AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALE COLLEGE ATHLETES ATTENDING PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

You’ve all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win.

— 1st Corinthians 9:24 (The Message Bible)

My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.

— Dali Lama

This study examined how Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality as a form of support while attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants that self-identified with religion and spirituality as it relates to its influence on student success in college. The research site was a public research institution in the Southeast region of the United States. Transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify themes. Six superordinate themes emerged: (a) trusting in the viability of a transcendent source, (b) manifesting presence through prayer, (c) transcendent source for struggle, hope, and resilience, (d) opportunities for growth, (e) making sense of a developing identity, and (f) other sources of encouragement and aid. These findings were considered in light of the extant literature and Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Faith Development Theory (FDT) frameworks. The results of this study suggested that Black male college athletes utilize religion and spirituality as a form of support during many of their college and life experiences.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, Black male student-athletes, higher education, ipa
I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Martha Culbreath, who taught me to love Jesus and who told me always to listen very carefully because sometimes the angels fly close enough to you that you can hear the flutter of their wings. I love you, grandma.
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If there is no struggle, there is no progress.

—Frederick Douglass

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About the Author
Chapter I

Faith is to believe what you do not yet see; the reward for this faith is to see what you believe.

—Saint Augustine of Hippo

Institutions of higher education in the United States are responsible for the provision of quality educational experiences for their student body and equip it with the knowledge and skills for success beyond their college careers (Kuh, 1995; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Matters surrounding Black male college athletes attending Division 1 colleges have been the topic of interest of many academic scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and sports enthusiasts (Donnor, 2005). Past research does not give attention to the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black male college athletes (Cuyjet, 2006; Waller, 2015; Watson, 2006). It also does not consider the impact of religion and spirituality on racism, racial prejudices, and stereotyping that Black male college athletes experience while engaging at a predominantly White campus (Harper, 2012; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008). To document how Black male college athletes, use religion and spirituality as a potential coping mechanism when encountering racialized experiences, have challenges with academic success, and who struggle with identity development, the principal investigator conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research study. The purpose of this IPA study was to examine how Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality as a form of support while attending a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Statement of the Problem

Based on the body of research about Black college athletes, we know little about the spiritual aspects of their lives and how it affects their college experiences at a PWI (Dancy, 2010; Love, 2001; Strayhorn, 2011). For many of these athletes, religion and spirituality provide
solace and countless ways to express social and political beliefs that mirror their experiences as Black Americans (Waller, 2015). Black athletes are challenged daily by a myriad of events, including racialized campus encounters, maintaining athletic eligibility, persistence towards the completion of their undergraduate degree, and the sense of identity as an African American male.

According to Harper (2012), racism and routine encounters with racial stereotypes are among the many factors that destabilize Black students’ persistence rates and sense of belonging at PWIs. Numerous scholars, including Edwards (1984), Hodge et al. (2008), and Oseguera (2010) have referenced that Black male student-athletes are repeatedly stereotyped as dumb jocks. Edwards (1984) wrote:

They must contend, of course, with the connotations and social reverberations of the traditional ‘dumb jock’ caricature. But Black student-athletes are burdened also with the insidiously racist implications of the myth of ‘innate Black athletic superiority,’ and the more blatantly racist stereotype of the ‘dumb Negro’ condemned by racial heritage to intellectual inferiority. (p. 8)

This caricature and other racial stereotypes continue to plague Black male student-athletes at many predominantly White colleges and universities (Hodge et al., 2008; Hughes, Satterfield, & Giles, 2007; Oseguera, 2010). Because Black men are so overrepresented in college athletics, Harper (2009) contends that the myth also negatively affects those who are not student-athletes, as their White peers and others (e.g., faculty, alumni, and administrators) often erroneously presume they are members of intercollegiate sports teams and stereotype them accordingly. “One could easily summarize their status as Niggers with balls who enroll to advance their sports careers and generate considerable revenue for the institution without learning much or seriously endeavoring to earn their college degrees” (Harper, 2009, p. 701). Harper’s (2009) point
illustrates the negative perceptions that Black male athletes frequently experience on White college campuses.

PWIs highly recruit Black male college athletes (Bimper, Jr., Harrison, Jr., & Clark, 2013; Hawkins, 2013; Simiyu, 2012; Smith, 2016). However, a large number of these student-athletes are underprepared for the rigors of college work (Harper, 2016). Schools do not recruit Black male student-athletes for their academic abilities but more to provide athletic “labor for revenue generation and to enhance the public visibility and reputation of these PWIs” (Cooper, 2016, p. 268). Research showed that African American male student-athletes graduate college at a dismal rate of only 50.2% (Harper, Williams, Jr., & Blackman, 2013), which is the lowest graduation rate of any other demographic group (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). A March 2017 report for the men’s and women’s basketball teams in the national tournament revealed that a substantial gap persists between the graduation rate of White and Black athletes (Lapchick et al., 2017). Case in point, White male basketball athletes graduate at 93 percent versus only 74 percent of Black male basketball athletes. White female basketball athletes graduate at 96 percent, while 87 percent of Black female basketball athletes graduate (Lapchick et al., 2017). Although African American male basketball athletes graduate at a higher percentage rate than African American males who are not student-athletes, the 19 percentage point gap between White and Black male athletes and the 9 percentage point gap between White and Black female athletes demonstrate a continuing academic issue when considering race (Lapchick et al., 2017).

Furthermore, an NCAA (2016) data showed a considerable graduation gap between Black and White college athletes from 2003 to 2016. About 91% of the White athletes graduate compared to 74% for Black athletes. Positioned within the broader context of the marginalization of Blacks in American society is the disparity in graduation rates (Simiyu,
2012). Black male athletes continue to face numerous challenges during their college career. Therefore, studying Black male athletes’ connection to religion and spirituality and its positive influences on their success in college are essential.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the essence of the religious and spiritual experiences of Black male college athletes at a White institution of higher learning. The issues that African American male athletes experience while in college warrant the need to explore what role religion and spirituality have in the lives of Black male college athletes’ ability to pursue and complete their degree. The research examined how Black male athletes report religion and spirituality to impact their persistence in college.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

In this research study the researcher addressed the following central research question: How do Black male college athletes attending a predominately White institution experience religion and spirituality as a form of support? This research study also explored the following sub-questions:

1. How do Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality when confronted with racism on campus?

2. How do Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality with the challenges of academic success?

3. How do Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality to make sense of identity?

**Significance of the Research Question**

Black male student-athletes are a unique population. They are cheered for their athletic competence, while at the same time, subjugated by the athletic system where they participate.
Although several negative factors have adversely impacted Black male student-athletes, recent research has noted many areas that influence positive outcomes (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). For example, the support of parents and mentors, faculty members and peers, and a welcoming, supportive campus racial climate have played a prominent role in the success of Black males on campus (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). This research further explored the aforementioned positive influences on Black males.

Black culture holds a strong bond with religion and spirituality (Cuyjet, 2006; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Studies reported that religion and spirituality have positively influenced Black males from high school through college graduation (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). However, none of the surveyed literature contained studies that explicitly examined the impact of religion and spirituality on Black male college athletes attending PWIs.

This research study intends to add to the understanding that religion and spirituality can represent a coping and social support mechanism for many Black male college athletes (Bowen, 1999; Brown, 1998; Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000). Further, this inquiry would also contribute to understanding how religion and spirituality can positively influence persistence toward graduation for Black male college student-athletes. Furthermore, this analysis could create a platform for Black college student-athletes to share their voices about the role of religion and spirituality in their college experience (Watson, 2006). The results of this investigation could be beneficial to college administrators, coaches, the student body and student affairs professionals on how Black male college student-athletes utilize religion and spirituality as an essential element in their everyday lives.

**Definition of Key Terminology**
**African American/Black:**

These two terms are used interchangeably to categorize a person who self-identified as being of African descent. Students who identified as multiracial as well as those who are international students were also included in this study.

**Division 1 Institutions**

Division 1 (D-1) institutions are referred to as the highest level of amateur athletic competition in the United States. Students who compete at such an institution are often highly recruited, decorated in their chosen sport, the recipient of a scholarship, and highly visible on their respective campuses and sometimes nationwide. According to The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Division 1 (D-1) institutions are active member schools of the NCAA. The NCAA also states that “Division 1 schools have the biggest student bodies, manage the largest athletics budgets, and offer the most generous number of scholarships” (NCAA, 2016).

**Predominantly White Institutions**

Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are institutions of higher education where the dominant race of students, faculty, and staff is White (Willie, 2003). Many D-1 PWIs are public institutions that, established by the Morrill Act of 1862, did not admit Blacks who were either free born or who had been freed from slavery until forced to do so by governmental policies and legislation.

**Student-Athletes**

For this study, Division 1 (NCAA Classification) student-athletes are individuals who receive aid (e.g., scholarship, grant, and tuition waiver) from a university that is awarded by the student’s athletic ability (Watt & Moore, 2001). It should be noted that not all student-athletes at D-1
institutions receive financial aid. Student-athletes compete in intercollegiate athletics within their division as representatives of their institution.

Positionality Statement

The problem of practice stems from experiences that I had throughout my life. I was raised in an urban community in Brooklyn, NY. The community was comprised of hard working people, but economic struggles were a reality for most families. Drugs and alcoholism were not pervasive in the community; however, undoubtedly wealth and financial success were not typical for most families living there.

During my early academic career, neither my parents nor school officials, intently discussed the importance of achieving good grades, graduating from high school and progressing to earn a college degree. As a high school student, if you were not concerned about your education, others showed little interest in your well-being and academic achievements. Fortunately, I graduated high school and went onto higher education and earned a college degree.

As a teacher, assistant principal, and Education Administrator, I worked with Black males extensively. Not only did these experiences facilitate my development and understanding of the importance of strong organizational skills, leadership skills, and the criticality of working together with people, but they gave me the valuable experience of understanding the challenges that Black male students faced. I learned from their experiences as well as my own. In fact, my experiences as a Black man provided the foundation that allowed me to see deep inside many of their issues and challenges.

My spiritual journey began very early in life. Both of my parents had a relationship with Jesus Christ and raised me to do the same. Later, I had the esteemed pleasure to serve as the senior minister of a culturally diverse congregation with the purpose of providing spiritual
development, economic empowerment, and social progress for many community residents. The experience of giving spiritual guidance to the congregation and the community offered me the ability to assess how spirituality is a source of hope and support for Black males through many of their life experiences. Also, the experience of attending seminary challenged me to think more critically about life, inclusive of faith and religion. My worldview has developed to think on a global scale about life and its existence. My spiritual grounding is a powerful resource for examining the significance of religion and spirituality on Black male student-athletes.

As a collegiate athlete, I had several experiences that provided the skill to research the experiences of Black college athletes. I did not attend a revenue-producing PWI where athletes are predominantly used to make athletic departments more prosperous. However, the small college I did attend offered a valuable and rewarding athletic experience. I experienced how to interact with all students, especially Whites. Being a Black athlete and working through the various perceptions and interactions that took place on campus gave me the experience to understand the myriad of encounters Black athletes experience today. Religion and spirituality enabled me to cope with personal experiences.

In conducting this research on Black college males and their religious and spiritual experiences, there was the prospect for biases to emerge. Research, personal bias, and opinion are inseparable. Personal bias and opinion, however, must be made transparent by rationally identifying and confronting personal views, being committed to open-mindedness, remaining skeptical, and thinking critically about research data (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

Roulston and Shelton (2015) assert that the researcher should consider “reflective practices” to help overcome biases. Reflexivity is when the researcher is explicitly self-aware of his or her position and how it may influence his or her research. It was critical for the results of
my study to be valid. Careful consideration of the results, with transparency, was the right solution.

I am researching this study because I would like to document the importance of religion and spirituality on Black college male athletes and how it serves as a coping mechanism and support for the Black male experience in college. Black college men are often unaware of the complicated lives that they inherit as an athlete. Their sheer youth brings with it inexperience and the incapacity to observe their experiences in a holistic manner (Waller, 2015). Only a few potentially see the depth of challenges they will experience, including social isolation that they will endure as a high performing athlete (Waller, 2015).

From my personal experiences, religion and spirituality serve multiple purposes in the lives of Black college students (Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, & Dennis, 2005; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Stewart, 2012; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Weddle-West, Hagan, & Norwood, 2013). As a means of support and coping Black college students utilize spiritual models, such as interconnectedness and transcendence, to adapt, manage, and navigate the college environment (Watson, 2006). Similarly, as I can attest, Black athletes also use spirituality to resist isolation, negative messages, and racial hostility that they may confront while attending PWIs (Chae, Kelly, Brown, & Bolden, 2004; Watson, 2006). With these various work and life experiences, I am poised, to take on the challenge of investigating the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black male college athletes.

Conclusion

This research is intrinsically reflective of my passion and observation of the experiences of the Black male college athlete. While low self-esteem and struggles with identity are among the many challenges these gifted artists of sport can face, religion and spirituality can provide
resistance to the fragmentation and invalidation Black college athletes experience. Results from this research could provide practitioners with a better understanding of how to address, and potentially support Black college athletes with their spirituality and religious practices, which they may use to find comfort and support to combat negative messages through spiritual resistance (Stewart, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework(s)**

Two broad theoretical frameworks grounded this research: Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and Faith Development Theory (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens to examine historical systemic implications of racism, in addition to acknowledging the narratives of Black male student-athletes. Faith Development Theory (FDT) is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the evolutionary process of the development of religious/spiritual values and behavior in the human life cycle.

**Critical Race Theory**

In college athletics, scholars have ignored the voices and lived experiences of Black male athletes (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Benson, 2000; Martin, Harrison, Stone, & Lawrence, 2010). Given the fact, there have been numerous discourses concerning race and racism, Critical Race Theory (CRT) presented an operative lens to critically examine how post-racial narratives circulate in sports, thus affecting Black male student-athletes’ experiences. CRT emerged in the mid-1970s as a response to the limited ability of critical legal studies (CLS) to address the effects of race and racism in the United States judicial system (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). The scholarship of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado initially led the development of CRT within the legal system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Mainstream scholars previously refused to accept racism as an ordinary practice in America, choosing instead, to look
upon racial power as “rare and aberrational rather than as systematic and ingrained” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiv). Observing racial power as rare diminishes the importance of race and how it affects people.

In the field of education, scholars are now giving far greater consideration to the influence of race on student learning (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T., 2000). To “make sense of persistent racial inequities in U.S. schools,” CRT has been used as a framework to discuss a variety of educational issues (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 115). A reexamination of how students are educated, specifically Black students, must be thoroughly inspected to determine its impact. While the need to reexamine how students learn in the U.S. is clear, Ladson-Billings (2005) posits that an isolated examination of class and gender falls short in sufficiently accounting for pervasive educational inequality.

Similar to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2008), emphasized the significance of developing a critical race lens to evaluate the educational system. They posit that the educational system is embedded historically in racism, which creates barriers for all students to receive equitable instruction (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2008). For this purpose, a critical race lens is critical to shedding light on all forms of racism in the educational environment.

**Critical Race Theory Tenets**

Scholars posit that CRT is characterized by the following tenets: (a) permanence of racism; (b) race is a social construct; (c) White self-interests (Interest-convergence); (d) whiteness as property; (e) intersectionality; and (f) counter-narratives/storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT commences with the supposition that racism is ordinary within American
society. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) contend that there is a pervasiveness of racism in daily life. “Racism is ordinary, not aberrational—‘normal science,’ the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most of the people of color in this country” (p. 7). From this perspective, CRT researchers assert that racism is not echoed by a chain of separate occurrences but is endemic and normalized in all institutions in American society. Further, Bell maintains that racism is pernicious and a staple of American history (Bell, 1992). CRT scholars argue that racism is a societal norm and has disproportionately debased minorities in America (Bell, 1992). The pervasiveness of racism tenet aligns with this study because CRT researchers assert that racism and racialized experiences are an everyday occurrence: not separate events, but a sequence of normalized behavior in America.

CRT’s second tenet contends that race is socially constructed. CRT presents a broad and inclusive understanding of being associated with a stigmatized population in a society defined by a dominant hegemonic hierarchy (Ladson-Billings, 2005). This thesis also holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. In other words, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Therefore, biological races do not exist among human beings today nor in the past (Sussman, 2014). Race as a social construction aligns with this study because it provides understanding to the conceptualization of race differences and how it’s used to justify and rationalize the unequal treatment of groups of people.

The next tenet is interest convergence. Interest convergence is the opportunism exhibited by those in power to selectively co-opt and exploit the oppression of the racialized minorities when it serves their interests. That is, Whites will typically advocate for people of color when serving their self-interests. Put in a different way, those of the dominant culture who enact
social, political, and economic change on behalf of minorities seldom do so without acknowledging the personal costs and gains associated with such actions (Harper & Harris, III, 2010).

Before World War II Black male athletes were not integrated into major college sports at White institutions. They were routed into sports such as track and field, mainly because they did not require the same kind of intimate physical contact as basketball and football (Smith, 2016; Watson, 2006; Waller, 2015). Post World War II, exclusion based on race changed as a consequence of economic factors within college athletics and higher education which guided the integration of football and men’s basketball (Davis, 1995; Smith, 2016). Simply put, the Black male athletes’ increased participation in college athletics was more for the economic benefit to White institutions than Black social progress (Donnor, 2005). White universities continue today, to depend on black bodies to provide significant financial appropriations and further the interests of whiteness through coordinated methods of black exploitation (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Edwards, 1969; Edwards, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Smith, 2016). Interest convergence aligns with this study because Black males were recruited to these institutions primarily for their athletic skills and to fill the coffers of White universities.

Intersectionality, the next tenet, points to the multidimensionality of oppressions and recognizes that race alone cannot account for disempowerment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). “Intersectionality’ means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 57). Kimberle Crenshaw invented the term intersectionality: which sought to provide a theoretical space regarding the law’s inability to make women’s experience of discrimination through race, class, and gender visible (Crenshaw, 1995).
Intersectionality aligns with this study because it provides an understanding of the overlapping or intersecting identities of the participants. The participants are Black and male who identify with religion and spirituality. These individuals operate at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Stewart, 2009), which includes their choice of religion. According to Anderson and Collins (2004), in respect to intersectionality, “linkages to other categories of analysis, including sexuality, age, religion, physical disability, national identity, and ethnicity … produce social inequalities” (p. 1). Black college males experience the complex layering of and negative synergy among multiple streams of biased categorization (Johnson & Rivera, 2015).

The next CRT tenet is Whiteness as property. It sets the standard in numerous situations. It is also the notion that whiteness itself has a value for its possessor and conveys a host of privileges and benefits (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Whiteness as property aligns with this study because it plays a role in the rights of possession, use and enjoyment, and disposition of black bodies by Whites, mostly for economic gain (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

The final tenet, counter-narratives/storytelling, in CRT is “naming one’s own reality.” It is using narratives to illuminate and explore experiences of racial oppression. It also aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Counter-narratives/storytelling also aligns with this research study because counter stories about stereotypic beliefs that Blacks are athletically superior while intellectually inferior (Hodge et al., 2008), are important. These stereotypes provide ready-made yet superficial evaluative frameworks for making quick judgments and conclusions about others (Coakley, 2009). Counter-narratives/storytelling will be a useful tool to attack embedded preconceptions of Black male college athletes.
Faith Development Theory

Understanding spiritual development in college students required a conceptual understanding of faith development theory. Perhaps the two leading theorists in faith development theory today are James W. Fowler and Sharon Daloz Parks. Parks’s original work builds on Fowler’s theory of faith development (Love, 2002). Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory was advanced through 359 interviews between 1972 and 1981 and intended to observe the intricacies of faith, provide understanding into “the nature and workings of faith” (p. xii), and “offering a theory of growth in faith” (p. xiii). Faith is the developmental approach that is best linked to spirituality. Fowler’s theory follows in the constructivist tradition of Jean Piaget (1952), whose germinal cognitive-structural theory focuses on the experiential nature of how people think and make meaning (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Moreover, Fowler’s “theories explicitly build on the foundations set by Erickson’s theories of psychosocial development, Piaget’s theories of cognitive development, and Kohlberg’s theories of moral development, and are intended to parallel and elaborate on these theories” (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 53).

Fowler (1981) initially offered six stages of faith in his seminal work on faith development. At a later point adding a seventh stage, Primal Faith, found in infancy (Fowler, 1996). Fowler’s second stage of faith development is the Intuitive-Projective stage often found in early childhood. It “is the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions, and stories of the visible faith of primally related adults” (p. 133). The third stage is the Mythic-Literal stage also found in early childhood. In this stage, “the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community” (p. 149). The next stage,
Synthetic-Conventional, commences in adolescents. Many religious people remain at this stage throughout their adulthood. Fowler (1981) represents this stage as “a ‘conformist’ stage that is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others and as yet does not have a, sure enough, grasp on its own identity and independent judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective” (p. 172).

The next stage, Individuative-Reflective, (usually occurs in the mid-twenties to the late thirties) is a stage of angst and struggle. The individual takes personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and feelings. As one can reflect on one’s own beliefs, there is an openness to a new complexity of faith, but this also increases the awareness of conflicts in one’s belief. For many young adults, the meaning of faith is chosen and believed. One’s views can differ from others and expressed in abstract terms. The faith development at this stage helps the person make sense of her life in family or community (Robinson, 2007).

The next stage is Conjunctive Faith, found in the early midlife stage and beyond. It “involves the integration into self and outlook…, where symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings … an opening to the voices of one’s ‘deeper self’” (p. 197). There is an internal dimension, one that is expressly spiritual and relevant to this study of the spirituality of college student-athletes at this stage. Fowler describes this interior discourse as encompassing “a critical recognition of one’s social unconsciousness—the myths, ideal images, and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one’s nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like” (p. 198).

Lastly, the Universalizing Faith stage is one that is “others” focused and not so much a matter of an achievable developmental stage. Fowler (1981) describes the Universalizing Faith as being exceedingly rare. For the ones who’ve attained this final stage: have generated faith
compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being. They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of a comprehensive and fulfilled human community (Fowler, 1981). Individuals who have reached a “universalizing faith” are those who, regardless of faith tradition many would ascribe to them a “saintliness,” affirming their faith achievement. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have notably achieved this stage (Fowler, 1981; Parry, Robinson, Watson, & Nesti, 2007).

Though Fowler’s seminal work in theorizing faith development through stages was significant, Parks (1986, 2000), a competing theory, enhanced it further. Parks (2000) situated her theory between Fowler’s (1981) third and fourth stages. Parks (2000) “formulated a theory of faith development specific to the young adult years of the college-age population” (Chickering et al., 2006, p. 57). Parks (2000) identifies this interim phase between adolescence and adulthood as “young adult”; emphasized by a time of “probing commitment.” She argues, “One explores many possible forms of truth – as well as work roles, relationships, and lifestyles – and their fittingness to one’s own experience of self and world” (p. 67). Her work highlighted the experimental landscape of this life stage. “The promise and vulnerability of young adulthood lie in the experience of the birth of critical awareness and the dissolution and recomposition of the meaning of self, other, world, and ‘God’” (p. 5).

Parks (1986) suggests that particular attention beyond just the basic understanding presented by developmental theorists be given, such as Fowler. “Faith development theory; however, like all other constructive-developmental theories has had a tendency to focus on structures and stages rather than on the process that gives rise to the stages and to shear structures (stages) from content (image-symbols)” (p. 138). From Parks emphasis on “process”
over structure, Chickering et al. (2006) present the three components to Parks “faith development during the young adult years” (p. 58)—(a) forms of knowing, cognitive aspects; (b) forms of dependence, affective; and (c) forms of community, social aspects. These components form the understanding from which Parks develops her four phases of faith development: adolescent/conventional, young adult, tested adult, and mature adult. As individuals develop, they have new ways of understanding, which Parks refers to as “forms of knowing” (Parks, 200).

Parks’s (2000) stages of faith development enlighten the previous faith development work of Fowler. She presents the college years as “harboring, as they do, both promise and vulnerability. Young adults embody critical strengths and yet remain dependent in distinctive ways, upon recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration” (p. xi). This concluding statement should remind student affairs professionals concerned with college student development, and particularly student-athletes that young adults seek places where they are content; places that allow them to embrace the completeness of their emerging selves. They find areas where their spiritual dimensions are recognized, stimulated, and challenged (Parks, 2000, p. 202).

The faith development work of both Fowler and Parks “represent the most thorough investigations to date into how individuals develop their religious and spiritual attitudes and beliefs, and as such provide useful heuristics for guiding the work of student affairs professionals” (Chickering et al., 2006, p. 63). Together, these two faith works inform this study and provide a sound basis from which an understanding of college student-athlete draw their spirituality.

Each tenet of Fowler’s and Parks’s FDT is not critical to the development of this study. For this research, Parks’s faith development during the young adult years provided adequate support for this research study. The researcher chose to view the topic through the lens of
Parks’s young adult years because this is the time when a person begins to reflect on life’s meaning self-consciously. Additionally, individuals initiate the process of taking responsibility for themselves, including their faith (Parks, 2000). FDT tenets will be utilized to draw conclusions about the spiritual and religious experiences of Black male college athletes.

Park’s FDT tenets “adolescence/conventional,” “tested adult,” and “mature adult” do not align with this research. These tenets occur outside of the young adult, college years when young adults make meaning in their lives. Parks argues that this period for young adults, experiencing faith involves making discoveries that differ from previously held assumptions about the world and subsequently altering their structures of faith and meaning (Parks, 2000).

Critics of the Theory(s)

CRT. Legal scholars have criticized CRT on many grounds, such as CRT scholars’ reliance on the persistence of racism (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Subotnik, 1998). Critical race theorists have argued that law reviews and law schools silence people of color. Randall Kennedy; however, contends that the relative scarcity of legal scholarship by people of color and the low numbers of law professors of color reflects more on low productivity, poor quality work, and the failure of [African Americans] to work hard enough (Capers, 2014). Moreover, CRT scholarship relies too heavily on “highly charged rhetoric and imagery,” and suffers from “significant deficiencies” and “empirical weaknesses” (Capers, 2014, p. 4). CRT scholars respond to these claims by asserting that the contributions of CRT are substantial and have shifted the conversations about race in important ways (Capers, 2014). For instance, considerable discussions led to the examination of the expressive message of a race-based state-sanctioned practice of “stop and frisk”—which disproportionately affects young men of color (Capers, 2014).
Darder and Torres (2004) are also among the critics who contest CRT’s hyper-emphasis on race in education. According to Darder and Torres (2004), CRT uses race as “the central category of analysis” (p. 97) in educational debates around racism to the exclusion of “a substantive critique of capitalism” (p. 99). Further adding, “that the use of ‘race’ has been elevated to a theoretical construct, despite the fact that the concept of ‘race’ itself has remained under-theorized” (p. 99). Other detractors have also criticized CRT because the claim is that its major tenets do not include social class and gender as part of its framework due to its focus on race (Hiraldo, 2010).

In spite of such opposition, CRT continues to be a viable framework for this research study. For example, according to Bell (1992), race is a critical social construct in the analysis of social, political, and educational problems of people in society. The CRT framework remains suitable for critical race thinkers engaged in studying race relations on predominantly White campuses (Foster, 2005).

**FDT.** One of the more thorough and convincing critiques of FDT is the limitations within its stages of development. Chickering et al. (2006) pointed out that researchers claim that Fowler’s (1981) theory suggests that individuals who have reached the last stage of the theory have more faith experiences than those in the earlier stages. Furthermore, Keeley (2010) stated that Fowler’s theory is limited in that it encompasses stages that individuals are said to move through as they develop and too much focus is on the age groups associated with that stage.

Gilligan (1982) and Streib (2003), who have both done extensive research on adolescent and young girls, concluded that FDT’s model of development is based on the male experience and therefore is inadequate for understanding the psychological development of females. This inadequacy is most evident in analyzing moral development (Gilligan, 1982). The criticism that
Gilligan (1982), Streib (2003), and others allege can be applied at any of the major stages of development, from childhood through late adulthood (Piper, 2002).

Parks (2000) utilized Fowler’s work to develop an alternative theory of faith development. The theory focused on how young adults—individuals between the ages of 17 to 30—make meaning in their lives. She argued that faith is “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (Parks, 2000, p. 7). Additionally, young adults, experiencing faith involves making discoveries that differ from previously held assumptions about the world and subsequently altering their structures of faith and meaning (Parks, 2000). Since colleges and universities have traditionally played a role in fostering this faith development by providing students with new experiences and ways of thinking, the researcher focused on Parks’s (2000) theory of faith development as an alternative faith development theory adaptable to college-age students.

