

MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE AFRICAN AMERICAN  
STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION:  
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## Abstract

In the last fifty years, the number of African Americans pursuing a four year college education has significantly increased (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a). When higher education participation rates include two and four year institutions, the enrollment rates for Black students are even more noteworthy. Despite this progress, the rates of college and university enrollment among African Americans are lower than other racial and ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This disparity has resulted in concerns that existing supports and/or programs in earlier grades, at home, and in communities are not as effective at encouraging more of these students to pursue higher education. Understanding the factors which motivate African American youth will help enable all systems in their lives to adopt strategies and policies directed at reducing disparities and continuing increases in enrollment. This study, expanding upon research investigating academic resiliency in this population, examined the factors that motivated currently enrolled Black college students' decisions to pursue higher education. A grounded theory approach of qualitative methodology was used to analyze interviews of ten subjects (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The study's findings indicated several themes arising from multiple levels of support resulting in students' decisions to pursue higher education, such as the influence of parents and other family members; positive high school environments in which teachers and other staff members encouraged students to go to college; peers similarly engaged in the process of furthering their education; and involvement in organizations promoting academic achievement through, in some instances, mentoring programs. Additional themes explored included the communication of the message from family members and school personnel that college was an expectation, and the value of personal characteristics such as self-motivation/self-

determination. Implications for future research, and relevant information for high schools, teachers, counselors, school psychologists, parents and families, students and community organizations were also discussed.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
CHAPTER	
I.    PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY .....	1
II.   REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	3
Historical Context of Education for African Americans .....	3
Higher Education for African Americans.....	5
The Benefits of Higher Education for Black Individuals and Communities .....	7
Influences on the Educational Experiences of African Americans .....	9
Positive School Environment .....	10
The Need for High Quality Teachers with High Expectations.....	11
Counselor Influence .....	12
Parent and Family Support as a Motivational Factor .....	14
Peer Influence .....	15
The Role of the Black Church in Motivating Students to Go to College .....	16
Mentorship, and Community Programs.....	17
Involvement in Sports as a Motivational Factor for Black Athletes ....	19
The Influence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities .....	21
Barriers to Pursuing Higher Education.....	22

Educational Resiliency .....	24
Conclusion .....	25
METHODOLOGY .....	27
Qualitative Research .....	27
Grounded Theory .....	27
Participants .....	28
Procedures.....	28
Consent Forms .....	29
Measures .....	29
Treatment of Data .....	30
Consent and Background Information .....	30
Interview Data.....	30
Data Collection .....	30
Data Analysis.....	30
IV. RESULTS .....	32
Thoughts About College During Their High School Years .....	32
Application Process .....	32
Decision to Pursue Higher Education .....	35
High School Preparation.....	37
Expectations.....	38
Reaction to College Acceptance .....	39
Influences.....	39
Influences on the Pursuit of Higher Education .....	40
Ethnicity of the Motivators .....	43

College Experience .....	44
Thoughts and Feelings About Higher Education.....	44
Change in Perspective.....	47
Important Relationships.....	49
Campus Involvement .....	51
Additional Comments .....	52
V. DISCUSSION.....	54
Family Support .....	54
Supportive High School Environment.....	55
Supportive Peers .....	56
Teacher Encouragement and Support.....	57
Involvement in Programs That Promote Higher Education.....	58
College as an Expectation.....	60
Self-Motivation/Self-Determination/Self-Efficacy .....	61
Limitations of the Study .....	62
Implications .....	63
Implications for Future Research.....	64
Implications for Resiliency Research .....	64
Implications for High Schools .....	65
Implications for Teachers .....	67
Implications for Counselors.....	68
Implications for School Psychologists.....	69
Implications for Parents and Families .....	70



Implications for Community Organizations and Mentoring	
Programs .....	72
Implications for Students .....	73
Conclusions.....	74
REFERENCES .....	77
APPENDICES	
A. Informed Consent Agreement.....	87
B. Interview Protocol.....	91

## **Chapter I**

### **Purpose of this Study**

Since the passage of key civil rights legislation in 1964, there has been a significant rise in the number of African Americans<sup>1</sup> pursuing a college education, a highly visible trend when analyzed by decade. In 1970, 15.5% of African Americans were enrolled in four-year, degree-granting institutions. By 1980, that figure had risen to 19.4%; followed by 25.4% in 1990; 30.5% in 2000; and 38.4% in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a). The increase is even greater when all two- and four-year institutions are included. Despite this progress, the rates of college and university enrollment among African Americans are lower than other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. For example, in 2013, the immediate college enrollment rates for high school graduates at two- and four-year institutions were Black (57 percent), White (67 percent), Hispanic (66 percent) and Asian (81 percent) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The disparity between African American students' enrollments and those of students from other backgrounds has resulted in concerns that existing supports and/or programs in earlier grades, at home, and in communities are not as effective at encouraging the pursuit of higher education among this population.

The purpose of this study was to explore the prior educational experiences of African American students currently enrolled in a college or university so as to identify those factors contributing to their decision to pursue higher education, and thus help professionals in schools, as well as related fields (i.e., psychology) and community

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<sup>1</sup> The terms African American and Black have been used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

organizations, to be better able to motivate African American high school students to strive for achievement in this area. As educators, psychologists and others focused on supporting the African American population gain greater insight into strategies that have proved successful in facilitating college and university attendance, this knowledge may enable greater numbers of Black students to further their education.

The current study explored the specific motivational factors that prompted these African American students to continue their schooling, including those related to parents and family, teachers, counselors, peers, and the school environment. The goal of this study was to identify factors that contributed to students' resiliency. Their current experiences in college were also explored in order to identify the factors motivating them to persist in the pursuit of their college education. This study analyzed the participants' experiences within the larger context of the increase in the number of Black students enrolled in degree-granting institutions. In addition, this research departs from the deficit approaches of the past and adds to the literature on resiliency by delineating the factors that contribute to positive educational experiences for young African American men and women.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Historical Context of Education for African Americans**

African Americans had extremely limited opportunities to obtain an education throughout most of the early history of the United States due to the institution of slavery (Bennett, 1993; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2010; Gates, 2011). During this period, educational opportunities were often a function of geographical location. Some northern states supported the creation of schools for African Americans. For example, in the 1700s, a private school was opened in New York for Africans and American Indians, and by the 1800s schools for the education of African adults were established in Philadelphia. The situation, however, was vastly different in southern states (Bennett, 1993; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2010; Gates, 2011). By force of law, African Americans were forbidden to learn to read and write. For example, South Carolina outlawed the education of Africans in the 1700s and Mississippi and Alabama outlawed the teaching of enslaved Africans and free Africans in the following century. This was one component of slavery, a system which prevailed in southern states from the country's founding until almost two centuries later. Until slavery was outlawed by the post-civil war enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, mandated illiteracy for African Americans was viewed as a way to ensure the continued submission of those enslaved (Institute for Higher Educational Policy (IHEP), 2010). There were those, however, who fought this injustice. Starting in the 1600s, religious groups and other individuals used their own funds to educate enslaved Africans (Bennett, 1993; Franklin & Higginbotham, 2010; Gates, 2011).

Once African Americans obtained legal protection of their rights to an education, the rate of illiteracy within this population decreased dramatically (Finkelman, 2009; Gates, 2011). Access to higher education for this population expanded from a select few African Americans attending colleges and universities when the first historically Black college and university in the nation, Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, was founded in 1837 (IHEP, 2010). As policies of racial segregation replaced slavery in the southern states, funds made available during Reconstruction for the education of American Americans resulted in the establishment of Black colleges within the region (Duster, 2009).

The segregation of schools became illegal in 1954 when the United States Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned *Plessey v. Ferguson*, an 1896 ruling allowing for the “separate but equal” treatment of racial groups. The Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 further eroded the underpinnings of legal segregation by mandating that no program receiving federal funding could discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, or sex. An unintended consequence of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision proved unfortunate, however. For many African American communities, the closing of segregated schools resulted in the deprivation of important role models. The African American teachers who lost their jobs not only provided examples of education leading to successful life outcomes, but these teachers also held, and communicated, high expectations for their African American students (Patterson et al., 2008). The importance of such role models was borne out by the results of the present study.

At the start of the Civil Rights era, in 1960, only 20 percent of African Americans had graduated from high school; by 2000, 79% of Blacks had completed high school

(Finkelman, 2009). Statistics reveal significant progress in educational attainment for African Americans since that time (Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Nachazel, & Dziuba, 2013). As more African Americans complete high school, there has been a corresponding increase in higher education participation in this population.

### **Higher Education for African Americans**

The current literature reflects the significant positive changes African Americans have experienced in the field of education. Duster (2009) attributed the “latter part of the twentieth century” as resulting in “great progress for diversity in higher education, generally speaking, and for African Americans in particular” (p. 99). As indicated above, despite the increasing number of African Americans enrolled in two- and four-year educational institutions, the rates of college enrollment are lower for Blacks than for other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Similarly, Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Nachazel, and Dziuba (2013) found that the number of Blacks in the age group of 25-29 years old who had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 13% to 23% from 1990 to 2012. In contrast, attainment rates for Whites increased from 26% to 40% in the same time period.

Many African American individuals are motivated and qualified to attend college, but face significant challenges to achieving this goal. This is particularly noteworthy for Black men in higher education. According to Kim and Hargrove (2013):

Despite holding high aspirations to attend college, Black men comprised less than 6% of the entire U.S. undergraduate population in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b). According to Toldson (2012), although college enrollment rates for Black men are proportional to Black male representation in the adult U.S. population, college attainment rates fall far short of these

numbers....Additional evidence shows that almost 70% of Black men do not complete a college degree within six years, compared with 57% of the overall undergraduate student population (Harper, 2006). (Kim & Hargrove, 2013, p. 300).

Another disturbing fact is the gender disparity in college degree attainment between Black females and Black males. Although this disparity exists across cultures, the largest enrollment difference exists among the Black student population. Black females significantly outnumber males at all levels of higher education (Harper, 2006; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). For example, Kim and Hargrove (2013) have indicated that “the number of baccalaureate degrees earned by Black females in 2010 was approximately twice that of Black males (66% vs. 34% respectively), a gap not reflected in other racial groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2012)” (p. 300). This disparity has prompted a great deal of research directed toward understanding the issues surrounding Black male enrollment in higher education. Harper and Kuykendall (2012) suggested that Black males are the most disadvantaged group in education, identifying the two factors of underpreparedness and disengagement as explanations for the challenges faced by Black males in college.

In recent years, a number of researchers have departed from a deficit approach and preoccupation with the factors that have led to African American male underachievement and have begun to study those Black male students who are successful in college (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Consistent with the focus of the present study, the research in this area has documented that such students “serve as agents, displaying strong self-efficacy and engagement. They leverage peers, family members, mentors, and spirituality along their journey to success (Bridges, 2010; Harper, 2006, 2009, 2012;

Herbert, 2002; Herndon, 2003; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003; Museus, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008; Williamson, 2010).” (Kim & Hargrove, 2013, p. 300).

