

Phil also had a specific event that was the *Internal motivation* for *Moving forward* with
his academics. Growing up, Phil’s neighborhood was unsafe. As he grew up, he realized he
needed to leave this community, where he did not feel safe and which could lead him down the
wrong path. He convinced his mother to allow him to move 50 miles west to a small town where
he could feel safe and focus on his education. His *Internal motivation* to get out of a harmful
environment was the first step for him in his academic success. Phil described this moment:

Well, I moved from the city around my sophomore year in high school right before the
beginning of school to get out of the city. I didn’t see it going well. Not pretty much too
much of a safe place right now. I left in order to make sure that I could continue to go to
school and continue to grow up because I’ve seen a lot happen. I know a lot of people
who are dead or not probably going to see not too many more days. I didn’t want that. I
wanted to go to school. I wanted to stay focused. I decided to leave. I do think a big thing
was, for me, going to living in a safer place. I guess the idea of moving out about four
years ago now, four or five years ago. I do think that plays a role, where you live, and the
things that go around the schools you go to.

For James and Frank, *Moving forward* did not happen because of a sudden realization.
Instead, it came more gradually over time. Like Val, these two participants saw the need to be
surrounded by like-minded people who would provide positive support for them, when needed.

James’ *Internal motivation* for *Moving forward* came from the realization over time that
he had positive support systems in place that were vital to his academic success. James began to
associate with people who he knew would be positive support systems for him. When growing
up, people he hung out with offered either negative or positive academic support; he found out that he preferred people who gave him positive support. He described these various people as his collection of support that has made him successful:

There are support systems that I actually collected myself, because nothing comes handed out. So you have to get your support system. But once you have it, it really ... It’s a big influence on your success in life and college, no matter what. So I have a pretty good support system, and they’ve pushed me to be successful, even when I don’t want to...I have picked people to hang around with. That I want to be successful with. People that I know I am going to get my work done with…and we can do this together to be successful.

Frank also developed the Internal motivation for Moving forward by surrounding himself with people who helped him in his classes. He learned during his first 24 credit hours of college-level work that finding individuals whom he could study with and who were knowledgeable about the subjects would help him succeed. Similar to James, Frank also learned over the years to find like-minded individuals who shared common academic goals. Such people must want the same education and life goals. Frank observed:

I try to find at least two people that know a lot about the class. Therefore, if I need help, before I go to my advisor maybe we could study together or I could try to get a better understanding from them, as well. I think of students just like me…who are coming together for one goal. That’s to better our education and make a better life for ourselves and our families.

In summary, the idea of Moving forward is tied closely to Self-awareness. For some of the participants, Moving forward derived from a distinct moment. However, for others, Moving
forward was more gradual. Like *Moving forward, almost all of the participants spirituality as a support system.*

**Spirituality**

James, Val, Peter, and David all believed *Spirituality* played a role in their success. *Spirituality* was an *Internal motivation* that was a support system for them. Although a few of the participants attended church when they were younger, none of them were active churchgoers at the time of the interviews. Instead, their faith was more internal and often acted as a guiding force in their educational decision-making process, as well as coping mechanisms for stress. Phil was the only person who did not believe in *Spirituality*. Although his father was a spiritual man, Phil thought if he could not see it or know where the ideas came from, then he did not believe it. Instead, he placed his trust only in himself. Frank did think of himself as spiritual but did not believe it was a support system for him except when he prayed for being able to study hard and do well in school. He said:

I really don’t try to bring *Spirituality* stuff into school that much, but I’ll pray for me to study hard and get a better grade in classes. Maybe that’s probably the farthest I go with bringing the spirituality part into school.

James was a deeply spiritual person who turned to his faith at critical times during his college career. He had moments during his first 24 credit hours of college-level coursework when there had been major obstacles that interfered with his educational goals. The summer before this interview, he did not know whether he could return to college because he did not have a place to live. Using his *Spirituality* support system, he was able to find housing in the last weeks before the semester started. This strong faith gave him strength and encouragement when he could have given up on his academic goals. James talked about his *Spirituality:*

I have a very religious background. I have a couple things that happened in my life to where there’s no question. I have faith in. This summer I didn’t know if I was coming back to school this summer or not. I didn’t know where I was going to lay my head at this summer, anything. Where I was going to eat, anything like that. And I just jumped out. Just went head first. And I just let my faith take care of everything. Stuff just started laying in place for me. I just prayed and then life stuff started happening. So religion does play a big role in my success. I can do nothing else. Just so many things that’s so how? How did that happen? And it’s only one thing. I believe it’s only one reason why. I just have faith and I take that faith and I carry it on my back.

Like James, Peter was a deeply spiritual person. Although Peter did not have time to attend church, during his first 24 credit hours of college-level coursework, he wrote and read the scriptures every night to help keep him motivated. His Internal motivation to perform this task gave him support during difficult times. Peter described his support from Spirituality:

I would write scriptures and read them. Just read them for motivation. I’m not necessarily like a go to church person. To be honest, going to church, I kind of stopped once I started working, because I can never get a Sunday off. Then that’s when I started to rely more on my spirituality than religion. I don’t even like the word religion. Yeah, I would describe myself as more of a spiritual person. My spirit has to be in the right place, kind of like a combination of both but now I’m more focused on my spirit, and everything.

David’s Spirituality support system also kept him grounded. David found prayer helpful. Like Frank and James, he prayed when he felt there was a need. David also always kept a bracelet with a specific scripture in his pocket. He took it out during the interview. The bracelet,
which he received at a summer camp for foster children, was worn from years of use. David explained that rubbing the bracelet and mentally reciting the scripture calmed him during stressful moments during the day; it gave him strength and a sense of calmness. David explained:

Since I was, like, five, one of the first things a foster family did teach me, say this prayer every night. Ever since, at night, I always say it. Whenever I’m going through whatever I’m going through, the good or bad, I don’t bestow it on anybody else, because that’s not really good, I got a prayer on a bracelet in my pocket, actually. I got it at one of these camps I went to, it was like a Bible camp for foster children. The director of the camp gave it to me which was one of the last things he did before he died and I always keep it because it means a lot to me. It definitely helps me. The bracelet reminds me that I everything happens for a reason, whether we know why or explain why. I know there got to be somebody to get me out of some of the places I been. It just doesn’t happen by coincidence. Somebody’s been watching me and helping me this way.

Unlike the others, Val specifically talked about how God was a major support system for him. Although Val did not have the time to attend church anymore, he knew he could look to God for guidance. He knew he could pray to God anywhere at any time. Val stated:

I believe God pushed me through everything. Every single thing I’ve been through, he helped me through. That’s the thing, I don’t really go to church as much anymore, because I work, or have something to study for. I guess it’s very spiritual. Like a very spiritual connection with God currently.

In summary, the men who felt Spirituality that guided them in academic quests did not always feel a need to attend church. They described a more internal faith that kept them going when they needed it. This Spirituality got some of them through difficult times that otherwise
could have derailed their academics. Their faith was for some a way to cope with stress. The one person who did not have *Spirituality* explained that although he was raised to believe in *Spirituality*, if he did not see it he could not believe in it. Instead, he felt he was the maker of his own destiny.

**Conclusion**

*Internal motivation* is a support system that comes from within a person. While each person had some type of *Self-awareness*, not every participant displayed the other subthemes. Some of the participants found support from *Moving forward*. Most of the participants felt support through *Spirituality*. The participants explained how this type of motivation became a support system for them. It derived from either major events in their lives or environments they had been living in. Each of the participants took these experiences they and internally processed them in a way that later was used as a supporting reference when they made positive academic decisions. While *Internal motivation* deals with what was within the participants, the last theme found is *External motivation*.