Theory Rationale

CRT and FDT offer a framework to support beliefs and understanding through student perspective and reflection of their experiences. The rationale for utilizing CRT is because CRT as a framework is vital to the study as it enables a greater understanding of the perspectives and the lived experiences of Black males attending White colleges and the need to design an effective call to action to provide support to this unique population. Moreover, CRT views race as a primary social construct to consider in the analysis of social, political and educational problems in society (Bell, 1992; Singer, 2005). The premise for CRT is that an examination of race and racism must begin with an understanding that Whiteness has been positioned as the optimal status criterion not only in the American society but also at the global level (Bell, 1992; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007). CRT is, therefore, a framework or a set of fundamental insights,
perspectives, and methods that could help with understanding Black males’ experiences with race related encounters on a historically White campus.

The rationale for utilizing FDT is it allows the researcher to provide an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the evolutionary process of the development of religious and spiritual values and behavior in Black male college athletes. The idea of understanding the developmental process of human faith can be an invaluable resource.

**Conclusion**

To analyze the way in which Black college male athletes understand their success, the theoretical frameworks CRT and FDT were chosen. These frameworks will serve to focus the study of Black male college athletes’ experiences with religion and spirituality. These concepts have been studied concerning Black college males and have shown to be a useful lens in this context. The subsequent literature review, described in more detail studies concerning religion and spirituality as well as some of the issues that have led to the research problem.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.
—James Baldwin

In exploring how Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality as they engage at a predominantly White campus the literature concerning the historical and current status of Black males attending schools of higher learning, including an investigation of Black male athletes in college, is reviewed. Then, the role of race, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping on college campuses towards Black male athletes is explored. Finally, the literature that looks explicitly at the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black male college athletes attending PWIs is examined.

**Black Males in Higher Education**

This section examines research that considers the historical background of Black males and their admittance into institutions of higher education. Additionally, the segment reviews the current status of Black men at PWIs, including enrollment and graduation statistics. Lastly, the literature investigates Black male athletes as overrepresented actors in revenue-generating sports, such as football and basketball.

**Historical Context of Black Males at PWIs**

The exclusion of African Americans from attending PWIs dominates the historical narrative of higher education (Flowers & Shuford, 2011; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Wiggins, 2000). The earliest admittance of African Americans to higher education was initiated in the 1800s (Harper et al., 2009). The need for Black colleges and universities was birthed out
of the institutional arrangements of the Black Codes\(^1\) during the early 1800s, and during Jim Crow segregation in the late 1800s (Davis, 2007; Fleming, 1984; Hawkins, 2010; Willie, 2003).

The first three colleges established for the specific purpose of educating Black Americans included Cheyney State College (1837) and Lincoln University (1854) in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University (1856) in Ohio (Fleming, 1984; Harper et al., 2009; Hawkins, 2010; Willie, 2003). These three institutions, established for freed slaves and their children, kindled the central access movement for African Americans—the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Harper et al., 2009). These Black institutions of higher education became reservoirs of Black intellectual and athletic genius during the late 1800s and throughout the early 1900s. During the post-Civil War era, historically White colleges commenced admitting a small number of Black Americans. The view that Black Americans were inferior; however, was widespread and substantially affected the attitudes of their benefactors (Fleming, 1984; Harper et al., 2009; Willie, 2003).

In 1890, Congress passed the Morrill-McComas Act requiring states to either admit Black students to existing institutions or provide separate and equally funded schools for them. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* court case of 1896 ruled that states could continue the racial segregation of public schools only if accommodations and facilities were equal (Willie, 2003). For schools located in the southern portion of the United States, the “separate but equal” doctrine meant industrial training rather than liberal arts education for Blacks (Harper et al., 2009).

\(^1\) Black Codes: A series of restrictive laws established by White southerners in the former Confederate states in 1865 and 1866. The “Black Codes” were designed to restrict freed Blacks’ activity and ensure their availability as a labor force now that slavery had been abolished.
At the turn of the twentieth century, more than 2,500 Black students graduated from both Black and White colleges (Willie, 2003). Although a small amount of African Americans was permitted to attend PWIs throughout this period, more than 90% of all African American degree-holders in the late 1940s had been educated at HBCUs (Harper et al., 2009). In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that racial segregation, including the operation of “separate, but equal” facilities for public education would no longer be legal (Brown, 2001). The Brown v Board ruling removed a major roadblock for Blacks to attend PWIs.

Desegregation, along with the equal opportunity for African Americans and HBCUs, was significantly enhanced with the implementation of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Harper et al., 2009; Meyers, 1987). Congress reaffirmed its support of the approximately 100 two- and four-year HBCUs (Meyers, 1987). The act sought to support HBCUs during the period in which increased numbers of African American students pursued educational opportunities elsewhere (Harper et al., 2009). This 1965 congressional act; however, brought about the unintended consequence of some legislators’ supporting HBCUs based on the desire to minimize Black student attendance at historically White campuses (Meyers, 1987).

The presence of Black students at PWIs increased dramatically for a number of reasons: First, the GI bill provided access to colleges and universities for many Black war veterans; second, the Supreme Court rulings during the 1940s and 1950s ruled in favor of admitting Black students to institutions receiving federal monies. Next, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination based on race, color, sex, or national origin among federal government agencies and all organizations that received funding from the federal government. Finally, the Higher Education Act of 1965 made monies available to traditionally White colleges that were also
considered “developing institutions” (Fleming, 1984; Harper et al., 2009; Willie, 2003). “The term ‘developing institutions’ was incorporated into the legislation as an apparent effort to avoid designating Black higher education institutions as the primary recipients of the federal assistance made valuable in the funding” (Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 43). These actions, however, did not deter the empowerment of Black students and other young people of color.

By 1968; however, 80% of all Black students who earned undergraduate degrees graduated from HBCUs (Anderson, 2002). By the 1970s, most public universities in states with large Black populations were admitting significant numbers of Black students, and many private universities and colleges were admitting them regularly, even if they remained underrepresented as compared with their proportion of the national population (Willie, 2003). The increased admissions of Black students were a significant advancement for Black people.

During the 1980s, Black students lost ground, especially at PWIs that suffered massive cutbacks in financial aid and grant funding (Willie, 2003). The number of Black students at PWIs fell in the 1980s, and for the first time since the 1960s, PWIs began to receive negative publicity based on the experiences of Black students on those campuses (Willie, 2003). Reports of racial incidents on more than 250 universities over a 3-year period from 1987 and 1990 occurred (Camper, 1991). The 1990s to the present, saw a significant and steady increase in college enrollment of Black students at PWIs (Fleming, 1984; Harper et al., 2009; Willie, 2003). According to estimates at the time, two-thirds to three-fourths of the Black students in college are now in predominantly White educational settings (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984).

Current Status of Black Males at PWIs
There is a significant postsecondary enrollment gap between Black men and their White counterparts. Moreover, Black women also have a slight lead over Black men attending college. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (2016), Black men consisted of only 1,217,000 of the 19,196,000 or 6.3%, of total enrollment at institutions of higher education. Black women comprised of 8.6% of the total enrollment, and White men made up 32.4%. It is also important to note the other admission rates to view a holistic picture of the enrollment gap for men. Hispanic men made up 8.2% of the total enrollment, Native American/Alaska Native men were .5%, Asian/Pacific Islander men .4%, and nonresident alien men 1.9%. Low enrollment statistics for Black males is evident. Likewise, low graduation rates for Black students are noticeable.

The graduation statistics for Black students are low compared to other ethnicities. According to Shapiro et al. (2017), Black students had the lowest six-year completion rate (45.9%). Hispanic students had an almost 10%-point higher completion rate than African American students (55.0%). Over two-thirds of Caucasian and Asian students completed a degree within the same six-year period (67.2% and 71.7%, respectively). White students had the highest completion rate elsewhere: 14.8% of White students who started in four-year public institutions completed at a school other than the starting institution. The completion rate elsewhere for Asian students was very similar to that of Hispanic and African American students (10.3%, 11.3%, and 10.6%, respectively). As these results demonstrate, the differences in the completion rates of White and Black students, and White and Hispanic students were equally driven by the differences in completions both at the starting institution and elsewhere. This was not the case for the completion gaps between Asian and Hispanic as well as Asian and African American students: the completion rate was much higher for Asian students than for African American and
Hispanic students at the starting institution but was very similar regarding completions elsewhere. Not only are enrollment statistics low for Black men, and completion rates low for Black students in general, the graduation rates for Black men, individually, are even worse.

The graduation statistics for Black men matched by gender are also disturbing. African American men had the lowest completion rate (40.0%), and the highest stop-out\(^2\) percentage (41.1%) and Asian women had the highest completion rate (75.7%) and the lowest stop-out rate (11.2%). Within each race and ethnicity category, women outperformed men. The most significant gap was among Black students, with women having a 10%-point higher completion rate than men (50.5% and 40.0%, respectively). The smallest difference was among Asian students: female Asian students’ completion rate was 6.6% points higher than male Asian students (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Since enrollment and graduation rates are low, the same is the case for some degrees that Black men receive. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), during the academic year 2014-2015, 10.6 percent of bachelor’s degrees conferred from the degree-granting institutions of higher education were to Blacks. Of the 10.6% of degrees conferred to Blacks, 64.0% were conferred to women, while 36.0% were to men. This rate is compared to (both male and female) 66.5% for Whites, 12.0% for Hispanics, 7.4% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 0.6% American Indian/Alaska Natives. Blacks had the most substantial gap between genders.

What’s noted here is that females earned more degrees for each race. The data signified a gap between Whites and all other races, including Blacks. It also identifies gaps between Black men and women, where the women have higher levels of enrollment, graduation, and degrees

\(^2\) Stop-out: Students temporarily withdraw from enrollment at a college or university.
conferred. Black men’s dismal college enrollments, disengagement and underachievement, and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education (Harper, 2012).

**Black Male Athletes in Higher Education**

A significant amount of research has taken place over several decades around Black male college athletes (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Bimper et al., 2013; Harper, 2009, 2012, 2015; Hawkins, 2010). Much of the literature focuses on the problems and negative experiences of Black male college athletes (Beamon, 2014). Scholars have highlighted the range of inequities at various Division 1 institutions. The majority of the literature has been on members of the revenue-generating sports teams, namely men’s basketball and football. Harper (2006) illustrates these two sports garner the most media attention (which additionally generates television contracts and corporate sponsorship), attract the most fans (who pay to attend games), and also, yields its highest revenue from merchandise sales (e.g., jerseys and other apparel).

Data from Lapchick et al.’s “2013 Race and Gender Report Card” revealed that Black male athletes account for approximately one-quarter of all student-athletes in Division 1 intercollegiate athletics, compared to their counterparts. Further analysis highlights that this segment of Black athletes is proportionately overrepresented in revenue-generating sports—football at 54.4% and men’s basketball at 57.2%. With such high representation of Black athletes concentrated in high-profile revenue-generating sports, the development of Black student-athletes ascends to the height of concerns for intercollegiate athletic programs. The fact of the matter for these athletic programs is that the development of Black male athletes, or lack thereof, has an impact on factors such as player eligibility, recruiting, NCAA academic progress
report assessments and penalties, institutional persona, and eventually the bottom line—profits (Lapchick et al., 2013).

Recent graduation rates for Black male athletes have shown improvement (Harper et al., 2013; Lapchick, Sanders, Fox, & Van Berlo, 2014). Despite the gains; however, football and men’s basketball continue to hold the lowest graduation rates in Division 1 sports. According to Harper et al. (2013), between 2007 and 2010, 50.2% of Black male student-athletes graduated within six years, compared to 66.9% of student-athletes overall, 72.8% of undergraduate students overall, and 55.5% of Black undergraduate men overall. The research also found that 96.1% of NCAA Division 1 colleges and universities graduated Black male student-athletes at rates lower than student-athletes overall. 97.4% of NCAA Division 1 institutions graduated Black male student-athletes at rates lower than undergraduate students overall. At one university, Black male student-athletes graduated at a comparable rate to Black undergraduate men overall (Harper et al., 2013). On 72.4% of the other campuses, graduation rates for Black male student-athletes were lower than rates for Black undergraduate men overall (Harper et al., 2013). Black males are meaningfully underrepresented in the academic side of the student-athlete experience, and they are far less likely to earn a college degree, even when it’s “free” (Smith, 2016, p. 128).

Conclusion

Several themes emerged from a review of the literature on the current status of Black men in higher education, including Black male student-athletes. First, the research showed that there is a significant gap between Black men who attend college and their White counterparts. Second, since enrollment and graduation rates are low, consequently Black males receive degrees at a much lower rate than most ethnic groups according to academic statistics. Finally, Black athletes are proportionately overrepresented in revenue-generating sports, such as football.
and men’s basketball. Black athletes graduate at a dismal rate of 50%, but recent graduation rates have shown improvement (Harper et al., 2013; Lapchick et al., 2014).

Therefore, regarding Black males in higher education researchers are asking for an investigation into the implementation of initiatives that aid Black men, mainly, Black male student-athletes to become successful and complete their degrees. Universities and organizations, such as the NCAA, should collaborate to provide more significant outreach and support aimed at meeting the needs of the Black male athlete (Messer, 2006). Black male student-athletes, in turn, will be charged with the responsibility of complementing institutional initiatives by persisting and eventually completing their degrees. With these actions and efforts, we can only expect the future to bring more progress (Messer, 2006). The next section explored the role of race, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping of Black male athletes on college campuses.

**The Role of Race, Racism, Discrimination, and Stereotyping for Black Student-Athletes**

This section reviewed the literature on the racialized experiences of Black males on predominantly White campuses, including racism, discrimination, and stereotyping of Black athletes. Black athletes experience racism, discrimination, and stereotyping on college campuses (Beamon, 2014; Bimper, 2015; Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Hodge et al., 2008). According to racial realists, racism is inherent in U.S. culture and processes traditionally and the present (Foster, 2005; Hawkins, 2010). According to the research on diversity and multiculturalism, a common thread defines racism as a belief that one “race” is demonstrably superior to others (Bucher, 2010; Jones, 1997; Kitano, 1985). Discrimination is an action or actions directed toward members of a particular group based on racism (race superiority) (Bucher, 2010; Kitano, 1985). These acts of discrimination are formalized into what
has been termed “institutional racism,” which are the practices that “differentially and negatively affect members of a subordinate racial group” (Feagin & Feagin, 2012, p. 20). Stereotyping merely is a widely held belief that an individual is a member of a particular group based on characteristics. Black athletes consistently travail through each of these experiences at PWIs.

**Racism in College Athletics**

Historically, Black athletes have struggled to realize a full measure of success in predominantly White organized sport (Hawkins, 2010; Rhoden, 2010; Smith, 2016; Wiggins, 2000). Behind the segregated walls of athletics, and out of the view of most members of the dominant culture, HBCUs were forced to establish its separate sporting organizations, most notably the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) in 1912 (Hawkins, 2010; Wiggins, 2000). Soon after the formation of the CIAA, similar athletic associations, like the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) and the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) were organized for Black schools. The addition of these athletic conferences further led to establishing the legitimacy of Black college sports.

Hawkins (2010) asserts that HBCUs provided the primary avenue of intercollegiate competition for athletically talented high school athletes who sought to prolong their athletic careers and obtain a college education. Although a limited amount of Black athletes attended predominantly White colleges and universities in the 1800s, the majority competed at HBCUs. Despite their educational shortcomings, or possibly because of them, HBCUs provided a roadway to athletic prominence for many Black athletes to showcase their talents (Edwards, 1969).

Similar to Hawkins’s (2010) assessments, Wiggins (2000) asserts that athletic programs at HBCUs were comparable to those at PWIs in that they began as informal, student-run
activities and evolved into a highly structured and institutionally controlled phenomenon. Like PWIs, HBCUs held highly competitive competitions such as the annual Thanksgiving Day football games between various schools, including the classic match between Howard University and Lincoln University. The event drew thousands of spectators from around the country, and contributed to a sense of institutional pride, national reputation, and school spirit, among students, faculty, and alumni (Wiggins, 2000).

The differences; however, between athletic programs at HBCUs and PWIs were almost as vast as their similarities. Unlike their White counterparts, Black colleges lacked the funds necessary to hire large coaching staffs, purchase the latest equipment, and build elaborate athletic facilities. The financial circumstances of most HBCUs made it impossible for them to outfit well-equipped teams like those at PWIs (Rhoden, 2010; Wiggins, 2000). Black athletic programs faced severe challenges in maintaining parity with White athletic programs.

As a result of the numerous difficulties experienced at HBCUs, a significant number of changes were on the horizon for Black athletes and their participation at PWIs (Davis, 2007; Edwards, 1969; Smith, 2016). Black student-athletes made a significant shift from attending traditional Black colleges and universities in the South to attending predominantly White colleges throughout the United States (Rhoden, 2010). The Jim Crow era, primarily excluded Blacks from collegiate sports; dominated by White, upper class, Protestant males (Davis, 2007).

By the early 1960s integration slowly began to take place in southern athletic conferences. The Brown v. Board of Education school desegregation decision in 1954, combined with the fledgling Civil Rights Movement and the desire of educational institutions to achieve prominence in sport, resulted in the gradual integration of athletic programs at schools that had historically refused even to compete against African American athletes (Rhoden, 2010;
Wiggins, 2000). The migration of Black athletes to PWIs recognized as social mobility for many African Americans occurred at the cost of enduring challenges inherent in the structural arrangements at PWIs (Hawkins, 2010).

With growing spectator interest and resulting financial rewards from rising attendance figures, PWIs could no longer afford to sit idly by and allow HBCUs to siphon off potentially valuable Black athletic prospects merely because of an accident of birth (Edwards, 1969). In the mid-1960s and 70s, PWIs in the South began recruiting Black athletes en masse. A growing number of White coaches and athletic directors began to realize that their segregated teams could no longer compete successfully against schools that had already integrated (Rhoden, 2010).

Two cornerstone events significantly impacted the landscape of college athletics and the relationship that Black athletes had with PWIs. In 1966, Texas Western (now the University of Texas-El Paso), with an all-Black starting lineup, upset Adolph Rupp’s University of Kentucky Wildcats to win the NCAA national basketball championship. The all-White team at the University of Kentucky won numerous championships in its legendary history and could not imagine that a team with majority Black basketball players could be skilled, savvy, or intelligent enough to defeat them (Rhoden, 2010). The victory by Texas Western transformed the landscape of college basketball for years to come.

In the sport of football, the South had long resisted recruiting Black players, instead relying on the banality of White only athleticism (Rhoden, 2010; Smith, 2016). However, suddenly the Black competitor was in popular demand, especially after legendary football coach, Paul “Bear” Bryant of the University of Alabama Crimson Tide, discovered the value of the Black athlete in college football. On September 12, 1970, the University of Southern California (USC), which had broken the color barrier, beat the University of Alabama. USC and the
athletic talent of many of its Black players impressed Coach Bryant so much; he congratulated the USC players on the field after the game. Soon after the monumental contest, Coach Bryant noted that he would never again let a tremendous Black talent leave the state of Alabama (Rhoden, 2010).

The USC-Alabama game began a chain reaction that escalated the African American presence in White Southern sports. This set in motion an uptick in recruitment efforts for Black players to big-time White college athletic programs across the country, especially in the South (Rhoden, 2010; Smith, 2016). Although Black athletes became integral players at PWIs, they were often stereotyped because of their emphasis on athletic participation.

**The Racialization of Black Males in Sport**

W.E.B. Du Bois, in his much-celebrated work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, declared that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (1903, p.3). For many Black Americans, including Black male college athletes, Du Bois’s assertion regarding race has found itself extended to include the twenty-first century (Hawkins, 2010; Hawkins, Cooper, & Baker, 2014).

In U.S. history, race has been a controversial term due to the contradictory scientific data that has attempted to distinguish race as a biological construct (Hawkins, 2010; Omi & Winant, 2014; Sussman, 2014). Race as a social construction has increased in legitimacy in the context of this country. Therefore, race as a sociological construct suggests that there are specific phenotypical differences (mainly skin color) that are used to justify and rationalize the unequal treatment of groups of people based on these differences and because of these differences (Hawkins, 2010; Omi & Winant, 2014; Sussman, 2014). Consequently, the shared experiences of Blacks in the United States is a racialized experience; covered with racism or racist practices
(Hawkins, 2010). With that, it is appropriate to look beneath the surface into this complex situation between Black athletes and Division 1 NCAA institutions where institutional arrangements consistently position Black athletes as intellectually inferior and physically superior (Hawkins, 2010). Academic clustering and stacking racialize Black male athletes.

**Academic Clustering.** Academic clustering among athletes finds its roots as far back as the turn of the twentieth century (Davis & Cooper, 1934). Defined as the grouping or clustering of a disproportionate percentage of athletes into selected majors when compared to the overall university percentage in the same major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987; Schneider, Ross, & Fisher, 2010). According to Coakley (2009), academic clustering is evident in specific courses and majors, where athletes in revenue-generating sports, specifically, are overrepresented. The basic premise is that Black athletes, specifically, and a minority of White athletes in revenue-generating sports, are clustered into majors due to perceived levels of intelligence and as a means to manage their eligibility better (Hawkins, 2010).

For instance, in 2006, a University of Michigan football player entered college intending to earn a business degree. He was motivated—as well as many of the other football players were—to pursue a bachelor’s degree in the less rigorous General Studies to assist in meeting the demands of a collegiate athlete. He graduated from the University of Michigan without earning the degree which he planned to receive (Hawkins, 2010). This experience is one example of how academic aspirations meet the reality and the demands of competing in major college sports, where academic clustering has been the remedy (Case et al., 1987; Schneider et al., 2010).

**Stacking.** There is little research literature on stacking at the collegiate level. Stacking is the placement of African American players at specific playing positions, and not others (González, Jackson, & Regoli, 2006; Smith & Henderson, 2000). That is, Black players are
placed at positions based on their race, where they will have minimal input into the outcome of the athletic contest. Case in point, White athletes are commonly thought of as being smarter and more intelligent than Black athletes, and thus pushed to play positions like quarterback and center in football. These positions are widely associated with requiring intelligence and quick decision-making skills. Black players, on the other hand, are guided to play positions such as running back, wide receiver, or defensive back. These positions are universally thought of as reactionary positions and requiring greater athleticism (Smith & Henderson, 2000).

In the sport of baseball, White players are far more likely to play the position of pitcher and catcher: positions which are collectively acknowledged as leadership positions. Whereas, Black players, who are seen primarily as being physically gifted, are assigned to non-core, non-central positions such as right field (Smith & Henderson, 2000). The long-term impact of racial stacking provides African American players with less of a chance to assume leadership positions as coaches and managers when their playing careers are over (González et al., 2006; Smith & Henderson, 2000).

The marker of intellectually inferior and physically superior assessed towards Black male athletes have positioned them into a peculiar situation of duality. Being a student and an athlete at PWIs presents a dichotomy—“two warring ideals in one dark body”; a “double-consciousness”³ (Du Bois, 1903, p. 9). Though better treatment, more privileges, and access to more opportunities are available to Black male athletes, the superior physicality of the black body and the belief in the inferiority of his mind is an ideology that has been hard to deinstitutionalize (Hawkins, 2010; Hodge et al., 2008; Wiggins, 1989).

³ Double consciousness is a concept that W. E. B. Du Bois first explores in his 1903 publication, “The Souls of Black Folk.” Double consciousness describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.
Racial Stereotypes Against Black Male Athletes

The historical origins of the “dumb jock” stereotype are tracked back to 500 B.C. when Greek athletes were disparaged for the inordinate amount of time they utilized in preparation for competition and for neglecting their intellectual development (Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Sailes, 1993). Greek athletes were branded by particular philosophers of that period as useless and ignorant citizens with dull minds (Coakley, 2009). Media attention challenging the scholarship of college athletes, particularly in the revenue-producing sports of basketball and football, has stained the academic credibility of college student-athletes (Sailes, 1993). Consequently, conceptions about the dumb jock stereotype became targeted towards African American student-athletes. Studies show that stereotypes of Blacks are more harmful than stereotypes of other ethnic minority groups (Comeaux, 2010; Jones, 1997; Thomas et al., 2007; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005).

Black college men, including Black male athletes, at PWIs, consistently face racist stereotypes and racial microaggressions that demoralize their achievement and sense of belonging (Harper, 2009; Harper, 2015; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007). For example, in a qualitative methods study of 143 Black undergraduate men at 30 colleges and universities throughout the United States, Harper (2015) explored the perceptions of these students’ experiences with racism and stereotyping while on campus. The main findings showed that these undergraduate men were frequently confronted with stereotypes but succeeded in resisting them through their campus leadership roles, their engagement in student organizations, and their use of a three-step strategic redirection process. Stereotypic beliefs about Black athletes

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4 The three-step strategic redirection process is handled by the “achiever” student both inside and out of the classroom. The achiever is asked a stereotypic or microaggressive question (i.e. “You got weed?”). The achiever questions the assumption and then waits for the stereotyper (or microaggressor) to reflect on their assumption.
incessantly depict them as athletically superior while intellectually inferior (Hawkins, 2010; Hodge et al., 2008). These stereotypes provide ready-made yet superficial evaluative frameworks for making quick judgments and conclusions about others (Coakley, 2009; Harrison et al., 2009; Stone, Chalabaev, & Harrison, 2012).

Research has drawn substantial attention to student-athletes and the degree which they experience a climate of campus discrimination by notable members of the college community. African American male student-athletes at major Division 1 schools encounter the most damaging and deep-rooted racial stereotypes by other members of the community (Beamon, 2014; Comeaux, 2010; Czopp, 2010; Hodge et al., 2008; Lapchick, 2010). Comeaux (2010) studied faculty perceptions of Black student-athletes. “They dismissed Black student-athletes as ‘affirmative action beneficiaries,’ innately intellectually inferior and not deserving of college admissions on their merits” (p. 399). A significant amount of African American athletes reported receiving a lower grade, being suspected or accused of cheating, and being given a hard time when asking for accommodations to represent the college (Simiyu, 2012).

In an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education entitled “Black Athletes and White Professors: A Twilight Zone of Uncertainty,” Black male student-athletes reported feeling that they were not taken seriously by many of their White professors (Perlmutter, 2003). In a related study, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) found that engagement with faculty, particularly outside the classroom, was essential to academic achievement for Black and White male student-athletes alike, but professors devoted significantly more time to educational engagement with White student-athletes. Being an African American college athlete, therefore, plays a role in the

Participants said these three steps often protected them from leaving encounters frustrated and confused about the assumptions White peers and faculty made about them (Harper, 2015).
athletes’ reports of adverse treatment by faculty over and above that of being an athlete alone (Dee, 2014; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005).

These negative perceptions by the college community are not just limited to faculty members. For instance, Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, and Bimper Jr. (2011) examined opinions at Division 1 schools, and discovered that White male students frequently considered Black male student-athletes as not being academically equipped to attend college, nor were they believed to be intellectually capable of receiving grades as high as White student-athletes. Similar to Harrison et al.’s (2011) study, Sailes’s (1993) study also concluded that White students felt that Black student-athletes were not academically prepared to attend college. White students, by and large, felt it was the Black athlete’s athletic talents, not intelligence, that provided admission to college (Sailes, 1993).

Segregation laws, such as Jim Crow, and racism played a significant role in the stereotyping of Black male student-athletes at PWIs (Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Sailes, 1993; Singer, 2005). To be more specific, the racist practices that Blacks experienced in employment, housing, and voting rights echoed in the domain of collegiate athletics. To extend this argument, Green, Smith, Gunnings, and McMillan (1974) concluded that “the most glaring fallacy about intercollegiate athletic competition … is the assumption that fairness is inherent. The patterns of racial discrimination, both overt and covert, institutional and individual, found in the larger society are reflected in and perpetuated by athletics in the United States” (p. 12).

The consistency of racism in college sports had an overwhelming effect on Black male student-athletes who attended PWIs. Black male athletes were recruited into a society for which they had no cultural or educational preparation, isolated by its unwritten codes, discovering an immense gap between himself and the college community (Olsen, 1968). From
the original journey to the present, racial stereotypes have beleaguered Black male student-athletes (Edwards, 1984; Hughes et al., 2007; Oseguera, 2010). Failure to have substantive conversations about those as mentioned above will negate advancement efforts as it relates to Black male student-athletes who attend PWIs (Harper et al., 2013).