Education is often considered the key to success, especially in the Black community. While rising rates of African American enrollment in college are noteworthy, it is also important that researchers identify elements that would aid in efforts to recruit and retain such students (DeMarquis, Cunningham, & Courseault, 2006). In order for the increase in the number of African American students enrolling in degree-granting institutions to continue, it is critical that educators and policymakers understand what factors students attribute to their pursuit of higher education (Freeman, 1997). The current study explored and documented those factors, including the benefits of higher education.

### **The Benefits of Higher Education for Black Individuals and Communities**

It is evident to many African Americans that the historical legacy of racism and discrimination in America has had long-range effects in their communities, crime and poverty among the most severe. Scholars (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Brooms, 2014; DuBois, 2001) have stressed education as a catalyst for positive change. The benefits to both individuals, as well as the community, are significant. It confers upon individuals the ability to rise above negative circumstances, ranging from those that are material in nature and those contributing to personal development. Education was cited by Duster (2009) as the key to open doors, from employment to politics and economic ascendancy. According to Brooms (2014): “Education has proven to be a great elevator for Blacks; in fact, education has a transformative power that liberates us from our former selves and allows us to create ourselves anew” (p. 207). Higher education was also credited by W. E. B. DuBois, whose classic work, *The Education of Black People*, was republished in



2001 (DuBois, 2001), as one of the basics to the production of character, essential not only to the individual but to the larger African American community. The underlying philosophy was that educated individuals would serve to move the community forward by promoting the benefits of education to others within the community:

The community must be able to take hold of its individuals and give them such a social heritage, such present social teachings and such compelling social customs as will force them along the lines of progress, and not into the great forests of death. What is needed then, for any group of advancing people, is the College-Bred Community, for no matter how far the college may fail individual cases, it is, after all, the center where knowledge of the past connects with the ideal of the future. (p. 57).

When most African American children are asked in their early years the question typically asked of small children: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” most will offer a response associated with success in life, such as, “doctor”, “lawyer”, or “police officer”. All of these aspirations require higher education, the first two advanced degrees. Jobs that offer middle-class lifestyles without higher education requirements are increasingly rare. According to Karen and Dougherty (2005), “In the past 40 years, higher education has virtually become the necessary passport to the middle-class, as the value of the high school diploma has sharply dropped” (p. 33). The ability to achieve financial success is a powerful influence on the career choice decisions of African American college students (Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007). The greater the number of such successful individuals, the greater the possibility of change for all people within the community. The present study explored the value that African American college students

placed on academic achievement and the persons who influenced them to pursue their goals.

### **Influences on the Educational Experiences of African Americans**

Researchers have explored how the life experiences of African Americans influence their choices, specifically concerning students' attitudes and perceptions about their educational experiences (Freeman, 1997). In a study conducted examining the barriers that African Americans face in their decisions to pursue higher education (Freeman, 1997), findings suggested that one such barrier stemmed from teachers' perceptions of students' abilities, particularly lower expectations for Black students. Not only did such negative perceptions of their ability correlate with student achievement (Freeman, 1997), they also suggested to students that this is what they could expect in higher education as well. Another study of high school students' perceptions of their abilities found that, in addition to teacher expectations, curriculum had an impact on student confidence and performance (Schein, 1990).

The Freeman study also found two important components of a student's decision to continue with education: social capital and cultural capital. Social capital consists of the network that provides information, social norms, and achievement support. Cultural capital is the product of: (a) a group learning over time how to solve problems of survival in an external environment, and (b) those arising from internal integration (Schein, 1990). Such learning is simultaneously a behavioral, cognitive, and emotional process. The strength of the culture derives from its ability to reduce anxiety about predicting and understanding events happening around the group (Schein, 1990).

Financial capital was also explored as a factor motivating educational attainment within the African American community. The expected cost of the education balanced

against the prospect of future wealth and success gained from enrollment, among the other considerations, impacts students' perceptions of the value of education (Freeman, 1997). This element also has a component of cultural capital in the Black community, as there is a strong belief in the role education plays in success. For example, Black students have stressed that their parents and grandparents impressed upon them the importance of getting an education as a way to improve their life chances (Patterson et al., 2008).

In a study to assess the strengths of high-achieving African American high school students in racially diverse settings, Marsh, Chaney, and Jones (2012) found that resiliency was maintained by overcoming self-doubt and deriving support from other individuals with the same ethnic background. The study also highlighted that membership in a religious group was important as a support to students.

### **Positive School Environment**

According to Gandara and Orfield (2006): "access to higher education is dependent in very large part to the quality of K-12 education to which students are exposed" (p. 115). It is not only important that Black students have positive relationships with teachers. Research findings indicated that such students also need to feel secure in their school environment (Travis, & Leech, 2013). Students will be more invested in their education when they feel a sense of belonging in a positive learning environment, as their belief in their potential to achieve more will be reinforced.

According to the research on academic resiliency, school environments removed from negative aspects of the students' immediate community help Black students feel special which, in turn, facilitates their belief in their academic abilities (Morales, 2010). This is especially important for Black males, given their underrepresentation in institutions of higher learning (Brooms, 2014). According to Brooms' study on

affirmative identities among African American males, the success of this population will depend on the academic and social support in the school setting, and is achievable when their presence is viewed in a positive way (2014).

### **The Need for High Quality Teachers with High Expectations**

Research has suggested that high quality teachers contribute to the academic success of students (Pitre, 2014), as a good education is unlikely to be obtained without teachers of that caliber. In reviewing the literature concerning the achievement gap, Pitre found high quality teaching to include high expectations, student engagement in the classroom environment, and facilitating students' understanding of how the material being taught is connected to their lives, as well as strong and cooperative relationships with people in the school community (2014).

Boykin and Noguera (2011) noted that research has consistently shown that high teacher expectations contribute to the academic success of African American students and their desire to further their education. There is also extensive research documenting, correspondingly, that low teacher expectations have adverse academic effects for many Black students (Mistry, White, Benner, & Huynh, 2009). Fergus, Noguera, and Martin (2014) have also discussed the importance of high teacher expectations in the development of self-esteem in Black and Latino male high school students. The teachers they studied communicated high expectations that their students could and would succeed and held them to high academic standards.

An effective teacher can act as a supportive pro-social mentor and role model for attitudes and behavior that lead to the mastery of critical life skills (Travis, & Leech, 2013). The connections made with teachers, along with other adults and peers, help to shape the moral identity of students. When teachers encourage students to pursue

scholastic achievement, they communicate a belief in the students' abilities, which then motivates the students to learn (Strayhorn, 2010). For example, research findings suggested that Black students whose teachers praise them for their efforts are more likely to earn high achievements in mathematics (Strayhorn, 2010). For Black students to do well in school, it is thus often important for them to have teachers who believe in their abilities and give them positive attention when they show effort. This is, unfortunately, not a circumstance that all Black students benefit from, as unqualified teachers are disproportionately assigned to teach in low-income schools where the majority of students are African American and Latino (Hammond, 2010).

Fergus et al. (2014), in their study of high achieving Black and Latino male students, observed that teachers also communicated the expectation that their students would go to college. They conveyed to their students the belief that college was a “pathway for success” (p. 100)—a belief that their students internalized. These teachers taught their students the process of applying to college and helped to raise the students' expectations of the type of college that they would attend. In addition to teachers, counselors can also help to motivate students to pursue higher education.

### **Counselor Influence**

Black students face many challenges in the pursuit of higher education. In most high school settings, counselors are extremely important in providing students with information regarding higher education and helping them through the process of applying to college so that they may obtain their educational goals. Counselors are also in a good position to assist students and their families to be prepared for the transition by informing students of the cultural changes and expectations in the college environment, and helping

parents to prepare for and understand the support their child will need emotionally and financially (Guiffida & Douthit, 2010).

Unfortunately, many ethnic and racial minority students do not receive the benefits of access to school counselors for college counseling. According to Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, and Holcomb-McCoy (2011):

[A] growing body of research indicates that high school counselors have tremendous influence on the college plans of Black and Latino students; however these students are least likely to have school counselors, more likely to have less well-trained counselors, and most likely to have counselors who are forced to give up counseling for other non-counseling related tasks (McDonough, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). In addition, the work of Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, and Colyar (2004) suggests that counselors in schools serving more Black students (a) have higher student-counselor ratios, (b) receive fewer resources toward college planning and preparation, and (c) operate under a limited school-wide emphasis on college access. (p. 190).

Bryan et al. (2011), using a social capital theoretical framework, identified school counselors as a source of social capital in the college application process. Furthermore, in an earlier study, Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, and Day-Hines (2009) found that students were less likely to seek the help of counselors who did not convey a belief in their ability to go to college. This study, along with that of Muhammad (2008), found that positive expectations by their counselors were motivating factors for African American students' decisions about college attendance. Outreach by school counselors may also contribute to more positive outcomes when counselors collaborate with African

American families and communities to enhance the educational achievement of students (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

### **Parent and Family Support as a Motivational Factor**

Family support is often crucial to a student's pursuit of higher education. According to Strayhorn (2010), "one way in which families play a role in the academic success of students is through parental involvement" (p. 181). A parent attending school meetings and thus being involved with the school process was found to be associated with high achievement in math among Black students (Strayhorn, 2010). Such parents were more likely to be knowledgeable about resources available at the school, the progress of their children, and problems they needed to address. Parents' high expectations for their children created a system for lasting perceptions and values, which often contributed to success in school (Strayhorn, 2010).

Parental involvement has been noted in many research studies as a key component of successful students. According to Foster and Tillman (2009), consensus exists that there is a direct link between parental involvement and the success of students among researchers, district and school personnel, and state and federal policymakers. Morales (2010) found that active parental involvement has a positive effect on the academic achievement of African American students. Parental involvement is important for all students; however, it is especially important in the urban schools that Black students attend (Foster & Tillman, 2009). A study by Williams and Bryan (2013) explored factors contributing to resiliency in Black youth, and found that realistic expectations concerning academic performance served as a source of motivation.

High parental expectations have proven to be invaluable in the lives of resilient at-risk students (Morales, 2010). According to Guiffreda and Douthit (2010), levels of

family support diverge greatly between high-achieving students and low-achieving students, with high-achieving students experiencing more emotional, academic, and financial support from families than lower-achieving students whose families offered a perceived lack of support.

Research has suggested that extended family members may provide an additional source of support, contributing to a more positive academic performance (Williams & Bryan, 2013). In a qualitative study on resiliency in urban Black youth, Williams and Bryan (2013) found that the extended family network, which included aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, had a positive impact on the educational experience of the youth by providing them with positive role models, academic and moral support, information about college, and supervision (2013).