**External Motivation**

*External motivation* is the third superordinate theme that emerged from the interviews. According to Erdem and Cicekdemir (2016, p. 159), “External motivation is revealed by extrinsic forces and is not directly related to the duty itself”. This superordinate theme shows that each of these men appeared to be involved in something outside of their academic studies. Some of the participants discussed how their involvement on campus created a feeling of connectedness to the college. The participants who worked on or off campus saw support from their employers in areas such as scheduling around their class and tutoring. *External motivation* is a support system that gave the participants insight, which helped in their educational decision-
making process. Based on the information provided by all six participants, subthemes emerged that supported this superordinate theme. These subthemes are Programs, services, and courses; Extracurricular activities; Employment; Community and location, and Setting the example.

Programs, Services, and Courses

The six participants discussed a variety of on-campus Programs, services, and courses that played a supportive role during their first 24 credit hours of college coursework at the community college. Although their Programs, services, and classes were different, they all felt support that developed a connection with their community college, answered questions concerning their academics, and provided life interests and skills that went beyond learning for a grade.

David was the only person who brought up federal financial assistance programs as a positive support system. David was able to attend college because of federal programs that provide funding for foster children to attend college. He knew that he did not have anyone who could assist him with paying for college, and the money he made at his job would not support him and his tuition and fees. Knowing that he could attend college without a huge financial debt was a major relief for David. David did not take this program for granted. As he explained:

I was a foster kid my whole life, so I’ve just kind of been on the move a lot. Technically, I’m still a part ward of the state, so I haven’t spent a dime of my own money, just based off of my FAFSA. When you apply for FAFSA, if you’re in foster care after 13 that kind of helps you with the financials. So I haven’t had to pay my own money, thank the Lord. They’ve given me a lot of funds towards school. I’m on a scholarship program through the state right now. If I keep a 2.0 average, I get a stipend every month. They play a big role. Real blessed for it. Grateful for it.
The federal financial assistance program was not the only federally-funded program mentioned as a support system. The TRIO Student Support Services program was considered a positive support system by three of the participants. James, Frank, and Phil identified the TRIO Student Support Service program as a positive support system because it provided counseling, activities, and programs for the students. The three participants were active members. Although their experiences in SSS were different, they found that the SSS advisor was a strong positive force who kept them all on track to reach their academic goals.

Student Support Services was one of the first support systems that James discussed in his interview. He liked the program because he could see the advisors anytime and ask them any questions. James also liked how SSS strongly encouraged him to do his best in school. SSS was a place James could always turn to for advice, answers, and encouragement. James said:

The support service called TRIO, they really pushed me. Because I know I’m a really annoying person, coming down to academics. So I’m a pest. So if I don’t know something, I ask 20 times and stuff like that. If I’m not sure of something, I just make sure I’m sure of something, so they really ... They put up with my experience sometimes. They just put up with me. And they just help me out no matter what.

Frank found that the people who worked in the program wanted him to have goals and strive to complete those goals. He was particularly grateful to the SSS advisor who spent time with him planning his academic goals and monitoring his progress. He liked how she helped him get ready for transferring to a four-year college. Frank said:

The TRIO program they helped me a lot. I got introduced to them 2015 and I also got inducted into the program 2015. The SSS advisor helped me to better myself and to work harder and to strive for goals. She also was helping me to get ready to transfer to a four-
Like Frank, Phil appreciated how the SSS advisor helped him plan his academic future. Phil also saw the benefit of being involved in Student Support Services during his first 24 credit hours of college-level work at the community college because this federally funded program helped him figure out how to set up his classes for the next semester. Phil explained that he had a difficult time figuring out what courses to take for his major before being in SSS. In addition, during his scheduling appointments the advisor also checked in with how Phil was emotionally doing and feeling about school. He appreciated this extra care. Phil said:

Well, here we have a TRIO program. They have additional counselors and you have to qualify to get into the program. They help me out with my scheduling. I see them from time to time, probably maybe once a month I make an appointment to see them, to talk, see where things are at, see where my head’s at, and see what path I want to go down. They help me out with all the scheduling, breaking down of classes. They’ll sit with you and crank out the times, crank out the schedule, get it down. I feel like that actually really helps not only me, but other people that I know. Me, I’m a very indecisive person so when it comes to picking my schedule, it was the worst thing ever. I’m always changing it back and forth and they really sit there with you and help you out through that process.

Besides the federally funded programs, the community college had a formal tutoring service; it was identified by three of the six participants as being an academic support system. The participants who did not use the free tutoring program were unaware of its existence until asked about it during follow-up interviews. The Testing and Tutoring Center provided a free formal tutoring program on campus at the community college. The center offered tutoring in a
variety of subjects, and it appeared that the three participants went there to seek help in the areas of mathematics, sciences, and writing.

James learned about the tutoring services from a peer who told him about a study review he could attend that was on a subject he was struggling with that semester. Once he attended the study review, he went back and attended other reviews and sought individual tutoring sessions. He saw firsthand how his grades improved from utilizing these services. James said, “The Tutoring Center, that’s a big resource. If I weren’t able to do that, I’d probably be in some big trouble right now with some of my grades from last year.”

Peter also discovered the Testing and Tutoring Center during his first 24 credit hours of college-level work. Even though he did not elaborate on his time at the Tutoring Center, he did say the following, “The Tutoring Center, they help me a lot when it comes down to math in certain areas that I struggle in.”

Val had experiences similar to James and Peter. However, unlike the other two participants, Val could not stop raving about not having to spend extra money on outside tutoring because he knew outside tutoring was expensive. Val only went to the Testing and Tutoring Center for biology and was thrilled to see his grade improve after just a few sessions. Val stated:

The tutoring that’s here. I did use that couple times last semester for biology. That’s definitely helped out a lot. It’s something you don’t have to pay for. You don’t have to go way out of your way to go find someone for help.

Another service that was mentioned was both an on-campus and off-campus support system. The local and campus libraries were mentioned by only two of the six participants, Val and David. They did not talk about the resources or assistance from the library staff. Instead,
they found the quiet atmosphere, hours of operation, and free use of computers and Wi-Fi very helpful for them.

Val lived near a library and went there to study. The quiet surroundings provided him with an atmosphere that was conducive for studying. Val said, “Library was definitely my go-to factor either, and I use the library, which was down the street from my apartment or here, after or before class. I’m always in the library. That’s my biggest form of success.”

David also used the off-campus library as well as the on-campus library to study. However, it was the available computers that were a huge support for him. David did not own a computer, so he used those computers when the on-campus and off-campus libraries were open to write and submit papers and assignments and take online tests. The quiet atmosphere allowed him to concentrate on his school work without interruption. David said:

I believe the library has been a real big help, because I didn’t have a computer for most of my college experience so far. Just being able to come in early or stay after school has been a real big help so I can study or get a paper done early. If I was running late for school, I could do it in the morning. Just been an overall help.

Frank mentioned various courses as being support systems for him. Although other participants mentioned positive Relationships with faculty members, Frank specifically talked about how the knowledge from some of his courses provided informational that he could later use to make sound decisions. Frank took the first-year-experience course, and he discovered that information from the course was useful because it went beyond how to study to include more of what life was like as a college student and how to be a responsible student. Frank stated:

We [the class] talked about relationships, jobs, a number of things outside of school, as well. The course taught me to talk to people in class. Find out who’s smart and who you
can get notes from maybe if you miss a day from class.

In addition to his first-year-experience course, Frank also discussed how four other courses provided him with support that he could rely on in the future. He felt that information from his sociology and psychology courses was important for when he marries and starts a family because those courses gave him insight into how to be a good husband and father. His American government course gave him knowledge on why he needed to start voting in all types of elections. Lastly, his Black cinema course provided information concerning the stigma of Black in film and society. He felt this course was extremely helpful as he thought about who he wanted to be now and in the future. Frank said:

Marriage and Family broadened my horizons on just marriage in general, parenting, and everything like that. I think that’s going to help me be a better father one day, once that day comes. I was kind of happy about taking his class, as well. The counseling part and how that whole process goes and everything with counseling and how to keep things confidential, and things like that about the psychology course. I think that’s going to help me better my career, as well, from taking that class. I’m taking an American government class right now. That’s broadened my horizons on politics, as well. Which I think everybody should be a part of politics because that controls our whole nation. That’s one thing for sure. My American government class with politics. Maybe another thing was probably; well I took a Black cinema class, as well. That helped me with knowing why it’s such many different stigmas towards the Black man, or the Black people in general. Just how to try to overcome those stigmas and try to better myself to help better the next black person. I think that most definitely that Black cinema class helped me a lot.
In summary, most of the Programs, services, and courses the men discussed helped them with academics. Some of the Programs, services, and courses helped with finances, social problems, and personal goals and issues. Finally, some of the Programs, services, and courses gave them knowledge that they could use now and later in life. While all six participants discussed their Programs, services, and courses, only four participants discussed Extracurricular activities as support systems.