**Stereotype Threat**

College students who receive a scholarship to play competitive sports represent a stigmatized group on campus (Comeaux, 2010; Sailes, 1993; Simiyu, 2012; Stone, Harrison, & Mottley, 2012). As previously noted, faculty, administrators, and other student body members view college athletes in terms of the “dumb-jock” stereotype. Which characterizes athletes as less intelligent, motivated, or prepared for college courses compared to traditional students who do not play sports (Edwards, 1984; Harrison, 2002; Sailes, 1993; Wininger & White, 2008). Case in point, Wininger and White (2008) surveyed the perceptions of student-athletes who faced the negative stereotype of “dumb jock” by their non-athlete peers. A total of 118 student-athletes from a comprehensive regional state university located in the Southeastern part of the United States were surveyed (55 males & 63 females). The sample included 26 African Americans, 85 Caucasians, and 7 other participants. First through fourth-year students were represented. The central results showed that student-athletes perceived that other students (non-athletes) had significantly lower academic expectations for their classmates based on their status as an athlete (Wininger & White, 2008). The negative effects of lower expectations of Black male student-athletes are dangerous and often a self-fulfilling prophecy (Steele & Aronson, 2005).

What is notable at this juncture is that academically engaged African American college athletes are most susceptible to what is known as a stereotype threat in the classroom when the
context links their unique status as both scholar and athlete (Stone, Chalabaev, et al., 2012).

What is a stereotype threat and how does it pertain to African American student-athletes?

According to the seminal work of Steele and Aronson (1995), a stereotype threat is defined as the risk of conforming, as self-characteristic, to a negative characteristic about one’s group (p. 797). That is, it is a situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group. The existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or any of one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one’s own eyes (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Building on Steele and Aronson (1995), Schmader, Johns, and Forbes (2008) argue that a stereotype threat is caused by a cognitive imbalance that occurs when cues in a social context activate three links. First, the salience of the stereotype that one’s social group typically underperforms in a domain; second, the salience of one’s positive membership in the target group; and third, the salience of one’s personal goals to perform well in the domain. The stereotype threat does not follow from the activation of each concept but from the propositional relation that defines the imbalance between the three ideas (Schmader et al., 2008). Activation of the imbalance between these three nodes leads to the tension and distress that undermines working memory capacity and increases performance monitoring processes that impair the ability to demonstrate one’s full potential (Stone, Chalabaev, et al., 2012). Therefore, African American college student-athletes, they are most likely to perceive an imbalance between their athletic identity and the negative academic stereotype if they are intrinsically motivated to succeed in academics.
Researchers have examined the effects of the label, “student-athlete,” on academically engaged African American college athletes (Dee, 2014; Harrison et al., 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone, Harrison, et al., 2012). For example, Stone, Harrison, et al. (2012) tested the effect of academic engagement and identity priming on the academic test performance of Black and White college athletes. A total of 151 college athletes at a large state university in the southern United States were recruited over a 3-year period to complete the study. The final sample included 75 Black athletes and 76 White athletes who represented nine varsity sports on campus. The main findings from Stone, Harrison, et al. (2012) showed that academically engaged African American college athletes performed poorly on the difficult test items when primed for their athletic identity, but they performed worse on both the difficult and easy test items when primed for their identity as a scholar-athlete. The performance of the academically disengaged athletes and the production of engaged White college athletes were unaffected by priming any aspect of athletic identity in the testing context (Stone, Harrison, et al., 2012).

The status of being a scholar-athlete or student-athlete can increase the threat of being branded a dumb jock. The stereotype threat Black athletes experience can diminish their performance in the classroom in addition to the detrimental effects of just making their athletic identity salient (Stone, Harrison, et al., 2012). Educating student affairs practitioners and other student-athlete supporters concerning true academic determination and success of college athletes, and creating effective educational programs that assist college athletes in redirecting the destructive stereotypes hold promise for eliminating these responses (Stone, Harrison, et al., 2012).

**Stereotypes and Racial Microaggressions**
The racial microaggression literature identifies and examines the impact that judgments by non-Blacks may have on Black male college athletes (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978; Sue et al., 2007). Racial microaggressions are subtle and contemporary forms of racism scholars use to describe verbal and nonverbal charged messages towards people of color. In 1978, psychologist Chester Pierce and colleagues, defined microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of Blacks by offenders” (p. 66). In essence, “microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Recurrent and insidious racial microaggressive messages marked by individuals who do not consciously recognize the racist origins of implication to their actions (Constantine, 2007). Microaggressive interactions are pervasive and automatic to the point where they are dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous (Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggressions can take on many different forms. Sue et al. (2007) identified three types of racial microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations.

**Microassaults.** According to Sue et al. (2007), microassaults are explicitly racial, derogatory verbal or non-verbal attacks meant to harm the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. An example of this action would be to refer to an African American as “Colored,” a person of Asian descent as “Oriental,” or use some other racial epithets. Microassaults continue to be one of the oldest forms of racism.

**Microinsults.** A microinsult characterizes communications that convey an insensitivity and subtle snub of one’s racial identity: deemed as rudeness and demeaning of a person’s ethnic heritage. This type of microaggression represents a cleverly designed rebuff, apparently intended to convey a hidden insulting message to its recipient. The context in which
microinsults are made is crucial. They often occur nonverbally by sending the message that people of color and their contributions are not relevant.

**Microinvalidations.** Microinvalidations can be verbal or nonverbal. These actions attempt to invalidate the experiences of people of color by communications that disregard, disavow, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions frequently target individuals; however, they can additionally stigmatize entire groups and create damaging hierarchies of power within society.

**Discrimination Against Black Male Athletes**

Similar to previous discussions about Black athletic superiority, academic preparation of African American college athletes has received much deliberation (Beamon & Bell, 2006; Comeaux, 2010; Wiggins, 2000). The use of entrance exams, (e. g., the SAT or ACT) is hotly debated as an institutionally racist practice that exhibits race and class bias. It creates a disadvantage for a significant population of racially marginalized groups; especially for African Americans and Latino Americans who score lowest among racial groups (e. g., Native Americans, Asians, Caucasian Americans) (Hawkins, 2010; Waller, 2003; Wiggins, 2000). In 1983, the NCAA attempted to remedy the poor academic performance and low graduation rates of college athletes by passing a rule known as Proposition 48 (Coakley, 2009; Figler & Whitaker, 1995; Leonard, 1993). Proposition 48 declared that all first-year student-athletes would be ineligible to participate on varsity sports teams if they had not achieved a score of 15 on the American College Test (ACT) or 700 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The ruling allowed athletes who satisfied just one of these requirements to be accepted into college and provided athletic aid. However, they were not allowed to practice with their team as first-year students and forfeited a year of eligibility. Although Proposition 48 succeeded in raising overall
student-athlete graduation rates, particularly for Black student-athletes, the measure received harsh criticism because it declared ineligible a disproportionately high percentage of Black student-athletes (Waller, 2003).

In 1989, the NCAA toughened its standards even more by passing Proposition 42, which prohibited universities from providing athletic aid to athletes who did not meet both GPA and test-scores requirements (Coakley, 2009; Figler & Whitaker, 1995; Leonard, 1993). Like Proposition 48, Proposition 42 was heavily criticized. Student advocates believed that the scores required for both tests were unfair to Black student-athletes because nearly 75% of Black students scored below 15 on the ACT and more than 50% scored below 700 on the SAT (Coakley, 2009; Figler & Whitaker, 1995; Leonard, 1993).

The charges of discrimination, however, were countered by an equally sincere cadre of African Americans who argued that the propositions were not racially discriminatory and were a step in the right direction (Edwards, 1984; Hackley, 1983). For example, Edwards (1984) was a very outspoken advocate of the rule changes, and there were a substantial number of other African American academicians who also supported the stricter academic requirements for student-athletes (Wiggins, 2000). Moreover, Hackley (1983), the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff’s chancellor, suggested that critics of the new rule were intentionally “retarding the progress of deprived peoples” by claiming racism and arguing against higher academic standards (Hackley, 1983, p. 37). The overall belief by these supporters of more academic stringency was that it was essential to have more robust academic standards that would greatly benefit all student-athletes, including African Americans.

Conclusively, in 2003, the NCAA launched the Academic Performance Program (APP) which created several metrics, including the Academic Progress Rate (APR) meant to measure
eligibility and retention, and the Graduation Success Rate (GSR). The parameters only measured student-athletes receiving athletic scholarships. According to Blackman (2008), the rules disproportionately affected Black student-athletes and HBCUs. He also emphasized that previous academic legislation implemented by the NCAA was also racist (Blackman, 2008). The APPs penalty structure took away athletic scholarships for schools that did not meet its minimum standards. Blackman (2008) maintained, “The NCAA cannot ensure a student-athlete’s educational opportunity if it eliminates the only practical means many student-athletes have to attend college. The athletic scholarship has been and should continue to be an avenue for many at-risk student-athletes to attend college” (p. 257). It is undeniable that without earning an athletic scholarship, many Black athletes would not be able to attend college.

Current NCAA academic performance standards (APR and GSR) for student-athletes have shown progress. Among the 2017 bowl-bound football teams, the average GSR for African American student-athletes is 71 percent, up from 68 percent in 2016 (Lapchick et al., 2017). Only two teams graduated less than half of their African American football student-athletes, which is an improvement from five schools in 2016 (Lapchick et al., 2017).

Black student-athletes must continue to progress towards achieving better academic standards. Meeting athletic eligibility requirements necessitates a commitment to academic preparation. Regrettably, the problem stems from the educational preparation students get before they ever get to college (Lapchick et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Numerous arguments developed from a review of the literature on the role of race, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping towards Black male student-athletes. First, Black male athletes are racialized and guided to positions based on their perceived lack of intellect and
physical prowess. Second, historically, Black schools, inclusive of their sports programs have been grossly underfunded which led to the migration of Black athletes competing for the prominence of playing sports at PWIs. Third, Black male athletes experience racial stereotypes and racial microaggressions. Racial stereotypes are injurious, deep-rooted actions by non-Blacks towards Black counterparts. Racial microaggressions, inclusive of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations are designed to lead to psychological distress and race-related stress in African American student-athletes. Finally, Black athletes are arguably discriminated against by academic test scoring which effects their participation in NCAA sanctioned activities.

Therefore, given the negative laden environment that Black college male athletes experience, further research into ways to address the concerns highlighted in the literature is necessary. Colleges and universities can play a fundamental role in the re-education and resocialization of the perpetrators of the numerous racist and discriminatory practices afflicted upon Black male athletes (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). School administrators and faculty can deliberately create and implement policies and guidelines to address the institutional racism, discrimination, and stereotyping that compromises the learning environment for Black athletes to succeed in college (Singer, 2005). According to Simons et al. (2007), the university administration needs to correct the misinformation based on the dumb jock stereotype and provide the campus with more accurate information about athletes.

The university should facilitate more faculty participation in the athletic enterprise to help reduce the misperceptions by both parties. It would help college athletes if faculty sensitive to Black students (i.e., the hiring of Black faculty members) were identified to offer guidance and mentorship, create forums for coaches, and faculty to discuss their concerns and ways to cooperate in the education of Black male athletes (Simons et al., 2007). Moreover, the university
should also strive to create opportunities for African American athletes to interact with other students away from the sporting arena and classroom (Simiyu, 2012). This way, the university would be helping Black athletes to see themselves as part of the university community as a whole and the rest of the university community to experience a different side of the athletes (Simiyu, 2012). The following section examined the religious and spiritual experiences of Black male athletes.

The Religious and Spiritual Experiences of Black Male Athletes

Religion and spirituality play a significant role in the lives of African American college students, including Black male athletes (Dancy, 2010; Dennis et al., 2005; Herndon, 2003; Stewart, 2012; Waller, 2015; Watson, 2006). Religion and spirituality have been discovered to promote different components of student success in college for Blacks (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). This section discusses the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black male college athletes.

Religion and Spirituality Defined

As frequently cited in the literature, scholars have yet to agree on clear-cut definitions for both religion and spirituality (Parks, 2000; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Stewart, 2012; Walker & Dixon). It is significant at this point to have an understanding of what is meant by “spirituality,” and it’s distinguishing from “religion.” Spirituality and religion are two separate theoretical constructs used interchangeably. It is critical that the terms are initially defined before further investigation into the literature to understand how their meaning is different, yet significantly connected.
Watson (2006) concisely defined the two terms, asserting, “spirituality is a belief in some external, animating force, whereas religion is the adherence to an established system of beliefs and practices grounded in spirituality” (p. 113). Similar to Watson (2006), Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis (2002) argue that spirituality is an individual phenomenon identified with the belief in some form of higher creational force or Supreme Being. In contrast, religion is frequently conceptualized as the “routine and pragmatic demonstrations of spirituality” (Constantine et al., 2002, p. 605). Simply put, religion is commonly viewed as incorporating spirituality that reflects the manifestations of formal theological beliefs and activities (e.g., church attendance and rituals) of individuals who share a group identity.

Comparable to the views of both Watson (2006) and Constantine et al. (2002), Stewart (2012) advocates that spirituality is the engagement of the “Big questions” about meaning, purpose, belonging, and values that may transcend organizational and doctrinal dogma of religion. Religion, on the other hand, is housed in its institutions, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Religious practices (i.e., liturgical styles, rituals, and forms of prayer), serve as cultural norms and traditions. Finally, Netland (2001) proposes that “religion connotes rigid, authoritarian, oppressive institutions; dogmatism and lack of openness to alternative perspectives; and cold formalism or ritualism” (p. 152). Whereas according to Robinson (2007), spirituality is about the practice and outworking of the spirit, and how it is developed, with its different aspects and relationships connected, sustained and understood. Spirituality is relation and action centered, and about making connections with these various aspects of life (Robinson, 2007).

Although spirituality and religion remain separate entities, persons who participate in formal religion may have a sense of spirituality, and those who are spiritual may express their
beliefs through formal religious practices (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Both spirituality and religion are significant ways of expressing faith in God. And are essential supportive factors in the lives of Black college students.

**Black Spirituality**

Black spirituality is a vital and distinctive spirituality forged in the crucible of the lives of African Americans (Bridges, 2001; Phelps, 1998; Martin & Martin, 2002; Stewart, 1999). The collective spirit found in many African Americans is an attitude that sees all of life in the context of the encounter with the Divine, which is rooted in a distinctive and ancient worldview (Bridges, 2001; Phelps, 1998). Martin and Martin (2002) noted that, “Black spirituality is the sense of the sacred and Divine that inspires, motivates, and uplifts Black people and endows them with dignity, self-worth, meaning, purpose, and hope as they seek to transcend and transform soul-destroying, life-threatening systems” (p. 11). In other words, spirituality in the Black context is how African Americans make sense of the world in which they reside. It is an effort to make life meaningful and to do so in response to the various questions asked about our existence and the world in which we live (Pinn, 2013; Floyd-Thomas, Floyd-Thomas, Duncan, Ray, Jr., & Westfield, 2007).

Stewart (1999), writing about Black men’s spirituality, examined themes that provide for support and resistance. Stewart (1999) is credited with distinguishing between two functions of spirituality—creative soul force and resistant soul force. Creative soul force depicts the support function of spirituality, which assists African Americans to adapt and transform their environments through the innovative use of Black culture. Resistance soul force, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of spirituality in helping Blacks transcend oppressive systems and structures, so they can survive and thrive more efficiently. Stewart (1999) further argues that
Black spirituality consists of five functional dynamics: (a) formation of Black consciousness, (b) unification of African Americans, (c) legitimization of African Americans as people, (d) the strength to challenge stereotypes, and (e) an instrument of personal and social transformation for African Americans. Watson (2006), building on Stewart (1999), discovered that expressing spirituality through religious practices is vital to Black men in college and enables them to define their purpose. A sense of spirituality provided motivation to continue to pursue their educational goals in the face of challenges and obstacles.

Black spirituality is expressed by attending church, praying, reading scriptures, singing, reflecting, and dancing (Herndon, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2002). However, spirituality more generally is expressed through an active search process to be more connected to the Divine while resisting demonization (Stewart, 1999). Historically, Black people have often turned to their spirituality to find space for freedom no matter how severe the circumstances (Martin & Martin, 2002; Stewart, 1999; Watson, 2006).

The Role of the Black Church

Scholars have recognized the central significance of religion and spirituality in African American culture—the Black Church (Cone, 1984; Cone, 2008; Du Bois, 1903; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mitchell, 2004; Pinn & Pinn, 2002; Stewart, 1999; Wilmore, 1984). Stewart (1999) posits that the Black church is “the primary institution preserving the creation, perpetuation, and practice of Black spirituality thus has engendered the development of spiritual practices that invariably insulate Blacks from complete subjugation and dehumanization by the larger culture” (p. 121). Its importance is so great that some scholars suggest that the Black Church is the Black community, with each having no identity apart from each other (Cone, 1984; Pinn & Pinn, 2002).
The Black Church (the term used to refer to all historically African American congregations and denominations) has a long and distinctive history in the United States (Putnam & Campbell, 2012). Born in slavery, it symbolized a people who were utterly stripped of their African heritage while enslaved by “Christian” White men (Cone, 2008). Slaves, pre-Civil War, organized underground churches and hidden religious meetings. The Black Church embraced as the “invisible institution,” was the clandestine nature of events where mutual relationships, worldviews, behavior patterns, and social and political action were ‘officially constituted’ by the slaves (Cone, 2008; Costen, 2007; Pinn & Pinn, 2002; Raboteau, 2004). Slaves also would secretly mix evangelical Christianity with African beliefs and African rhythms (Cone, 2008; Keller, 2006; Raboteau, 2004). The underground churches provided psychological refuge from the White world. Their songs—celebrated as the Negro spirituals—gave the church members a secret way to communicate and, in some cases, to plan rebellion (Raboteau, 2004).

Post-Civil War, Blacks, who were now free, in both northern and southern cities formed congregations and churches. They organized independent Black congregations and churches to practice religion apart from White oversight (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Pinn, 2005). Black preachers provided leadership, encouraged education and economic growth, and were often the primary link between the Black and White communities (Gaines, 2012). The Black Church established and maintained the first Black schools and encouraged community members to fund these schools and other public services (Barnes, 2005; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

During the Civil Rights Era, the role of the Black Church and spiritually defined concepts of social justice and redemption formed the basis of Black resistance and the push for social change (Stewart, 2012). The Civil Rights Movement was anchored in the Black Church, organized both by Black ministers and laity, and supported financially by Black Church
members (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Many other civil rights groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were influenced by Black church culture (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Not all Black churches were united in its affirmation of solidarity and social activism; however, and in dialectical fashion, it became a beneficiary of the Black consciousness movement it had helped to spawn (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Black churches are the primary spaces for African Americans in the United States. Scholars have provided evidence of the importance of Black churches on African American culture (Bridges, 2001; Cone, 1984; Cuyjet, 2006; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Wilmore, 1984). African Americans remain committed to church involvement and religious practice, in part, due to the range of individual benefits and support that these opportunities provide, such as its positive influence on the transition to college, academic performance, coping with stress, spirituality, and career selection (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010).

**Religion and Spirituality Among College Students**

Higher education scholars and practitioners have recently advocated that colleges and universities pay more attention to students’ spiritual development (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Chickering et al., 2006). Several present-day colleges and universities tend to refrain from directly encouraging students to reflect on their “inner lives,” particularly their spiritual values and development (Bryant et al., 2003). Smith (2001) posits that all students have “a spiritual side to their nature, but organized, institutionalized spirituality … is not well regarded on campus” (p. 96). Comparable to Smith (2001), Astin (2004) formulates that there is a “bifurcated connection between academe and internal development—the dialogue of meaning, truth, spirituality, and personal calling within higher education has been replaced with
the more practical discussions of business calculus, mass communication law, and cognitive psychology” (p.74). Hence, college is a critical time when students search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual and religious beliefs and values (Bryant et al., 2003). Researchers have investigated the significance of religion and spirituality and the role it plays among college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011a; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011b; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Bryant et al., 2003; Chickering et al., 2006; Kneipp, Kelly, & Cyphers, 2009).

Bryant et al. (2003) studied the degree to which students in their first year of college were involved in religious practices and considered themselves spiritual. Roughly, 3,700 first-year students from 50 colleges and universities were sampled. The study traced changes in religiousness and spirituality of the students throughout their first year on campus. The central finding was that overall students became less religiously active with respect to attending religious services, praying/meditating, and discussing religion. However, students became more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives. For example, the percentage of students who did not attend religious services rose dramatically by 27%, and 13% of students stopped praying or meditating over the course of the first year (Bryant et al., 2003). On the other hand, students seemed to be committed to integrating spirituality into their lives, as the percentage responding that this goal was “essential” or “very important” rose by 5.6 and 4.5 percentage points over one year, respectively (Bryant et al., 2003).

Besides Bryant et al. (2003), Astin et al. (2011a) examined students’ changes during their time in college and how college sparked their spiritual qualities. The researchers conducted a longitudinal study that surveyed more than 112,000 first-year students from 236 institutions of higher education across the country. The researchers followed up with nearly 15,000 of the
previously interviewed students during their junior year. They discovered that mainly, college life plays a significant role in the spiritual development of students.

Astin et al. (2011a) as well discovered that while religious engagement waned while participants were in college, student spirituality increased. During the college years, students were actively more engaged in their spiritual quest, more connected to others, more accepting, and likewise more caring. This growth in spirituality enhanced academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and satisfaction with college. Moreover, the researchers found that specific college activities improved spiritual growth. Events such as service learning, studying abroad, and interdisciplinary studies enhanced spirituality because they afforded students the occasion to learn about new cultures, new ideas, and introduced them to various people. Furthermore, meditation, self-reflection, or encouragement from professors to seek meaning and purpose are instances of engaging in “inner work,” or other activities in college where spirituality is enhanced.

Kneipp et al. (2009) examined religiosity and spirituality and their influence on student adjustment to college. This quantitative study used a religiousness/demographics questionnaire, a spiritual well-being scale, and student adaptation to college survey to examine whether students’ spirituality and religiousness impacted college adjustment from a welfare perspective. A total of 233 undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology course at a small southern university: from varying religious backgrounds participated in the study. Chiefly, Kneipp et al. (2009) found that there was a correlation between spirituality and religiousness and college adjustment for students. Spirituality provided more to college adjustment than religiousness. Nonetheless, both were statistically significant. The intangible and internal motivation
(spirituality) played a more substantial role in the college adjustment component than the actual, external motivation (religiousness) (Kneipp et al., 2009).

Lastly, in another study conducted by Astin et al. (2011b), the researchers attempted to develop a new method of measuring aspects of spirituality and religion for college students for the sake of offering researchers and practitioners a new way of tracking student development. This quantitative and longitudinal study involved more than 112,000 undergraduate students from schools across the country. The researchers developed a 12 scale instrument that determined spirituality and religion can provide a new approach to studying and implementing student development practices (Astin et al., 2011b).

Astin et al. (2011b) advanced that researchers and student affairs practitioners should reflect on the virtues of spirituality and religion while tracking student development. Considering spirituality and religion proposes new insights to studying and practicing a more well-rounded approach to student development. Fundamentally, spirituality, religiousness, and spiritually related qualities are instrumental in the lives of college students. Therefore, these elements play a significant function in student development.

The studies as mentioned earlier examined a wide variety of students and found that spirituality and religion play a significant role in student spiritual development and college adjustment (Astin et al., 2011a; Astin et al., 2011b; Bryant et al., 2003; Kneipp et al., 2009). College does indeed impact students’ religiousness and spirituality. Therefore, the findings should offer some guidance to student affairs practitioners and give insight into ways to effectively support students while they continuously engage their spiritual development.

Religion and Spirituality Among Black College Students
Analogous to the broader U.S. Black population, Black college students have shown to be more spiritual than Whites, and other racial groups (Chae et al., 2004; Dennis et al., 2005; Gehrke, 2013; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Gehrke (2013) found that African American college students had a higher spiritual connection than either Caucasians, Asians, or Latinos. The higher spiritual connection exemplified by Black students was known to increase during their tenure in college. Moreover, Gehrke (2013) found that African American college students associated with a spiritual quest more than Latino and Caucasian students during their time in college. Although the literature does not in any way suggest that other racial-ethnic students do not value spirituality or practice religion; research shows that, on average, these things are simply more important to African American students (Chae et al., 2004; Constantine et al., 2000; Herndon, 2003; Johnson, Oates, Jackson, Miles, & Strong, 2003).

Religion and spirituality represent essential coping and social support mechanism for many African American college students (Bryant et al., 2003; Constantine et al., 2002; Dennis et al., 2005; Weddle-West et al., 2013). Constantine et al. (2002) discovered that African American college students who were more spiritually oriented were more likely to use spirituality as a means of handling specific life’s stressors. Phillips (2000) also found that religious affiliation and frequency of spiritual practice positively affected African American students’ adjustment to college, and higher levels of change then contributed to better academic success.

Like Phillips (2000), Walker and Dixon (2002) instituted that the overall identification with spirituality positively correlated with academic performance, especially for Black students. Black students had higher levels of spiritual beliefs and religious participation than their White student peers (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Individuals that strongly identified with spiritual beliefs and behaviors had higher GPAs and more academic honors than those that did not. They also
had fewer academic probations and suspensions. For Black students, their [spiritual] beliefs, as well as the implementation of those views, appear to be [more] important than for their White counterparts (Walker & Dixon, 2002).

The study of religion and spirituality for Black students yielded slightly different findings (Chae et al., 2004; Constantine et al., 2002; Dennis et al., 2005; Walker & Dixon, 2002). The studies found that religion and spirituality rated higher, assisted with higher levels of adjustments to college, and influenced academic performance for Black students (Constantine et al., 2002; Gehrke, 2013; Walker & Dixon, 2002). The earlier stated idea that Blacks are more spiritual and religious, and the literature in this section helps to move the argument forward as to why this potential mechanism for achieving success may be beneficial to Black students (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Holland, 2014; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor et al., 2004; Walker & Dixon, 2002).

**Religion and Spirituality Among Black College Male Athletes**

Religion and spirituality are an essential factor in the daily lives of many student-athletes (Herndon, 2003; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006). Black college students, including student-athletes, tend to use spiritual and religious practices as coping mechanisms more often than their White peers (Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003; Herndon, 2003; Jackson, 1998). Consequently, many Black male student-athletes have a moderate perspective on some campus experiences, such as racism.

Brown et al. (2003) conducted a study that examined the perspectives of racial discrimination among White and Black collegiate student-athletes. The data revealed three key findings: (a) intercollegiate student-athletes with high levels of athletic identity centrality reported high levels of agreement with the perception that discrimination is no longer a problem,
(b) spiritual and religious belief served as a mitigating factor when it came to perceptions of racial discrimination and, (c) student-athletes in the study that reported that spiritual beliefs were important in their day-to-day lives tended to perceive that discrimination was no longer a problem (p. 173). These findings point to the fact that for some Black student-athletes spiritual and religious beliefs and practices help to mitigate perceptions of discrimination that accompany their experiences on predominantly White campuses.

Religion and spirituality have also been known to be positive contributors with issues of depression, mental health, and well-being (Storch, Storch, Welsh, & Okun, 2002; Watson & Czech, 2005; Watson & Nesti, 2007). Storch et al. (2002) conducted a study that examined the relationship between spirituality and clinical depression among intercollegiate athletes. One key finding revealed that only intrinsic spirituality was negatively associated with affective symptoms of depression. Perhaps inherent spirituality beliefs provide a sense of hope and security that protect against stressors and adverse life events that occur in the life of athletes, including Black athletes (Outlaw & Toriello, 2014, p. 214). Balague (1999) argued that when athletes have curtailed religious practices due to busy sporting schedules, or when suffering from anxiety and depression, athletes should be encouraged to renew their religious traditions. It is likely that this would assist the athlete in managing sport and life issues more constructively, by helping them to be reflective and learn from the inevitable disappointments of competitive sport (Balague, 1999; Watson & Czech, 2005).