### **Peer Influence**

During adolescence, young people begin to develop autonomy from their parents and often look to peers for support and guidance. According to the literature (Holland, 2011), the influence of peers extends to decision-making, especially in regard to academic involvement. In contrast with certain theories that Black students may sabotage their academic progress in an attempt to stay within the norm of their peer group, studies have found that peers play a significant and supportive role in the academic experiences of African American students (Harper, 2006). Holland's (2011) study explored the influence of peers in the decision of African American students' to pursue higher education and found that encouragement from peers in the pursuit of higher education had a significant impact on students. Encouragement took such forms as:

- (a) recommending that they attend college and/or a particular college, (b) advice to visit college, and (c) offering insight as to whether a college's offer of admission should be



accepted or rejected. Such peers were often not only advocating higher education for others, but were also considering this option for themselves.

Consistent with this theme, Fergus et al. (2014), in their study of the experiences of African American and Latino high school students in schools designed to address the special needs of males of color, found that these schools focused on “developing a sense of brotherhood with peers” (p. 129). Through the development of strong, supportive peer networks, these schools were able to counter the influence of the street culture and cultivate a belief in academic achievement by communicating the pervasive message that college was an expectation for all students.

In Harper’s (2006) study, peer support was significant in enhancing the experiences of high-achieving African American male college students. In the current study, many participants reported that although they found support in peers of all racial backgrounds that from their peers of the same ethnicity was the most encouraging and validating.

### **The Role of the Black Church in Motivating Students to Go to College**

From the beginning of their existence in this country, Black churches have considered a part of their mission to provide support and exposure to education in the Black community (Douglas & Peck, 2013), and to promote literacy among this population. The Black church is not only one of the most important institutions in the African American community, it is often the only one supported and controlled entirely by Black people (Douglas & Peck, 2013). Churches often establish their own educational programs, such as tutoring initiatives, preschool/daycare centers, GED instruction and private elementary day schools, among others (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Along with its support functions, the Black church offers socialization. As reflected in the literature, the

church plays a significant role as a gathering place for the extended family (Patterson et al., 2008).

Historically Black churches have provided college-educated role models for African American youth. These individuals and financial support from church members through scholarships have helped to motivate Black students to go to college (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). This is particularly important for youths whose family members have not pursued higher education. Kim and Hargrove (2013) have found that spirituality and church involvement have been motivational factors contributing to the success of African American males in college. Herndon (2003) also found that church involvement and religious support played a major role in the perseverance necessary for Black males to succeed in college. For many of these Black men, religion and spirituality also provided coping mechanisms for addressing issues of racism and other challenges encountered in the pursuit of higher education. Many Black churches also provide mentorship and community programs that serve as an additional source of motivation for African American youth.

### **Mentorship, and Community Programs**

According to the research on resiliency, many Black youth have attributed their success in high school to having mentorship from an adult (Williams & Bryan, 2013). When the student completes high school, however, this need for mentorship does not end. Despite the increase in the number of Black students in higher education, once there, they often experience a struggle to fit in and do well. In order to assist with this difficult situation, mentorship programs have been established in high schools and colleges to connect Black students with individuals who have succeeded in higher education and can relate to the students' experiences. Research has shown that having a mentor in high

school may help encourage adolescents to see education as an opportunity for personal advancement (Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012), as mentors provide examples of linking education to: (a) their present success, (b) stronger beliefs in the importance of school for future success, and (c) indirectly to enhanced views of the importance of school for adolescents (Hurd et al., 2012).

Williams and Bryan (2013) found that school- and community-based programs played a major role in the lives of half of the African American students in their study. These programs provided opportunities for extracurricular participation and many provided mentors who supported the students in their pursuit of higher education. In addition, Williams and Bryan (2013) noted that these programs “may provide African American students with academic or school-oriented peer cultures and positive relationships with other resilient students. Examples of programs include cross-age peer, adult-youth, and group mentoring and after-school, academic enrichment, college preparation, and college outreach programs.” (p. 298).

Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2010) and Williams and Bryan (2013) have also recommended that school counselors and parents, searching for positive community-based programs for African American high school students, contact Upward Bound on college campuses and reach out to Black and other community organizations including: “Black sororities and fraternities, African American churches, local branches of community organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and programs designed for African American students’ success such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) [and the] National Black Achievers Program (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).” (Williams & Bryan, 2013).

Research also suggested that establishing mentoring relationships with faculty members positively contributes to Black students' satisfaction with their college experience. Such satisfaction often leads to successful completion of the higher education degree (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). Satisfaction levels are especially significant when the mentoring relationship involves a student assisting the faculty member with research in their shared field (2007). In addition, mentoring plays an important role in reducing isolation and providing systematic support (Hunn, 2014).

### **Involvement in Sports as a Motivational Factor for Black Athletes**

Involvement in extracurricular activities has also been seen as a factor that promotes education in the Black community. Being involved in sports, particularly, exerts a strong influence on students as such students are aware that college will present the opportunity to continue participating in sports and, for those with the most athletic ability, offer exposure to college via recruiters. Shifrer, Pearson, and Muller (2015), in conducting research to determine whether a connection existed between involvement with sports and attending a four-year college, found a correlation between engagement in sports clubs and college enrollment for Black males (2015).

Harris, Hines, Kelly, Williams, and Bagley (2014) have explored the motivational factors that led to academic engagement and success of Black high school athletes. They have stressed the importance of a collaborative approach of coaches, teachers, principals, and parents to motivate Black athletes to pursue a college education and to excel not only in sports but in academic subjects as well. Rhoden (2006) and Harris et al. (2014), in discussing the influence that coaches have on Black athletes, have stressed the necessity that coaches communicate high expectations and develop a strong academic identity in their students. Singer (2008) has emphasized the importance of preparing Black high

school athletes for their college experiences. When coaches, teachers, and parents communicate a common message to Black athletes that their intelligence is as important to their future as their athletic ability, these athletes have greater confidence that they can succeed in college (Harris et al., 2014; Rhoden, 2006; Singer, 2008).

Athletic scholarships to colleges and universities remain a major motivational factor for many Black youth who envision professional sports careers (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012). The academic performance of many of these student athletes has been a major concern for many years (Anderson, 1990; Bimper et al., 2012; Edwards, 2000; Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixon, 2008). Donner (2005) found that a significant number of African American college athletes have difficulty with their academic performance. Singer (2008) reported that Black college athletes often experience greater expectations for athletic performance than for academic achievement. Lapchick (2011) reported that Black male college student athletes at schools in the NCAA men's basketball tournament had significantly lower graduation rates than their White teammates. One explanation for this outcome was found by Bimper et al. (2012) to arise from the negative stereotypes that Black athletes encounter in terms of expectations of their poor academic performance by faculty, peers, and others in their colleges and universities.

There has been a shift in the research in recent years to begin to study the Black male student athletes who are successful in their academic subjects as well as in college sports (Bimper et al., 2012; Comeaux, 2007). Comeaux (2007) has advocated for learning from the experience of academically successful college athletes to discover and implement strategies for fostering the educational development of the majority of Black athletes. The Black student athletes who were successful in both their sport and their

academic performance developed a community of support that included peers and supporters within their academic and athletic departments. These Black athletes praised their athletic department for creating an academic center composed of counselors who believed in these athletes, had high expectations for them, and who inspired them to do well academically and to graduate. Once again, consistent with the research above, high expectations and support were motivational factors for these Black college athletes to do well academically and to attain college degrees (Bimper et al., 2012).

### **The Influence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) were founded so that newly freed slaves might be provided with an education in the United States (Butler, 2011). HBCUs were located mostly in areas where there were large populations of Blacks, mainly in the southeastern and northeastern regions of the country. According to Hale's (2006) book highlighting the importance of the HBCU, these institutions provide a sustained climate of welcoming and acceptance for Black students. Black colleges provide motivation for students and continually reinforce the message that they will succeed (Hale, 2006). This optimism transcends their open admission policy, a policy indicating that some of these students might have been denied admission at other institutions where entrance is more competitive. Because the HBCU is already a homogenous group, students do not encounter the tension that exists in other environments where their race may be perceived as hindering full acceptance (2006).

Among the most notable contributions of HBCUs is their rate of students obtaining degrees in the difficult, but desirable and highly marketable, areas known as "STEM" (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012). In 2009, nearly 20% of STEM bachelor's degrees received by African American

students were conferred by HBCUs. According to Hilton et al. (2012), one factor that contributed to the success of Black males at HBCUs was the presence of campus administrators. These personnel were very accessible and made students feel that they cared about their success during interactions. The campus environment also provided a role in Black males' success, as students at HBCUs felt greater support and more comfortable on their campus than peers who attended predominantly White institutions (Hilton et al., 2012).

### **Barriers to Pursuing Higher Education**

There are many factors that present barriers to the advancement of African American students to higher education, particularly for those from low-income communities where primary and secondary education is often unsatisfactory. The issues students from low-income communities often face include: (a) school district funding disparities, (b) tracking into remedial courses, (c) unqualified teachers, (d) low teacher expectations, (e) stereotype threat, and (f) premature departure from high school (Museus, Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Many Black students are often so discouraged in the lower grades that the prospect of succeeding through secondary school seems illusory, let alone attempting higher education. When students attend schools that are inadequately funded, which is all too common with ethnic minorities, they are likely to be issued outdated textbooks, have use of obsolete technology, receive less instructional materials, and have limited access to support personnel who might guide them through the educational process. Even minority students who do not live in low-income areas are more likely to be tracked into remedial classes, limiting their future choices to pursue higher education (Museus et al., 2011). If the barriers to educational

attainment, as described above, are not overcome, higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and mental and physical health problems often result (Hurd et al., 2012).

Claude Steele has researched another barrier to the pursuit of higher education by African American students—the issue of stereotype threat mentioned above (Steele, 2004, Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

Stereotype threat is related to being or feeling at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one's racial group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Their research confirmed that when African American students were exposed to negative stereotypes about their racial group's intellectual ability, their performance on standardized tests was lowered due to increased anxiety and self-doubts. When the stereotype threats were removed, African American students' performance greatly improved and was equal to that of their White counterparts. Stereotype threat is pervasive among even the most motivated and academically superior African American students. The resulting lowered performance on standardized tests can impact adversely their ability to pursue higher education at all levels (Steele, 2004).

Barriers exist within higher education itself that also make it difficult for African Americans to be successful and graduate. For example, many low-income students of color who are otherwise prepared to succeed in college do not attend because of inadequate financial aid (Gandara & Orfield, 2006). Once enrolled, the absence of financial aid may necessitate students' decisions to leave school (Jones, 2001).

Adjusting to a new environment and a different value system is often difficult for African American students when they may face a social and academic climate that is neither inclusive, nor affirming, at a time when they have broken away from their traditional sources of support: family and cultural heritage. Establishing goals and short-



term objectives and committing to them are necessary for success, but African American students often struggle with setting realistic goals. Other difficulties that may serve as barriers to success in higher education include: (a) family income level, (b) educational attainment level of the parents, and (c) the student's insufficient academic preparation (Jones, 2001).