**Extracurricular Activities**

*Extracurricular activities* were discussed by James, Phil, Peter, and Frank as positive support systems. *Extracurricular activities* ranged from participating in clubs and organizations to attending college-sponsored events. Many of the participants felt a sense of connection to the college because of their participation in these activities.

*Extracurricular activities* were a strong support system for James during his first 24 credit hours of college-level work. He became involved and connected to his community college right away, which made him feel comfortable about asking for help with his school work when he needed it. His involvement in campus clubs and organizations thrust him into two leadership roles. He said:

I was kind of pushed into the role of president of BSU. And I had no clue what I was doing at all. The person that gave me that role was a very nice young man, well-rounded, and somebody that you could actually look up to. And then just I met a lot of people from him. And then once he left, then a lot of people stepped up. And I was able to see more vividly, more so, the African American leaders around here. Freshman year, well back to last year, I was blessed to have an opportunity to be student ambassador as a freshman. And they said that’s not rare. So being a student ambassador as a freshman put me up to a
higher standard. So it was maturing really, really fast with your freshman year.

Phil, like James, took a leadership position in student government during his first 24 credit hours. He was a member of student government and was asked to be the treasurer. He said that it made him feel great to be part of an organization that helped bring about change at the school. As treasurer of student government, other clubs had to see him about money. He said:

Last year I was treasurer for student government… We’re the people you talk to about maybe if you wanted to start a new club or anything, you need a couple people for positions. We give you a budget to help you out. I was kind of in charge of that as well. Anybody came and asks for money, my approval would be needed with my advisor as well. That was how we got it done. I kind of felt like I was helping out with school, making changes, and things like that.

Along with James, Peter was a member of the Black Student Union at the community college. Unlike James, he did not hold a leadership position; he was very involved, however, with the organization during his first 24 credits of college-level work. The Black Student Union was a support system for Peter because it showed him how to become organized while in college. He said, “The Black Student Union, it helped me become more organized and more disciplined. It’s like it gave me a lot more structure to my life.”

While James, Phil, and Peter enjoyed being involved with clubs and organizations on campus, Frank found pleasure in attending various on-campus programs and events during his first 24 credit hours of college-level work. He thought these programs and events were a support system for him because they made him feel connected to the school. They allowed him to interact with people and instructors outside of class and helped him make new friends. He said that the activities for him made “the best out of this college experience here at the college.”
At the time of the interview, Frank had received a letter from the College Honors Program. He was very excited about becoming a member and taking honors-level courses during his second year at the college. He saw the benefits of taking harder courses as he pursued his bachelor’s degree. He said:

Well I didn’t enroll in it [the honor’s program] yet, but I just think that’s another stepping stone for me to accomplish. I do want to enroll in that program because they help you with scholarships and they also help you with school, as well. I just want to get as much support as I can to help me to go through school. I think things like that also give people motivation to do better because you can get more help by just going to school and completing your grades and getting good grades. You can get more help for scholarships and just finding better opportunities.

In summary, being involved in some form of extracurricular activity was important for many of the men. Not only were some of the men involved in clubs, but they took on leadership roles during their first 24 credit hours. Others saw that attending events introduced them to people who became their friends. The various activities outside of the classroom created a connection with the college, and that helped them see how the things they were learning inside and outside the classroom could help them in their future careers. Besides Extracurricular activities, some of the participants felt Employment was a support system.

Employment

Five of the six participants identified Employment as one of the support systems that factored into why they were successful during their first 24 credit hours of college-level work. Of the participants who were employed, two worked on campus and three worked off campus. Some of the participants said they were thankful that their employers adjusted their schedule around
their courses and participation in *Extracurricular activities*. For two participants, their on-campus *Employment* presented a chance to make connections and friendship. For all of the working participants, their employers stressed the importance of a college education.

Although Phil did not elaborate on his off-campus employment, he did say “They’re open from like 5:00 AM to 11:00 PM. They give me because I do go to school, they give me... They move my shift that way I can start at like 2:00 or something like that.” Phil was able to attend classes in the morning and his clubs and organizations from noon until he had to go to work. In the summer, he worked full time and made up for the time lost during the academic year.

Like Phil, Val found that if he worked long hours in the summer, his off-campus employer would be more flexible during the school year. He said, “Usually they’re (work), ‘all right, you tell us what’s your schedule is. Tell us what you can work.’ Because the summertime, I’m full-time. All summer, I’m full-time.” By having the flexible time during the school year, he could allocate more time to concentrate on his school work. Val explained:

> During school time, I only work Fridays and Sundays and that’s it. Two days. We’re not open on Saturdays. I would work Saturdays, if they’re open. They’re like all right, do your school schedule. Let us know what you can work, what you can’t.

Unlike Phil and Val, Frank worked on campus at the bookstore during his first 24 credit hours of college-level work. Frank was able to meet and get to know instructors outside of the classroom. He made friends with some of the students he waited on, and he learned about the college and how it operated. He said, “Well I worked on campus, so that was great... I think that helped me a lot with learning.” He went on to explain how it helped him with his communication class because he learned to improve his speaking skills and interact with the public. Frank also appreciated how the bookstore allowed him to take time off to seek tutoring help. He said:
They actually built it my hours around my schedule. They are also great about if you need to go to tutoring, they’ll find someone to just stay later or something for you, just so you can still make sure academics.

Like Frank, James worked on campus, but in athletics. This job did not exist until the athletic director created it especially for him. He met the athletic director through his involvement with his extracurricular activities. James said “I don’t even know what to call it, because we I don’t have a title for it, but I think athletic director assistant. That really helped me out in my field, because my major was sports management.” He thought having knowledge and skills from this position at the community college would improve his chances of finding a good job in sports management after graduation.

David’s off-campus work experience, like all of the other participants, gave him flexible hours. His employer at the fast-food chain scheduled his work schedule around his classes and the library hours. David believed she was good to him because she saw the importance of earning a degree. She spent time telling David the importance of not spending the rest of his life in low-wage jobs. David also watched her over time and saw how unhappy she was with her life without a college education. He reflected on her by saying:

She never graduated high school. That’s one thing she always kind of wanted for us, her peers, is just to do better than her. That kind of influenced me, because I don’t want to be kind of down like her, wishing that I did this when I had the chance, and it kind of influenced me.

Peter’s off-campus work experience taught him that one must work hard to be successful. His work experience also gave him leadership skills that were used not only in the classroom but also in his Extracurricular activities. Peter found that he appreciated how his job forced him to
better himself in ways he had not challenged himself to do before. He reflected on how he took the knowledge he learned about how to tackle challenging courses with how he had to tackle learning his job. He said:

I think work pushes me to ... Work just pushes me, because I’m pretty sure that most people don’t necessarily enjoy their jobs if it’s not your dream job. I can relate that to school, because you may not understand why you have to do all of this just to do what you actually want to do, but everything is a process. Then work helps me socially how to be professional in a certain environment, and it gives me responsibility. People put the trust in me in most of the jobs I work at. That helps me build myself. The things I learn from work helped me when I was in the Black Student Union. It gave me the leadership skills that I didn’t know I had until I started working.

In summary, some of them made connections with people at the college and community. Some of the men had positions where they could explore potential careers. For another, it gave him insight of what his life would be like without a college degree. All the participants’ employers gave them flexibility in their schedules so they could not only take classes but attend Extracurricular activities and tutoring. While Employment was a subtheme for five of the participants, only two of the participants discussed Community and location as a support system.