Coakley (2009) offered that prayer and more generally spirituality have been known to have a positive effect on student-athletes. Coakley (2009) likewise suggested that athletes utilize prayer as a survival skill against uncertain stressful situations; to help live a morally sound life; to sanctify the athletes’ commitment to the sport; to put competition into perspective; to establish
a strong bond of attachment between teammates; and to maintain social control. The use of religious prayer to alleviate anxiety and stress in uncertain situations is prevalent among athletes (Coakley, 2009). Building on Coakley (2009), Watson and Czech (2005) proffered that investigations have shown that the use of prayer by athletes before, during, and after competition to be a common and valuable practice for enhancing performance and overall well-being (Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Park, 2000; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000).

Black athletes regularly call upon their spiritual resources to help them cope with and thrive in their environments on predominantly White campuses (Galli & Reel, 2012; Seitz, Sagas, & Connaughton, 2014). Case in point, legendary baseball great, Jackie Robinson, while a student-athlete at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) was known to indicate that spirituality often helped him to overcome challenges (racism) as a student-athlete (Waller, 2015). Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) suggested that the moderating effect of spirituality may have both theoretical and practical implications, especially during an age in which interest in spirituality has increased while religiosity is in a state of decline.

**Conclusion**

Three viewpoints transpired from a review of the literature on the importance of religion and spirituality among Black male student-athletes. First, religion and spirituality play a significant role in the daily lives of Black male athletes. Next, the Black Church and Black spirituality have shown to provide a reliable source of support in guiding Black Americans, including Black athletes through stress-related encounters. Finally, religion and spirituality among college students in general, and Black college students specifically, assist in degree
attainment and academic performance; and a coping mechanism against adverse experiences such as racism, depression, and stress.

Therefore, despite the rich cultural-religious and spiritual heritage of African Americans in this nation, researchers have indicated that there is a profound need to further investigate the importance of it as an agent for survival and resilience among Black college athletes (Waller, 2015). Moreover, the models of support (e.g., academic, physical, health, nutritional, etc.) given to Black collegiate athletes must be expanded to create a more holistic model that includes spiritual care (Waller, 2015) and religious well-being and how to foster the religious well-being of those student-athletes who desire this experience (Seitz et al., 2014).

Summary

This review of the literature explored research related to Black male college athletes and their experiences as a unique student population. The first segment examined the literature surrounding Black men, the achievement gap, low enrollment, graduation rates in college, and Black male athletic participation at PWIs. Black males are disproportionately affected on college campuses at rates higher than White males, women, and other racial-ethnic groups.

The second segment explored the effects of racism, discrimination, and stereotyping on college campuses towards Black male athletes. The literature review revealed that Black male athletes could expect to encounter some form of racism—covert or overt—on college campuses where they are enrolled (Hurtado, 1992; Solórzano et al., 2000). Racism is a permanent component of American life (Bell, 1992); facing and coping with racism, discrimination, and stereotyping for Black male athletes is a risk factor and impediment to their social involvement and academic achievements at PWIs (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996).
Lastly, the literature review examined the literature related to spirituality, including religiousness, and the role of faith and belief as a foundational understanding of spirituality. Black males, including Black male athletes, identify that religion and spirituality is a crucial component in the development of their “worldview”—how one perceives society and feels connected to it (De Haan & Schulenberg, 1997).

Researchers have called for an investigation into the implementation of initiatives that aid Black male student-athletes to become successful and complete their degrees; ways that school administrators and faculty can deliberately create and implement policies and guidelines to address institutional racism, discrimination, and stereotyping that compromises the learning environment for Black male athletes to succeed in college; and more interdisciplinary scholarship that examines the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black male student-athletes (Waller, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of religion and spirituality on Black male college athletes attending PWIs. The ensuing research design chapter addressed how the researcher explored the stated research problem.
Chapter III: Research Design

Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.

—Booker T. Washington

This study explored the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black male college athletes who attend a predominantly White institution of higher education. More specifically, the study was designed to examine religion and spirituality as a potential coping mechanism for Black male student-athletes who encounter racialized experiences, have challenges with academic success, and who struggle with identity development. The results of this research informed efforts to improve the experiences of Black male college athletes as they navigate collegiate campuses throughout the United States. In this chapter, the researcher provided an overview of the qualitative design utilized. Additionally, a concise depiction of the principal participants and a description of the research site was presented. Finally, the researcher offered the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Research Question

This research study sought to address the gap in the literature through a qualitative research project that explored the following central research question: How do Black male college athletes attending a predominately White institution experience religion and spirituality as a form of support? To address this question, the following driving questions were examined in this study:

1. How do Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality when confronted with racism on campus?
2. How do Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality with the challenges of academic success?
3. How do Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality to make sense of identity?

**Qualitative Research Approach**

This study utilized a qualitative approach to understanding the research problem. The qualitative methodology focused on exploring meaning (e.g., how individuals make sense of the world, how they experience events, what meaning they attribute to phenomena) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In other words, qualitative researchers are more preoccupied with the quality of experience, rather than causal relationships.

Qualitative research is a positioned endeavor that locates the observer in the world. It is comprised of a set of interpretative, material practices that makes the world visible. In essence, these practices transform the world. The world turns into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) also asserted that qualitative research involves an interpretative and naturalistic approach: “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). By paying close attention to the natural settings in which events and processes occur, it is possible to uncover the subtleties and nuances of phenomena through qualitative inquiry. Therefore, qualitative studies hold tremendous explanatory power and possess an authenticity that has a unique and meaningful impact on readers.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

Research is an inquiry whereby data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted in some way to “understand, describe, predict or control an educational or psychological phenomenon or to empower individuals in such contexts” (Mertens, 2005, p. 2). From a philosophical perspective,
this study aligned most strongly with the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). The interpretivism paradigm is considerably different from postpositivism in that it adheres to the position of multiple, equally authoritative, and apprehendable realities. Butin (2010) contended that the interpretivism paradigm does not fall into the category of being eternally singular; instead its reality is constructed in the mind of individuals, groups, and cultures. It is a story told that remains ongoing and varied. For the interpretivist, “there is no single or authoritative truth … since every group or culture privileges the truth of their particular viewpoint” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). The interpretivist will not forcibly arbitrate between opposing declarations of actual truth to determine which is best; however, she or he might accurately and thoroughly document the perspective under investigation (Butin, 2010).

As an interpretivist researcher, it’s important to recognize his role as part of the story being told because the researcher is the one examining and describing the research and must be mindful of this process (Butin, 2010). The hidden meanings within the stories, interviews, and observations should be allowed to surface without guiding its meanings by the researcher. The researcher and the participants must jointly create findings from the interactive dialogue and interpretation—that is, there must be a collective understanding and consciousness of various social and organizational realities.

A secondary philosophical influence on this work is critical theory, which serves as a disturbance and objection to what is considered as the status quo (Parker, 2015). In other words, the primary function and motive of the researcher is to help liberate various oppressed groups in society. Critical theory researchers aim to empower participants to work toward egalitarian and democratic change and transformation (Ponterotto, 2005). In concurring with critical theory, this
study displayed a tenor of advocacy and encouragement, as it called attention to the voices of students, often silenced or ignored.

**Methodology**

To understand the phenomenon outlined in the problem and purpose statements, and to answer the research question, the qualitative research method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for this study. The primary goal of IPA is to investigate how individuals make sense of their lived experiences through a close examination and interpretation of personal accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Given IPA’s emphasis on the meaning that individuals attribute to experiences and real-world settings (Larkin & Thompson, 2011), it was an appropriate selection for the investigation of the research question presented.

Jonathan Smith introduced IPA during the 1990s. His ground-breaking work positions IPA as an alternative, but complementary approach to most of the traditional qualitative methodologies, such as narrative and grounded theory (Smith, 1996). IPA was first used in the area of psychology, and much of the original work utilizing IPA transpired in health psychology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Wagstaff et al., 2014). From its origin forward, Smith (1996), along with many others have refined the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. It has gained in popularity within clinical and counseling psychology, as well as in educational and social psychology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is an approach to research which focuses on attempting to understand the experiences of the individual participant and what meaning these experiences hold (Smith, 2004). To examine this process, IPA draws upon the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.
Phenomenology. The historical movement of phenomenology was launched chiefly by phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. Husserl (1927), mathematician and philosopher, posited that phenomenology has as its task the systematic examination of the significance that individuals place on their experiences. Husserl devised this notion of intentionality as a guide to understanding how people interpret experiences and the awareness of their life’s realities (McCall, 1983). His focus on the interpretation of lived experiences contributed to the body of literature in phenomenological psychology that targets lived experiences as the basis for understanding human life (McCall, 1983; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology assumes that we can only know what we experience through conscious awareness and sensory experience (Husserl, 1927). It allows for naturalistic inquiry and interpretation (Bogdan & Taylor, 1990) that can unveil the common themes that are shared and understood by a group. Its value lies in its ability to record the experiences of individuals and to place them within categories that allow the researcher to identify the themes that are common to members of the group. By critically examining the participants’ stories and the descriptions of their experiences, the researcher gains a richer and more thorough understanding of the significance of the participants’ personal experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

Husserl’s thought was further developed by his protégé, Martin Heidegger (1962), into existential philosophy and hermeneutics. Heidegger was concerned with the ontological question of existence itself (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith, Yosso, et al., 2007). Heidegger viewed phenomenology as a process to study people in their world and interpret those experiences to create outcomes—hermeneutics. Heidegger posited that phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretative (Tymieniecka, 2002).
Furthermore, Heidegger suggests that “we” and our activities are always “in the world,” our being is being-in-the-world: our activities and the meaning things have for us, *are* by looking to our contextual relations to things in the world (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger, unlike Husserl, established phenomenology as a metaphysical ontology rather than as the foundational discipline (Heidegger, 1988).

**Hermeneutics.** Hermeneutics is an essential component of IPA. Hermeneutics (from the Greek word ‘to interpret’ or ‘to make clear’), maintains that one needs to comprehend the mindset of a person and their language which mediates one’s experiences of the world, to translate his or her message (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Hermeneutics involves the restoration of meaning and IPA draws on interpretation to make manifest what is typically hidden and to look for meanings embedded in human experience (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA researchers attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of their subject and, through interpretative activity, make meaning comprehensible by translating it. Simply put, the IPA study is a dynamic process with the active role of the researcher who influences the extent to which they get access to the participant’s experience and how, through interpretative activity, they make sense of the subject’s world. The analytical process in IPA describes a double hermeneutic or dual interpretation activity. First, the participants make meaning of their world and second, the researcher tries to decode that meaning to make sense of the participants’ meaning making (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The double hermeneutic is central to IPA research. Along with the participants, the researcher can look at the same phenomena (the participants’ experiences) yet maintain different viewpoints. According to Smith et al. (2009), the researcher’s theoretical knowledge allows him or her to perceive what the participant does not.
The double hermeneutic process allows the researcher to take note of emerging patterns from the participants’ narratives, which they are not aware of (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

IPA synthesizes ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics resulting in a method which is descriptive (Husserl) because it is concerned with how things appear and letting words speak for themselves, and interpretative (Heidegger) because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). For Heidegger, the essence of human understanding is hermeneutic: the knowledge of the everyday world derives from our interpretation of it (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nyström, 2001).

**Idiography.** The third theoretical orientation which IPA relies upon is idiography. Idiography refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases and examining individual perspectives of study participants in their unique contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Wagstaff et al., 2014). The fundamental principle behind the idiographic approach is to explore every single case, before producing any general statements. Idiographic contrasts with the nomothetic tenets which underlie most empirical work in psychology, in which groups and populations are studied to establish the probability that certain phenomena will occur under specific conditions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA relies on idiography—that is, the primary concentration must be on the specific rather than the collective.

Furthermore, idiography investigates how a particular person, in a specified context, makes sense of a given phenomenon (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). It undertakes a worldview in which individuals actively participate in the interpretation of their subjective world. In this world, there is no objective reality or objective truth (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). The researcher plays an integral role in the generation and interpretation of data (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Given its idiographic emphasis, IPA guards against making claims of the transferability
of results to broader populations (Smith & Osborn, 2008). A theoretical rather than empirical
generalizability is produced whereby readers can build connections between the findings, their
personal and professional experiences, and the existing literature (Smith & Osborn, 2008).
Readers are encouraged to reflect on the particular applicability of the research results. That
capture what it is to be human at its most basic (Smith et al., 2009).

Rationale for IPA

The primary goal of IPA research is to understand how individuals attribute meaning to
their lived experiences by conducting a detailed analysis of their accounts (Smith & Eatough,
2007; Smith et al., 2009). That is, it gives voice to participants by capturing the essence of their
stories and making sense of their experiences by thoughtfully and systematically sharing an
interpretation of the content (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). The flexibility of IPA research
permits themes and ideas to emerge during analysis, complementing the authenticity and utility
of the findings (Smith, 2004).

This study, an examination of the influence of religion and spirituality on Black male
college athletes attending PWIs, aligned well with IPA research. According to Larkin and
Thompson (2011), IPA research centers around a topic that is central to participants.
Additionally, it provides an opportunity for participants to share invaluable insights about their
experiences, yielding a robust body of evidence to be analyzed. The use of IPA is essential to
the researcher’s goal of calling attention to the influence of religion and spirituality on Black
male college athletes attending PWIs.

Participants

The chief concern in IPA is to give full appreciation to each participant’s account (case)
(Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA research is conducted using a sample of individuals that can
speak profoundly about the research topic (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007). For this reason, samples in IPA studies are usually small and homogenous, which enables a detailed and very time consuming case-by-case analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The study aimed to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is contrary to other methodologies, such as grounded theory, which engages in constant comparisons and seeks exceptions or odd cases which helps them produce a multidimensional dynamic approach of how different factors affect human behaviors (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

This study included interviews with eight participants that self-identified with religion and spirituality as it relates to its influence on student success in college. The participants were Black male athletes, at least 18 years of age, and enrolled as a junior or senior student. The students were at least junior classification to indicate a measure of persistence. Measuring student-athletes’ religiousness and spirituality after a sustained period was critical because it established the effectiveness and influence in their lives. Before conducting the interviews, participants completed a demographic questionnaire.

To gain specific information related to the phenomena, participants were recruited using purposeful sampling: the practice of selecting participants that can speak to and inform the research question (Creswell, 2013). An introductory recruitment email was sent to the school’s athletic department (Appendix A). The email was forwarded to all third and fourth year Black male student-athletes. The email gave a brief description of the study. Interested students were asked to respond to the researcher directly. Additional email contact was made to various on-campus ministries (i.e., Athletes in Action; Fellowship of Christian Athletes). Since many Black student-athletes are affiliated with these on-campus organizations, they were a suitable
resource for potential participants. Through purposeful sampling, the researcher gathered rich and vital information for the study (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling created the opportunity to find students already seeking ways to explore and understand the influence of their religious and spiritual experiences while in college.

The research site selected for this study is a public research institution in the Southeast region of the United States. According to US News & World Report (2018), the research site is ranked among the top Tier 2 national universities. The research site is committed to providing access to a broad array of higher educational opportunities through its network of campuses. The institution has achieved special distinction in areas such as ocean engineering, biomedical research, arts, and humanities. Athletically, the school competes at the NCAA Division 1 Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level and the NCAA Men’s Basketball Division 1 level. This type of institution was desired for this study to find participants who identify with religion and spirituality.

**Procedures**

The selection of IPA as a methodology was due to the influences of each aspect of the research design, commencing with crafting a research question that refines the meaning-making process of a significant life event or phenomenon (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The data collection and analysis procedures of this study follow standard IPA research recommendations and are described fully in the following sub-sections.

**Data Collection**

Upon securing approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix D), data was collected for this qualitative study. Data collection approaches for phenomenological research usually involves direct interaction with individuals on a one to one
basis or direct communication with individuals in a group setting (Moustakas, 1994). By seeking to discover the meaning individuals make of their lived experiences interview questions were best suited for this study (van Manen, 1990).

Smith and Osborn (2008) suggested that the researcher must establish a well-organized interview guide (Appendix C) before data collection. Per IPA data collection protocol, the researcher used one-on-one, open-ended, one to one-half hour, semi-structured interviews with eight Black male college athletes who identify with being spiritual and religious. Semi-structured interviews were considered to be an exemplary data collection method for IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher and the participant to engage in a dialogue in real time. The interview process also gave enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which the researcher investigated in more detail with further questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Open-ended questions allowed participants to tell their stories, elaborate on their experiences and aim to be descriptive of the meaning created (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) argued that “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” is at the heart of interviewing (p. 9). The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed, rich, thick descriptions from the participants about their religious and spiritual experiences while attending a PWI (Geertz, 1973).

All interviews were recorded with the permission of each participant using two digital recording devices with one serving as a backup in case the primary device malfunctioned. Smith et al. (2009) noted that IPA requires a verbatim record of data that is collected (p. 73). That is, all the interviews and interactions with the participant must be recorded. All recorded interviews were transcribed into text by a professional transcription service (Rev.com). The researcher
received a non-disclosure agreement from Rev.com to ensure confidentiality. Individual interviews with the participants were conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and on campus location, and scheduled for one to one-half hours. The researcher wrote detailed notes of any significant observations about the interview and compiled memo notes immediately afterward (Saldaña, 2015). The researcher maintained a journal during the interviews to write and interpret impressions and emotions that emerged.

The researcher maintained a password-protected file that documented participants’ actual names and their pseudonyms. All audio files and written documents containing data was stored electronically on the researcher’s personal computer. Files were backed up using an external storage device and in a secure data storage program online. Passwords and other security features were maximized. Any physical documents (field notes, consent forms, etc.) related to the research project was stored in a locked cabinet, and the key was kept in possession of the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Analyzing data in qualitative research involves preparing and organizing data and processing the data into themes, identifying patterns, then summarizing and attempting to find meaning (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), the researcher custom builds, revise, and choreographs the data analysis for the study. The data analysis phase can be further broken down into three main elements, which are: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These elements are common to most types of qualitative analysis, including IPA.

With the IPA methodology, it’s important to focus on the participants’ attempts to make sense of their experiences. IPA involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative
relationship with the transcript. Smith et al. (2009) designed a structure for analysis that includes several stages, which the researcher followed. The first stage encompassed the reading and re-reading of the interview text, listening to all the data. Then, the researcher made initial notes of areas of interest. During this stage, note taking included the recording of critical phrases and descriptive and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009). The next stage involved working directly with the notes and comments to identify and develop a preliminary list of categories, themes, and patterns, comparing across participants (Roberts, 2010).

It should be noted that this process is not prescriptive, and there are many ways of working with the data (Smith et al., 2009). However, at the end of this stage, emergent themes were constructed, and the analyzed data was traced through the process from the initial transcripts to the final structure of themes (Smith et al., 2009).

The next step was coding the data. This involved the process of organizing data into small chunks before any meaning is made of those chunks. According to Handler and Turner (1992), “Assembling chunks of data reduce the volume of words into smaller and more analyzable units” (p. vii). Next, the researcher used a descriptive coding process to generate more broad themes based on the identified codes considered relevant to the study. According to Saldaña (2015), descriptive coding provides the reader with what one saw and heard. Descriptive coding offered a clear set of categories for the researcher to determine the secondary coding, in this case theming the data (Saldaña, 2015). The themes were developed into the primary basis of description in the findings. The next step in the data analysis process involved the presentation of the themes. The researcher used a qualitative narrative to present a detailed discussion of several themes. Finally, the data was interpreted for meaning (Creswell, 2013).

**Ethical Considerations**
To ensure adherence to ethical procedures, the researcher sought IRB (Appendix D) approval. The researcher followed the guidelines of the IRB to ensure that all participant’s rights were respected and that no participant was put at risk through participation in this study. All study participants received a consent form (Appendix B) outlining their rights as voluntary participants. To protect privacy, participants remained anonymous, and responses and information identifying the school they attend was generalized to ensure confidentiality. In this study, all participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity further. Findings were aggregated by themes for presentation to prevent identification of any individuals. Every effort was made to ensure the findings would not be linked directly to individuals or the university.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is attempting to establish credibility and objectivity within the data collection process, data analysis, and reporting of information (Patton, 2002). The researcher employed member checking, and the use of rich data to enhance trustworthiness. Maxwell (2013) described that with member checking, the researcher solicits feedback about the data collected from the participants. With member checking, participants received the opportunity to offer input as to whether the data presented is an accurate representation of their experiences. Samples of the initial analysis was sent to the participants to gather their thoughts and to achieve the most authentic representation of the participants’ viewpoint.

During the interview process, the researcher continually asked follow up questions to make sure that the participants’ responses were captured correctly. The researcher also offered summaries of some reactions that were unclear while the interview was still in process. Furthermore, the researcher followed up with students via email regarding any further
information that was unclear based on the collected data. It was essential to capture any small
details to help ensure credibility and trustworthiness, even though they may not have seemed
significantly relevant to the overall purpose of the study.

Rich data was collected through the interview and transcription process. Maxwell (2013)
noted that rich data is derived from interview studies where “such data generally requires
verbatim transcripts of the interviews, not just notes on what you felt was significant” (p. 126).
The interview protocol was designed to pull detailed descriptions from the participants about
their experiences. These experiences were highlighted in the findings chapter, including lengthy
quotes to help describe the themes that emerged throughout the data collection process.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. First, the generalizability of the findings was
restricted. Since the participants fit a selected identity, their experiences were not assessed as a
representation of all Black males on campus. That is, since IPA emphasizes the importance of an
idiographic focus, claims of the transferability of results to broader populations are restricted
(Smith & Osborn, 2008). This research was intended to reflect some of the experiences of eight
participants who have experienced the influence of religion and spirituality on student success.

Second, religion and spirituality may influence some of the outcomes for Black male
college athletes. However, there may be other factors that may contribute to academic success,
appropriate responses to racialized encounters, and identity development. This study was limited
to exploring the influence of religion and spirituality on these factors.

Finally, religious diversity was limited. Since most of the Black male athletes identified
with Protestant Christianity, the recruitment response by other religious affiliations was minimal.
Notwithstanding, this study offered rich data on the influence of religion and spirituality on Black male student-athlete success.

**Summary**

This research investigation explored the influence of religion and spirituality on Black male college athletes who attend a PWI. IPA methodology was utilized to give voice and make sense of the participants’ accounts through in-depth interviews. Standard IPA procedures were followed to collect and analyze data in a predominantly inductive manner (Smith, 2004). Given the active role of the researcher in qualitative research and IPA in particular, precautions were taken to control for bias. Overall, the strength of IPA research resides in its ability to capture the meaning that individuals attribute to significant life experiences (Smith et al., 2009), such that others can understand, appreciate, and support them and those in similar situations in more meaningful ways. The subsequent chapter addressed the study’s findings and analysis of the data obtained from the participants.
Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

There is nothing like looking if you want to find something.

—J. R. R. Tolkien

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine how Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality as a form of support while attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). The analysis of the interview data yielded six superordinate and twenty emergent themes. The superordinate and emergent themes were: (a) Trusting in the Viability of a Transcendent Source (trusting the process; relies on faith for grounding; experiences of being spiritual; being in relationship); (b) Manifesting Presence Through Prayer (connecting with God through prayer; seeking blessings and protection; seeking guidance for success); (c) Transcendent Source for Struggle, Hope, and Resilience (challenges to academic achievement; acts of discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice; experiences with loss and hardship; engaging law enforcement); (d) Opportunities for Growth (being the best possible person; developing through experiences; impacting the lives of others); (e) Making Sense of a Developing Identity (Black male identity; athletic identity; religious identity; understanding purpose and destiny); and (f) Other Sources of Encouragement and Aid (religious institutions; coaches, professors, and academic advisors). The researcher discussed the emergent themes, and these themes identified as those recurring in at least four of the eight participants’ interview data.

Study Participants

The researcher purposefully recruited a similar group of eight participants, based on the guidelines for conducting an IPA study provided by Smith et al. (2009). This study included interviews with eight participants that self-identified with religion and spirituality as it relates to its influence on their lived experiences. The religious and spiritual traditions of the participants
consisted of the following: six participants identified with Christianity, one participant identified as a Jehovah’s Witnesses, and one participant identified with the Muslim/Islamic faith tradition. The participants were Black male college athletes, at least 18 years of age, and enrolled as a junior or senior student.

Description of Participants

**Jackie Robinson.** Jackie is a senior member of the Baseball team. He is pursuing a degree in Sociology. He has a 2.8 GPA. Jackie was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and has lived his entire life in the South. Jackie expressed enthusiasm about becoming a Division 1 athlete. He hailed: “It’s been great. I feel like I’m more exposed to the world just because playing on the bigger stage, more people know your name and more people know who you are … it’s been a good experience.” Jackie grew up in what he labels, a “household of Christianity.” His parents raised him with a dedication to the Christian faith. Jackie conveyed his Christian upbringing in this manner: “We went to Bible study, Sunday school … involved in the church, on the praise team and stuff like that. I pretty much had a strong religious upbringing.”

**Kareem Abdul.** Kareem is a junior member of the Basketball team. He is pursuing a degree in Sociology. He has a 3.3 GPA. Kareem was born in Saint-Pierre, Martinique and grew up in Canada. Kareem speaks three languages. He is fluent in Creole and French, with English being his third language. Becoming a Division 1 athlete was important to Kareem. He was “grateful for the opportunity” to play basketball and earn his degree. Kareem grew up in the Baptist faith tradition. He shared: “I grew up as a Christian. And my family, on Sunday we always go to church. And we were making sure that we prayed, and we go to Bible class, and things like that.”
**Barry Sanders.** Barry is a senior member of the Football team. He is pursuing a degree in Business Management (Entrepreneurship). He maintains a 3.1 GPA. Barry was born in Tallahassee, Florida. His upcoming graduation continues the long legacy of family members who have graduated college, which includes his mother, sister, and many aunts and uncles. For Barry, becoming a Division 1 player, “turned out to be something great.” He is the author of his first book. Barry grew up as a member of the Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church traditions. Barry appreciated his parents for raising him in the church. He reflected: “I think with getting into church early thanks to my mom, it helped me understand who God is or how the Bible work [sic] or how life work [sic] with karma or whatever that may be. How you treat people.”

**Emmitt Smith.** Emmitt is a senior member of the Football team. He is pursuing a degree in Exercise Science and Health Promotion. He has a 3.1 GPA. Emmitt was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. Emmitt’s parents were both from Trinidad, and he grew up within a Trinidadian culture. Emmitt was excited about being a Division 1 athlete. He retorted: “I would say here at this school; they’ve treated me very well.” Emmitt grew up in the Pentecostal church tradition and never departed from it. He posited, “I’m still rooted and strong there.” For Emmitt, going to church “was the only way I know. I’d be going to church every Sunday consistently.”

**Jim Brown.** Jim is a senior member of the Football team. He is pursuing a degree in Public Management. He retains a 3.0 GPA. Jim was born in Tampa, Florida. Jim’s parents were college graduates, and he is following in the family tradition. Jim’s father was a world class sprinter and qualifier for the 1984 Olympics. Jim expressed great excitement at being a Division 1 athlete. He shared: “It’s just been an amazing journey for me. I’m glad where I’m at
right now.” Jim grew up in the Baptist church tradition. As a young child, the church congregation prayed over his future because it believed in the African proverb that held: “[It] takes a village to raise a child.” Jim asserted, “I’ve always just been involved in church, Sunday school, the whole nine, Wednesday night service.”

**Jerry Rice.** Jerry is a junior member of the Football team. He is pursuing a degree in Communications. He has a 2.7 GPA. Jerry was born in Apopka, Florida. He has an older brother who was the first member of his family to go to college. His brother also played professional football with the Cleveland Browns. Jerry grew up primarily as a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses faith tradition. His mother was a Jehovah’s Witnesses, and his father was a Christian. Jerry explained his unique upbringing: “You can imagine what that’s like in a household ... I kind of celebrated Christmas, but I didn’t. I never had a birthday party, but I got birthday gifts. Eventually, I grew out of it [Christianity], is what I would say. I followed my mom in that aspect.”