### **Educational Resiliency**

Educational resiliency refers to the ability of students to overcome difficult and challenging life circumstances and other risk factors, and to succeed in their academic goals (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). The concept of resiliency has two components, risks and positive adaptation. According to Kim and Hargrove (2013), personal and family level protective factors are components of the first line of defense for an individual in an at-risk group. On a personal level, a strong sense of self and high self-efficacy, along with confidence in one's abilities and academic preparedness, are important. Within the family structure, having support and encouragement, along with resources, proved to be necessary for success. Encouragement and involvement of fathers was especially important for Black males. Protective factors in the social environment are also vital. These include attending schools with good teachers and administration, and supportive peers (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

In their research on Black student performance compared with that of White students, Eccleston, Smyth, and Lopoo (2010) found that Black students did not perform as well on a variety of measures of academic achievement. Over time, the deficit has decreased, but it is still present. The question remains: How do Black students overcome the challenges described above, continue to thrive, proceed through the educational system, and even go on to pursue higher education? Some theories indicate that Black

students do not measure their self-worth in accordance with their academic performance (Eccleston et al., 2010). In fact, Black students felt more positively about themselves overall than their White counterparts, despite having significantly lower standardized test scores. One reason suggested for this outcome was that Black students may receive early socialization to not consider external sources to be dependable as the best judge of their academic ability.

In a study conducted with students who attended seven high schools designed to serve a population of ethnic minority male youth, Fergus et al. (2014) found that all of those schools fostered a climate supporting the development of resilience in these youth. The constant message students received—from everyone at their school, including principals, teachers, counselors and peers, and reinforced by their parents—that they would succeed and pursue higher education resulted in educational resiliency and a belief that they could succeed in college.

## **Conclusion**

In order to continue to increase the number of African American students enrolling in degree-granting programs, it is important that research studies investigate those factors influencing this upward trend. The most reliable source for such information comes from the students themselves. The current study focused on the individuals and organizations directly involved in the choice of African Americans to pursue higher education. There is a need for research in the area of motivation of these students, such as the present study investigating the factors that led to the pursuit of a college education on the part of a sample of African American students, so that this knowledge may be applied by professionals working with students and result in a greater number of positive

outcomes for the community. The students who succeed in higher education are well situated to become the future leaders of the African American community.

The review of the literature suggested the following research questions, which were explored in this study:

- What motivational factors influenced African American students' decisions to pursue higher education?
- Was the goal of a college education supported by their families?
- What role, if any did their high school teachers, counselors, coaches, and other school personnel play in their decision to pursue higher education?
- Did their peers influence or support their decision to go to college?
- Were there other individuals or organizations that motivated them to further their education?
- What experiences have they had since entering college that have impacted their decision to remain in school?

## Chapter III

### Methods

#### Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a form of research in which the researcher collects and interprets data, making the researcher as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Qualitative research is not meant to have a rigid approach to analysis, but one that is interpretive, very dynamic, and free-flowing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

A researcher will choose to use the qualitative method for several reasons, among them: (a) this method is effective at capturing the inner experiences of participants; (b) the process helps to explore how meanings are formed and transformed; (c) the researcher can investigate issues that have not been the subject of prior research; (d) relevant variables can be discovered that can be tested subsequently through quantitative research; (e) qualitative research allows for a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena; and (f) most importantly, qualitative research gives investigators the opportunity to connect with participants and, thus, to see the world through their perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**Grounded Theory.** Grounded theory is a form of research that was originated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 for the purpose of constructing grounded theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). One of the core concepts of this approach is building theory from concepts derived, developed, and integrated based on that data. This method is a unique form of qualitative research in that: (a) the concepts out of which the theory is constructed are derived from data collected during the research process and not chosen prior to the beginning of the research; and (b) research analysis and data collection are

interrelated in a dynamic process in which the researcher analyzes the data collected, and the concepts derived from the analysis form the basis for subsequent data collection.

Thus, there is an ongoing process of data collection and analysis throughout the research process.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited by using a network sampling approach. Study participants comprised 10 students who identified as African American and were currently enrolled in a four-year college or university. There were two male and eight female participants between the ages of 18 and 33. Six students (60%) were enrolled in state for college, while four (40%) went out of state. Six (60%) were preparing to enter their second year, two (20%) were fourth-year students, and one (10%) was a third-year student. Nine (90%) of the participants attended public high schools, and one (10%) attended a private boarding school. Of the ten participants, three (30%) were attending HBCUs and seven (70%) were attending predominantly White colleges or universities. All participants were born and raised in urban communities.

Most of the participants (60%) were traditional students who went directly from high school to college. Three participants (30%) completed community college and then transferred to a four-year university. For one participant (10%), there was a gap between graduating from high school and enrolling in college. In-depth interviews, conducive to the small sample size, were conducted with the participants.

### **Procedures**

When meeting with the participants, the researcher introduced herself and explained the purpose and the process of the study. The consent form was reviewed and signed prior to conducting the interviews. Once consent forms were signed, interviews

were conducted in quiet locations so that confidentiality could be protected. Interviews were recorded on a hand-held recording device and a flash drive recorder, following which they were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

### **Consent Forms**

The researcher collected completed consent forms from each participant. The consent form explained the purpose and procedures of the study, presented the risks and benefits of the study, and explained the procedures taken to protect confidentiality. The form also provided contact information for key individuals involved in the study. (See Appendix A.)

The form stipulated that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to stop the interview at any point. The consent form also asked their permission to audio record the interview with an electronic device.

### **Measures**

The interview protocol (see Appendix B) consisted of open-ended interview questions created by the researcher. Participants were first asked to provide their name, and then to answer questions about their racial identification, age, student enrollment status, and gender identification. The majority of the interview focused on participants' educational experiences prior to enrolling in their current program, so as to gain an understanding of the decision-making process each underwent when choosing to pursue higher education. Questions covered topics such as organizations in which they were involved, adults or professionals who were influential in their lives, and family support systems that may have had an impact on their decision-making. An additional set of questions were oriented toward the previous educational institution they attended,

including the nature of the high school, supports within that system, and affective experiences at that institution.

### **Treatment of Data**

**Consent and Background Information.** The consent forms collected from participants were kept in a locked storage cabinet in the home of the researcher. Participants were assigned an individual number code to protect their identity.

**Interview Data.** Recording data and hardcopies of the interviews were kept in a locked cabinet inside the researcher's home. After each interview was transcribed, the information was stored in a password-protected database on the computer in the researcher's home. All documents and data collected, including audiotapes and hardcopies, will be deleted and shredded three years following the completion of the research.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected using an open interview format. Participants were recruited using the method of network sampling. The length of interviews ranged from 30-70 minutes in a private setting. Each participant received the same interview questions. The questions were open ended. At the end of the interview each participant was given the opportunity to address any related issues not covered in the interview protocol. (See Appendix B for interview questions.)

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interview was completed and transcribed, analysis of the material began. The Corbin and Strauss (2008) Grounded Theory Method was used to analyze the results. Using the Grounded Theory method, the researcher analyzed the interviews from all of

the participants, identified similarities and differences in responses and created themes from such responses.

There were three components of the data analysis. The first step in the process was open coding in which the researcher listed all of the responses and delineated concepts to stand for blocks of raw data. This process of constructing data comprised breaking the data down into manageable pieces, interpreting those data pieces, and devising conceptual names that represented the ideas within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 160). Another key component of data analysis was axial coding, defined as “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). Once the concepts were related, the various levels of concepts were linked to build categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process also checked the relationships, based on incoming data, and then incorporated new information (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Selective coding, the final step in the process, focused on the integration of the data. Selective coding is defined as “the process of linking categories around a core category and refining and trimming the resulting theoretical construction” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263). From this process, the overall themes were developed. Once the data was analyzed, the researcher was able to create a framework, from the perspective of the subjects, of the factors contributing to each participant’s decision to pursue higher education.



## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

The responses of the participants, separated into four major sections: (a) thoughts about college during their high school years; (b) influences; (c) college experience; and (d) additional comments, are presented in this chapter along with several subsections related to the major sections.

#### **Thoughts About College During Their High School Years**

This series of questions was designed to elicit the participants' high school experiences in preparation for college attendance. This section explored the point at which they decided to pursue higher education, the application process, support throughout the process, their expectations about college, and their reactions once they became aware that their efforts to attend were successful.

**Application Process.** Of the 10 participants interviewed, nine (90%) said that someone helped them during the college application process and some had more than one source of help. School counselors were cited by five (50%) participants. Five participants (50%) answered that family members helped them with the application process. Three participants (30%) stated that organizations not associated with their school helped them, for example, mentorship programs and churches. One participant (10%) mentioned two sources of assistance: her counselor and "the internet." One respondent (10%) stated that various school personnel helped with the application process, including her "soccer coach and principal." This same respondent stated that her friends also offered assistance in this area.

The participants were asked to reflect on the obstacles they faced throughout the application process. Four participants (40%) cited figuring out the financial aid

component as difficult. One respondent described her confusion with supplying all the information the forms demanded: “The whole financial aid process [was difficult], ’cause I was working at the time and I had to put down my tax information and my mom’s tax information, and my dad was working. So it was not very straightforward.”

Three participants (30%) stated that their academic record, in terms of grades and standardized tests, was an obstacle. One participant described how she feared poor test scores might endanger her college plans: “The biggest obstacle for me was that my SAT scores weren’t in the range...of what they [require] for entering into school.”

The essay was difficult for three participants (30%). Two participants (20%) mentioned that application fees were an obstacle for them. One participant (10%) cited the obstacle of finding the motivation to get started with the process. One participant (10%) stated that lack of support and understanding of the college experience was an obstacle. Another participant (10%) talked about the challenges of balancing all of the obligations in her life while applying for schools:

I do a lot and I was trying to apply to college, too. It started to take [a] toll on my health....So I guess just finding the balance [was the obstacle]. I wanted colleges to see that I was persistent....I [participated in a demanding extracurricular activity], so sometimes I wouldn’t get home until 9-10 o’clock, and [then] I still had to do homework. I would fall asleep with [my books] in my bed and wake up and try to do my homework in [school]. It was a lot in terms of scheduling....Then, on top of that, I had to do stuff [at home] too.

Participants were asked about the amount and types of schools to which they applied. Participants applied to a range of two to ten schools, and the types varied from state institutions to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). One

respondent recalled a simple application process: “I only applied to one school, Community, and obviously I got in there.” Another participant described her application plan, which was based on her confidence that she would get the result she desired:

I didn’t apply to many schools...’cause, the way I look at it, in life if I want something, I’m going to get it...I have to try for what I want, and not put myself in a situation where I would be settling for what I don’t want. If you have that confidence and mentality that you are a winner, you get what you want.

All participants (100%) applied to an in-state university. Nine (90%) applied to state colleges or universities, four (40%) applied to HBCUs, five (50%) applied to out-of-state universities, six (60%) applied to in-state public universities, and three (30%) applied to community colleges.