Community and location

Community and location were only directly brought up by two of the six participants as one of their support systems during their first 24 credit hours of college-level work. David’s and Phil’s stories were different. David grew up in the area, while Phil moved to the area where the community college was located. These two participants both realized how the community and its location supported them in ways that factored into their academic success.
Although Phil had the support of his mother at home, he saw the need to leave during his sophomore year of high school. He knew the location where he was living did not give him support and as he put it, “I didn’t see it going well. Not pretty much too much of a safe place right now.” Phil moved from a city to a rural Midwestern town because he wanted to feel safe. His move allowed him to not worry about his safety and concentrate on his studies. He stated:

I left in order to make sure that I could continue to go to school and continue to grow up because I’ve seen a lot happen. I know a lot of people who were dead or not probably going to see not too many more days. I didn’t want that. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to stay focused. I decided to leave. I think a big thing was, for me, going to living in a safer place. I guess the idea of moving out about four years ago now, four or five years ago. I do think that plays a role, where you live, and the things that go around the schools you go to. I went from a school that have 4,000 kids in it to my new school that I attended with 1,700. It was a big school, don’t get me wrong, it was a big school, but space wise, this was actually bigger. Pretty nice school actually. I would say it was a relief. I don’t see it as that dangerous. Not from where I grew up. To me it’s not. Some people say it’s bad. That’s typically people who grew up in the surrounding towns and cities. That’s a cakewalk. I can take a walk to a real dangerous part ... I could take you to a real dangerous place and we can take a walk down there. You’ll really feel what scared is there.

Unlike Phil, David lived all of his life in the district where the community college was located. The small-town life David experienced never made him worry about his safety. He did not take his safety for granted because he said, “Kids from nearby cities would love to be in my position, to get away from everything, and be in a town where you don’t have to worry about
anything.” David enjoyed the rural life. It was relaxing and not hectic. For David, who spent his life moving from foster home to foster home, living in the same area was something constant that he needed in his life. He felt comfortable there, and this comfort became a support system for him during his first 24 credit hours of college work.

In summary, *Community and location* were support systems. On top of the stress from starting classes and adjusting to college life, they did not have to worry about their safety. They liked the rural atmosphere where they lived and how it seemed more relaxing than the hectic life of the city. This relaxing atmosphere created a supportive environment. However, Frank and Val, their External motivation did not come from the *Community and location*. For them it was the support of *Setting the example*.

**Setting the Example**

Only two of the six participants, Frank and Val, had the *External motivation* of *Setting the example*. No one ever told Frank and Val that they had to set the example for being a college student. However, both men felt an internal desire to set the example for their younger relatives. Frank believed that as the older cousin, it was his duty to be *Setting the example*. He had several nieces and nephews who looked up to him. As a college student, he spent time talking to them about his experience and was looking forward to them coming to his graduation ceremony. He hoped that having his nieces and nephews see him walking across the stage in his cap and gown would give them the knowledge that they too could someday achieve a college degree. This *External motivation* was a source of support for him when he had bad days in school. He thought about how important it was to not give up and instead continue so he could show his younger relatives the importance of obtaining a college degree. Frank said:

> My nieces and nephew up to me a lot. They play a big role in me actually to get over the
hump and to actually graduate and keep moving forward. One of my goals was to just actually have them come to my graduation to see that I was in college and that I graduated. Because they don’t understand. They don’t really see too many positive people going to school. When they see my school, when they dropped me off, it was like, “Oh this was the school you go to. You go to school?” They just think of me as an adult. I just want them to know that there’s more to life once you graduate from high school and there’s more to do with yourself.

Val’s External motivation to be Setting the example was similar to Frank’s. As the oldest child, Val explained that based on his personnel beliefs and values he felt an internal sense of duty to be Setting the example for his siblings and his nieces and nephews because they looked up to him for guidance. Like Frank, Val knew he represented college for them. They saw what he was doing and knew that education continued after high school. He said:

I’m the oldest, so I have to set that example. I have to do what they should do once they get to where I’m at…My nieces and nephew, they look up to me a lot. They don’t know much about college, but they see that I’m doing it, so hopefully that inspires them to go on and continue past high school and go to college, as well.

In summary, both Frank and Val had an External motivation to be Setting the example for their younger relatives. They saw how their personal success could affect others, which urged them to want to do well in school. Their relatives never asked them to do this, but it was something inside them that saw how their academic success was not only important for them but for others as well.

Conclusion

External motivation, like Internal motivation, influenced the participants’ academic success. This type of motivation was not just one area, but in fact appeared to be a range of
conditions. Their involvement in Programs, services, and courses; Extracurricular activities; Employment; and Community and location gave them insight into what they wanted to do with their lives and gave them knowledge or funding to pursue their academic goals. Although some of the participants were more involved than others, they all were externally motivated in some way to achieve their academic goals. Finally, living in a place where they did not have to worry about their safety allowed them to concentrate on their school work.

**Summary**

Three superordinate themes emerged from the participants’ data. These themes supported the original research question, which was how did support systems affect Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of college coursework? All three themes exposed more than one type of support system that was derived either on or off campus. The themes revealed how there was both Internal and External motivation that guided the participants. Finally, no one theme dominated the others. In fact, although the various themes might have been separate, they complemented each other and worked together to influence success. No participant had only one support system or support systems from only one area. The data instead revealed that the participants needed support systems from all three superordinate themes. The data also revealed that even when the participants were dealing with the same superordinate theme, their support systems within the theme varied.

The trustworthiness and authenticity of the themes came from a selection of checks and balances. First, the participants reviewed their transcripts and cleared up any information that was uncertain in meaning. Participants also looked over their areas of chapter four. Finally, the volunteer research auditor double-checked the researcher’s hand-coding to make sure she had not misinterpreted any data or missed any potential themes.
The three superordinate themes and 12 subthemes provide strong evidence to answer the research question. The data not only revealed how each of the participants’ support services contributed to their academic success, but it also sparked ideas for future programs and research. Chapter 5 will develop the emergent themes and subthemes into findings, discuss the findings in context with previous literature and the theoretical framework, and suggest how to implement the findings in future practice and research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

This narrative study examined the following research question: How did on-campus and off-campus support systems affect Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of college coursework? The theoretical framework used in this study was Uri Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, which helped the researcher understand how support systems either directly or indirectly affected judgment and behavior at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977).

The six participants in the study all attended the same community college in the Midwest. The initial interview occurred off campus. Each participant’s interview transcript was emailed to him and a second meeting was set up. All of the participants met a second time either in person, Skype, or telephone to review their transcripts for accuracy and clarification. A volunteer research auditor looked over the researcher’s coded interviews and made sure no themes were missed. The themes Relationships, Internal motivation, and External motivation largely support concepts that were identified in the literature review. The themes also include many other support systems that were not mentioned in the literature review, such as peers being considered family, informal mentors, college personnel other than faculty members, moving forward, setting the example, libraries, and courses other than the first-year experience course.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first part discusses how the findings answered the research question and related to existing literature. The second part discusses recommendations for practice. The final part discusses recommendations for future research.

Relationships

The first finding illustrates how on-campus and off-campus relationships created support systems that positively influenced Black male community college students who had completed
24 credit hours of college coursework. M. Brooks et al. (2013), Cherng et al. (2013), Dotterer et al. (2013), Harper (2006), E. A. Jones and Yearwood (2012), M. H. Jones et al. (2013), T. P. Palmer et al. (2014), Poole (2006), Robinson and Werblow (2013), M. Rubin and Wright (2015), Spurgeon and Myers (2010), Swenson Goguen et al. (2011), Turner and Thompson (2014), and J. L. Wood and Turner (2011) only examined one specific relationship, such as family, mothers, friends, peers, or faculty. This study uncovered four subthemes: Blood relations, Peers and friends, Informal mentors, and Campus personnel. Some of these themes aligned with and expanded upon support systems identified in the literature. However, some of the subthemes had not been discussed in the literature.