**Lawrence Taylor.** Lawrence is a senior member of the Football team. He is pursuing a degree in Public Safety Administration. He has a 2.8 GPA. Lawrence was born in Miami, Florida. Lawrence grew up in extreme poverty, and becoming a Division 1 athlete has “been really amazing.” He also proclaimed: “It’s been really humbling, just obviously coming from where I came from. The first time I ever had my own room, my own bed to myself. It was a lot of things that were different for me coming to college.” Lawrence grew up in the Muslim/Islamic faith tradition. Lawrence’s parents converted to Islam when he was a small child. In sharing the story of his upbringing, he declared: “I ended up obviously being Muslim. And being a Muslim, it teaches you so much patience, modesty, to care for others, to think about others before you think about yourself.”
Walter Payton. Walter is a junior member of the Football team. He is pursuing a degree in Public Safety. He has a 2.6 GPA. Walter was born in Stone Mountain, Georgia and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. Walter is the first member of his family to graduate high school, and the first one to attend college. Walter was happy to be the first one in his family to achieve educational success. He conveyed: “Yeah, it makes me feel great that I have nieces and nephews that basically look up to me, so that keeps me going, and that just makes me feel good.” Walter expressed his enjoyment about becoming a Division 1 athlete by declaring, “Honestly, it’s great.” Walter grew up in a “big Christian family.” Walter’s family did not go to church consistently. However, he acknowledged his family’s religious consciousness by stating: “We always prayed through hard times and the good times, so praying to God is something that we always do, most definitely.”

Trusting in the Viability of a Transcendent Source

Black male college athletes who attend PWIs often utilize religion and spirituality as a ritual of care, support, and encouragement when engaged with on and off campus related experiences. The first superordinate theme in this study captured the participants’ experiences with placing hope, conviction, and dependence in a superior, supreme, or supernatural resource, to aid them as they engaged the campus environment. Participants trusted and relied upon the presence and the perceived actions of a non-human entity (God\(^5\)). In this case, it refers to how each participant viewed God as a capable transcendent source in his daily life.

The researcher discovered four specific areas of convergence among the participants related to the reliance on a supernatural cause. The participants’ consistent belief, faith, and dependence on God’s presence during their lived experiences were significant. Second, the

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\(^5\) In Christianity, God’s name is Yahweh or Jehovah. The Jehovah’s Witnesses also use Jehovah as God’s name. In Islam, God’s name is Allah.
participants demonstrated reliance on their religion and spirituality as a foundation for managing challenging experiences. Furthermore, the participants experienced important moments of expressed spirituality amid their peers. Finally, the participants exhibited an intimate and involved relationship with the presence of God. Thus, the four emergent themes discussed here are: trusting the process; relies on faith for grounding; experiences of being spiritual; and being in relationship.

**Trusting the Process**

The participants had a deep sense of the significance of placing their trust in God. Trusting God, in matters that pertained to their successes was critical since the participants believed that all circumstances would arrange accordingly for the higher good. The participants experienced moments that whenever an outcome was unclear or uncertain, they sustained an unshakable certainty in the Divine plan for their lives. It was essential to the participants to maintain a keen sense that trusting the process would be beneficial. For example, when Lawrence was asked how does he use religion and spirituality to overcome some of his struggles, he shared:

Like I said, just kept having faith and kept trusting the process really. Just kept trusting in God and trusting that if I did the right things that I would see good, positive things come out of it. I really just followed that, and this really how I follow my life.

Lawrence established the practice of employing an unquestioning trust that God was present and working in the midst of all of his circumstances. He believed that by doing things correctly good results would come from it. Lawrence committed to following this custom.

Similar to Lawrence, Emmitt, being acutely aware of the “many temptations,” and “adversities” he experienced, believed that no matter how many difficulties or challenges that he
undertook, “it’s not even a question to trust Him.” Emmitt placed his trust in God: no matter the circumstance, no matter the situation. He unquestionably positioned himself to believe that every part of his experiences would harmonize for his good.

Barry, equally, appraised his religion and spirituality through the process of developing confidence that God was dependable and that he could be trusted to meet his needs. He proclaimed:

What I’m saying is that from a spiritual standpoint I’ve always put my trust in God. I never worry about, “Dang, where I’m I going to get my next money from? Who going to help support me?” This and that, I don’t stress. From a spiritual standpoint, I have been a witness to see that things happen on time. Without being on athletic scholarship, God provided family and that support to help me get through school.

Barry’s religion and spirituality pointed to the fact that he would not worry about the events in his life—such as money, or who would help support him. His experiences imparted an understanding that things will happen promptly when needed. Barry felt that God would provide the help that both he and his family would need during his college journey.

Jerry held that it was essential to leave things in God’s hands. When asked how does he use religion and spirituality to help him be successful, he proclaimed: “let Him deal with it.” Jerry saw little reason to be apprehensive about the outcome of the events of his life. Whether it was on the field or in the classroom, Jerry held an assurance that God was in control. Jerry reflected on his understanding of trusting the process. “At the end of the day, He knows what’s best for you, and He has plans for you. So not to stress so much and not worry about things that’s out of your control.” Jerry acknowledged that God was in control of the events of his life.
So, therefore, there was no need to be anxious or worry about the outcome. God has it all in control.

**Relies on Faith for Grounding**

The participants appeared to find structural stability, security, and control through religion and spirituality. Several of the participants experienced it as a benefit for character development. Additionally, for many of the participants, their behavior and responses in certain situations were guided by the foundation of their religion and spirituality. Lawrence expressed that religion and spirituality were crucial to his overall development and kept him grounded while also being instrumental in helping to build his moral character. He argued:

> So I think religion is good because it helps keep us grounded, it gives us morals, it gives us guidelines to go by because there’s a lot of things you shouldn’t be doing in general. I think religion gives everybody that conscience in the back of your head. And when you think about doing something like stealing, or doing drugs maybe, or going to kill somebody, whatever the case may be, it gives you that little thinking in your heart, in your chest, whatever the case may be, in your mind, it makes you think, “Okay, this isn’t right.” Otherwise, we just all be running around crazy like chickens with our head cut off.

Lawrence acknowledged the criticality of being grounded by one’s faith. He understood that it was invaluable for making moral decisions and maintaining an emotional and psychological balance to life.

Jerry’s experiences with religious and spiritual grounding were comparable to Lawrence. He found that spiritual grounding helped him to endure a myriad of enticements that athletes experience on campus on a daily basis. He noted that there are “so many temptations on campus
and so easy to do the wrong thing. You got to go back to your roots and really think before you act, most of the time.” Jerry was aware of the dangers of being exposed to the lures of college life. Jerry avoided the subtle traps that occur on many college campuses affording him the opportunity to “keep a clear mind” to maintain academic and athletic success.

Similar to Jerry and Lawrence, Kareem applied religion and spirituality to help him stay grounded and not fall to the persuasions of college living. While acknowledging that it was challenging to be spiritual, Kareem recognized that it was vital to utilize it for strength and endurance. He posited:

And on campus, on campus is pretty much it’s kind of hard to be spiritual. Because there’s a lot of temptation. Parties, and as an athlete, it’s kind of hard to stay away from these temptations, because people give you attention. People always come at you, and you can easily get yourself in trouble, because of the temptation. So this one of the many thing (sic) I use spirituality for. Against my temptation on campus. Doing the right thing, saying the right thing. So it’s mainly how I use spirituality on campus.

In spite of Kareem’s challenges to be spiritual on campus, he retrieved it to support him as he experienced numerous tempting invitations that surround the college environment, such as campus parties and other social events. Notoriety as an athlete could bring about potential dangers, and Kareem was sure to lean on his spirituality to help him do what he regarded as the “right thing.”

Walter recognized religion and spirituality as support for being productive in all aspects of his life. He contends that relying on God and a word from God allowed him to be creative, useful, and constructive. He expressed his religion and spirituality as an essential tool for productivity. He reacted:
Honestly, I always thought that was a great feeling, getting the word from the man up above, because it seemed like to me, that any time I didn’t get a word from Him, or I didn’t pray, or anything of that nature, I wouldn’t produce in anything that I was doing. Whether it was school, real life, or playing ball I always took that serious.

Walter was grounded in the belief that hearing a word or message from God was central to how he would perform. He based success in school, in his daily life, or his performance on the field to his interactions with God. Walter sincerely took these moments, with great care and concern.

Experiences of Being Spiritual

The participants identified moments where their religion, and more precisely, their spirituality functioned during interactions with others. Participants regarded experiences where they felt more spiritual or acted on their spirituality in a more significant way than at other times. Jim shared an episode when he was hit by a car while walking to class. After being hit, at first he felt outraged, but then he described how he sensed a calming feeling come over him. He explained:

I feel that spirit moment to let him know that [that the accident was a mistake and everything was going to be alright]. I asked him if he was okay. Before he even asked me if I was okay. And me for not even being hurt. I mean, I had a cracked rib, and a herniated disc in my back, concussion. So, it was a pretty hard hit. But I feel like that was a spiritual moment, like [I] had a sense of calmness.

Jim’s response to the accident was extraordinary. He displayed his religion and spirituality by refusing to be angered by an incident where he apparently was injured by another person. He saw the need first to be concerned about the feelings of another person and be less concerned about his welfare. Jim cited this as a moment to share God’s love.
Kareem celebrated experiences of being spiritual by revealing an intense sensitivity to hearing what he insinuated was the voice of God. He vocalized his experience in this manner:

But you know, sometimes you feel like He’s not there, He’s not giving you no sign. But He always there, you always have a little voice behind your head, don’t do that. Or you know do this, and don’t do that. So me, I think that little voice it’s hearing me, it’s not really ... people call it the subconscious. I don’t really call it the subconscious, I think it’s Him talking to me. So I really think I’m more of a spiritual type.

Kareem alleged that his spirituality was communicated through hearing God’s voice. Kareem experienced moments where he felt isolated and that God was not present with him. However, he settled on the understanding that God was always present and that his presence could be sensed through hearing God talking to him.

Lawrence recognized his experiences of being spiritual through his expression of faith during his childhood. Lawrence grew up in extreme poverty and had many life-altering experiences. In reflecting on his 13-year-old self, he described his experiences:

There were so many things that just hit me, and it was just like I’m just so blessed. I don’t know. It’s scary to look back at it because it was like how did somebody through all those things [his house burning down; homelessness; living in poverty] have faith, through all the things I was going through, and still even now go through? How did that kid have faith at 13 years old? That’s scary, you know? I don’t know. It’s crazy to think.

Lawrence evoking the nature of his childhood experiences indicated that he valued those experiences and that he housed his spirituality in the faith that he had to withstand his circumstances. Reflecting on his life and the person that he was, he saw a durable commitment
to his spirituality, and as his older self, he saw it as incredible that at that point in his life he could reflect an inner sense of spirituality.

Jackie’s experiences of being spiritual directly connect to race or ethnicity. When asked if there is a difference between the spirituality of Blacks and Whites, he theorized: “I think it is a different spirituality. I think that Black people are more spiritual just because of history, our ancestors were more spiritual. That’s just been a thing that’s been going on forever.” Jackie further suggested that strong emotional responses expressed within the church environment imply that greater spirituality is at work. He speculated: “You’ll hear people speaking in tongues and stuff and just getting in deep worship, and I just feel like showing more emotion is more spiritual because I feel like they can actually feel that coming over them, and that’s what makes them react that way.” Jackie held that the depth of one’s spirituality is tied to experiences of oppression. He viewed that the historical persecution of African Americans has produced greater spirituality among its people. Jackie believed that displaying more emotions indicates superior spirituality.

**Being in Relationship**

The participants revealed a strong consciousness of an intimate and long-standing relationship with God. The participants displayed confidence in an association with God and that God was connected to them as a source of encouragement during many of their lived experiences. Emmitt argued that “when you’re spiritually grounded, you know that God is with you … you just know God is with you, you feel it.” Reflecting further, Emmitt acknowledged that he had a long-standing relationship with God. His long standing relationship with God was essential to him. He thought: “It’s truly amazing now that I think about it. It’s like man we’ve been going for a long time … this is honestly pretty cool now that I’m talking about it, just
thinking about it … Hey, it’s been a long, long time.” Emmitt’s account exhibited confidence that God was with him through all of his endeavors. After pondering his thoughts, he was astonished and pleased that he had maintained an enduring relationship with God.

Similar to Emmitt’s experience, Jackie shared how there was a need in his life to get closer to God and that getting close to God was indispensable to him. When asked about his relationship with God, he uttered:

To me, I felt like with everything I was dealing with in my life, my mom and dad being divorced and living with a single mom, struggling all our life, I just felt like I needed somebody to put my faith into. That’s when I started becoming closer to God and stuff. I started drawing closer to my relationship with God.

Jackie sought a closer relationship with God as he struggled through the pain of living with the experience of divorced parents. Jackie put his faith in God, which ultimately developed into a much deeper and endearing relationship.

Jim communicated his relationship with God as being more spiritual and less religious. He felt it was essential to have a conversant relationship with God than one that was unfamiliar to him. Jim sensed a hypocrisy in the lives of many Christians who claim to have a relationship with God but in actually its one that’s uninformed and deficient in experiential knowledge. He proclaimed:

I would say, I mean, I try not to keep it religious because I feel like it’s more about having a relationship with God. And having a relationship with Jesus. Even I would associate myself as a Christian. But I feel like it’s a lot of people who say they’re Christians, but don’t have a relationship with God. My relationship with Jesus and I feel that’s probably the most important thing at the end of the day, not calling you something,
not being a part of a program, not saying, oh I go to church. But actually having a relationship with God.

Jim’s account detailed that a relationship with God is not an abstract concept or something that you claim. It is heartfelt and deep-rooted. Jim believed that it is more than saying you are in a relationship with God, but being in a relationship with God.

Kareem’s story about his relationship with God was unique in that he saw God as a co-pilot and significant contributor to his success on the field. He believed that God was in control of events that took place in the games he played. He voiced:

I’m going to talk to him the whole time and ask him to help me out, and let me go through this. Help me out, even during games. I’m going to talk to Him, “let that play develop.” “Let him hit that shot.” And that’s really how it is. So me and Him, it’s probably ... I think He in me, and I’m in Him, so I basically just be like before I play games, I be like, “Take the lead, and You do what You want to do. You got it.” It’s a union.

Kareem understood his relationship with God as one that was integral to the events he experienced on the field. He believed that God was a guiding force that led to his success and that he was in complete alliance with God in the outcome of his performance on the field.

**Conclusions.** It was imperative for the participants to embody the requisite of maintaining a faithful dependency on religion and spirituality throughout their lives. The participants also understood through their lived experiences that God was forever present and, in essence, determined matters for their benefit. Moreover, the participants keenly preserved a principal belief that religion and spirituality is a foundation for making good decisions and modeling good behavior. Looking further, the participants’ religion and spirituality aided them in
comporting themselves well during significant life crises. Lastly, the participants’ religion and spirituality continually reinforced the engagement of an intimate relationship with God as needed support. The next superordinate theme discussed the participants’ association with prayer as a resource for survival.

**Manifesting Presence Through Prayer**

Black male college athletes utilize prayer as a survival skill and support mechanism when challenged with uncertain stress-related circumstances. The second superordinate theme in this study captured the participants’ association with prayer as a resource for the facilitation of their daily life experiences. The participants expressed a deep association with God through a commitment to prayer. Second, the participants sought Divine benevolence and safety for their day-to-day undertakings. Finally, the participants pursued direction for achievements both on and off the field. Therefore, the three emergent themes that signify these specific areas of convergence across participants were: connecting with God through prayer; seeking blessings and protection; and seeking guidance for success.

**Connecting with God Through Prayer**

Many of the participants found a deep sense of connection with religion and spirituality through the process of prayer. The participants regarded their frequent supplication with God as a source for understanding or coping with the countless events they experienced throughout their daily activities. Several of the participants, like Jerry, discerned a more meaningful connection with God through his prayers. He maintained that “I feel I connect with God more in prayer. I pray a lot. I pray about anything that’s on my mind or any situation I’m in. I just pray, and I believe you have to have faith in your prayers.” Jerry further explained that praying or petitioning God provided him a personal connection with God: a place to feel safe, without the
concern of being judged. He shared: “I feel special. I feel like it’s real. No one else is there. No one else has an opportunity to judge me. No one else has information on what I’m really praying about. It’s my personal, one on one space. Me and God.” Jerry’s response hints to the idea that his relationship or connection with God through his commitment to praying was exceedingly personal and created a close bond with God.

Jackie responded similarly to Jerry when discussing the subject of prayer. He believed that talking with God through the day was crucial. He explained that he would pray and talk to God throughout the day, “not just when I wake up,” he said. “And not just when I go to sleep but throughout the day, just thanking him a lot.” Jackie was grateful for what he alleged that God had done for him. He expressed his thankfulness during their daily conversations.

Lawrence also displayed a tremendous amount of gratitude for the things that God had done in his life. He conveyed that having the opportunity to pray was a reason for him to be grateful. He asserted:

But I think just that in general, that connection is a blessing because you just think about other people in the world. So many things that people got going on that’s so much worse than what you got going on. Even something as simple as getting up to go pray and get on your knees to prostrate is something a lot of people can’t even do. And I just think that small thing, those little things like that, it just really humbles you, like I said, and just makes you real grateful.

Lawrence was determined to acknowledge his appreciation for the insignificant events that happened in his life. Simple things, such as, being able to pray was noteworthy to him and created a sense of humility and thankfulness.
Several of the participants, when acknowledging a connection with God through the process of praying to Him, displayed a deep emotional response that prayer was the foundation for their relationship with God. Emmitt argued that “everything is done through prayer.” What’s more, he voiced that “prayer is my first response, not my last resort.” Emmitt believed that prayer was his everything and that he needed to pray for every situation. He shared: “With everything, I always pray — football to the classroom to eating or driving or sleeping. I always try to continuously pray. Prayer is my foundation. I just go from there. Without prayer, I can’t expect to do anything.” Emmitt postulated that praying was essential to him and it surrounded all the events in his life.

Along with Emmitt, both Kareem and Walter had a strong emotional response to their connection with God through prayer. Kareem maintained:

And I really like getting closer to Him at night, because that’s where I get my alone time. When you talk to God, it’s always a new song. It’s meant to be private. Like I’ll say it’s a private thing. Because He really knows what you want, so you can’t really ... it’s not like talking to a friend, a friend you can hide your real emotions. But saying certain words, play with the words. But He really know what you really want. So you can just be free, and let yourself go with Him.

Correspondingly, Walter issued a strong emotional response in explaining what prayer meant to him as an integral part of his relationship and connection to God. He declared:

That means a lot … that’s everything to me. So prayer is huge for me. I pray before the game; I pray every morning. I make sure, I don’t care how tired I am, I could come in four o’clock in the morning, I still will make sure I get on my knees and pray to the man up above.
In both Kareem’s and Walter’s case, they both valued such an intimate and caring connection with God through prayer. Private, cherished moments brought about a sense of self-worth and closeness to the relationship. No event or situation would prevent the participants from taking time to pray.

**Seeking Blessings and Protection**

The participants frequently sought Divine intervention during competition on the athletic field. Athletes are known to experience injuries and often engage in thoughtful meditation for safety, protection, and success as they compete. Jerry pointed out that even when he is preparing to compete in a game, “you say a prayer. You ask for Him to look over you and watch over [you], and everything like that.” Jerry’s request was tactical as he pursued protection as part of his preparation for athletic battle.

Lawrence aired the belief that Allah (God) was his source of security from injury while he fought on the field. After experiencing multiple surgical procedures due to past injuries, he continuously requested protection during on field clashes. Lawrence petitioned:

> I know I always say a prayer before I go out on the field. There are prayers you’re supposed to say, and if you say the prayer, you have angels out there with you. So I always say it every time I get on the field. I just be like, “Bismillah, Bismillah, Bismillah [Arabic].” And it’s basically just asking God to bless you and be with you.

Lawrence made a commitment to seeking protection from injury during athletic competition. He found security in an angelic presence which he believed would bless and protect him during the games he played.

Emmitt’s experiences with injuries on the field also caused him to seek Divine presence for his well-being. In recalling the events of his freshman season, he was reminded that he
injured his hamstring muscle prior to a spring contest. Doing well in the spring competition meant an opportunity for Emmitt to attain a position on the football team during the fall season. In reflecting on that experience, he recalled:

I remember I prayed and I was like, I have to practice. I remember I got so down and I was just praying to God. I was like, “Lord, please help me.” … I woke up and literally my hamstring, it was good to go, and in that spring game, I really excelled.

This scenario demonstrated that Emmitt actively requested God’s help in matters surrounding his physical healing from injury. Emmitt was thrilled that he recovered in time to compete for a position on the team and that his performance bested several of his challengers.

Several of the participants expressed deep gratitude and sincere thankfulness as they felt protected while participating in a dangerous activity. Walter intimated that he was grateful for the source of protection and safeguards he received. He proclaimed:

And everything was going well. Like, if I do a halftime prayer, “Lord I just want to thank You for looking over me at this half. I just want to ask You to continue to look over me and my family and keep me guided in the right direction, protect all my limbs.” And it’s like I thought, “Pray, I’ll go out the next half and do a phenomenal job.” It’s like He really watches over me, like He answers my prayers.

Walter believed that God was watching over him during the games he played and that God heard his prayers while he competed.

Similar to Walter, Barry experienced moments of gratitude when sharing his experiences with injury. Barry felt it was important to honor God for protecting him from harm. He was thankful to God because he witnessed many athletes injured on the field and according to him it was possible to “suffer injuries at any given moment.” Barry was grateful for the protection he
received, “even if it’s the slightest injury.” Whether it was “having some nicks and bruises on myself,” he was appreciative that God was protecting him and that any injury he sustained was not more damaging than what it could have been. The participants sought blessings and protection from God while playing in the game and their actions were a significant acknowledgment of how they used religion and spirituality as a support structure.

**Seeking Guidance for Success**

Several participants sought spiritual guidance to help them succeed as they engaged the college environment. The participants routinely petitioned God’s help and assistance for success with classroom responsibilities, athletic duties, and other social affairs. When Lawrence was asked how does he use his religion and spirituality for success in college, he indicated that he appealed to God for assistance and support with the process. He shared: “I just remember praying and just asking God to help guide me.” Lawrence invited God to be instrumental in his accomplishments. He pursued God’s guidance as a fundamental procedure for his success.

Jackie sought guidance from God to help him endure his challenges. He did not want God to remove some of the problems he was experiencing, but he most assuredly wanted advice that would help him to sustain his trials. He contended:

It’s so many times where I go through something and then I just turn to God … I feel like a lot of people are opinionated and want to try to give you the right advice and all of that, but sometimes that’s not what you need. … I just like to talk to God about my problems and ask him to not take my problems away but just help me through them.

Jackie voiced that when he experienced challenges he turned to God for advice. It was important to him to withstand stressful situations and not have them eliminated to make life easier.
Jerry was also keenly aware of the significance of using religion and spirituality to support him when he experienced challenges. He needed to maintain focus on his responsibilities and sought God’s help in that matter. He held:

I pray about it. I ask him to help me focus. Saying it and doing it is two different things. I could say I’m going to focus, but not really want to do it. You may need help. So I prayed about it, and I asked him to help me focus. I feel like He really came through. He put that in my life, and I’m still focused at this point right now.

Jerry made it clear that he prayed to God to help him stay focused, and on task. He believed that God came through when he needed assistance, and Jerry has remained committed to the process of seeking God for advice.

Kareem requested guidance as he experienced uncertainties and a lack of confidence on the basketball court. When the doubts arose, he remained faithful to looking for God to help him during these situations. He explained that God “kind of helped me with being more confident on the court. Being more vocal. Feeling good on the court.” Kareem expressed that God was intricately involved with how he played basketball and the choices he made on the court. He shared:

Even before a play happened, I’m going to talk to Him and let Him know, yeah, this is what I’m going to do, what you think? And let’s say the defense do something else. That’s what He think (sic), so that’s His answer right there. So I always have an interaction with Him on the court.

Kareem’s communication with God during athletic competition demonstrated his reliance on God to help build his confidence as a player and to provide insight into his decision making that led to success on the court.
Conclusions. The manifestation of God’s presence was fully witnessed through the lives of the participants. The participants presented as a core value an interactive engagement with a Divine presence through the ongoing experience of prayer. The mostly private encounter established an intimate unity between the participants and a transcendent source. The participants also pursued a protective presence that shielded them from harm as they engaged in athletic competition: in the hope that they would not meet any accidental physical injury. Furthermore, the participants regularly appealed to God for course directions in both school and personal affairs. God’s presence was instrumental in leading the participants into living productive and useful lives within the campus community. The following superordinate theme discussed the participants’ experiences with struggle, hope, and resilience.

Transcendent Source for Struggle, Hope, and Resilience

Black male college athletes point to frequent portrayals of difficult, demanding, and painful experiences from childhood through their college years. The third superordinate theme from this study captured the participants’ experiences of courage and toughness in managing many of life’s trials and struggles. Many of the participants showed how they confronted the difficulties experienced in the classroom. Second, the participants navigate experiences with racism and preconceptions of their being. Next, several of the participants specified instances of handling adversity and devastation. Lastly, the participants signified “shock” and “confusion” over moments of encounters with law enforcement. Hence, the four emergent themes that signify these specific areas of convergence across participants were: challenges to academic success; acts of discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice; experiences with loss and hardship; and engaging law enforcement.

Challenges to Academic Success
The participants experienced a myriad of difficulties with excelling in much of the classroom coursework. Having to deal with issues both in and out of school brought about unique complications for the participants. Each of the participants had their exclusive stories detailing the pressures they experienced in the classroom. For instance, Lawrence mentioned how difficult his first semester was when he entered college. He said that “Honestly … when I got here, it was tough. My first semester was really tough because I wasn’t used to writing a lot of big papers and wasn’t used to studying, having a study hall, all this different stuff that I told you.” Lawrence expressed that the college environment was a new experience for him regarding academic engagement. It was difficult for him to make the necessary adjustments to succeed educationally in college.

Jackie also listed his challenges with academic success. A tremendous amount of stress and anxiety built up within him as he attempted to be a productive student. He explained that when he first came to the school, he “got in those classes and … just saw the type of work that [he] had to do and it gave [him] anxiety.” Jackie’s anxious moments provided a basis for the reliance on religion and spirituality.

The participants’ academic challenges are noteworthy since athletic eligibility is a significant factor for these athletes. Athletes are required to maintain a minimum GPA to be eligible for participation. Eligibility was a specific matter of concern for Jerry. Jerry was troubled by the fact that during the previous semester, he struggled with his classes, right down to the very end of the course. He explained: “I experienced challenges probably last semester, honestly. It got down to the wire is what I would say. I got down to a do or die point where, if I don’t, I’m not going to be able to play.” Jerry expressed much trepidation surrounding the
possibility of academic ineligibility. While it was an extremely harrowing experience, he
maintained the minimum GPA and participated during the season.

Kareem’s challenges were also unique considering that he had experienced a language
barrier. English was Kareem’s third learned language, and it often presented problems for him in
the classroom. He described how he was having “a lot of challenges, just because of the
language barrier.” Kareem endured his language challenges for more than five years of living in
America and attending American schools. Kareem declared, “Because unlike the other students,
I can’t just go and be fluent. Me, I need to translate certain things from French to English.
Understand certain things.” Kareem endured his language impediment as he attempted to be a
successful student.

Like Kareem, Walter experienced academic trials during the previous spring semester.
He noted: “That was probably the toughest semester I ever had. I was taking stats,
microeconomics, macroeconomics, it was pretty tough. You know, that was tough ... out of all
the years ... this spring that passed recently was the toughest spring ever, man.” Walter
experienced his most challenging semester since he attended college. He disciplined himself,
however, to ensure he was eligible for the next season.

Barry’s academic challenges resulted from issues that extended far beyond the classroom.
His difficulties were directly affected by what was taking place back home where he lived.
Violent activities that surrounded his community seemed to reach him as he attempted to achieve
success in the classroom. He lamented: “From an academic standpoint it got more and more
challenging, just the stress, the frustration, so many shootings because people back at home were
getting murdered. It was just a lot to deal with and trying to focus academically.” Barry
demonstrated how the events of his home community had a direct impact on his academic focus. It was a significant burden on him, but religion and spirituality provided critical support. In observing several of the participants’ engagement with academic challenges, it is noteworthy to examine further how the participants depended on religion and spirituality as they confronted the various complications of academic success. When Kareem was asked to describe the role religion and spirituality played in his ability to remain in and persist through school, he explained it was important for him to get close to God to help him with his studies. He described:

That’s how close I got to God in order to help me get through my studies. And I’ll still be closer to God because now college is a different milestone. So it’s still going to be the same diagram. The closer I am to Him, the more successful I’ll be in my classroom. The less I am with Him, maybe the less I’ll be successful in my classroom too.