When asked if they were thinking about going out of state for college or staying in state, six participants (60%) stated they hoped to go out of state and four (40%) stated they always planned to stay in state. Of the group that thought about going out of state, two (20%) mentioned the cost of tuition as a factor precluding that option. One participant recalled how the practical considerations of attending an in-state school influenced his decision:

I had every intention of leaving. I was not staying. The school I was accepted into was my safety school. Once I got in I was like, “okay, good.” But I was waiting on other schools to come through. I had no intention on going [anywhere else], but as I saw these out-of-state prices, I started to rethink things.

Participants were asked to reflect on the reason they selected the university they chose. Three (30%) based their decision on location. One respondent answered, “Oh, that’s simple. Just because it’s close.” Three participants (30%) mentioned that the visit

convinced them to go to the school. Two participants (20%) selected their university based on its reputation for being a “good” school. Two participants (20%), who had completed community college, stated that they chose their college because they were able to transfer all of their credits to the new school. Two participants (20%) chose their university because it was affordable. One of the participants (10%) stated that she chose her institution because she was interested in personal development and a supportive atmosphere: “I felt like I could grow there, and it was a very nurturing environment.” Two participants (20%) stated that they liked that the university was diverse.

Three (30%) participants were attending HBCUs. They were asked to reflect on that choice and each responded similarly. One participant denied that she chose her university because it was an HBCU, but rather because it was “the best institution period.” She went on to remark that the mission of an HBCU would give her satisfaction: “[I] want to see Black people doing well.” One participant stated that she had always heard bad things about HBCUs, but having done her own research in high school, she found positive and important characteristics that distinguish HBCUs from other institutions: “You look into history and realize these schools were built for you, and you are not just a number. You are there to succeed. It’s almost like a family.” The last participant who attended an HBCU did so because she felt at home during a campus visit.

**Decision to Pursue Higher Education.** When participants were asked to recall the point at which they realized that they wanted to pursue college, two (20%) stated that they “always wanted to” go to college; for three participants (30%), this realization occurred in high school; for two (20%), it occurred in middle school; for one (10%), elementary school. Two participants (20%) did not realize their desire to go to college until adulthood.

Three participants (30%) attributed their decision to pursue higher education to the thought having been “embedded within them” as something they were supposed to do after high school, three (30%) described it as if they had “no choice,” two (20%) attributed it as a result of fears of not being successful and being a “product of their environment.” One participant stated that she desired to “prove to myself that I could succeed.” One young man mentioned the need to carry on his “family legacy,” and pursue a college education like his father.

An encouraging high school environment was a big influence on one participant’s (10%) desire to go to college. Two participants (20%) attributed their decision to their view of college as necessary to get jobs that would help them make the money they desired in the future. One student (10%) stated that her friends and her “crowd” influenced her. Consistent with the literature about positive peer pressure among African Americans, she described people in her environment who were not considering college the “outsider[s].”

Participants were asked if they felt the idea of college was supported in their homes, school, community, and among their peer group. All participants (100%) felt the idea of college was supported within their homes, eight (80%) thought the idea of college was supported in their high school, and seven (70%) said the idea of college was supported within their community. Two respondents (20%) stated that it was not supported within the community, and one (10%) stated, “people didn’t care either way.” All participants (100%) thought that the idea of higher education was supported among their peers. One participant (10%) concluded that her choice of friends was an important factor: “I pretty much surrounded myself with people where the expectation was to go to college.”

**High School Preparation.** When participants were asked if they thought their high school prepared them for college, six (60%) responded that high school had prepared them, while for four (40%) such preparation had not occurred. Two respondents (20%) stated that there were too few counselors for the amount of students, resulting in insufficient help with the application process. According to a student: “The school only has two counselors and they have to advise 600 and something kids to go to college.” One student reflected on how effective high school had been in preparing him, stating: “There were a lot of things that I already knew when I got [to college].” One other student mentioned that she did not feel fully prepared for the reality of the college environment, despite the adequate academic preparation:

When I got there I realized [I had the expectation] that they [would be] holding my hand. You think that...everyone is going to be friendly and helpful, but it's kind of the opposite. You have to do everything on your own.

When participants were asked for examples of their high school promoting higher education, three (30%) stated that their high schools sponsored college tours; three (30%) stated that their high school gave them information about college fairs; two (20%) mentioned that their counselors reminded them about deadlines; and three (30%) stated that their high school communicated the expectation that students would go on to college. As one student recalled: “[college] was required, well, not required, but expected of us.” One respondent (10%) was “not sure” what the high school did to promote higher education for others, but she felt no one helped or encouraged her because her grades weren't “good enough” for her to be considered college material. Another student attended a high school extremely oriented toward student pursuit of higher education:

They made us do a college preparation course. That whole course was dedicated to applying to colleges, seeing what you like, looking at financial aid, figuring out what you want, seeing if you wanted to go to the Army. [For an] entire quarter, we were in class doing college [preparation] stuff.

Students were also asked to recall if their high schools offered SAT preparation classes. Five participants (50%) said “yes,” four participants (40%) said “no,” and one (10%) did not recall.

**Expectations.** When participants were asked their expectations of the college experience, four (40%) expected it to be “what you see on TV,” primarily consisting of parties and going to class. One participant explained that the entertainment media had made her somewhat wary of what college would entail:

I expected college to be like [what] you see in the movies where you see...these huge auditorium size classes, with a professor that was like super smart, and kids not being able to answer the questions...being embarrassed....Like what you see on TV, I thought it was going to be hard. I thought it was going to be really difficult.

Four (40%) of the participants expected to meet new people and develop friendships; two (20%) expected the experience to be difficult; and one (10%) thought the opposite, considering it easy to “do well academically.” One participant (10%), as mentioned above, expected to experience “self-growth” and be in a “nurturing environment.”

The participants were asked about their fears concerning attending college. Seven (70%) stated they had some fears about attending college and three (30%) stated they did not have any fears. Four (40%) participants were apprehensive about failing or not doing

well. One participant explained her fear that she would prove inadequate to the challenge and her concern that such fears would become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

I thought that what I already [feared] about myself was going to be true. I thought that I was going to go to school [and] going to try very hard, and I thought that I just wasn't going to do well at it. I thought that I was just going to have to settle with my thoughts that college wasn't for everybody.

Three participants (30%) feared not being able to make friends, and two (20%) mentioned a fear of being homesick.

**Reaction to College Acceptance.** Participants exhibited a range of emotions when asked what their thoughts and feelings were when they found out they were accepted into college. Five (50%) participants said they were “excited” with the news, two (20%) described their reaction as happy, and one (10%) was anxious to broadcast his news on social media:

I was really happy [because] I got accepted into both of the schools I applied to. So I put it all on Facebook, and everyone said congratulations. And it was really awesome because my best friend in high school [and I] went to the same [college], so it was really cool.

One participant's (10%) reaction to acceptance was apprehension: “I was scared because I felt like I wasn't prepared enough for college, and I felt I wouldn't get that far.” One (10%) said that she felt “relief” because she applied for early acceptance, and one said that she was “not happy” because she did not get into the college of her choice.

## **Influences**

This section of the interview process was designed to gather information as to what or who influenced these students to pursue higher education, with an additional



emphasis on the role ethnicity played when these young African American men and women were guided throughout the application process.

**Influences on the Pursuit of Higher Education.** When participants were asked what or who influenced them to pursue higher education, seven (70%) credited their family. One respondent paid tribute to the family member who instilled the idea of college in her when she was a young child:

One of the first people to even put the thought [of college] into my mind was my Grandmom...my mother's mom....Since I was very small, like barely even walking, she was always saying...to me, "Go to college, go to college." Literally, [she was] the first person to tell me to go to college, before I was even thinking about it, when I was just thinking about jumping rope. She was always telling me, "Read more books, stay in school, go to college, get a better education, push yourself, go further." And she's been telling me that since I was a little girl. She preaches it to my niece and my nephew, all of the kids. She was always telling me to go.

Three participants (30%) expressed that their biggest influence was a self-directed wish for a more promising future, and not to fulfill the negative "stereotype" of the African American community. According to one respondent: "There was no other option, but to go to school and better myself. If you don't go, then you can't really live in the world, [and] you can't really thrive in the world."

Two participants (20%) responded that the idea of "making money" was their influence for pursuing higher education. One participant stated: "I come from pretty much a poor family, and I've heard that when...people...go to college, compared to people who just have a [high school] diploma, the income difference is pretty

substantial.” One participant responded that she liked the idea of “having more options” for work and career than the job she had at the time, and she thought going to college would give her the opportunity to “see what else I was capable of, see what else I could be good at.” One respondent said that her “high school” influenced her to pursue higher education, and another respondent talked about the influence that peers had on her pursuit: “All my friends went to college. They were all talking about college. Everyone I was surrounded by went to college. So it was just...expected of me to go to college.”

Participants who had described their high school experience as influencing the decision to attend college were asked to identify the school personnel, if any, key to their decision. Of the seven participants (70%) who responded that teachers influenced them, one recalled a particularly encouraging math teacher:

He was like my big brother, and he already knew that I had potential in me, even when I didn't see it in myself some days. He would be, like, “Come on, you got this. You can go through these applications,” or whatever. “You can finish these essays.” He actually edited some of my essays...when I was applying for scholarships.

Two participants (20%) stated that all of the adults in their school were influential. One respondent recalled how teachers and adults would consistently imbue a positive message into their interactions with students:

Everyone was supportive in their own little way....Throughout the lesson, they would...always reference when you “go to college.” It was always, “when you go to college,” not “if.” Everyone silently pushed you to go to college, and I appreciated it.

Two participants (20%) stated that coaches influenced them, and were instrumental in helping them stay motivated. One respondent (10%) stated that school counselors influenced the decision to pursue higher education.

When asked about whether any organizations influenced their decision to pursue higher education, eight participants (80%) reported being involved in such organizations, and two (20%) stated that they were not affiliated with any organization outside of school that influenced them. Of the eight participants who credited organizations, three (30%) were involved with nonprofit community organizations, two of whom were involved with the same organization—a mentorship program. Two participants (20%) were involved with a school-affiliated mentoring program which one described as particularly impactful:

That was really empowering...Black women empowering Black youth. All of the women were dentists, doctors, teachers, owned their own business, principals.

Just all women to look up to, and all Black. That was the main thing. It was for all the Black girls in the school.

Two participants (20%) were influenced by their church to pursue higher education, and one (10%) responded that his sports organization, a tennis club, was very influential.

When participants were asked if they were influenced by family, all (100%) stated that family members influenced their decision to pursue college. When the researcher followed up by asking participants to identify the influential family members, five cited mothers (50%), five cited fathers (50%), three cited grandmothers (30%), two cited aunts (20%), one cited a sibling (10%), one cited an uncle (10%), and one cited the participant's children (10%). All (100%) participants continued to maintain contact with those family members.