**Blood Relations**

The first subtheme, Blood relations, is consistent with the literature. For example, the participants from this study found emotional support from the relatives who they felt influenced them in wanting to continue with education. This finding is similar to Dotterer et al. (2013) and Herndon and Hirt (2004), which found a correlation between university students’ families’ emotional support and persistence and retention. As in those studies, family members of these participants also provided emotional support that influenced their decision to stay in college. Five of the participants talked about their mother’s assistance in keeping them focused on their studies. This is similar to Robinson and Werblow (2013), which found that mothers who govern the family valued education and provided a strong sense of focus and direction for their sons.

**Peers and Friends**

Some aspects of the subtheme Peers and friends, which was both an on-campus and off-campus support system, echo the literature, while other aspects differ from it. Cherng et al. (2013), Harper (2006), M. H. Jones et al. (2013), Lundberg (2014), Poole (2006), Spurgeon and
Myers (2010), and Strayhorn (2008) considered peers and friends to be separate concepts in either on-campus or off-campus support systems. Cherng et al.’s (2013) longitudinal study saw how friendship support systems influenced persistence. This research reaffirms these findings. James, David, Phil, and Val had longtime friendships that provided strong support systems that the men turned to for guidance. As was found in Cherng et al. (2013), James, David, Phil, and Val saw the need to keep their high school friends in their lives even if they were not attending the same schools. Those four participants chose friends in high school who also saw the value of an education and were planning to attend college.

James, Frank, and Peter explained how their peers provided a positive atmosphere. Peter specifically selected friends who were similar to him, were nice, and who would motivate him. These actions were similar to Harper’s (2006) work, which claimed peers, rather than celebrities, promoted a positive atmosphere for Black male college students. All six participants discussed how their friends or peers were keeping them on track with their studies and making sure they attended their classes. This finding is similar to Poole’s (2006) quantitative study, which found that peers were a factor in student success and staying in school.

The major difference this study had from the literature was the notion that friends were considered family. Cherng et al.’s (2013) study concerning friendship did not mention this concept. James, Peter, and Frank all explained that their truest and closest friends were like family to them. The bond they felt was just as strong as any of their blood bonds. Each of the three participants talked about love and respect for their friends who had not only supported them during their first 24 credit hours but had been their support before college.
Informal Mentors

The third subtheme, *Informal mentors*, is both an on-campus and off-campus support system. This finding differed from the literature because informal mentoring was not considered in the literature review. Unlike formal mentors, the people mentioned in the interviews did not have any formal type of training, but provided similar guidance and support. Unfortunately, the literature only examined formal mentoring programs and did not consider informal mentors. Even though the finding differs from the literature, some of the studies in the literature did reaffirm the importance of mentors. This claim is consistent with Brown’s (2007) study, where the participants talked about the academic, emotional, and social support that mentors provided. The role of *Informal mentors* in this study is also consistent with Crisp (2010), which found a correlation between the mentoring experience and academic performance. The participants acknowledged that the people who were informal mentors positively affected their academic performance. While *Informal mentors*, who were found both on and off campus, did not have formal training, *Campus personnel* did have training in working with students.

Campus Personnel

The research supported the literature on how *Campus personnel* comprised a support system that influenced Black male community college students. David, James, Peter, and Frank all talked about how their instructors were support systems that influenced them. The findings from this research echo Hargrave et al.’s (2016) claim that positive engagement with faculty members created a higher level of cognition and interest in the material. All but two of the instructors mentioned by the four participants were White, which reaffirms M. M. Kim and Conrad’s (2006) finding that the race of the instructor did not make a difference in how Black
male students bonded with their faculty members. Instead it is the positive interaction and emotional support provided by faculty that matters.

This finding differs from the literature in that prior research had only considered faculty members as a support system. This study identified *College personnel* as support systems that influence academic success. The role of *College personnel* in this study aligned with Pritchard et al. (2007), which showed that connections with faculty members helped students adjust to college life. The participants talked about faculty, club advisors, and administrators whose support helped them to adjust to their college life. Val specifically explained that he felt more connected to the college because of the interaction he had with his instructors. Val’s experience echoes both Tinto (2007) and Astin (1975), which found that students’ interaction with *College personnel* created a welcoming and nurturing environment.

**Summary**

The first major finding of this study is that positive *Relationships* were vital to student success. These relationships come from both on-campus and off-campus interactions. They involve a mixture of people who shared the characteristic of wanting these Black male college students to succeed. Of these relationships, friends, peers, faculty members, and mothers appeared to be the strongest support systems. *Relationships* are a powerful support system, but do not work alone. The participants also were influenced by an *Internal motivation* support system.

**Internal Motivation**

The second finding, *Internal motivation*, demonstrates how off-campus support systems such as *Self-awareness, Moving forward, and Spirituality*, could positively influence Black male community college students during their first 24 credit hours of coursework. While the
subthemes *Self-awareness* and *Spirituality* are consistent with the literature, the subthemes *Moving forward* and *Setting the example* were not mentioned in the literature review.

**Self-awareness**

The off-campus support system of *Self-awareness* is a finding consistent with information about self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. All six of the participants in the study displayed high levels of self-esteem and had their own academic goals, comparable to Nieves (1991), which found that students with high self-esteem were more likely to continue, particularly if they could define their educational goals. James, David, Peter, and Phil talked about how knowing who they were helped them focus on their academics. They utilized their strengths to help them achieve their academic goals during their first 24 credit hours of course work. This finding echoes Bandura (2012), which found a direct connection between self-efficacy and academic achievement. Each participant had strong positive views about himself, with is comparable to Ezeofor and Lent’s (2014) finding that students’ personal views about themselves affected their emotions and behavior and indirectly played a role in academic success.

The six men in this study all appeared to have strong self-esteem and felt some connection to the community college they attended. Self-esteem is an internal influence on academic success. The participants appeared to have high self-esteem and a connection to their community college and were successful. This contrasts with L. S. Jones’ (2011) research, in which the Black male community college students had low self-esteem and did not feel any connection to the college, faced academic challenges, and experienced off-campus issues. By having *Self-awareness*, some of the participants connected with *Moving forward*. 
Moving Forward

All of the participants discussed the concept of *Moving forward* in their education. This concept was not identified in the literature review. However, the idea of *Moving forward* is consistent with other concepts that make up self-efficacy, because the participants’ confidence was a factor in how they controlled their emotions, behaved, and took action (Bandura, 2012). The participants’ internal desire to move in a positive direction with their education guided their academic success. This notion is similar to J. L. Wood et al.’s (2015) study of the effects of self-efficacy on first-year Black male students who attended community college, which found that the greater the self-efficacy, the more likely the student would stay in college because the participants had a focus that guided them to academic success.

The participants in this study both directly and indirectly mentioned roadblocks and explained that it was important to have a positive view. *Internal motivation* appeared to move the six participants forward positively and away from potential negative barriers. This idea echoes E.C. Bush and Bush’s (2010) study, which revealed how retention decreased among Black male students who had a negative perception of the roadblocks facing them in college. While some of the participants used *Moving forward* as a support system, other participants used *Setting the example* for their younger relatives as a support system.

Spirituality

The subtheme of *Spirituality* is another off-campus support system that answers the research question. *Spirituality* was a support system that factored into all but one participant’s success. Each of the other five men had in their own way turned to their *Spirituality* for guidance and support during stressful academic moments. For example, David carried in his pocket a bracelet with a scripture passage on it that he rubbed when he felt anxious or tense. During
stressful moments James prayed for answers, and Val wrote out scriptures every night. Their use of spiritual techniques is similar to what Jett (2010) discovered. Jett (2010) found that some Black male students prayed as a relaxation technique to cope with stress; two participants talked about how they coped with stress through their spirituality.