Kareem pointed out that his success in the classroom was directly related to a close embrace with God. The closer he would be the more successful he was. Conversely, if he found himself distant from God, he lacked the academic success he fought so hard to gain.

Lawrence explained that religion and spirituality gave him the patience to stay in school and endure the process. He said:

Honestly, just talk about my religion and my faith helping me get through school and staying in school was just, like I talked about earlier this whole time, patience. Just having that patience and having that faith and just trusting in something better, something bigger that I can see.

Lawrence believed that his faith gave him the perseverance he needed to succeed in school. He leaned and depended on a transcendent source to support his academic journey.
Jackie often turned to God when he felt anxious about the type of school work he was expected to complete. He explained that “I also turned to God in those situations too because when I have a test, I just ask him to just take my hand and instill in my mind that I can be successful.” Spiritual support was essential to Jackie. He sought a vital connection with God that made him feel like he could be successful in school.

Emmitt’s response to his academic challenges was practical in its application. He depended on religion and spirituality; however, he took personal responsibility for his academic success. When asked how does he maintain success in the classroom, he shared:

Prayer and study. Yeah. You’re keeping it like, faith is no good without works. You can’t just pray about it, and oh, well, I’m gonna pass the test now. I prayed. You still gotta put in your part. I’m just, all right, I’m gonna pray, and I’m going to study, and everything will be nice here after that. If I do my part and study and do all I can, then He’s gonna do his part as well. You just have to believe.

Emmitt believed that just trusting in one’s faith was not sufficient enough for success in the classroom. It was vital to him to take the time out and study the classroom material. He suggested that using religion and spirituality is inadequate by itself without the necessary efforts that a student must do to succeed academically. Emmitt declared the best strategy for student success in the classroom was “prayer and study.”

**Acts of Discrimination, Stereotyping, and Prejudice**

The participants frequently experienced some form of unwanted racial or ethnic bias as they engaged the college environment. False judgments and preconceptions by others were often commonplace occurrences that adversely affected how the participants navigated the university
setting. Fellow students and professors’ racial labeling and fundamental intolerance for perceived differences unfairly characterized the participants as “thugs” or “threatening.”

Each of the participants expressed their own experiences with racialized encounters. Lawrence felt that being a Black male was an intimidating factor for his White counterparts. He often experienced what he termed “that look” from White students as he interacted with them. He asserted:

I think being a Black male, especially a big Black male at a school like this or really in college period because there’s not a lot of colleges that aren’t predominantly White unless you talk about HBCUs. But being at a university like this, and every time you’re walking around, you almost have that look. You just know what I’m talking about, that look. You’re walking in the hallway. You see somebody, and he’s just staring at you like you might’ve punched him in the face or something or rob them.

Lawrence’s emotional response illustrated a deep frustration with White classmates. He sensed their apparent discriminatory perceptions of him as a menacing individual because of his large frame and dark skin.

Like Lawrence, Walter experienced negative and discriminatory perceptions of him being a “thug” because he wore dreadlocks and tattoos. He explained: “If a guy has dreads, he’s a thug. That’s the first thing that come to mind, is he’s bad. You got to watch that guy. He’s a hothead; he stays in trouble. And if they see tattoos, he’s a thug too.” Walter’s passionate response demonstrated that he was mindful of the perceptions that White classmates had of him. He felt that it was “crazy” for people to feel that way, but he understood that it was something that happens every day and he had become immune to it.
Jerry found that stereotypes and prejudices towards him were also a reality in the classroom setting as he engaged school instructors. He believed that his professors negatively judged him for being a Black person, and often perceived efforts made by Black students in the classroom not as robust as White students. He proclaimed:

We get stereotyped sometimes. Some teachers may hate on you. Some teachers may down-talk you just because you’re a Black student and they think we get away with everything. They think we don’t take school as serious as the White folks. It could be challenging at times. You just got to stay strong.

Jerry’s experiences reflect the negative perceptions of Black students by a significant number of White educators. Jerry believed the professors think that Black students are not willing to work as hard as White students and that Black students are the beneficiaries of unwarranted social programs, such as affirmative action.

Jim’s experience with discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice was centered more around social events that took place on campus. In describing an occasion where intolerance and bias were evident to him, Jim shared a situation where he was treated differently than his friends when they attempted to attend a campus party. He explained the interaction:

They said, “We don’t allow you guys” [Referring to Black people]. And we were like, you know? Caught off guard. “Well, Jim, we’ll allow you, because you’re different. You don’t act like them.” I’m like, I’ve heard that before. So, from that time, I knew, okay, they don’t like to associate with Black people when it comes to parties, and stuff like that.

Jim discovered that Whites are often selective with their prejudices towards Blacks, and other people of color. He understood that the White students allowed him to attend the campus party
because in their eyes he was different, he was an athlete, and didn’t act like other Black people. The racial microaggression that Jim and his friends experienced is an everyday reality for Black student-athletes.

Discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice was not limited to race and ethnicity for the participants. In another story expressed by Lawrence, he experienced bias based on his Muslim religion, including discrimination from people of his race. He thundered:

You talk about Black kids, White kids, whoever, but just being a Muslim in general, it was like being Black. You know what I’m saying? Being Muslim, it was just different. But instead of your race, it’s your religion. So now you got your own people picking on you. Black people over here talking about us. You know what I’m saying? It was crazy.

Lawrence understood that prejudice towards him was not limited to his race. He saw that discrimination comes in all forms including prejudices against those religions that were not of the Christian faith tradition.

Each of the participants experienced a racialized encounter in one form or another by White students, professors, and in some cases Black students. When the participants were asked how did religion and spirituality support them during these encounters, Lawrence said, “It allows me to have the patience, just really that understanding that they’re ignorant to it, and they don’t even probably realize what they’re doing.” Lawrence believed that much of the prejudice towards him comes from the ignorance that Whites have about the Black race.

Emmitt replied in a similar fashion. He posited: “The thing is about me, is I always say to myself, what would Jesus do? I’m just gonna try to be better than the situation. Better than that person.” He went further: “Because if I respond back to a negative, [with] something negative, what makes me better than them now … I try to be better than that person by handling
the situation better. So I always ask myself, what would Jesus do?” Emmitt’s response showed that it was necessary for him to demonstrate the actions that Jesus would have taken. Emmitt believed responding negatively to a negative situation was the wrong approach for him to take.

**Experiences with Loss and Hardship**

The participants’ lived experiences included extraordinarily challenging and difficult times, along with a significant amount of emotional devastation. Death, destruction, and despair were commonplace occurrences as the participants navigated their lived experiences. Lawrence believed that the Muslim faith tradition was designed to develop character and more importantly, “it teaches you so much patience.” Lawrence voiced his viewpoint as he reflected on his experiences as a small child when his family lived in poverty, their home was destroyed due to an early morning fire, and became homeless for an extended period.

Lawrence felt that living with loss and hardship was intricately woven into his faith tradition: Islam. As he continually read through the Koran [The sacred text for Muslims], Lawrence believed that adversity and suffering was the foundation of his faith. He understood from the Koran’s readings, “It always talks about how Allah [God] loves the patient ones, and He’s going to test you with loss and hardship.” Lawrence held that tough and trying times were the design of God.

Jerry expressed deep emotions when he shared his experience of losing one of his brothers. He mourned: “I lost one of my brothers. It was just hard for me to do, dealt with it. I found myself praying a lot. I was down bad. I needed some questions answered and stuff like that.” Jerry’s response reflected the impact that his brother’s death had on his life. Feeling despair and grief, he relied on his religion and spirituality through frequently praying. He sought answers from God as to why he experienced such a grim moment.
Both Walter and Barry shared unique stories of hardship and loss as the result of the murder and death of many friends and family members. Walter shared a tragic moment in his life when told at the age of six; his mother was raped and murdered. He cried:

I mean, when I was young when the detective came, I was six. You know, I remember him coming in, knocking on the door, and mentioning that my mother, my biological mother, had passed away. She had been raped and killed and left I think in a lake or something like that. You know, I had sense enough to know at the age of six what death meant and what was going on, and it played an impact on me negatively, that I went to school, starting acting up, causing fights and things, etc., etc. So it was pretty tough on me taking on all of that.

Walter’s experience was a difficult situation for him to handle, particularly at such an early age. The negative behavior that followed was indicative of the traumatic experience he endured. His religion and spirituality were vital in supporting him as his family was known to pray “through hard times and the good times.”

Barry, likewise, experienced hardship and loss as the result of murder and death in his family. In sharing the stories of his lived experiences, destruction and killings were a constant reality that he sustained. He shared the story about his younger brother’s father being shot dead. He said:

Then my little brother his father got murdered in front of our house and stuff like that. It was a lot of stuff going on. Dealing with that situation, it was family related that set up the murder. He had won the lottery. He was about to get an insurance policy the next day.
Barry’s experience with death and murder was reflective of the turmoil that surrounded his family, and community. He further detailed that his experiences with death and murder in his life were not infrequent events but almost an everyday occurrence. He supposed that “time after time with it happening so much over fifteen, twenty times where I’ve experienced murders and stuff like that. I’ve almost been in situations with getting killed, wrong place, wrong time. Two of my brothers has been shot.” The experiences that Barry noted were a heart wrenching reality for him.

Many of the participants experienced these challenges during their youth, and throughout their college years. Each participant relied on religion and spirituality to enable them to endure such tough and painful moments in their lives. In asking the participants how they used their religion and spirituality during these lived experiences, Barry provided what this researcher believed was the chief sentiment that most of the participants offered. He conveyed that “dealing with [these] situations and being a student-athlete, it’s kind of a hassle. But that’s when you be mentally prepared and strong to put stuff to the side and focus on the mission at hand.” Barry acknowledged that his experiences were stressful; however, it was important to keep his concentration directed towards his goals.

Barry also explained that his spiritual connection with God was his greatest support. He reasoned that “I think with having a spiritual connection has continued to help me mentally elevate to think positive. … it’s like the spiritual side has helped me continue to stay focused, knowing what’s my mission, what I’m working for.” Barry felt that it was difficult as a student-athlete to handle these experiences. However, the mental strength that he possessed helped him to stay focused on his mission. Furthermore, his spiritual connection with God also enabled him to understand what his future goals were and aided him to maintain his course of action for life.
Engaging Law Enforcement

It was a surprising discovery for the researcher that several of the participants described stories that included unexpected interactions with members of law enforcement. The participants found that being a young Black male and engagement with police officers was an inevitable reality. The participants’ interactions with the police resulted in emotions that included: being upset, surprised, frustrated, frightened, shocked, confused, and disbelief.

Barry described the experience of engaging the police after they were called on him and his friends following their attendance at a local frat party. Barry explained that while waiting for other friends to leave the party he encountered the police. The officer demanded: “Hey, I need to see you guys ID, we got a call that four Black guys were out here robbing people and you guys fit the description.” Barry, amazed at the police officer’s allegation, mused: “How the heck we fit the description?” Barry felt that the encounter with the police was unwarranted and as he described it, a “racial approach.”

When asked about the encounter, Barry explained that the unexpected engagement with the police was a stunning ordeal. He said, “The biggest word I can say was shocking because of course any situation can go any way, and it’s all about how you react to certain things.” Barry then explained that his religion and spirituality enabled him to demonstrate maturity throughout the ordeal, and “it helped [him] not get out of character.” Barry claimed: “That’s where the spiritual and the maturity side really becomes effective. I think it was more so shocking because it’s like, wow, like really”? Barry’s experience with law enforcement demonstrated that his religion and spirituality enabled him to use wisdom and not allow an apparent unjust questioning to escalate into greater turmoil for him and his friends.
Jerry had his own unique experience with law enforcement. He described an encounter with the police while he and a couple of his teammates were interested in off-campus housing. When Jerry and his friends entered the house with a key provided by the realtor, shortly after that they heard a loud knocking at the front door. They soon realized that it was the police asking them to open the door. They stood aghast at the sight of the police officers.

Jerry shuttered: “We opened up the door. The police got their guns out already. We like ‘What’s going on?’ They telling us they have a breaking and entering while the realtor is right here with us. But the realtor is Black herself.” When asked how did that make you feel, Jerry explained that he was distressed about the situation. He shared:

I was really upset. Frustrated because I was confused on why they were approaching us this way. It was crazy to me, really. I was kind of scared too at the beginning of it. Opening up the door with a gun pointed at you from a cop and all this going on nowadays. It was kind of frightening.

Jerry’s emotional response demonstrated that his encounter with the police was an extremely upsetting experience for him. Jerry’s religion and spirituality did provide the necessary support he needed during the interaction. Jerry believed that it brought out the best in him, which was being unassuming and showing humility. He declared: “As Jehovah’s Witnesses, we’re very humble. I wasn’t rowdy about anything when the police came to the house. I was probably the most quiet out of everybody. Sit back and observing what’s going on. That’s just something we were taught.” Religion and spirituality played an essential role during Jerry’s interaction with the police. He used it as support during his stressful interaction with law enforcement.

Jim’s experience with law enforcement was striking. He tells a story where he was pulled over for driving a car with darkly tinted windows. At first, Jim sensed that the traffic
officer’s attitude was too forceful. He said: “But his tone, at first came off aggressive.” Jim further explained the emotions he felt at the time. He wailed:

   And I was scared. …. You never know what could happen as a Black man driving a car, or walking to the store. This is like right after Trayvon Martin, so I’m on my Ps and Qs. Keeping my hands on the steering wheel, just trying to be cooperative. But he definitely came up like I did something wrong. “Your tints are too dark.” Like what? I didn’t say nothing; I just was trying to keep quiet. Trying to be respectful.

Jim’s experience with the police brought about great concern for him. He understood being a Black man and encountering the cops could be dangerous. Jim did his best to remain calm and not react with any irrational behavior.

Walter’s experience with law enforcement was also stark. His involvement with the police was at the heart of the negative encounters that the participants experienced. Walter shared the story about driving a car to South Florida and a police officer pulled him over and pulled out his gun when the officer demanded: “Get your registration and your license and all that, all your paperwork.” Walter explained that when he reached for the paperwork, the officer yelled: “Hey! Stop there before I blow your head off!” Walter was concerned about the police officer’s threatening language. He listened as the officer said: “This car that you’re driving, it looks like it’s been in a burglary.” Walter was surprised at what the officer alleged.

Walter continued to engage the officer then he replied, “Officer, I’m just coming from school. I didn’t do no robbery. I’m just getting out of practice.” The officer said, “Are you sure? You can be the guy. I think he looks like you due to your hair.” Walter suggested that the encounter with the officer baffled him. He wondered, “How am I being stereotyped due to my
hair.” Walter then explained that he leaned on his religion and spirituality to aid him during the experience. He offered:

Honestly, it was just a ... wow, man. Lord, this is crazy how I can be criticized based off my skin color or my hair, by what design it is, that I’m a bad guy. You know, so like I always do man, I did a quick cross across my body and told the Lord to watch over me, and later that night I got home safe.

Walter was shocked that his skin color and hair reflected devious, criminal behavior to the police officer. Walter sought God’s help in protecting him and making sure that he arrived home safely after such a disturbing ordeal.

Conclusions. The participants maintained that religion and spirituality were a sustainable resource in support of their academic achievements throughout their college years. The lack of educational preparation, language barriers, and community violence directly complicated the overall classroom success of the students. The participants embraced the idea that religion and spirituality were critical entities to support their classroom development. Moreover, a significant number of race-related confrontations also challenged the participants. Hairstyles, large physical black bodies, and preconceived ideologies about their intelligence factored into how White students and professors engaged them. The participants’ religion and spirituality provided support through these encounters and presented a force for endurance.

Additionally, the participants lived through the experiences of encountering tragic and devastating losses in their lives. For the participants, religion and spirituality provided a sense of relief during these stressful moments and gave them hope in a better tomorrow. Lastly, the participants regularly relied on religion and spirituality as they interacted with law enforcement. These tense and potentially dangerous occurrences were often a shocking and disturbing ordeal.
The subsequent superordinate theme discussed the participants’ opportunities to achieve personal growth.

**Opportunities for Growth**

The participants believed that both favorable and adverse events indicated a critical set of opportunities to achieve growth or self-transformation. The fourth superordinate theme from this study captured the participants’ understanding of their experiences as fertile soil for personal growth. The participants acknowledged their experiences as a stimulus for becoming a better person. Next, the participants learned lessons from personal development and progress. Finally, the participants desired to impact the lives of other people powerfully. Thus, the three emergent themes that indicate these specific areas of convergence across participants were: being the best possible person; developing through experiences; and impacting the lives of others.

**Being the Best Possible Person**

The participants found that utilizing religion and spirituality throughout their life experiences presented an opportunity to display their better selves. They attempted to be the best possible person in all situations as they engaged classmates, friends, and others. When Emmitt faced several challenging situations that were difficult to handle he expressed, “I’m just gonna try to be better than the situation. Better than that person.” Emmitt’s reflection of being the best possible person was to be better than what the condition called for and much more importantly—better than the other person. Emmitt found this to be a reliable tool for his faith and a far better representation of what his faith meant.

Barry exhibited his religion and spirituality from the position that growth came from the realization that no one is perfect in their actions or their engagement with other people. However, it was essential to strive to be a better version of one’s self. Barry’s viewpoint was
that he believed from a spiritual standpoint, “we all not perfect but at the same time we know that, but you still try to become a better version of yourself each and every day.” Barry expressed his faith—that is, his religion and spirituality, by accepting the reality that he was incapable of being faultless in his interactions with people, but he could strive to be a better person and behave far better than what the situation called for him to be.

Kareem viewed that being the best possible person was intricately tied to a close connection to God. He described how he is a better version of himself or became a better version because God is with him. He claimed: “So that’s why I’m trying to be the best version of me. And by being the best version of me, it’s really being closer to God. Trying to be close to God, and doing the right thing in life.” Kareem believed a direct connection to God made him a better man and a better Christian. His closeness to God enabled him to do the right thing in the right situation.

Lawrence made sense of being the best possible person through understanding that it comes from the foundation of one’s faith. Regardless of whether or not it comes from your faith tradition or another one. He described it in detail:

And it’s really, like I said, if there was anything I could say to anybody and really talk about religion or spirituality, whichever, it’s just whatever allows you or makes you feel better or make you want to be a better person, those are things you should follow and trust in. And I think anybody with any type of spirituality would agree with that. Whatever’s going to help you be better, that’s what you should believe in, that’s what you should follow regardless of whether it’s Islam, or Christianity, or Jewish. Whatever makes you feel better and do better around the world and be a better person is what you should believe in.
Lawrence’s experience demonstrated religion and spirituality allow you to become a better person. He believed that all religious faiths could help you be your best possible self as long as you believed in it.

**Developing Through Experiences**

The participants associated much of their development, growth, and maturity with the countless number of trials they experienced throughout their lives. Whether the experience turned out to bring success or it brought about despair, the participants recognized that each encounter helped to make them into who they had become.

Lawrence was succinct in his assessment of his overall development as a man, a student, an athlete, and a Muslim. He believed anything he became was based entirely on the experiences he endured. He claimed: “I know just that whole process of everything I went through, just really shaped me into who I was.” Lawrence credited the level of maturity that he reached to each of the life challenges that he encountered.

Barry was thankful for each of his experiences that assisted in his development. He viewed his problems as far less challenging to handle than what other people may have experienced. Barry expressed his thoughts when he said he was “just thankful, understanding that it could be worse. People go through certain situations, somebody probably just died a couple of seconds ago. I think living with the mentality, no matter how tired, how emotionally drained, physically drained, somebody out there is going through something worse.” Barry believed that the personal sufferings he endured paled in comparison with what many other people have had to manage each day.

Jim believed that many of his early college experiences helped develop him into the person he had become. His experiences also enabled him to establish a stronger connection with
God. He explained that he had not developed a “personal connection with Jesus Christ, with God, until [he] had gone through things outside of [his] family.” He went further, “I feel like I developed my personal relationship with God in my freshman year, going through different challenges, things of that nature.” Jim experienced being on his own for the first time when he attended college as a freshman. He grew in his relationship with God through the trials he encountered.

Like Jim, Emmitt experienced many tests of endurance but utilized religion and spirituality to help him develop, grow, and progress forward with life. He shared: “God has helped me through so many obstacles, so many things. He just keeps propelling me forward ... It’s definitely helped me tremendously. So it’s definitely propelled me in the right direction, and I’m just gonna keep using it.” Emmitt expressed that religion and spirituality was a powerful support in his life. Through God’s help, he overcame many hurdles that were intended to keep him from moving forward to reach his goals.

**Impacting The Lives of Others**

The participants revealed an enthusiasm for wanting to make a significant contribution to the lives of other people through religion and spirituality. Helping others, including strangers, had a positive influence on how the participants felt about themselves and how they made other people feel. For example, Lawrence explained that helping others was critical to him. Since he experienced living a life which included homelessness and knew the power of its devastation, he desired to become a professional athlete so that he could give back to those who found themselves in need. He hoped:

I always just wanted to help others, help people. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me three or four years from now. I want to play in the League [NFL], and after that, I
want to go help people and give back to homeless families. Those are things that I want to do.

Lawrence wanted to contribute back to society in a powerful way. He hoped for the opportunity to take his athletic talents to the professional leagues so that it could provide him with the economic resources to help families that experienced similar hardships like his family.

Helping others and impacting their lives presented an opportunity for Jerry to see himself as a role model. When discussing how he used his religion and spirituality, he alleged: “I use it to be a role model to others. To inspire others. Be a help to others in any way possible. It could be the littlest thing. Just saying hi to somebody could change someone’s total day. You know?” Jerry wanted to be an example to other people and help make things better for them any way that he could.

Similar to Jerry, Jim saw himself as a vessel for doing good unto others. Helping other people was meaningful to him, and it gave him a great feeling inside when he aided other people. Jim rejoiced:

I love it. I mean, I be feeling like I’m just a vessel. Words be flying out of my mouth that I probably usually wouldn’t even say. I be feeling like I’m in the zone, like really helping somebody. That’s really all I like to do, help people. So, that feels good to me, especially after. I’m like, wow, that’s amazing.

Jim was amazed at how he felt when he made the lives of others a little bit better. He saw himself as yielding to what seemed like a calling for him—to help others.

Kareem believed that he impacted the lives of others principally by doing the right thing for people. Kind gestures and considering the plight of others presented him with the opportunity to touch other people’s lives in a small, yet powerful way. He shared:
I use my spirituality just to do the right thing. Like the right, or the good thing. Like, let’s say I see somebody in need, holding the door for an old lady. Or giving out money to a poor man. That’s how I use my spirituality because there’s something God will do. So I’m the image, He created me as His image. So I should be doing what He would do. So I’m trying to be kind to people.

Kareem’s response demonstrates that he views himself as a representative for God. He treated people as he believed God would. Being kind and caring for the welfare of others were examples that Kareem lived to do.

Walter also viewed utilizing his religion and spirituality as an opportunity to do right by others and to help them during their need. Walter extolled:

Honestly, this having the spiritual effect on me definitely keeps me driven and motivated each and every day to do great by people, whether they’re homeless, or a student, or an athlete, or anything of that nature. It keeps me going every day, so without it, honestly, I’d probably be in the street honestly having a different mindset. So, yeah.

Religion and spirituality was a powerful resource for Walter. He was determined and inspired to do for other people regardless of status. Walter was compelled to help others in any manner that he could—great or small.

**Conclusions.** The participants responded to substantial opportunities to achieve personal growth and demonstrated a transformative personality as they engaged the college campus. They experienced openings to exhibit the better nature of themselves, which they took advantage of entirely. The participants voiced that religion and spirituality were a reliable resource for producing transformative behaviors when confronted with demanding situations. Additionally, the participants behaved better than what the case called for or responded in a better manner than
how another person might. The participants also developed higher levels of maturity through significant trials in their lives. The tests the participants endured brought about a closer bond with God or propelled them forward to reaching their goals. Finally, the participants chose to influence the lives of others by helping and giving back and contributing to the welfare of others. Religion and spirituality acted as a powerful resource in that regard. The succeeding superordinate theme discussed the participant’s experiences with identity development.

Making Sense of a Developing Identity

Black male college athletes at PWIs regularly experience challenges with identity, purpose, and meaning for life. The fifth superordinate theme from this study captured the participants’ identity development as they engaged a college campus. Identity in this instance referred to how Black male college athletes viewed themselves in connection to their roles within the college campus environment, as well as how these perceptions have shaped their experiences within the college campus structure.

The researcher found four specific areas of convergence between participants associated with identity development. The participants expressed their experiences through the intersection of being a Black male and spirituality. Second, the participants displayed the practice of being an athlete and the use of spirituality. Third, the participants conveyed their religious identity as expressed in their commitment to God. Finally, the participants desired to understand the purpose and meaning for why they are here and what they are destined to become. Therefore, the four emergent themes discussed here are: Black male identity; athletic identity; religious identity; and understanding purpose and destiny.

Black Male Identity
To be a Black male presented conflicting sentiments for many of the participants. Several participants displayed great pride and contentment at being an unapologetic Black man. However, others viewed the experience of being identified as a Black male more challenging. Case in point, Emmitt was proud that he was a Black man and showed a great sense of confidence in that fact. He said: “I’m happy I’m a Black male. You’ve heard the saying, “Black is beautiful.” And I totally agree with that. I’m just happy at being a Black male.” He went on further to claim that “being a Black male, it’s important. A lot of history, a lot of baggage with it, but I feel like I was perfectly made being a Black male, especially my relationship with God.” Emmitt expressed gratification that he was a Black male: happy about who he was created to be.

On the other hand, several participants expressed the struggle that came along with Black male identity. For example, Lawrence explained that the behavior of Black males frequently gets observed through a microscopic lens. He said: “Honestly, I think everything that you do when you’re a Black male is magnified, especially at a university. It’s almost like you always got eyes on you.” Lawrence also described how difficult it was for a Black male to be himself. Black men often feel pressure to behave or speak as what some characterize as non-Black. In other words, they feel the pressure to act White. He asserted:

So it’s almost like you walking on eggshells. It’s almost like you can never truly be yourself. Always got to put your White voice on, as they always say. I think that’s really what it is. It changes your identity, especially being in a university like I said because you can’t always be yourself. You can never truly be yourself.

Lawrence understood the challenges of being a Black male and engaged with a predominantly White campus. He felt that he couldn’t be his true self: that he had to be someone else to be accepted within the campus culture.
Similar to Lawrence, Kareem experienced challenges with Black male identity. He stated: “As a Black man, it’s hard. … because you don’t really get the same love that you get at home. You don’t really get treated the way you used to be treated. … you have to kind of adjust, kind of fit in.” Kareem also pointed to the challenges he faced when other campus identities are accepted, but Black male identity tolerated. He sighed: “Because in the school like this, they really look at you really as an athlete. Like not really as a person. Or you know, as who you are. They don’t really see.” Kareem witnessed the campus community’s approval of his status as an athlete far more than his state of a Black man.

It is noteworthy that Jackie seemed to suggest that his Black male identity was an invisible entity to many of his campus colleagues because of how well he spoke and how he engaged the college campus. He offered:

As a Black male, my identity is hidden sometimes because I’m more well-spoken than people where I’m from. People who don’t know where I’m from, they might think, “He’s just a college kid, and he’s just a well-spoken kid who hasn’t really been through much.” But people who really know me, and know where I come from and know a lot of things I’ve been through, they understand me more. But my identity, I’m really looked at as a leader in certain situations because I’m not afraid to speak out and I’m honest with people. A lot of people respect me as a person because I respect other people. So, just as a Black male, I’m respected by a lot of people from different cultures too, and different races.

Jackie viewed his Black male identity as hiding beneath the surface because he was well-spoken, respected by others, an acknowledged leader, honest, and expertly navigated a White campus environment with ease. It wasn’t that others did not know that Jackie was a Black male;
however, it was under the surface in the sense that as a Black male many perceived that he did not experience many of the hardships and challenges that other Black men endured. He argued that those who knew him well understood that he had undergone difficult trials similar to other Black males. The significant message here is that the trials, tribulations, and hard times experienced by many Black men is not a birthright, and must not be declared as such.

Several participants expressed that their Black male identity frequently intersected with religion and spirituality. When the participants were asked how do religion and spirituality affect your identity development as a Black man, the opinions varied. To Kareem they were inseparable. He proudly stated, “I’m … a Black male, religious, a religious Black male that loves God, and talks to God.” Kareem’s Black maleness undeniably linked him to his faith.