Participants gave a variety of responses to the question of what had been the most motivational factor contributing to their decision to pursue higher education. Seven participants (70%) responded that they wanted to have a degree for more career opportunities. One participant referenced financial pressure: “I believe that I need this degree...on my resume to get hired to pay off all this debt.” Two participants (20%) responded that they wanted a better life for themselves, and two (20%) stated that they did not want to let their family down. One participant, aware of sacrifices the family made on her behalf, wanted to prove worthy:

I always felt like [going to college] was just...something that I needed to do. I didn't want to let my mom down....The only reason she had to delay college was because of me, so I think that I just wanted more for myself, and wanted everyone to be proud of me.

Another participant was motivated by impending fatherhood and a desire for his child to be proud of him:

I have a little girl coming in November, and I was thinking randomly one day, “I don't want my child to have a career day and I'm like still in college.” Or, “I don't want the other kids asking, ‘What does your daddy do?’ and [she says], ‘He works at Payless.’”

Two participants (20%) responded that the most motivational factor for them was “learning” and opening their minds to new ideas, one (10%) mentioned wanting to make “money” in the future, and one (10%) responded that the networking opportunity was one of the biggest motivational factors for him.

**Ethnicity of the Motivators.** These questions asked the participants to reflect on the ethnicity of the people who helped, encouraged, or motivated them through the

process of considering and/or applying to higher education. When referring to those sources of assistance in high school, seven participants (70%) responded that the people who helped them most were from various ethnic backgrounds, two (20%) identified the people as White, and one (10%) identified them as exclusively African American.

When asked whether at least one African American person motivated them to pursue higher education, nine (90%) responded affirmatively. Three participants (30%) cited a teacher of the same ethnicity; three (30%) mentioned a family member; two (20%) credited a mentor; and one (10%), a friend. One participant (10%) stated that she could not think of anyone of the same ethnicity who motivated her to pursue higher education.

### **College Experience**

This section of the questions was designed to gather information from participants about their experiences subsequent to college enrollment. They were asked to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about higher education, how their perspective had changed once they entered college, important relationships they developed, and to identify new supports and their roles in helping these students with the college experience.

**Thoughts and Feelings About Higher Education.** There were a wide range of responses from participants when asked about their current thoughts or feelings about college. Two (20%) responded that college was important for self-growth; two (20%) stated that they “love the experience”; and two (20%) mentioned the need to prioritize the educational aspects of college, rather than the social ones. One stated: “You have to have discipline, to not go out to a party every time somebody asks you to. That’s definitely the biggest thing, to have discipline.” Two participants (20%) responded that college could be “overwhelming” and “frustrating.” One participant (10%) responded that college was the “best choice” she had made for herself. Two participants (20%) reflected on how

college is not necessary for everyone. One of those participants also offered an explanation that universal college attendance might not be achievable, but it was crucial for both self-improvement and to better living conditions for others:

I don't like how society makes it seem like it's essential for everyone, because I don't think that school is for everyone. But I do think that it's important for self-growth. And...the only way that we can...correct some of the atrocities in our society is if we begin to study them. [To] begin to get a better understanding of the underlying causes and effects...requires a lot [of] studying and learning, and college is required for that. I think the only way we can...contribute to society is if we pursue higher education.

Information was gathered on what the participants liked about their college experience thus far. Four participants (40%) responded that they liked the “freedom” they had to do what they wanted to do and three (30%) said that they liked learning to be independent. One participant reflected:

The freedom is what I like most about it....Nobody is on my back anymore wondering what time I'm coming home. And also, because I'm by myself, it gets me to step up and do things I wouldn't normally do, things I would usually rely on my mom for.

Three participants (30%) responded that they liked “networking” and “meeting new people,” two (20%) said that they liked the feeling of accomplishment and three (30%) said that they liked learning. One participant talked about how her college experience was not only adding knowledge, but helping her to mature: “Every day I leave the classroom, I [have learned] something new....I guess it feels like every day I go to class I [also] feel like I'm growing up a little bit more.”

Participants were asked whether there was anything they did not like about their college experience. Four participants (40%) responded that they disliked how “expensive” college is, and having to pay for it; two (20%) disliked having to be responsible for themselves; two (20%) mentioned the disorganization and disconnect within administrative offices; one (10%) disliked his college campus, considering it “boring”; and one (10%) cited the lack of diversity on her campus.

When asked to reflect on the most challenging part of their college experience, five (50%) responded that other priorities and/or responsibilities competed with the necessity to concentrate on education. One participant expressed a dilemma common among students: “balancing social life and academics,” while another respondent characterized it this way:

Having self-discipline, and since you don’t have anyone [looking] over your shoulder, you...have to decide [for yourself] when to have fun, and when it’s time to get in the books. And for me, being a bio major,...a lot of the time I need to be in the books.

The older, nontraditional student had more intense time management issues and defined the most challenging part of her college experience thusly: “As an adult, just juggling my home, my business, and finding time for my school work.”

One participant (10%) responded that staying organized was challenging for her, one (10%) cited seeking financial aid, one (10%) found the pressure to do well, and one (10%) referred to feeling disconnected from her family: “The most challenging part is being away from people that I [was used to seeing] every single day, because I am so close to them.”

When asked about the most rewarding part of their college experience, four participants (40%) responded that the opportunity to go to college was rewarding in itself. One participant expressed the sense of accomplishment attending college generated, especially given a contrasting family environment:

All of it [is rewarding]. Just being there. Just saying, “I’m a college student,” especially since none of my brothers and sisters went. My mom has three children, my dad has six children. I share one sibling with my two parents. And I am the only one who is in college. So that’s just rewarding enough for me, saying I did it. I got in. I not only got in, I went. I’m going. I’m trying, and I’m going to do it.

Three participants (30%) said that the friends they made were the most rewarding part of their experience, two (20%) cited their sense of accomplishment after completing goals, and one (10%) mentioned her internship.

**Change in Perspective.** This section involved how the college experience has changed participants’ perspective on life or enabled them to develop different interests. When participants were asked what interest for future work or life goals they had developed since being in college, each responded with a different answer. Responses varied from one participant (10%) who developed an interest to do preventive work with the criminal population, one (10%) who desired to become an accountant to “make good money,” and an interest in learning beyond the classroom was mentioned by a third participant (10%). She reflected in detail about how college had expanded her interests and sparked her intellectual curiosity:

I took a photography class, and I had no prior knowledge or experience [with the subject]. Now I look at pictures much differently. I...go to museums that I would



never go to before. Now, I get...really excited about that kind of stuff. You know, traveling and knowing the history of where I am going. We are going to go down south soon, and I'm just feeling like a big dork right now. I'm going to St. Maarten in July, and I want to know about the history. I want to know why St. Maarten is half Dutch and half French....Was there a war, did these people fight over land,...what happened?...Those [are] things that I want to know right now, and I know that's because of college.

A fourth participant (10%) responded that she developed an interest in working with children and taking self-care more seriously; a fifth (10%) had become interested in the research side of the occupational therapy discipline; and a sixth (10%) had developed an enhanced work ethic that caused her to be not only more serious about school work, but more serious about life in general. A seventh participant (10%) developed a desire to become more responsible and mature:

I definitely want to be more independent. So I've been doing more budgeting, figuring out my paychecks, putting my money to the side, figuring out what's for bills, putting money aside for groceries. Just the other day I went to the grocery store by myself for the first time ever, and I was like, "What am I doing in here?"

So I'm just trying to be an adult.

One participant (10%) developed an interest in writing, while another (10%) became interested in a teaching career since entering college.

The participants were asked to reflect on how college had changed their outlook on life. Four (40%) commented that college changed their perspective on people, as they learned not to make snap judgments. They became aware of the need to get to know people first, because they couldn't know anything about who the people were, what they

had been through, or what they had to offer based on appearance. One participant (10%) learned the need to accept that “things do not always have to go as planned,” and to be okay with that; one (10%) responded that she learned she was “capable of more than what I thought I was capable of”; and one (10%) responded that she learned she needed to become more self-accepting and not only try to please others:

I...kind of started to live for myself in a way. I don't think that I ever really did that. I was...always looking for approval from somewhere. And in doing that, I think that I made decisions that I thought would be well received....I think that in going to college, I was able to be like, “Okay, this is college and next is real life so you can't keep trying to do stuff for everybody else to make them happy. You have to do it to make you happy.” At the end of the day, if you are stuck doing something you don't want to do, then it was all pointless....I think a lot of time that's what I did. I think that college got me to think more in terms of what I wanted to do...instead of what everybody else would receive as, “Oh my gosh, good job.”

One participant (10%) responded that he realized that being a “grown up” was not as much fun as he thought it would be, another participant (10%) realized the divergence between the reality that college needed to be taken seriously and her pre-existing notions of college formed by media exposure.

**Important Relationships.** The participants were asked whether they had developed any significant relationships with other students while in college and how those relationships made an impact on their college experience. Nine participants (90%) responded that they had developed significant relationships; while one (10%) responded that she had not developed such relationships, which she ascribed to her status as an

older, nontraditional student or, as she put it, “an adult.” Of the nine participants who had developed significant relationships with other students, two (20%) said they felt supported through tough times by the others students; four (40%) responded that they enjoyed socializing (partying; hanging out) with the students they met; and one (10%) developed an especially strong bond with a group of young women who had not only become the closest of friends, but also reinforced peer pressure to succeed:

I met four people [who] were significant in that I found the sisterhood type vibe with them, because they would be there. Like for my birthday, I spent my birthday with them. It’s just like I got really close with them because I lived with them every day. And they were significant because they were kind of like me...If I was slacking in something, they would be, like, “You need to do this.” And they had study groups for finals, so they were helpful for stuff like that.

One participant (10%) responded that she learned she could be friends with people who had opinions on important social issues that were different from her own. Another participant responded that she developed a significant romantic relationship with another student while in college.

The participants were then asked whether they had developed any significant relationships with professors while in college and, if so, how it had impacted their college experience. Eight participants (80%) responded that they had developed a significant relationship with a professor, and two (20%) responded that they had not so far, with one stating her intention to make an effort to form a significant relationship with a professor when she returned in the fall.

Four participants (40%) stated that their perspective on important issues had changed as a result of attending lectures given by the professor, three (30%) stated that

the professors seemed to be “supportive,” and one (10%) responded a professor was willing to write a reference to enable her to transfer to a four-year university.

Participants were asked if they developed any significant relationships with a professor of shared ethnicity. Seven participants (70%) responded affirmatively, one of whom mentioned that as a result of her attendance at an HBCU all of her professors had been African American. Another participant reflected on her experience with a professor who was a powerful role model:

My race and crime teacher last semester is an African American female, and she is also teaching [a] class [which involves] going to prisons. I don't talk to her 'cause I'm kind of afraid to talk to professionals, but it's something amazing....Seeing all the [other] African American females around me [not attending college], and how they are kind of doing badly, and they are not setting an example, it's interesting to see [that there are] other black females setting an example. It makes me feel like I can do it.