Although the literature often focused on the off-campus support system of religion, none of the participants found time to attend any formal religious organization. For the participants who considered themselves religious, they all discussed how it was more internal for them than external, which differs from Weddle-West et al.’s (2013) finding that Black male college students who were actively involved in religion had a stronger feeling of empowerment. The six participants in this study all had a strong sense of empowerment without attending church. However, James and Frank both mentioned that they had attended church before college, and both would have liked to go again but did not have the time. Also, Frank’s father attended church regularly, and he felt that his father’s prayers were a comforting factor for him.

**Summary**

*Internal motivation* was a support system that created a driving force in all six of the participants’ academic success. Knowing and understanding who they were as persons shaped how they moved toward their academic goals. *Spirituality* guided five of the participants. For two participants, their spirituality was also used to cope with stress. *Internal motivation* called for the participants to look within; like *Relationships*, it was only one piece of the support system. The last piece of support system that all the participants discussed was *External motivation*. 
External Motivation

The final major finding is External motivation. Similar to the Internal motivation finding, External motivation not only answers the research question, it complements and differs from the literature. Within External motivation, the subthemes of Programs, services, and courses; Extracurricular activities; Employment; Community and location; and Setting the example, were all factors in the literature. However, the literature did not examine courses other than the first-year experience course nor the library as a resource.

Program, Services, and Courses

The subtheme Programs, services, and courses is a set of on-campus support systems that answer the research question. This finding is similar to other literature. The TRIO Student Support Services was talked about by three of the six participants. All three of them became involved in the program during the beginning of their first year of college and said it helped them want to stay in school. Their information echoes Wallingford’s (2008) correlational study, which found students who were involved in the various SSS programs during their first year were more likely to return the next year. The findings in this study also complement Wallingford’s (2008) notion that program leadership is vital for students wanting to be involved and use the SSS services on campus because the three participants in this study were not only active at the college but also held leadership positions.

Three of the six participants talked about the free tutoring program on campus. All three saw their grades improve in the classes where they sought tutoring, which helped them not to want to give up on their classes. This finding is consistent with Pruett’s (2015) study, which saw improvement in retention and developmental education among community college students who sought tutoring. The three participants explained that some of the tutors were students from the
college. This information, along with the information the participants shared concerning how their friends and peers also tutored them, complements Loyd and Eckhardt (2010), which found tutoring sessions led by peers correlated with an increase in retention rates.

Although David was the only person who spoke about the federal financial assistance program as a positive support system, his remarks complement the information found in the literature. David received a Pell Grant and he felt he would not have been able to attend school without it. For David, knowing he had money to attend allowed him to register for classes without the fear of being dropped. This finding is consistent with Bettinger (2004), which found that first-year students who received the Pell Grant were more likely to return the next year.

This study both supported and differed in the area of the first-year experience course. The literature focused on the first-year experience course that was mentioned by one participant. Frank appreciated how the course did not just deal with on-campus topics, but also covered areas of interest to the students on such topics as relationships and careers. This claim is consistent with Barton and Donahue’s (2009) findings that students who were obliged to choose the format of the course had a stronger physical and emotional connection to their college. This study differed from the literature because Frank also found other college courses that also influenced him. Frank’s sociology, psychology, government, and Black cinema courses provided him with information he could use as an adult outside of academics.

The library was a service that was new. Two of the six participants explained how the library was a quiet place to study and use the computer. The two participants used not only the on-campus library but also the local town library, which made libraries both an on-campus and off-campus support system. Besides Programs, services, and courses, some of the participants found Extracurricular activities to be support systems for them.
Extracurricular Activities

*Extracurricular activities* focused on cocurricular activities, which encompassed clubs, organizations, and college-sponsored events. Three of the six participants were involved in some activity that made them feel connected and wanting to stay in school. The participants liked how the clubs and organizations planned events that allowed them to socialize, make connections, and feel comfortable. Their claims are consistent with Flowers’s (2004) finding that engagement in cocurricular activities had a positive effect on student development and retention. However, the three participants’ information differed from Mertes (2005), which showed a correlation between social integration through campus activities and retention for females rather than the males in the study.

Employment

The subtheme *Employment* is both an on-campus and off-campus support system that answered the research question. The only difference between the subtheme and the literature was that the literature only focused on off-campus employment. In this study, two of the participants were employed at the community college they attended. Overall, five of the six participants worked; they discussed how their supervisors were emotionally supportive of the participants wanting to succeed in school. This finding echoes T. P. Palmer et al. (2014), which found that employers indirectly influenced retention by how they emotionally supported students. Both James and Frank worked on campus and found that they had more of a connection with the college because of work and were encouraged in tutoring by having flexible working hours. This is consistent with T. P. Palmer et al.’s (2014) claim that on-campus employment created an automatic connection to the college and encouraged students to study. The participants never mentioned work causing any anxiety for them. Their information differs from Mounsey et al.
(2013), which found that working students reported experiencing more stress than their non-working peers, and they displayed more signs of anxiety.

**Community and Location**

The subtheme *Community and location* is an off-campus support system that also answered the research question. David and Phil talked about how the *Community and location* was a support system that positively influenced their academic success. There was little information from the literature concerning the effect of location and communities. The found research differed in some ways from the information provided by Phil and David. Phil explained that he was in a toxic environment in the city and needed to move to a rural area so he could feel safe and concentrate on his education. His data differed from Waters’ (2015) investigation of how neighborhood mothers in Chicago raised and nurtured other children who lived in their community. His information did not indicate anyone other than his mother and family provided a nurturing environment.

Both David and Phil explained that living in a rural area provided the right atmosphere to influence their academic success. This is consistent with Woldoff et al.’s (2011) finding that geographic location played a significant factor in Black graduation rates. However, Woldoff et al. (2011) concluded that retention among Black male college students was negatively affected because they had to not only adjust to college but also had to adapt to a new type of living, which caused feelings of isolation and alienation. This situation was not the case with James, who moved to a rural area that was primarily White.

Val, who transferred from the largest community college in the state to a very small community, felt more connection to the smaller college. Both David and Phil felt that the location of the college helped them feel more connected to their college and their academics.
David’s, Val’s, and Phil’s claims echo Vasquez and Wood’s (2014) finding that the individual community colleges’ location, policies, and size could influence retention.

**Setting the Example**

The only publications that somewhat examined *Setting the example* for younger relatives were L. S. Jones (2011) and Lindholm (2006), which looked at setting an example between fathers and sons attending college. Frank and Val did not talk about fathers and sons. Instead, they wanted their younger relatives to see them attend and finish college, as otherwise their younger relatives might not attend college in the future. This concept is similar to L. S. Jones (2011) and Lindholm (2006), which found fathers who did not go to college might not see a need for their sons to attend. While *Setting the example* for their younger relatives was an internal support system for two participants, *Spirituality* was a support system for most of the participants.

**Summary**

*External motivation* both supported and differed from the literature. This study showed how the six Black male participants utilized resources and environments that best fit their academic needs. Two of the participants took their *External motivation* to another level by wanting to be *Setting the example* for their younger relatives. Like the other findings, there was not one support system that dominated the other influences. Instead, it was a combination of influences that came together for each person.

**Conclusion**

The research findings answered the question by identifying how on-campus and off-campus support systems both affect Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of college coursework. The findings verified that the answer to the
research question is that more than one support system creates a positive influence on Black male community college students’ academic coursework within their first 24 credit hours of college-level work. The data from the six Black male community college students was both consistent with and different from the literature. Only five topics from the literature review were not mentioned by the participants. The participants did not mention learning communities, orientation, formal mentoring programs, counseling and advising, or commuting. At first, some of the participants used the words counselors and advisors. However, after follow-up interviews, the participants explained that they were referring to the TRIO Student Support Services advisors. However, eight topics were mentioned by the participants that were not in the literature review. This revelation shows that the study could not predict the answers to the research question, but did anticipate many of the support systems.