Jackie expounded that he derived strength to cope with many of his struggles. He asserted:

[Religion and spirituality] gives me strength to deal with society knowing that racism is still going on, even slavery is still going on in some places. So, it definitely helps me cope with all of that, and it helps me just stay level headed when I just think about my faith. Just knowing that as a Black man, I don’t want to be another statistic, and I just want to make it through this life successful.

Jackie’s story detailed that he was strongly able to handle societal issues, such as racism. He coped with the struggle of being a Black man and avoided entanglement with the difficulties that inevitably leads to being classified statistically.

Jim expressed that religion and spirituality affected his Black male identity development on a large scale. “I feel like as a Black man, growing up in America, … it affects it in a huge way. Being judged, people gonna judge you no matter what. Some people might judge you
differently because, oh, you’re a Christian.” Jim voiced that people are often critical of who you are and the position that have chosen to take.

Lawrence intersected religion and spirituality with his Black male identity to produce patience in dealing with his campus colleagues. He said, “I think being obviously a Black man at a school like this, I said the word a million times, patience. My spirituality has really given me that patience, given me that acceptance for others, trying to understand others, and keeping a level head.” It was essential to Lawrence that he developed patience. On many occasions, he expressed that it was difficult to understand why people engaged him as they did—a Black man. Engaging Lawrence as a Black man meant his White campus colleagues interacted with him with suspicion and fear for which he sought patience for understanding.

**Athletic Identity**

Several of the participants were eager to identify with the role of athlete. For instance, Emmitt described his athletic identity as fast and quick yet he maintained a modest attitude. “I would say, I’m very fast, strong, quick, but I would say I’m very humble on the field. … I’m just a humble athlete who tries to work hard.” Jackie identified his athletic talents as poised and a great partner. “I’ve always been classified as someone who’s composed. Even my coaches, sometimes they tell me I’m too composed, … I’m a good teammate. I’m definitely one of the teammates they like being around.” Jerry acknowledged his athletic identity through the benefits that come with the status of being an athlete. “Sometimes I may get perks for certain things. People love athletes. Even White folks love athletes. Wearing this right here [pointing to the football team insignia on his shirt], people see this and they get happy.” Kareem, like Jerry, accepted the love that came because of his athletic identity. “As an athlete, we get a lot of love.
Yeah, we get a lot of love, because we represent the school.” To many of the participants the status of athlete meant recognition, honor, and pride throughout the campus.

The participants admitted that their athletic identity regularly intersected with religion and spirituality. When the participants were asked how do religion and spirituality affect your athletic identity, the sentiments were wide-ranging. Barry suggested that because he takes his faith on the field, “I’m going to have the best day or the best game.”

Jerry suggested he utilized his faith when he played in the game because it helped him build self-assurance on the field. “I use it to help me build that confidence. Knowing that I got Him [God] on my back and He got my back. While I’m out there on the field, I fear God. I don’t really see nobody else.” Jerry also described how he talked directly to God and asked him to be involved in the competition while he played. “Stick with me on this play right here. I’m going to need you on this play.” Jerry clearly connected his athletic abilities with his spirituality.

Likewise, Walter used religion and spirituality when he played. He expressed that his faith was definitely with him when he competed. “Definitely being on that field, whether there’s a good play or a bad play, spiritually it does up bring me in a variety of ways.” Emmitt felt like religion and spirituality thrusted him forward and helped him grow. He said: “So that definitely pushed my athletic development in a positive direction. It definitely helped me tremendously, tremendously. All of it is God.” The participants collectively used religion and spirituality as a significant factor on the field play.

**Religious Identity**

The participants acknowledged that religious identity was a substantial influence in their lives. It was imperative for them to be a reflection of their faith to others, including their
colleagues on campus. Barry shared that he wanted to make sure that his relationship with Christ was an open display. He said:

   I don’t think I’ve been exposed to the campus as of much with my religion for people to even know that I’m a Christian. But for the people who do follow me on social media, I feel publicly free announcing that I worship Jesus Christ. Publicly announcing my hashtag “For His glory.” Giving thanks and even just the testimonies that I have. Sharing that on social media, not hiding my faith in God, hiding my faith in the Lord.

It was a priority for Barry’s relationship with Jesus Christ to be on public exhibition. Barry utilized technology to shine a light on his relationship with the Lord.

   Emmitt believed that it was critical for his life to echo God. He desired for people to see the God that was in him and in everything that he did. He thought:

   I try to mirror God in a way. Try to be as close to Him as possible. So that’s just from the way you talk, the things you do, your actions. It just can’t be anything you know. If you’re really trying to be a true child of God, you can’t just do anything. … I just try to mimic God’s behavior and try as best as I can.

Emmitt’s response indicated the importance of being recognized as a Christian believer. He sought to imitate God to the best of his ability as he connected with other people.

   Jim wanted his identity recognized as a life lived in Christ. He wanted his different personalities seen, but his identification with Christ had the most significant meaning to him. He said:

   I feel like, in God, well in religion, my identity is Christ, child of God. But I try to show that identity with everything, and everything I do. I try to show all my identities in
everything. So, I feel like my identity isn’t just one thing. But one thing, in particular, is in Christ.

Jim recognized that he had many identities, which he was proud to possess. But he mostly wanted to identify with Christ. His identification with Christ represented the foundation of his faith for which he was proudest.

Jerry had a strong sense that the religion he chose was best suited for him. He was passionate about his choice of being a Jehovah’s Witnesses. He believed that he made the right decision in how to live out his faith. He said:

I chose it because how strongly the people are in the Kingdom Hall. They’re all so generous for one. They’re friendly. They’re welcoming. I felt like it was the real one for me. I really enjoy going to the Kingdom Hall. It was kind of humbling for me. It was good.

Jerry held that the Jehovah’s Witnesses faith and attending the Kingdom Hall was the correct choice for him. He believed that the people of the Jehovah’s Witnesses faith were kind, generous, and friendly. His experiences were real to him, and one’s he enjoyed.

One salient observation concerning religious identity was Lawrence’s acknowledgment of what it means to be a Muslim. When asked to describe the Muslim faith, he claimed:

Being Muslim and what it means to be Muslim, … is to follow the one true God, and we believe that that is Allah. Allah and God, it’s just Arabic, honestly. That’s all it is. So it’s funny, because I know my coaches will sometimes be like, “Oh, no offense, Allah.” They’re obviously being ignorant. They don’t know any better. It’s just funny, because obviously it’s the exact same thing, it’s just a different language.

Lawrence recognized that being a Muslim meant that he was to follow the one true God—
Allah. Lawrence believed that others determined that God was distinctly different based on religious belief or doctrine. He expressed that there was only one God who should only be distinguished by language.

**Understanding Purpose and Destiny**

The participants sought meaning as to who they were as Black males, why they existed, why they chose to attend their particular university, and what was the overall purpose for their lives. They also sought to understand their destiny in life and how they would fulfill it. When the participants were asked how they use religion and spirituality to make meaning of themselves and their experiences, they responded with a genuine understanding of that purpose.

For example, Emmitt conveyed that his existence was actualized in his relationship with God. He believed that if he lived his life without God, it would not have had any meaning or purpose to it. He responded:

Well. How do I draw meaning? Without it, I would be a lost man. Without knowing God, I would be a lost man. So just knowing God is there and knowing I have something to always go to and fall back, or whatever you want to say. It just gives you that extra boost every morning. You’re living for something. You’re not just here just to be here. We live to praise God and give him all the praise. … Just knowing I’m living with a purpose and it’s just not for no meaning.

Emmitt understood that the meaning for his was contained in the knowledge that he was living a life with God, and for God. He believed that his purpose was to honor God by reverencing Him and this was the central reason why he existed.

Jackie voiced that religion and spirituality gave meaning for his life. He found meaning in the help and support he received when he faced many of his life’s challenges. He shared:
I want to say it gives my life meaning because I can be looked at as someone who has faith and who has faith to just make it through situations so that people can look at me and be like, “Man, after everything he went through, he’s still going.” I feel deep down in my heart that God has helped me through all of this.

Jackie held a deep conviction that God helped him through all of his trials. Knowing that God was present with him and enabled him to endure his many struggles, gave Jackie meaning, which he felt could bring significance and encouragement to others.

Jerry shared that religion and spirituality provided him with the understanding that there are far more critical things in the world to gain than material wealth. He believed that it was more meaningful to work for God and His purposes than to have your focus in other places. He communed:

> It kind of helps you realize that money isn’t everything. The world may make it seem that way. You shouldn’t want to work for the world. You should want to work for God.
> The world is going to come to an end one day. You want to be on God’s side when that happens. Materialistic things are not so important.

Jerry admonished that the riches of this world is not forever. He felt that it is better to have worked in this life for God when this world comes to an end rather than having worked for worldly gain.

Jim viewed religion and spirituality from the lens of why he was a student at SESU. He believed that God had a reason and purpose for him to attend that university. He offered:

> I feel like I’m supposed to be here. I feel like there’s a meaning, there’s a reason why I’m here. Especially when times get hard. Alright, there’s a meaning for this. I’m

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6 Pseudonym
getting taught something. The lesson I’m learning from this, this is preparing me for something greater. That’s the mindset I try to take. And that’s how I get meaning with religion, with God. … There’s a meaning; there’s a reason for this. God has a plan.

That’s just how I think about things.

Jim understood that there was a purpose for him at the place of his location. He drew meaning from every experience, both the good and the hard times. He knew that God had a plan for his life and the school he attended was part of God’s overall blueprint for him.

Kareem made sense of the meaning of his life by finding purpose in unanticipated obstacles and disappointment. After an injury as a sophomore and unable to participate, he viewed the setback of a missed season as a blessing and the purpose of God because it extended his academic eligibility by one year and opened the door for him earn his master’s degree without cost. He expressed his gratitude:

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to do what I was here for, to play basketball. But if you look at it in the long run, now I have three years to have a master’s degree, and probably coming out of college with a master’s, more doors will be opened for me. So I really believe that God does everything for a reason. So I’m not the type of guy who questions God whenever something happened. I would probably ask him [for a] solution and show me the way.

Kareem viewed his injury as about the overall plan that God had for his life. Kareem believed that he should not question God but trust that He will provide the solution to the problem.

Conclusions. The participants made sense of their identity development utilizing religion and spirituality as a support structure. They acknowledged that Black male identity was intertwined meaningfully with their faith. The participants treasured the position they held of
being a religious Black male, and one who loves God. The participants also acknowledged that they reflected the station: child of God. They expressed the operation of their faith on the athletic field, and it was a direct correlation to the confidence and self-assurance achieved as they engaged their competitors.

Moreover, the participants recognized a robust religious identity: whether Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslim, or Christian, they believed in their faith and that it was right for their life. Finally, the participants understood the purpose and design for their lives. The meaning for who they were and what they were purposed to accomplish stored itself within the religion and spirituality they held deeply. The ensuing superordinate theme discussed how the participants utilized ancillary forms of support for success in their collegiate journey.

**Other Sources of Encouragement and Aid**

Black male college athletes frequently employ other forms of support and assistance to achieve success in college. The sixth superordinate theme from this study captured the participants’ experiences with school administrators and church organizations who provided aid and support for student academic challenges. And, who aided the participants’ persistence through college. Consequently, the two emergent themes discussed here are religious institutions and coaches, professors, and academic advisors.

**Religious Institutions**

The participants acknowledged significant contributions made by their religious institutions concerning their academic success. In addition to spiritual guidance, religious institutions provided social and material support for the participants to aid their educational journey. Barry provided an enthusiastic response when asked about the support he received from
the church. He explained that the church organized scholarship committees designed to help “young college students” succeed academically.

Barry appreciated the church for the “many different scholarships” made available to him, and other students. He said, “I took advantage of applying for many of the scholarships throughout my high school career before going to college. It was a great pleasure to be honored to earn a scholarship from a church that I’ve been loyal to too. You reap what you sow.” Barry was thankful for the opportunity to obtain a scholarship from the church. He considered the award he received directly connected him to his faithfulness to the congregation.

Emmitt, like Barry, gave a passionate response when he talked about the “care and support” that came from the church. Emmitt detailed that the church “every year before school starts they always put up a care package for every youth in the church and supplied it with books, pens, book bags, like the whole works.” He said further: “I was really appreciative. Very thoughtful of them for doing that.” Emmitt appreciated the love, care, and support the church gave to him each year to help with his education.

Jerry shared the story of how he received support from his religious institution. However, in this case, it extended beyond the walls of the religious institution to its members visiting students in their homes to ensure that they were making the grade in school. Jerry alleged: “My mom, she has friends that’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, of course. One of the sisters, her daughter, used to come over sometimes and try to help me with my homework and help me with schoolwork in general. They were there for me.” Jerry appreciated that the religious institution he attended [Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses], made itself available to serve him and his family by supporting his academic development.
Walter was grateful for the support he received from the religious institution he frequented on occasion. The idea of the church providing material and economic assistance was a great idea; considering that he was not well known by fellow congregates. He explained:

It was pretty neat. It was pretty astonishing to have an organization, a group of people who knows me but don’t ... they know of me. So just to hear and see those people who really don’t know me help me out, that touched me in a way. You know, so, it was pretty great to have some people who didn’t know me personally help me out.

Walter was astounded by the generosity of the church. The fact that he was not well-known to the church members, as other students were, didn’t hinder the church’s support of his education. The church’s gratitude affected Walter powerfully.

The participants cherished the idea that their religious institution supported their educational endeavors. The religious institutions demonstrated a loving concern for the needs of the participants. Barry’s feelings represented the attitude of most of the participants when he said, “I feel like the church is selfless.” The church demonstrated the attitude that it should always have—a selfless attitude.

**Coaches, Professors, and Academic Advisors**

Coaches, professors, and academic advisors played a significant role in the participants’ academic success. The participants sought support from each of these resources. Lawrence shared his story of how his professors and academic advisors were essential in helping him to build better study habits. He said:

On campus, the advisors that I had have been great. The teachers I had have been great. Just having so much patience with me, helping me really just build my habits up, trying
to be a better student, study habits, how to take notes. Things I didn’t do when I was in high school. I barely brought a pencil and paper to school.

Building better study habits was an extraordinary achievement for Lawrence. Through patience and trusting the advice he received from his advisors, he made tremendous improvements in his academic progress.

Jim understood that it was not wise to attempt to accomplish academic goals without asking the right questions and seeking help from school advisors. He responded: “You gotta ask questions, you gotta talk to people. You can’t do this on your own. So, I started collaborating with other people and getting in groups. So, we could schedule time a library meetup. Go over stuff in detail.” Jim saw the importance of talking with people about his challenges with school. He also saw that collaborating with other people could improve his knowledge. Meeting in groups and discussing matters in detail became a useful strategy for Jim.

The academic advisors and professors were enormously beneficial to Kareem. Since English was Kareem’s third language pursuing the help of advisors was crucial. He asserted:

So I went to see my academic advisor, and we had tutoring. So I put [in] extra hours. I’ll go to the teacher’s office, and get my paper ready a week before I need to give it to her. But it’s always like that, because especially in classes that include a lot of writing, a lot of speaking. I be having a hard time expressing myself because a lot of time my thought process is in French. So it becomes harder for me just to spit it out in English. So these are the times that I’ve been having challenges academically.

Kareem sought the help he needed to be successful in the classroom. Although Kareem met challenges with a language barrier, he persevered with the support of school advisors.
Kareem’s coaches, along with the academic advisors, provided additional aid and support to him. The coaches made sure he attended his classes so that he could maintain academic eligibility. Kareem explained:

My coaches. They’ll make sure that I’m good in class first, because I hear on campus you need to have a C in the class; otherwise, you’re going to fail it. And you can get kicked out of the school if you don’t pass. So me as a basketball athlete, study come first because, without the studies, I’m not going to be able to be on the court. So my coaches make sure they support me, and even my academic advisor makes sure if I need more hours in the class, she’ll put more tutoring for me.

Kareem believed that the coaches and advisors had a tremendous impact on his success in college. If Kareem needed more tutoring for improvement in the classroom, they made sure he received the proper attention.

Walter believed that all of the school’s advisors supported him when he needed it. He depended on the advisors to keep him motivated in the classroom. When asked what support other than religion and spirituality have you received on campus for your academics, he replied:

Academic support, basically, study hard and tutoring. You know, Gary⁷ and Mitch, they always get me going. “Make sure you get your four hours in, man. We want you to graduate on time. Make sure you come in and do this and that.” So it was definitely Gary and Mitch and Kristen and Earl. They always gave me the support. And even coaches, they always make sure that we stay on top of our grades. If someone show up, “Hey man, make sure you get this study hall in and get that grade up, or you won’t play.”

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⁷ Pseudonym academic advisors
Hearing the phrase “you won’t play” will definitely motivate someone to keep their grades up. You know, keep going on from there.

Walter made sure he connected with his advisors for support. He feared failing his classes, so it motivated him to succeed.

**Conclusions.** The participants expressed excitement that in addition to the support that religion and spirituality provided, ancillary support structures also assisted with their success in college. Religious institutions offered the participants scholarship donations and material gifts to support their education goals. The participants welcomed the selflessness of the religious organization as it exhibited the foundation of its existence—love and care. The participants also received support from members of the school’s administration. School personnel provided necessary academic support, when needed, for the students to succeed. The help of the coaches, professors, and academic advisors ensured that the participants would flourish in their course materials, which ensured athletic eligibility for the season and progress towards degree attainment.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question: How do Black male college athletes attending a predominately White institution experience religion and spirituality as a form of support? A close analysis of the interview data yielded several insights into how the participants made sense of their experiences using religion and spirituality to aid their success. The participants maintained a loyal dependence on religion and spirituality from their youth through their college years. They trusted deeply in an intimate relationship with God who presented itself as a dependable source that actively involved itself in all of their affairs.
The participants consistently manifested the presence of God through prayer. They petitioned God as a shield of protection against all physical harm. They sought spiritual advice for matters that dealt with school-related events or other personal undertakings. They vigorously engaged God as a central element to living productive lives.

Additionally, the participants sought religion and spirituality to benefit their academic achievements. Numerous kinds of barriers prevented the participants from achieving their desired educational goals. However, religion and spirituality was a sustainable resource for them to achieve success in this area. The participants faced a series of discriminatory acts, including being profiled which ultimately caused an appointment with law enforcement. They regularly leaned on religion and spirituality for support to endure these events.

The participants’ religion and spirituality provided a force that transformed their behavior into becoming their better selves, which included helping others, giving back to the community, and considering the welfare of others before themselves. They likewise developed higher levels of maturity as they experienced significant trials. The participants made sense of their Black male and athletic identities. They acknowledged its linkage to spirituality in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, the participants displayed an endearing religious character and developed an understanding of the purpose of their lives. Finally, the participants received support from subsidiary means, such as their religious institutions and school personnel. The resulting discussion and implications for practice chapter addressed these findings and how they situate within the current literature. The researcher also makes recommendations for practice and future research.
Chapter V: Discussion and Implications for Practice

If you can’t fly you run, if you can’t run you walk, if you can’t walk you crawl. But no matter what, you keep moving forward

—Martin Luther King Jr.

The purpose of this IPA study was to examine how Black male college athletes experience religion and spirituality as a form of support while attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). This study used two broad theoretical frameworks to ground the research: Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and Faith Development Theory (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided a lens to examine historical systemic implications of racism, in addition to acknowledging the narratives of Black male student-athletes. Faith Development Theory (FDT) is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the evolutionary process of the development of religious/spiritual values and behavior in the human life cycle.

This study employed a qualitative approach to understanding the research problem. The qualitative methodology focused on exploring how the participants made sense of their world, how they experienced these events, and what meaning they attributed to the phenomena of religion and spirituality (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This study was attentive to the quality of the participants’ experience rather than any causal relationships.

Summary of the Findings

The analysis of the interview data yielded six superordinate themes. The superordinate themes were: (a) trusting in the viability of a transcendent source, (b) manifesting presence through prayer, (c) transcendent source for struggle, hope, and resilience, (d) opportunities for growth, (e) making sense of a developing identity, and (f) other sources of encouragement and aid. Certain factors related primarily to the participants’ experiences on campus while other
factors pertaining to experiences off campus. All of these factors helped to contribute to an environment of support for Black male student-athletes.

This chapter includes a discussion of the significant findings as related to the literature on Black male college athletes and their experiences with religion and spirituality. This study also draws essential conclusions from the data presented in Chapter Four. The study then discusses the implications of these findings for the practice setting and provides specific examples of how these findings can be used in the practice setting. Finally, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and concluding thoughts.

**Interpretation of the Findings**

While each of the participants identified their unique experiences related to religion and spirituality, six subordinate themes were prominent aspects of the experiences of the Black male college athletes interviewed for this study. These themes present a dynamic dimension to the individual experiences of each athlete. The following sections described the topics in detail.

**Trusting in the Viability of a Transcendent Source**

This study’s conclusion that religion and spirituality is essential to Black male college athletes aligns with the historical literature that indicates religion and spirituality is a primary contributor to managing the daily life experiences of Black male college students, including Black male college athletes (Herndon, 2003; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Walker and Dixon (2002) concluded that individuals have a strong sense of religion and spirituality when they have a deep, meaningful connection with God, and strive for this relationship. Individuals frequently make attributions to God that enhance life meaning as well as well-being (Walker & Dixon, 2002). The participants in the study described that God’s
presence was continuously among them and a critical force in their lives that determined outcomes that were beneficial to their success in college.

In this study, the participants emphasized the significance of being in an intimate relationship with God. The supreme being (God) was a critical resource that was indispensable to their existence and how they navigated the college campus environment. The supernatural presence of a Divine deity provided a sense of co-creatorship in the successful accomplishments of the participants. Further, this study’s participants demonstrated a bonding trust and reliance upon God’s presence as a source of power and strength for engaging the existence of White supremacy and superiority among campus colleagues. Many African Americans typically embrace the value of religion and spirituality, its liberating power, the reliance on a higher power, and the practical application of spiritual principles in life (Herndon, 2003; McAdoo, 1993).

Previous research has found that Black male students expressed that God was a confidant and a present source with them at all times (Wood & Hilton, 2012). The present study confirmed that God’s presence was active among the students during all of their experiences, both on and off campus. This suggests that the findings are consistent with what we previously knew through the literature. Black male college athletes rely heavily on God’s presence to support them in their daily lives, and Black male college athletes view God’s presence as a friendly intimate contact that is a support structure throughout their lived experiences. The present research is therefore intended to make contributions to the literature on Black male college athletes’ experiences with religion and spirituality.

**Manifesting Presence Through Prayer**
The participants of the study employed the practice of prayer as a survival skill and support mechanism to manage uncertain stress-related situations. They petitioned God for generosity and well-being for circumstances that were both in and out of their control. The participants utilized prayer as a guiding force for directions and decision making. The participants’ emphasis on prayer as a unique skill for persistence and endurance is consistent with what is in the literature regarding studies related to Black male college athletes. Black student-athletes regularly call upon their spiritual resources to help them cope with and thrive in their environments on predominantly White campuses (Galli & Reel, 2012; Seitz et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2004).

This study’s conclusion emphasized that the participants connected with God through consistent communication and daily engagement. The connection with God was meaningful for the participants as it provided a safe, personal, and close bond with God. Prayer provided optimism for each of the participants as he engaged the college campus.

Coakley (2009) and Taylor et al. (2004) suggested that prayer is celebrated to have a positive effect on student-athletes. They proposed that student-athletes utilize prayer as a survival skill to alleviate anxiety and stress in uncertain situations, to help them live a morally sound life when faced with choices that reflect on their character, and to sanctify the athletes’ commitment to the sport which they played. Furthermore, they posited that prayer allows student-athletes to put competition into perspective, to establish a strong bond of attachment between teammates, and to maintain social control (Coakley, 2009; Taylor et al., 2004). It was necessary for the participants to use prayer for advice and guidance. Participants did not seek the elimination of their problems but requested help to endure whatever type of difficulty they would encounter.
Building on Coakley (2009) and Taylor et al.’s (2004) work, other researchers have indicated that investigations have shown that the use of prayer by athletes before, during, and after competition to be a common and valuable practice for enhancing performance and overall well-being (Czech et al., 2004; Park, 2000; Vernacchia et al., 2000; Watson & Czech, 2005). Vernacchia et al. (2000) found that a student-athlete’s spiritual and religious beliefs—which included the use of prayer—promoted a deeper meaning to their athletic successes, failures, struggles, and disappointments. The literature aligned with the overall responses of the participants. The participants sought prayer when they experienced uncertainties and lack of confidence during on the field performances. Participants acknowledged that they were more confident, vocal, and more precise about their decision-making after praying and seeking advice from God.

Prior research has demonstrated that Black male students use prayer for guidance or direction during their matriculation through college and life (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008). This study extended the literature by determining that Black male college athletes have an intimate relationship with God through prayer. Black male student-athletes also seek God as a source of protection and guidance. Thus, the findings of this study contribute to the literature insofar as there is a strong link between Black male college athletes and prayer.

Transcendent Source for Struggle, Hope, and Resilience

Encountering difficult, demanding, and painful experiences were commonplace amongst the participants in this study. They described a significant number of distinctive stress-related occurrences where religion and spirituality provided a sense of hope and resiliency to counterpoint many of their struggles. This study’s results highlighted how the participants
confronted challenges to their academic advancement and various discriminatory and racialized practices they experienced on and off campus.

The literature emphasizes the significance of how religious affiliation and frequency of spiritual practice firmly affected African American students’ adjustment to college and contributed to better academic success (Constantine et al., 2002; Gehrke, 2013; Phillips, 2000; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Researchers have instituted that the overall identification with spirituality positively correlated with academic performance, especially for Black students, including Black male college athletes (Constantine et al., 2002; Herndon, 2003; Phillips, 2000; Riggins et al., 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). This study relates to the literature in that the participants expressed that the closer they were to God, the more their studies improved. During moments where the participants felt distant from God their classwork suffered. The participants’ identification with God was a reliable resource for them.

In research by Walker and Dixon (2002), individuals that actively acknowledged spiritual beliefs and behaviors had higher GPAs and more academic honors than those that did not. They also experienced less academic probations and suspensions. The participants in this study cited that a minimum GPA and successful course completions were critical to maintaining athletic eligibility. The participants were required to sustain their athletic eligibility to preserve scholarships, grants, and financial aid. Eligibility was a specific matter of concern for all of the participants. Meeting athletic eligibility requirements necessitated a commitment to academic preparation for many of the participants in this study. Harrison, Comeaux, and Plecha (2006) found significant disparities in the educational development of Black and White student-athletes. Notably, Black student-athletes who were recruited from less prestigious high schools with insufficient resources. They were significantly underprepared for the rigors of college-level
academic work. Harrison et al.’s (2006) work were similar to Lapchick et al. (2017), which concluded that the academic challenges of Black male student-athletes stem from the educational preparation students get before they ever get to college. Both of these studies indicate how Black male college athletes remain challenged with maintaining athletic eligibility.

The results of this study align with the literature regarding the racial stereotypes and biased experiences that Black male college athletes endure on White campuses. Black college men, including Black male athletes, consistently face racist stereotypes and racial microaggressions that demoralize their achievement and sense of belonging (Harper, 2009; Harper, 2015; Smith, Yosso, et al., 2007). The participants in this study encountered situations which viewed them as thugs or intimidating because they were Black men, they wore dreadlocks for cultural identity and sported expressive tattoos.

Researchers have recognized the degree to which Black male student-athletes experience a climate of campus discrimination by notable members of the college community. African American male student-athletes at Division 1 schools encounter the most damaging and deep-rooted racial stereotypes by other members of the community (Beamon, 2014; Comeaux, 2010; Czopp, 2010; Hodge et al., 2008; Lapchick, 2010). Studies show that stereotypes of Blacks are more harmful than stereotypes of other ethnic minority groups (Comeaux, 2010; Jones, 1997; Thomas et al., 2007; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). The participants in this study recognized that discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice were pervasive and an everyday reality for Black students, which is consistent with the conclusions found in CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

A series of surprising events emerged from the interview data for this study. Participants described occasions where they unexpectedly encountered interactions with law enforcement. The participants detailed stories of being accused of committing crimes such as “robbery” or
“breaking and entering” while engaged in everyday college activities like attending a frat party or searching for off-campus housing. Moreover, participants described occasions of being pulled over by police officers while driving home from school because as one officer alleged: “This car that you’re driving, it looks like it’s been in a burglary.” Harris, Henderson, and Williams (2005) claim that despite the Fourth Amendment prohibition of unwarranted stop and detainment by authorities, police officers utilize legal loopholes that permit them to make traffic stops for investigation. Several of the participants expressed that the stops by the police were racially motivated.