Three participants (30%) responded that they did not develop a relationship with a professor of the same ethnicity, one of whom attributed it to the absence of possibility: “I have not had a professor of the same ethnicity as me.”

**Campus Involvement.** When participants were asked if they joined any organizations while in college, six (60%) responded in the affirmative and four (40%) did not. The students who had joined organizations participated in those affiliated with their field of study, community service clubs, an art club, and the NAACP. One participant reflected on the two organizations she joined during her first year as indicating dual sides of her nature:

I joined the NAACP, as well as the National Black MBA Association. Those were two organization[s] that I thought [were reflective of my personality]. My Black Panther side was the NAACP, the MBA Association was for my business side to further myself in my career.

### **Additional Comments**

This section allowed the students to offer their perspective on anything they felt needed to be added that had not been asked during the interview. Five participants (50%) felt that the interview protocol had been sufficient to provide relevant information on the topic being discussed, and five (50%) had additional comments.

Two participants (20%) added an emphasis on the importance of having supportive environments. They determined that having family, friends, and school personnel supporting them in the pursuit of higher education made it easier. One participant wanted to give advice to students starting college that they should always strive to do their best so they would not fall behind. One participant talked about her feelings of not being supported at home by her parents, and how she was able to turn a disadvantage into an advantage. As difficult as it was for her to not feel understood at home, that lack of support could also act as motivation to prove that she is strong and resilient. One participant, the nontraditional student, had more life experience than the other participants. An occurrence she witnessed in the financial aid office led her to the realization that supportive and helpful people could make all the difference in someone's life course:

I always remember there was this young Black girl at [my college] when I was waiting in line for financial aid. She had a baby, she was maybe 19 years old. And [while] she was waiting in line at financial aid, I was listening to what was going

on, [but] she did not know what was going on. She just showed up there and...didn't know the questions to ask. The woman [in the office] was, like, "You are too late to do your FASFA." And that was it. The girl took her little baby and she...walked out the door. This was...seven years ago, but I still think about that because [in contrast] a few feet to my left there was a young White man with his mother and father waiting in line with him for admission, and going through every step with him. And this girl didn't have anybody with her, but something inside of her made her show up that day and try to go to college, probably 'cause she had a baby and whatever, and who knows what happened to that girl. Perhaps that girl never ended up going back to college, but maybe if that lady in financial aid, or a family friend, could have helped to guide her through that process, 'cause...an 18 or 19-year-old child may not know what to do, she could have [taken] the next step for the rest of her life. But she stopped that day. The lady was just like, "You missed the deadline for FASFA," whereas she could have said, "Well, honey, you missed the deadline for FASFA, but...this is what you need to do...to apply for your FASFA [in the future]. You're not going to be able to get in for this semester but apply anyway, and if you qualify for FASFA, you may be able to cover...your whole education. If not, you may have to apply for loans, but you can get money to pay for your books and things you need." If somebody could have [taken] 20 minutes and [have gone] through the process with her [her life might have turned out very differently]. Everybody doesn't have somebody to do that for them, and [they] may not be able to do it themselves like I was able to....If more people had help in their schools, in their high schools, in their communities, in some kind of way, then they would go to college.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

This study examined the motivational factors that influenced African American college students to pursue higher education. The interview process explored the participants' high school experience, college experience, support from family and outside organizations, and influence from various systems in their lives. This chapter discusses themes that emerged from the participants' responses to questions related to their experiences prior to pursuing higher education, as well as what supports were available once they enrolled in college. Such themes included support from the following sources: family; teachers and other school personnel; friends; involvement in organizations that promote higher education and college as an expectation; and self-motivation/self-determination. Limitations to this study and implications for future research are also discussed in this chapter. Implications include areas for future research; and relevant information for high schools, teachers, counselors, school psychologists, parents and families, students, and community organizations.

#### **Family Support**

Participants were asked questions about the support they received from family members during their application process and to identify those family members who influenced them to pursue higher education. Many participants reported family members who were supportive and encouraged them in advance of college enrollment. Some respondents felt motivated to attend college to represent family members who had been unable to take advantage of the opportunity. As one participant expressed it: "My family [members] were always a big part in my education, and I know they were never able to go to college for whatever reason, so I wanted to do it for them."

The importance of an actively supportive family reported by the participants was also reflected in the literature. Morales' (2010) study identified the value of having parent input and high expectations as protective factors for academically resilient urban youth. According to Morales' study, high parental expectations were communicated through words and actions extending beyond general commentary that they wanted their children to do well. Specific and explicit messages reinforcing educational goals and ambitions, as well as supportive actions, were key (Morales, 2010). Consistent with the research findings, participants reflected on parents' supportive actions. There were numerous responses that "my mom" helped fill out FASFA forms and college applications, and that parents took students to college fairs. Additionally, a strong work ethic modeled by mothers was important in resiliency. Two participants reported that as children they witnessed their mothers go through the process of higher education and that experience proved insightful for them.

### **Supportive High School Environment**

The involvement of the high school was assessed through several questions throughout this research. The participants were asked to identify school supports that helped them throughout the application process. Many participants offered examples of the various ways in which this support manifested, such as receiving information about college fairs, obtaining fee waivers for SATs and applications, assistance with personal essays, and verbal encouragement from school personnel. Many participants also spoke of a school climate promoting higher education by communicating the idea that college was expected of them. Students internalized this message so that, as one participant recalled, she "never thought about not going." According to the literature, schools that separate students from negative aspects of their communities and connect them with like-



minded peers have great value (Morales, 2010). Being in an environment with exposure to different cultures and norms where the importance of education is also stressed can lead to academic resiliency.

Given the gender gap among African American males and females in higher education, it is important to consider what specific needs might be addressed to further Black males' commitment to education. According to research by Brooms (2014), it is important for schools to establish classrooms specifically for Black males that create an environment to counter the stereotype of African American males as unintelligent, uneducable, and dangerous. Rather, Black male images should be showcased as positive; with the schools providing academic and social support, and role models for Black male students.

### **Supportive Peers**

Peers are very important agents in the decision making process of teenagers and, as such, questions in the interview were geared towards assessing the impact peers and friends had on participants. Even when questions did not directly ask for information about friends, participants responded that their friends were a big support in their pursuit of higher education. For a few of the participants, their friends were going through the process simultaneously and thus were important by nature of their complete understanding of what the participant was experiencing. This finding was consistent with the literature that peer support, especially from peers of the same ethnicity, was key in the experience of African American students. Given concerns about Black males' academic achievement, it is noteworthy that the support of peers was found to be a factor attributing to the success of African American males in college (Harper, 2006).

The importance of African American students associating with like-minded peers similarly oriented toward pursuing higher education was a theme in the present research consistent with the literature. One study that investigated the effects peers had on African American students' decisions to pursue higher education found that the peers with whom students spent the most time were advocates for academic engagement and planned to continue their education following high school (Fergus et al., 2014; Holland, 2011). One participant talked about how surrounding herself with people who were educated made her goals appear more attainable. A few participants acknowledged their support of friends considering going to college.

The social component of college was especially important for many participants in this study. Finding new friends, looking forward to learning from new people, and developing relationships with people from different environments was mentioned by respondents as something they looked forward to. Many reported new friendships or "meeting new people" as the most rewarding part of their college experience thus far.

### **Teacher Encouragement and Support**

Teachers spend a great amount of time with students during the school year and have a major influence on their development during adolescence. Teachers not only instruct but also represent a positive example or role model of success as a result of higher education. When responding to questions geared towards teacher involvement in the application process and the promotion of higher education in their high school, several participants cited teachers as influential in their decision making process.

Teachers were very involved in the application process for many of the participants. Some participants recalled teachers reviewing essays, writing recommendation letters, helping them select a university that would be a good fit, and

providing words of encouragement when students were feeling anything but hopeful. As presented by the literature, teacher expectation is essential for the success of their students. According to the Freeman (1997) study, which examined the barriers for African Americans' pursuit of higher education, teacher expectation of students played a large role in their decision to pursue higher education. A few participants also recalled striving to emulate teachers.

Students in the current study stated that when teachers talked about college as something they were going to do, it became something they expected for themselves. One participant recalled his teachers being influential in the idea of accepting college in his future as more than just an option. The fact that they expected him, and every other student, to go to college, acted almost as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This reflection was consistent with the research that positive perceptions and high expectations among teachers can raise and improve student performance (Strayhorn, 2010).

### **Involvement in Programs That Promote Higher Education**

A few students reported that their involvement in mentorship programs dedicated to college preparation was influential for them. One participant discussed her high school-based program that separated students by gender and brought in Black professionals of the same gender to talk with students about the possibilities following high school, thus offering female students female mentors and male students male mentors.

For some participants, the process of applying to colleges was made easier because of the help they received from mentors in their programs. Additional benefits for some of the participants included assistance with fee waivers and conducting college

tours. For many of the participants, mentors served as resources for determining college course selection and possible majors.

Community organizations are effective agents for promoting youth development outside of school. This study asked participants specific questions about their involvement in such organizations. Mentorship programs were a theme in the interview results. As discussed above, a few of the participants were involved in nonprofit organizations instrumental to the participants' desire to consider higher education in their future plans. Two participants in a mentorship program sponsored by a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization expressed that having mentors of the same ethnicity who were encouraging and helpful was meaningful and among the most significant aspects of their journey. This was consistent with research that found mentoring to play an important role in reducing isolation and alienation for students of color (Hunn, 2014).

One participant spoke about the importance of his church family in his pursuit of higher education, consistent with literature affirming the value of the Black church as a reservoir and resource for the educational advancement of Black people (Douglas & Peck, 2013). As described by the participant, mentorship provided by positive male figures in the church, who had successful careers and had attended or were attending college, provided a meaningful example of what he should strive for as a young African American male. The appearance and demeanor of these mentors—the participant spoke of them “dressing the part” and presenting as dignified young Black males—were also key components in his inspiration. Another factor that added to the effectiveness of this program was accountability. Because the participant knew he had to report to his church family on a weekly basis, he felt not only the responsibility to just go to college, but also to do well.

Two participants mentioned affiliations with community sports teams as important to them when considering college. Both participants were in leadership positions within those organizations and spoke of their motivation to be an example of excellence for younger team members: knowing of the admiration these boys had for them inspired them to set an example of success and achievement. This is consistent with research findings that mentoring serves as a reciprocal relationship for the mentor and the protégé, both intellectually and psychologically (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). Mentors serve many purposes, among them, role model, teacher, advisor, guide, and a resource. The interaction between the mentor and the protégé allows for practical experience in which the protégé can gain insight and experience (2007).