Uri Bronfenbrenner’s theoretical framework framed the interview questions so the participants could explain how on-campus and off-campus support systems influence Black male community college students’ academic success. The findings from this study, in turn, align closely with the theoretical framework. While the subthemes are on the microsystem level, the three superordinate themes are on the mesosystem level because this level is where academic influence takes place. The last three levels were not as clear-cut as the first two levels. The information provided by some of the participants was indirect. The exosystem, which indirectly affects a person and includes such things as customs, laws, and values, was indirectly discussed when all six of the participants discussed self-awareness. Knowing themselves and who they wanted to affiliate with comes from the values and customs they carry within them. The fourth macrosystem, concerned with a person’s socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race, indirectly affected the participants. James directly talked about how being a Black male college student
meant responsibility, which was why he saw the need to be the president of the Black Student Union. Five of the six participants left their homes to attend a community college that was not in their district because they wanted a different life than the one that was near their home. Five of them had to work to pay for college. The final level, chronosystem, which dealt with general events that occurred during their time, was indirectly discussed by Frank, who took an American government course and realized the value of voting. Before the course, he felt his vote would not make a difference, but the course showed him otherwise. He said that not only will he vote in the next major election, but that he now realized how valuable it was to vote in smaller local and state elections because the people in office did affect life.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory would argue that a combination of support systems intermingled to provide positive influences for each of the six participants. Each participant had different types of support system influence them. However, they all had multiple influences, as expected by Bronfenbrenner’s model.

Based on the findings, existing knowledge, and participants’ evidence, it appears that on-campus and off-campus support systems work together to create positive influences and academic success. One support system may help, but a person with multiple positive support systems has a better chance of academic success. This support is both internal and external. Therefore it is vital to promote and supply multiple support systems, starting in the first year of college.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the conclusions above concerning *Relationships, Internal motivation,* and *External motivation,* there are four recommendations for practice that could become support
systems on and off campus for Black male community college students. These recommendations include an outline on how to implement the ideas.

The first recommendation is creating a Black male peer program. This program would be a mentoring program for students as they start college. The program would be both an on-campus and off-campus program. The design of the program would partner two community colleges who would work together to provide programs and mentors for their Black male first-year students. New students would be paired with mentors who had completed at least 24 credit hours of college-level coursework and had at least a 2.0 GPA from the other community college. Not having their mentor be from the same college would keep issues such as which instructors they recommend and gossip about other students to a minimum. Instead, the focus of the meetings would be on how to succeed.

The reason behind this program is that Black males are looking for similar Black males who can help each other stay in school. The participants discussed how their friends and peers texted them, called them to make sure that they were going to class, and helped them with studies. Some of the men in this study were helped by peers who attended different schools, but gave them general guidance that made them successful. The participants did not appear to care whether their informal mentors talked to them in person or not. They were more concerned with having some type of support that would assist them when they needed it. This program would provide that assistance with a simple text or phone.

Mentees would be paired with a mentor who had similar likes and dislikes. A lengthy questionnaire would pair the two people. Based on the research from this study, the successful Black males wanted to associate with like-minded individuals. The questionnaire would need to be more than similar hobbies; it would need to include ideas concerning spirituality and how
they view themselves. A person who might have a low opinion of himself needs to find someone who helps him see the good within him.

The mentoring would be conducted by Skype, email, texting, and talking on the phone. This online mentoring model is already proven to work at Northeastern University, and it would be a benefit for Black male students because it would provide skills that are now used in the workplace with online meetings and workshops. All mentors would be trained and would be required to meet with their mentees at least once a month by Skype or phone. All mentors would be required to fill out an online form after each meeting to let the program know what was discussed and whether the mentee or mentor had any questions or concerns. Mentor resources and discussion guides would be made available for the mentors. The program could even hold online study sessions and tutoring, with a variety of mentors leading the sessions.

A staff of three people from each of the colleges would run the program at each institution and would work together to provide workshops and online forums for all participants and mentors. The staff would look for community leaders to be part of the events. Each campus would have a room with computers designated for Skyping and holding online events. Funding for this program would include the space, computers, internet, personnel, and events cost.

A second recommendation concerns Family and Friends Appreciation Days at the college. Although many four-year institutions host family weekends, community colleges do not have these types of events. Instead of a weekend, a few days each semester could be designated to invite family and friends of students to come to the college and attend classes, programs, and activities. The programs and events would be a way to thank them for all of their support. On these days, if students would like their family and friends to meet their instructors it would be a way for instructors to put a face to the students’ family. The research from this study showed that
instructors and family are both support systems and if they had a chance to meet on a
mesosystem level, it would be an even stronger connection for the students.

Having family and friends on the campus would create a welcoming atmosphere and let
everyone know the community college cared about its students. On those days, special themes
and special topics could center on ways that family and friends could support students off
campus. Since the Midwest community college the six participants attend has horticulture and
massage therapy, free 10-minute messages could be provided to family members and flowers
given to each mother to thank her for her support.

The third recommendation is to create a mandatory orientation to college that could be
completed online or in person. No matter which format the student chose, a resource center for
the orientation would be made available on a learning platform system. Currently, the
community college the participants attended has an orientation, but it is neither mandatory nor
online. The mandatory version would not only explain the college’s rules and procedures, but
also provide all the resources available to the students such as TRIO Student Support Services,
free tutoring on campus, and available scholarships. It would be a one-stop shop of information.
All of the campus activities, clubs, and events would be available for the students. As long as the
students were registered for classes, the orientation would be open for them to access
information.

A small assessment would be required by the students to know whether they completed
the orientation and understood the rules and procedures. Upon completion of the orientation
assessment, a certificate would be given to the students, and a copy of it would be sent to the
admissions office to show the students had fulfilled the requirement. Orientation would be
available to new students before starting their semester or online the minute they signed up for
classes and would have to be completed before registration for their second semester. The orientation would also be a time to introduce the students to their academic advisor. The online version would have a picture of the person, and her or his biography and interests would be available.

The mandatory online orientation would be based on the participants’ observations that they stumbled upon the free tutoring and SSS or were told by someone they knew. Having the programs, rules, and services available for students to review at the beginning of their college career would be a benefit. It could also be a great resource and reference point when they had a question about a rule or procedure. The participants who were in SSS used their advisor to answer questions that could have been available in an orientation if the students had attended one. Also, not everyone can participate in SSS. Having a mandatory orientation would not only be a way to make sure these students would have the same knowledge, but it would be a place for them to ask questions about college.

The orientation would also provide information concerning off-campus resources and services. Since community colleges are part of the community, it would be important for students to know about the various services and resources that were available to them. The participants in the study often spoke about how they did not know about the resources or services that were available for them where they currently lived. They also did not know who to talk to about finding out about the services. Community members could also create video messages to the students that could be shown online in class that told them about their services and resources. Putting a face on the service can be very helpful and portrays a community that cares about these students.
In addition to the mandatory orientation, there could be a free optional family orientation. These orientations could be set up in the morning, afternoon, or evening to familiarize families with the college and the resources, services, and events available for the students and themselves. Having a family option would help the family feel connected to the college from the beginning.

Although most community colleges have orientations to college, specifically tailored orientations based on interests and preferences could be a benefit to Black male students. These orientations could have questionnaires that find out quickly what the students’ interests are and then give them information about those programs. Also, they would learn from the beginning of their college career about organizations on campus such as the Black Student Association. They would have the time, location, and the name of the advisor available to them.

A mandatory orientation would prevent students from not knowing what programs, services, and activities were available for them. Having the resources section and online version remain available to them for the remainder of their time at the community college would give them a reliable place to obtain information quickly. The participants found that they wanted resources and went to people or areas they found helpful. When follow-up questions were given to the participants who did not mention various services or programs at their community college, they explained they did not know those programs or resources were available. Orientation would keep that from happening. Recommendations for future practice should be accompanied by recommendations for future research.

The final recommendation is to set up the employee-student mentoring program on campus. In 2013, a program designed to pair college employees with new students. The College mentors consisted of administrators, faculty members, and staff members. However, the program only lasted one year. Based on the information from the literature review concerning formal
mentoring programs, retention improves when students have a personal connection with a member of the College.