The emphasis on stereotyping and racial profiling of Black males is consistent with what is in the literature. Young Black men have been consistently stereotyped as criminals (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Welch, 2007). The practice of racially profiling young black males as criminals attempt to increase the likelihood of uncovering illegal activity. Most of the factors contributing to the endorsement of racial profiling are most likely rooted in inaccurate and often discriminatory claims (Welch, 2007). This study’s conclusion stressed that the participants relied and depended on religion and spirituality as they interacted with law enforcement. The participants in this study acknowledged that they were extremely concerned and worried when these encounters with the police took place. They maintained a sense of calm and composure throughout the ordeal as not to exacerbate the situation that potentially could have resulted in their harm or death.

To summarize this study’s contribution, it was found that religion and spirituality were a sustainable resource in support of academic achievements, race-related confrontations, and encounters with law enforcement for Black male student-athletes as proposed in previous research. This study suggests that religion and spirituality help Black male college athletes to
respond to substantial opportunities to achieve personal growth and demonstrate a transformative personality as they engaged the college campus. Religion and spirituality did support the students in developing higher levels of maturity through significant trials in their lives. This study’s analysis extends the previous research on Black male college athletes and their use of religion and spirituality as a form of support.

**Opportunities for Growth**

The participants in this study held that both favorable and adverse occurrences provided opportunities for spiritual and personal growth (Mattis, 2000). As this study verified, Black male college athletes responded to the challenges to produce transformative behaviors while engaged with others, and during particular circumstances. The participants indicated that religion and spirituality guided them to learn lessons from their lived experiences and the experiences of others. In other words, developing, growing, and progressing forward was continually produced in their lives. Opportunities for growth in this study afforded the participants the occasion to become the best possible person in all situations, to develop in their relationship with others through their lived experiences, and to impact the lives of others more powerfully.

Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) acknowledged that the principal function of struggle and crisis is spiritual growth. Fowler (1981) alleged that disequilibrium is significant in inciting changes in patterns of faith and belief. Parks (2000), whose work focuses more directly on college students of traditional age, utilizes the image of “shipwreck” as the primary step in the young adult life toward “gladness,” “amazement,” and ultimately a more refined sense of meaning and faith (Bryant & Astin, 2008). The participants in this study expressed that the struggle and crisis they endured helped build spiritual growth within them. For example, one participant shared that his experiences enabled him to establish a stronger connection with God.
The increase in his relationship with God came through the trials and tests he encountered.

The participants in this study voiced that they experienced growth opportunities in terms of helping others in need. Assisting others consisted of random acts of kindness towards people, including strangers. The participants were proud that they helped other people to feel better about themselves. Many of the participants viewed their desire to impact the lives of other people as a calling from God to be the best possible person they could be and helping others fit that criteria.

Past research has shown that students who experience crisis and challenging experiences grow and develop a more profound faith. The present study proposes that transformative behaviors are the production of crisis experiences. Also, the research shows by focusing on the needs of others; the students continually produced spiritual growth in their lives. The findings of this study contribute to the literature on Black college male athletes, and their opportunities to grow, mature and develop their faith and relationship with others.

**Making Sense of a Developing Identity**

In previous literature, researchers have considered the role that religion and spirituality play among Black students and identity development (Chae et al., 2004; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Stewart, 2009). For example, Sanchez and Carter (2005) established a connection between racial identity and spirituality for Black students. Ethnic and religious issues are a fundamental part of the self-identity development for Black students during college. Racial and religious identity development progressions are complex and may vary between students of color (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). The participants in this study frequently intersected Black male identity with religion and spirituality. The participants expressed that they were strong Black men who loved
God. They conveyed that their Black maleness inextricably linked to their relationship and connection with a higher being.

Stewart (2009) studied how spirituality impacted Black students’ multiple and integrated identities. The relationships individuals have with others and individual abilities to integrate multiple roles, contexts, and identities within one’s self-image or identity (Stewart, 2009). The participants in this study were eager to identify with their role as an athlete. Athletic identity meant recognition, honor, and pride throughout the campus for the participants. Further, the participants collectively intersected religion and spirituality with their play on the field.

The participants suggested that they played better when they felt God’s presence with them during competition. They felt more confident and believed that their athletic development progressed forward positively. The participants also found that religion and spirituality were supportive with on the field struggles, which included racism (Waller, 2015). Previous studies undertaken referred to Black male athletes and the use of spiritual resources to help them cope with and thrive in their environments on predominantly White campuses (Galli & Reel, 2012; Seitz et al., 2014; Waller, 2015).

The participants in this study voiced that religious identity had a substantial influence on their lived experiences. Parks’ (2000) FDT tenets suggests that the college years (Young Adult Stage) is the time when individuals start to reflect on the meaning of living consciously. Individuals initiate the process of taking responsibility for themselves, including their faith (Parks, 2000). This period for young adults experiencing faith involves making discoveries that differ from prior assumptions held about the world and consequently altering their structures of faith and meaning (Parks, 2000). The participants in this study commonly cited that purpose and
destiny were meaningful to them. They pursued an understanding of the objectives of their lives and how best to fulfill them.

This study’s results emphasized that the participants used religion and spirituality to make meaning of themselves and their experiences. Love and Talbot (2000) maintained that religion and spirituality is a process that involves the pursuit of discovering direction, meaning, and purpose in one’s life. Religion and spirituality provide a sense of purpose, helping Black men to stay on the right path as far as accomplishing the goal of graduating college, and obtaining goals post-graduation (Riggins et al., 2008). The overall blueprint that God had for the lives of the participants was evident to each of them. They set out to accomplish their goals whether through the good or the hard times.

To date, a considerable body of research has sought to understand the identity development of Black college males (Chae et al., 2004; Dancy, 2010; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Stewart, 2009). This study provides many invaluable insights into the identity development of Black males and how they integrate multiple identities. The results of this study contribute to the body of research on the perceptions of multiple identities of Black male college students.

One notable observation in the results of this study as it pertains to religious identity was that the participants made explicit references to believing in God and that God was the supreme deity they most trusted. However, the participants made no clear distinction that a distinctly different God represented their particular faith. For example, one participant acknowledged God by the name Jehovah and another participant called God Allah. The remaining participants acknowledged Him as God. As one participant noted there is only one true God. He said: “Allah and God, it’s just Arabic, honestly. … It’s just a different language.” God was a living presence to all of the participants, but to some, there is only one God.
Other Sources of Encouragement and Aid

This study’s conclusion that Black male college athletes employ other means of support and assistance—inclusive of support from their religious institutions, coaches, professors, and academic advisors—to achieve success in college is consistent with the literature (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Gaston Gayles, Crandall, & Jones, Jr., 2015; Riggins et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2004). Support from religious institutions give Black men a place to have an extended family to lean on for financial assistance or when faced with academic adversities (Cuyjet, 2006; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008).

All of the participants in this study recognized that in addition to spiritual guidance, religious institutions provided social and material support for the participants to aid their educational journey. The participants received scholarships that were designed to help young college students. The church supplied care packages to every student who needed additional material supplies. The participants recognized the church as being “selfless” and passionate about the “care and support” of those who attended their congregations, particularly college students.

The results of this study align with the literature regarding Black male college athletes receiving support from their religious institution. This level of intimacy and frequency of interaction are not surprising considering that many church members form close friendships and even family-like relationships with the congregation (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Taylor et al., 2004). A strong bond exists between Black culture and religion and spirituality (Cuyjet, 2006; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor et al., 2004).

Several of the participants cited that coaches with the assistance of academic advisors and other school personnel were a critical resource in helping participants to succeed academically.
The participants in this study built better academic study habits by attending study hall and receiving additional tutoring to assist in passing classes and completing courses that lead towards graduating on time. The language barrier that hindered one participant and the poor educational preparation students get before they ever get to college were critical factors in the academic challenges of the participants (Lapchick et al., 2017).

The participants frequently acknowledged their academic advisors as being good people. They were individuals who genuinely cared about the well-being of all the participants (Gaston Gayles et al., 2015). Though the advisor’s primary jobs were to provide academic guidance and support, many served in familial capacities for the participants in times of doubt, fear, and other various crises, which is consistent with the literature (Gaston Gayles et al., 2015).

Much like what previous research has found, religious institutions and school personnel are known to provide additional support to assist Black male athletes in succeeding in college (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Gaston Gayles et al., 2015; Holland, 2014). The present study proposed that religious institutions provided social and material support for the participants to aid their educational journey. The present study also suggests that school personnel were an invaluable resource in helping participants to succeed academically. This study, therefore, intended to contribute to the literature on Black college male athletes and the need for supplemental support to their collegiate success.

**Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework(s)**

In Chapter II the researcher described the theoretical frameworks used for this study. CRT and FDT offered a framework to support the students’ beliefs and enabled a greater understanding of the students’ perspective and reflection of their lived experiences. How the results connect with the theoretical frameworks are discussed in the following sections.
CRT

CRT provided an operative lens to examine historical systemic implications of racism, in addition to acknowledging the narratives of Black male student-athletes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In this study, the admitted discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice towards the participants, most closely linked to the CRT tenets of the permanence of racism, intersectionality, and storytelling/counter-storytelling. The results of this study aligned with CRT’s views that racism is pervasive in daily life, that Black men who identify with religion and spirituality operate at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression, and that the use of narratives to illuminate and explore experiences of racial oppression are important.

The lived experiences of Black male college athletes are essential, as this study emphasized their voices in acknowledging their lived experiences. The Black male student-athletes interviewed in this study seemed to actively engage religion and spirituality to support their educational attainment, racialized encounters, and identity development. The experiences and storytelling by the students in this study are consistent with the tenets of CRT where the voices and lived experiences of Black male college athletes are recognized.

FDT

The premise of FDT suggests that young adults are focused on making meaning of their lives. They actively seek and discover the most comprehensive dimensions of their experiences (Parks, 2000). FDT has a strong connection with the use of religion and spirituality by the participants interviewed in this study. Every participant interviewed in this study expressed a sense of personal responsibility for their faith. The Black male college athletes interviewed in this study were committed to their relationship with God. While at times the students questioned the nature of the events that were occurring in their lives, they expressed a deep-rooted trust in
the transcendence of a supreme deity. The results of this study linked heavily to FDT in that students self-consciously engaged the significant matters in their lives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this IPA study was to investigate how Black male college athletes attending a predominately White institution experience religion and spirituality as a form of support. Black male college athletes utilize religion and spirituality as essential support throughout their daily lived experiences. Religion and spirituality are found to be a critical resource and represent a coping and social support mechanism for many Black male college athletes (Bowen, 1999; Brown, 1998; Constantine et al., 2000).

The results of this study have added to the literature by illustrating how religion and spirituality serve to support Black male college athletes. These significant findings represent the essential nature of affirming the religion and spirituality of each participant. The researcher found that possessing an unwavering trust in God is crucial concerning an individual’s experiences with religion and spirituality. For Black male college athletes, the existence of God’s presence is critical. Relying on one’s faith and an intimate involvement with God was emphasized as a high priority. Students consistently cited prayer as an essential procedure for maintaining a strong connection with God. Divine protection and guidance were significant factors in achieving success and accomplishing established goals. God’s presence is foundational for managing struggles with academic achievement, experiences with discriminatory actions, encountering painful and traumatic occurrences, and engagement with law enforcement officials. The opportunities for growth relates to becoming a better version of one’s self and taking opportunities to make the lives of other people better. Making sense of identity is meaningfully intertwined with faith. Purpose and destiny were an essential
component of religion and spirituality. Students in this study utilized additional resources to support their success in college.

The results of this study are encouraging because they are consistent with the literature in which Black male students rely more heavily on spiritual and religious resources as a coping mechanism as compared to their White counterparts (Walker & Dixon, 2002). The most significant contribution of this research is that it gives voice to the experiences of young Black male students who must consistently navigate a predominantly White college campus environment. The study gives voice to the participants by capturing the essence of their stories. Furthermore, by acknowledging the many hardships and difficulties that they faced, including at a younger age. Then by allowing their voices to make sense of their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Their voices represent that their faith in God is strong and that they maintain a lasting hope for the future.

This research adds to the literature a deeper understanding of how Black male college athletes make sense of their experiences. This study contributes to the current literature on the experiences of Black male college student-athletes enrolled at PWIs: that they are a unique population facing challenges beyond those experienced by traditional non-athlete college students. Black male college athletes still confront racism, have academic problems, and continue to make sense of their identity. However, additional research and the existence of dedicated and committed practitioners present an opportunity to improve the college campus experiences for Black male student-athletes. The following sections addressed implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

**Implications for Practice**
Religion and spirituality are regarded as an anchor and source of support as described by the participants. Trusting in God, consistent life of prayer, and development through experiences are valued among this study’s participants. The results of this study offer some critical implications for several interest groups. These include those who develop achievement programs for student-athletes, such as student affairs practitioners, school administrators, faculty, coaches, and athletic directors. Also, clergy and religious institutions may be served well by the implications of this study.

Student affairs practitioners who are committed to holistic student development must understand how religion and spirituality affect the college experiences of Black males, particularly Black male athletes (Watson, 2006). The incorporation of religion and spirituality into the educational environment would provide college, and university professionals added resources to support Black male student-athletes. Love and Talbot (2000) suggest, practitioners need to be open to the various notions of religion and spirituality that students bring to campus; acknowledge that some students are deeply emotionally invested in the religious and spiritual elements of their lives; and admit the need for training to equip them to deal with the religious and spiritual development of the student.

Student affairs professionals are primarily tasked with holistic student development; however, to incorporate religion and spirituality into the educational environment further, school administrators could offer elective courses in religion for student-athletes. Students enrolled in religion courses have developed a sophisticated understanding of who they are and what they believe (Braskamp, 2007). More practically, student-athletes could participate in service-learning courses. Service-learning courses offer opportunities for student self-reflection and
identity information. They also provide students with the freedom to integrate their spiritual and religious worldviews in their reflection and interactions with others (Braskamp, 2007).

The results of this study also suggest that students need additional opportunities to attend on-campus religious centered programs. Participants indicated that they were aware of several on-campus religious programs available to student-athletes, including Athletes in Action (AIA) and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). However, due to their busy athletic and academic schedules, it was difficult for them to attend the weekly sessions consistently. Colleges and universities could provide information as to where specific religious meetings or study groups could take place. Whether they meet in dorms or residence halls, student-athletes could schedule an agreeable time to attend school sponsored faith-based groups for student spiritual enrichment.

Moreover, the results of this study suggest that there should be diversity in on-campus religious programs offered, particularly programs offered to Black students. Religious leaders assume a critical position in the lives of the Black males in this study. For example, one participant reflected, “[The] campus should be diverse. FCA should maybe be led by a Black and a White FCA leader. Just to give some equality there. A Black religious person from the community should come out and … interact with the athletes.” The participants expressed that having a White leader in the FCA program was not a significant issue; however, having a Black representative of their religious views provided encouragement, motivation, and focus. Besides, it offered an opportunity to have another perspective on issues related to Black males.

Further, the results of this study hold implications for the need to provide multi-faith opportunities for all student-athletes. The participants in this study held various beliefs and faith commitments. School administrators, faculty, and student affairs practitioners could develop partnerships with external constituents who focus on religious or spiritual leadership (Stewart,
Kocet, & Lobdell, 2011). These partnerships may include cooperation with religious, spiritual leaders such as imams, priests, ministers, rabbis, teachers, and others who specialize in religion or spiritual development (Stewart et al., 2011). Additionally, campus and religious life centers could be established to celebrate the existence of religious diversity among the campus community. Students can engage with religious communities that uphold shared values and beliefs or participate with different faith traditions to help acknowledge commonalities and differences among world views.

In light of these findings, local churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and the Kingdom Hall could assume an essential role in addressing the campus challenges that study participants identified. Colleges and universities should be open to partnering with religious organizations. Local religious centers are indispensable to the continued spiritual development of college students (Herndon, 2003). Neighboring campus religious assemblies may have student-centered outreach programs that may include weekly religious studies. Religious institutions and college student-athletes may benefit from programs centered around the interests and needs of students (Herndon, 2003). The participants in this study acknowledged the impact that religious institutions had in supporting their success in college.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The study expanded the body of knowledge on Black male college athletes attending PWIs and their experiences with religion and spirituality as a form of support. This study, however, has raised a new set of issues specific to Black male college athletes and require a closer examination and further investigation. It was the intention of the researcher to represent as many faith traditions as possible. However, not all worldviews are described in this study. There would be great value for practitioners who are concerned with student success to explore
the religion and spirituality of students-athletes who are of religious affiliations and beliefs not researched in this study. There is a growing acknowledgment that religious and secular diversity exists on college campuses (Stewart et al., 2011). Many colleges and universities today acknowledge the richly diverse and multicultural tapestry that characterizes their campus. Whereas a campus might have been solely Christian or Judeo-Christian, there is now a multitude of other religious and secular perspectives that need to be considered (Stewart et al., 2011).

The spiritual and religious practices and needs of religious minority groups require more accommodation as the world advances toward a pluralistic society. Mayhew (2004) suggests that “spirituality is the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world” (p. 647). Further research related to the religion and spirituality of Black male student-athletes from all faith traditions is encouraged.

Another area of future research could be to take a more in-depth examination of the relationships between law enforcement and Black male student-athletes. The most surprising discovery of this study pointed out that Black male college athletes’ encounters with the police often involve the experience of an unwarranted interrogation, and at times a severe threat of a potentially deadly situation. The study revealed that the cops get called on these Black males because of the claim of seeing a “suspicious-looking person” or a deep-rooted belief that Black males “fit the description” (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). On several occasions, the police encountered the participants with their gun drawn and the potential to shoot an unarmed student because they were in spaces that other people believed that they did not belong. Black college males are stereotyped and profiled by police at alarming rates (Welch, 2007). Regardless of whether a Black male is on or off campus, they remain targets for discriminatory acts in historically White spaces (Smith, Allen, et al., 2007). A study that looks into understanding the
effects of these psychosocial and stress-related experiences of Black male college athletes is warranted.

The participants in this study were junior and senior students. Future research should explore the influence of religion and spirituality on Black male student-athletes enrolled as first-year students. The purpose of the researcher for this study was to take a longitudinal view and assess the religion and spirituality of the participants after several years as a college student-athlete. Bryant et al. (2003) explored the extent to which students in their first year of college were involved in religious practices and considered themselves spiritual. Are students committed to religion and spirituality during their first year of college? Do students only become more committed to religion and spirituality over time? These questions and others will help to guide the issue regarding how Black male college athletes negotiate the college experience while constructing their spiritual and religious identities and commitments (Bryant et al., 2003). Further examination should take place in this area.

Finally, it may be valuable for future research to quantitatively measure whether and to what extent religious and spiritual practices increase for Black males during their college years. One likely instrumentation to use is the Armstrong Measure of Spirituality (AMOS). AMOS seeks to incorporate a more inclusive understanding of religiosity and spirituality, one that would take into account cultural differences, concerns about self-esteem and mental health, and moral judgment (Berkel, Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004). The four central goals of AMOS are: (a) to reflect the multidimensionality of spirituality; (b) to examine influences of a person’s relationship with God on his or her relationships with others; (c) to explore associations among different dimensions of spiritual attitudes, behaviors, and experiences; and (d) to acknowledge
cultural differences in how individuals and groups experience their relationships with God (Berkel et al., 2004).

A second quantitative instrumentation to use is the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS). ROS measures both intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation. Individuals who are extrinsically oriented are said to use their religion for some personal gain (affiliation, socialization), whereas those who are intrinsically oriented live rather than use their religion (Berkel et al., 2004). These research tools are designed to measure the level of spirituality of study participants.

Concluding Thoughts

Black male college athletes have faced tremendous challenges en route to enjoying a successful athletic career, and at the same time completing their college education. These gifted artists of sport have made every effort to reach their goals and purpose in life despite the many difficulties laid upon the path to success. The literature has explored the influence of religion and spirituality on Black college men. However, this study added new findings to the body of literature by examining how Black male college athletes attending a PWI experience religion and spirituality as a form of support.

The results of this study suggested that Black male college athletes utilize religion and spirituality as a form of support during many of their college and life experiences: including challenges with academic growth, encounters with law enforcement, and identity development. Religion and spirituality have been determined to have a tremendous influence on the experiences of Black male student-athletes, and it should be used in conjunction with their developing life practices. The stories that have been shared by these young Black male athletes are rich, insightful, and extremely inspirational. They fully detail their lived experiences as
Black male college athletes on the road to success. Hopefully, their heartfelt stories will bring hope and encouragement to others who face a similar journey.
References


National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), “Degrees and other formal awards conferred” surveys, 1976-77 and 1980-81; Integrated postsecondary education data system (IPEDS), “completions survey” (IPEDS-C:90-99); and IPEDS Fall 2000 through Fall 2015, completions component. (This table was prepared September 2016)


Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Dear Student-Athlete,

My name is David M. Walker and I am a doctoral candidate in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University in Boston. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and am seeking research participants.

I am researching how Black male college athletes attending predominately White institutions (PWIs) experience religion and spirituality as a form of support. My goal is to expand the body of knowledge about the African American male college athletes’ experiences with religion and spirituality and to strengthen the support offered by faculty, staff, and administrators.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I will be interviewing you about your religious and spiritual experiences. The expected time commitment is between two and three hours over the course of three interactions (two in-person, one either in-person or via email). Per NCAA guidelines, no monetary gifts may be offered for participating.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please email me at Walker.d@husky.neu.edu and include the information listed below. I will provide you with additional details about the study. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

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<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred days and times to meet (including weekends):</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Respectfully,
David M. Walker
Ed.D. Candidate
Northeastern University
Walker.d@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Purpose: We are inviting you to take part in a research study. The study will explore how Black male college athletes attending predominately White institutions (PWIs) experience religion and spirituality as a form of support. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are an African American male student-athlete who self-identifies with religion and spirituality as it relates to its influence on your success in college. This study will involve three points of contact with the researcher, two in-person and one either in-person or via email. The first point of contact will be an initial meeting with the researcher (approximately 30 minutes). The second point of contact will be an in-depth interview with the researcher (approximately 60-90 minutes). The third point of contact will be a follow-up conversation with the researcher. You can elect to hold this meeting in-person (approximately 30 minutes) or you can respond to the researcher via email (time varies). The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

The purpose of this study is to examine the religious and spiritual experiences of Black male college athletes attending PWIs with the overarching goal of improving support for Black male student-athletes and expanding the body of knowledge about the African American male college athletes’ experiences.

Procedure: If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in individual interviews. As noted above, we will have three points of contact: two in-person and one either in-person or via email. For in-person meetings, you may select a location that is convenient and comfortable for you. All interviews conducted in person will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. Any information you provide in writing will also be analyzed. All materials will be stored securely, and your name will be omitted. Instead, a pseudonym, which you may select during the initial meeting, will be used to organize the information.

Risks: The primary risk associated with this study is the discomfort you may feel discussing your experiences as a Black male student-athlete. The researcher will respect your boundaries during the interviews and allow you to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. The researcher will provide you with resources for seeking additional guidance relative to your situation if needed.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the researcher hopes that the information gathered through this study will help better understand the essence of the Black male college athletes’ experiences with religion and spirituality at institutions of higher learning. The findings from this study will be shared with faculty, staff, and administrators with the intention of strengthening support services for African American male student-athletes on college campuses.

Confidentiality: Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers will see the information about you. If you decide to participate, you will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions
associated with this study (i.e. doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any personal information linked directly to you. Information about your age, gender, race, and field of study will be included to help others understand and interpret the research findings. Our interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. The researcher will code the written transcript to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. All physical documents or files related to this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All electronic files will be stored in a password-protected online file storage program and on an external data storage device. Only the researcher will have access to these storage mechanisms. All data will be retained for seven years and then destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decide not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time. You are not obligated to answer all questions that are asked of you during the interviews. You may indicate your desire to skip a question by stating “pass.”

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
Per NCAA guidelines no monetary contributions will be offered for your participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
You will be responsible for the cost of traveling to the interview site. However, you will be able to select an interview site that is convenient and comfortable for you.

**Contact Person:** Please contact David M. Walker at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or via email at Walker.d@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Cherese Childers-McKee who is overseeing my research at c.childers-mckee@northeastern.edu if you have any questions about this study.

**If you have questions about your rights as a participant,** you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of the person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td>Date</td>
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David M. Walker, Student Researcher Date
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about religion and spirituality. My research project focuses on the religious and spiritual experiences of the Black male college athletes attending predominantly White institutions. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into the religious and spiritual experiences of Black college male athletes. Hopefully this will allow me to identify ways in which we can support your achievements during your collegiate career.

Interviewee Background:

1. Tell me a little bit about where you’re from and what growing up in that area was like.
   *Possible prompts: Family background? Educational background?*

2. What has the experience of being an athlete at the Division 1 level been like?
   *Possible prompts:*

3. Describe the religious/spiritual tradition you grew up in?
   *Possible prompts: What was that experience like for you?*

4. How did your family express its religion/spirituality in terms of its practices? beliefs?
   *Possible prompts: What did these experiences mean to you?*

5. How have you used religion and spirituality in your daily activities?
   *Possible prompts: On campus? Off campus? On the field?*

Religion, Spirituality, and Academic Success:

6. Can you tell me about a time where you have experienced challenges to your academic success in college?
   *Possible prompts: What specific strategies did you use in dealing with this situation?*

7. Did you rely on any religious or spiritual resources to get through this situation? If so, what were they and how were they helpful?

8. Describe the support your religious institution(s)/organization(s) may or may not have on you regarding your academic success?
   *Possible prompts: Can you give me a few examples?*
9. Describe the role religion and spirituality play in your ability to remain in and persist through school?
   *Possible prompts* Would you say it helps you deal with your classes?

**Religion, Spirituality, and Racism**

10. Can you describe any racialized encounters that you may have had on campus? With classmates? With professors? During athletic competition?
    *Possible prompts*: What were your responses? How did you feel when this was taking place? How did religion and spirituality play a role in your responses?

11. What is the most common stereotyping (if any) that individuals on this campus (i.e., White classmates, professors) have about Black male student-athletes?
    *Possible prompts*: Why do you think this exists?

12. How did religion and spirituality help you handle stereotypic behavior towards you?

**Religion, Spirituality, and Identity**

13. How does your identity as a Black male impact your experiences in daily life?
    *Possible prompt:*

14. How does your identity as an athlete impact your experiences in daily life?

15. How does religion and spirituality affect your identity development as a Black man at a PWI?
    *Possible prompts*: Does your religious and spiritual views aid with Black male identity?

16. How do you use religion and spirituality to impact or influence the “meaning” or “purpose” for your life?
    *Possible prompts*: Can you share more about those experiences?

17. Do you have anything else to add/share that we may have not discussed during this interview?

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: May 25, 2018
IRB #: CPS18-05-09

Principal Investigator(s):
Cherese Childers-McKee
David Walker

Department:
Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
An Examination of the Religious and Spiritual
Experiences of Black Male College Athletes Attending
Predominantly White Institutions: An Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis

Participating Sites:
Study Site approval forthcoming

DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval:
12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MAY 24, 2019

Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
About the Author

David M. Walker was born in Philadelphia, PA. and raised in Brooklyn, NY. He received his education in the New York City Public Schools. After graduating high school, David went on to higher education at City University of New York-Brooklyn. There, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education, a Master of Science degree in sports management, and a post master’s degree in school administration and supervision. David is a graduate of New York Theological Seminary, where he earned a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree in theology. Finally, he received his Doctorate of Education degree at Northeastern University with a concentration in organizational leadership studies.

David is a retired administrator for the New York City Department of Education. He believes that education is the agent of a successful life. He also believes that God gives gifts unto men to use to glorify Him and represent Him in the earth, and he stands on Proverbs 18:16, which says, “A man’s gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men.” David is a retired NCAA Division 1 college basketball referee.

David lives in Harmony, FL. with his lovely wife, Emeline. He is the proud father of David Jr., Tameeka, and Elizabeth. He is also swollen with pride to be the grandfather of David Michael III.