The newly revised program could be tailored more for Black students. The program could be operated through the Black Student Union (BSU). The organizations could offer their members an opportunity to receive college employee members as mentors. Students could sign up at the first BSU meeting each semester. After the meeting, the two advisors would assign employees to each student. An email to both the student and the mentor would be sent explaining that the mentor will reach out and contact the person to establish their initial meeting. Students who had mentors from the program can keep their mentor or change mentors if they desire.

All college employees who are interested in mentoring a student would sign up and go through training held every semester. The BSU advisors would be the mentor trainers. During training, the mentors would learn about resources available to the students both on and off-campus, they would learn how to document all meetings with the mentee.

Once a year the BSU would hold a function where all the mentors and mentees could come together and interact. This function could be held on or off campus. The goal of the function is to provide a welcoming, caring, friendly environment. The BSU student could bring their family. Each fall and spring semester, the BSU would have seminars where the mentors and mentees could attend together. The topics for the seminars would come from the interest of the mentees.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the conclusions and recommendations for practice, the following recommendations are for future research. These recommendations came from questions after discovering the themes and findings from the research.
The first recommendation is for research concerning informal support systems. It would be interesting to see how students compare formal mentors to informal mentors. Currently the research on mentoring looks at formal mentoring programs and how they benefit students. The participants talked about people who fit into a more informal role. Could both be equally helpful or is one better than the other? This study could use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods.

The second research recommendation is based on the idea of friends being considered as family. Some of the participants in the study referred to their close friends as family. Since there were only six participants in this study, it would be interesting to see if other Black male community college students felt the same way. A quantitative study could be used to acquire a large number of participants.

A third study could address a notion two of the participants had, that they felt responsible for setting an example. Their information would ask whether there were other Black males who felt they were the example and if that played a role in their desire to succeed academically. This study could mix qualitative and quantitative methods by first creating a survey to find out who felt this way, with qualitative follow-up interviews to find out why and how they succeeded.

Due to the limitation of studying only Black male community college students, the fourth possible future study would be similar to this one but would interview Black female students. A future study could compare Black female community college students’ support systems with the findings from this study. The study’s protocol would be identical to this study: There would be six Black female community college students from the same community college in the Midwest.

The final idea for a future study is based on a limitation of its location. The community college chosen for this study is in a small town in the Midwest. The town is 50 miles west of a
metropolitan city and 10 miles from a state university. Four of the six participants were not originally from the community college region. If a future study were conducted at a community college in the city or suburbs, it would be interesting to see if the findings were the same.

Summary

This study provided ideas for future programs and studies that could benefit Black male students as they start community college. All studies have some limitations and spark ideas for future studies. This research also had limitations and therefore five ideas for further research were suggested. These ideas for future programs and studies result from the findings of this study, which answered the research question: How did on-campus and off-campus support systems affect Black male community college students who have completed 24 credit hours of college coursework? Instead of one answer to the research question, there were several findings that showed how on-campus and off-campus support systems helped Black male community college students during their first 24 credit hours of community college credits. The six Black male community college students who spent time sharing their lives provided this study with information that can help future Black male community college students.
References


Lentz, V. (2013). How to influence colleagues and decision makers: The need, the path, the habits. *Insight, 16*(3), 22-23.


Appendix A

Interview Questions

Pseudo Name________________

Primary Research Question

1. When you think of your college success, how did the support systems influence your success?

On-Campus Environments (programs, services, and relationships)

2. When you think of your academic success, identify the on-campus support systems that come to mind which influenced you in your academic success and explain how they assisted you.

3. When you hear the term college peers, who comes to mind?

4. Tell me how any of your peers may have contributed to your success. If the participant did not use the word friend, then ask how your on-campus friends might have played a role in your academic success.

5. Think of any college program, activities, offices, or services that might have contributed to your academic success and explain how these programs contributed to your success?

6. If there were any faculty and/or staff at the community college that you believe helped you to be successful please explain how they helpful.

7. What other factors at the college have contributed to your academic success and explain how they were helpful.

Off-Campus Environments (extrinsic support systems and intrinsic support systems)

8. When you think of your academic success, tell me about the off-campus support systems that helped you?

9. Earlier we discussed on-campus peers. Were there any off-campus peers that you believed played a role in your success, and if so, how did they help?
10. If you believe that your off-campus friends played a role in your academic success, explain how they were helpful.

11. When do you think of the word family, explain who you consider family?

12. If you believe that your family has played a role in your academic success, explain how they were helpful.

13. What other factors outside of the college have contributed to your academic success and explain how they have helped you?

14. Some people believe religion is a support system for them. What are your thoughts on that comment and if you believe religion has played a role in your success please explain how it has helped you.

15. How do you view yourself as a person and if you believe it is a factor in your success, please explain how it has contributed to your academic success.

16. What do you believe your personal strengths are and if you think these strengths play a role in your success, please explain how they contributed to your academic success?

17. Define what spirituality means to you? Based on your definition, if you think it played a role in your academic success, please explain how it contributed to your success.

Closing Question

1. Is there any other information you would like to share that you believe made you a successful college student?

2. Assume it is five years from now and you have been asked to speak to a group of Black male community college first-year students. Based on your own success, tell me the advice would you give these men on how to succeed as they begin their college education.

Ending Remarks to the Volunteer Participant

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Again, all information remains confidential. In a few days, I will email you the transcript of the interview and a list of possible dates to go over the transcript with you. Please look it over and let me know by email or telephone what date and time works with you to go over the transcript. We can have the meeting in person, by Skype, or by telephone. Again thank you for your time and have a great day.
Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Research Study

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Researcher: Terry Lyn Funston

Title of Project: Black Male Community College Students: A Narrative Study of their Success

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study:

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask her any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher whether you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this form and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are an African American male community college student with 24 or more credit hours of college level work.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research study is to investigate how the interconnection between on-campus and off-campus support systems contributes to the success of Black male community college students.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, the researcher will ask you to participate in an in-person interview, as well as follow-up interviews either in person, by telephone, FaceTime, or Skype. The time and location of the interviews will be agreed by the participant and the researcher, either on campus or off campus in a quiet, private location such as a college conference room or public library conference room. During the interviews, you will be asked open-ended questions, and you will provide as much information as you feel appropriate. The researcher will ask you to look over the interview transcript for feedback and also to look over and give feedback on any information she used from your interview in the results section of the dissertation.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a time and quiet place that is convenient for you, either on campus or at the public library. There will be at least one face-to-face interview lasting about one hour. Any follow-up interviews will be at your convenience either in person, by telephone, FaceTime, or Skype.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no risk, however, if at any time you are uncomfortable you may stop the interview.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking time in the study, other than receiving a $20 gift certificate from either an on-campus or off-campus establishment of your choice for volunteering your time and contribution to the research study. However, the information learned from this study may help future African American male community college students.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known to anyone other than the researcher, who will be the interviewer as well. Pseudonyms will be given to all participants. The interview will be recorded using a smartphone app called Rev which will also be doing the transcription work for the researcher. The participants’ pseudonyms will be the only names on the recordings. Since Rev will only have the pseudonyms, all of the transcripts will be under the pseudonym given to the participant prior to the recording of the interview.

**Can I stop my participation in the study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Terry Lyn Funston, the person mainly responsible for the research, at 815-825-9338 or at funston.t@husky.neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

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: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be compensated for my time as a participant?**

Yes, you will receive a $20 gift certificate from either an on-campus or off-campus establishment of your choice for volunteering your time and contribution to the research study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

No, there will be no costs associated with participation in this research study.

I agree to participate in this research study.
Signature of person agreeing to participate ____________________________ Date

___________________________
Printed name of person above

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

___________________________
Printed name of person above

Participant’s address:

Participant’s telephone number:

Participant’s email address:

Participant’s pseudonym:

Circle where you would like your gift certificate from
Campus book store Target
Campus cafeteria Giordano’s Chicago Pizza
Portillo’s Hot Dogs