### **College as an Expectation**

One very interesting theme presented by the majority of participants was the expectation of college in their future. Typical statements from participants included: “I was always going to go,” and, “It was just what I was going to do after high school.” Many participants spoke of college as the next logical step following high school graduation, an expectation reinforced by their schools, parents and other family members, friends, outside organizations, and themselves.

Participants gave various reasons about the importance of college, such as needing it for themselves, learning new ideas, and meeting new people. Many participants expressed their belief that they did not give ending their education with high school a second thought because they knew they needed college in order to be successful, given the limited employment opportunities available to those without a college degree. One participant, the nontraditional student, talked about the idea of having more “options” for herself than remaining a hairdresser, which she had done for many years of

her life. According to the literature, Black college students place high value on income and financial stability (Daire et al., 2007). This was consistent with the Morales (2010) study suggesting that moving up in social class was a powerful influence on Black students' desire to be successful in higher education.

### **Self-Motivation/Self-Determination/Self-Efficacy**

One impressive quality of this sample of participants was their level of self-confidence. Each respondent was determined to achieve the goal of completing a college education. This was just as true with students who had started higher education attending community colleges, taken time off between high school and college, or started at a four-year institution directly following high school graduation. Some participants reported their determination as deriving from internal sources. One second-year student stated, "I motivated myself," as she had a strong desire to be successful and knew college was the means by which she could attain that success. The nontraditional student offered another example of self-determination: she had no one but herself to help her stay focused on her goal to change career paths from being a hairdresser to a professional in the legal field.

Many participants spoke of themselves with high regard. This is consistent with the literature. In a study contrasting self-views between African American and European American students, African American students, despite having lower performance levels, had equal or higher self-views than European American students (Eccleston, 2009).

Many of the participants were very confident in their abilities because they considered themselves bright, felt that their high schools prepared them, and had no doubt that they had the skills to be able to be successful in college. According to the literature, there is a direct connection between giftedness and academic resiliency or success (Morales, 2010). As over half of the participants had been in gifted or

academically advanced programs in high school, or attended high schools specifically directed to such students, their self-confidence likely derived from proven academic ability.

According to the literature, a strong sense of self-efficacy is helpful in Black students surviving in residential and educational environments that they perceive as hostile, in which they are often faced with micro-aggressions (Kim & Hargrove, 2010). Many participants in this study expressed a need to “prove” to other people, and themselves, that they could be successful. This need to achieve, along with a strong sense of self-efficacy and confidence demonstrated by the responses of many of the participants in this study, was validated by the literature as a key component in success in higher education settings. In Kim and Hargrove’s (2010) study, referenced above, which used interviews, questionnaires and focus groups to gather information, participants displayed deep self-efficacy with regard to academics.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The sample size of this study was small. Thus, the results should not be generalized to a broader population. Over half of the sample of participants went to public schools considered college preparatory in nature which may have provided them with a slight advantage over students who attended regular public schools insofar as a desire to go to college. Another limitation was that participants were from a specific geographical location in the northeastern United States (all attended schools in Pennsylvania, with the exception of one participant who went to school in southern New Jersey), were from urban communities, and shared a similar lower- and middle-class socioeconomic status. Participants’ common location and socioeconomic status suggest that the findings cannot be generalized. One other limitation was that the majority of

participants were female. Although the sample was consistent with the ratio of females to males enrolled in higher education, as demonstrated by research described above, the study could be giving insufficient attention to the male student perspective, and thus not offer a comprehensive representation of the African American student population.

One final limitation to note in this study is the possibility of investigator bias, since the researcher was the creator of the interview protocol, and collector and interpreter of the data. In addition, the researcher has a great deal of interest in the topic presented. The degree of involvement of the researcher's interest in the design, implementation and data analysis may relate to possible investigator bias, and should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

Despite these limitations, this study provided an in-depth view of the experiences of African American students currently attending college and the motivational factors that contributed to their decisions to pursue higher education.

## **Implications**

**Implications for Future Research.** The goal of this research was to identify the factors influencing the decision making process of African American students in pursuing higher education. Researching this topic is essential for the number of African American students enrolling in degree-granting programs to continue to rise. Future research will need to be conducted to help further understand this trend.

The sample of participants in this study accurately represented the current gender divide among African American students: African American women surpass African American males in post-secondary degree attainment at all levels (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012), as discussed above. This gender gap is larger than that of any other ethnic group attending higher education institutions. It will be important to investigate the cause of this



differential in order to increase enrollment of males in degree-granting programs, and to understand what differences exist, if any, in the experiences of males and females in pursuing higher education.

The importance of higher education in the African American community is another major area for future research. As assessed by this research, many participants stated that although their families often supported their intention to attend college, the pursuit of higher education was not supported in their communities at large. This raises the research question of the level of importance of higher education in the African American community. If it is not of importance, how can change occur so that young people from majority African American communities may feel that they are supported in their environment? What roles can scholars and community activists play in elevating this as a relevant topic of discussion? Research efforts could be undertaken within African American communities to determine how such communities may help to make young African Americans feel more supported in their pursuit of a college education.

**Implications for Resiliency Research.** The core themes from this study represent the ability of these students to be resilient in the face of stereotypes of their communities, and to be successful in achieving their goals to attend college. The definition of academic resiliency, as presented by Kim and Hargrove (2013), is the process and results that are a part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles. As described in many of the interviews in this study, participants spoke about coming from communities where people were not proactive in attempts to remedy unfortunate life conditions. Several of the participants were raised in families in which attending college was not perceived to be possible for them. Overcoming such negativity speaks to the resiliency of many of the participants within this study, and has implications

for future research on the resiliency factors that affect young people from similar backgrounds.

The grounded theory approach gave participants the opportunity to present their stories as a means of providing data for researchers and educators to use to promote the goal of college to future African American students. The qualitative method gives a sample of the population an opportunity to be the source for further development. Although this research also explored the positive aspects of the participants' pursuit of higher education, certain questions brought to light some difficult journeys and obstacles that hinder students from attaining their goals. The salient theme of this research was to highlight success stories in the hope of giving educational professionals, and those in related fields such as psychology, insight on what needs to be done to enable students to be successful in accordance with the trend in research to depart from a deficit-informed framework, and move toward a resiliency-focused perspective that promotes success, in order to address the same goal (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

**Implications for High Schools.** The findings of this study indicate that high schools play a very important role in the promotion of higher education for African American students. The more prevalent the message is that students are expected to attend college, the more likely it is that such students will continue their education. A school environment that leaves a student feeling isolated and alienated can sabotage the best efforts of a qualified teacher and high academic engagement (Travis & Leech, 2013). The results of this study present many strategies that high schools could incorporate into their curriculum. The teachers, counselors, and other adults in the school uniformly conveying the message to African American students that going to college was the next thing they would do following high school helped motivate them. Many students recalled

“it was just expected,” or “I never thought not to go.” Having like-minded students and friends within the school environment was also cited as influential in the study participants’ pursuit of higher education. These results were consistent with the literature that a school culture of high expectations contributes to the success of students (Travis & Leech, 2013).

As students spend significant portions of time in school settings, their decisions are often influenced by their peers and relevant adults in such institutions. As reported by the participants in the study, students who felt the most supported in schools were frequently those who were ambitious and connected with teachers. A few participants talked about getting help from very busy counselors who had large caseloads. They attributed this ability to being “go getters,” i.e., assertive in getting their needs met. While some participants reported not being the best students academically, and felt that this disadvantaged them in finding support in their high school, they nonetheless proved that they could be successful in gaining admission to college. It is important for the adults in the schools to recognize that they are dealing with students of varying abilities and provide support for all students desirous of higher education to find the best fit for them following high school, whether that be a two-year or four-year program.

Many participants felt that their high school prepared them for college academically. Those few students reporting having received inadequate academic preparation in high school found that deficiency reflected in their college grades. Interestingly, one student spoke of his feeling overly prepared and a bit “cocky” because of the prestigious high school he went to, only to find the need to “humble” himself when he did not do well in college. According to the literature, African American students’ academic preparedness determined their achievement in the rigorous STEM (science,

technology, engineering and mathematics) fields, as discussed above. Researchers found that this preparedness of subject matter was necessary to start at an earlier stage of schooling, i.e., in the elementary school years. Unfortunately, research has also found that a lack of qualified teachers and resources in many elementary schools in minority communities results in the lack of self-efficacy among African American students, and makes them subject to streaming into remedial classes and/or susceptible to negative influences discouraging post-secondary education (Museus et al., 2011).

**Implications for Teachers.** As presented in the literature on defining a high quality education, teachers who have positive attitudes about their students impact the performance of those students in a similar fashion (Pitre, 2014). It was evident from the responses subjects provided that their teachers were influential in motivating them to attend college: the majority of participants answered “teacher(s)” when asked what personnel in their high school were supportive of their pursuing higher education.

The responses of the subjects in this study also provide suggestions for teachers who want to make a positive contribution in motivating African American students to attend college. The role of the teachers extended beyond content provider. Although many students had support from their family to attend college, such family members often had not attended college themselves and were unfamiliar with the practical aspects of the process. Teachers often filled the void, not only motivating students with words but with actions as well, such as writing recommendations, reviewing essays, helping with applications for admission, and, in one case, furnishing the student with scholarship applications. Teachers also acted as role models and mentors to some students, representing examples of successful college completion.

Positive perceptions and high expectations among teachers can contribute to better performance among students (Strayhorn, 2010). Many participants spoke about their teachers' presenting college not as simply an option, but as the next step they were going to take. This is consistent with the literature suggesting that teacher expectations and views of students' abilities can create a self-fulfilling prophecy directly and indirectly affecting their performance in school (Strayhorn, 2010). It stands to reason that when teachers expect superior performance from their students they may feel demands on themselves as well, such as enhanced preparation, being available as a resource for students, and communicating a positive message that all possibilities in life are attainable by their students. That the participants in this study had singled out their teachers as sources of motivation to pursue higher education is consistent with the literature stressing teachers' opportunities to produce a permanent impact on students. According to Travis and Leech (2013): "A teacher can fulfill a critical developmental role and facilitate the ability for youth to engage educational material and become lifelong learners" (p. 109).

**Implications for Counselors.** In high schools, counselors play a very important role in guiding students to the best options for their future following high school. One alarming finding of this study, however, was that only a few students mentioned counselors as helpful throughout the application process. The majority of the participants attributed this lack of support to inadequate staffing. Often there were only two counselors in the school to serve hundreds of students in the graduating class. Student assertiveness was a factor in obtaining the counselor's help, but those students who were less aggressive often felt that they had to look to family, friends, and themselves to navigate a complex process.

In an era of budget cuts, administrators must prioritize limited funding. Given the pressure to meet federal testing standards, counselors may often be considered less integral to the education process than other staff members. The limited numbers of counselors, an issue in many schools, makes it very difficult for students who have ambitions to pursue higher education. Inadequate staffing was not the only reason participants cited when discussing the lack of support from counselors. Some reflected that their counselor “did not really care” about them. Communicating such attitudes is inconsistent with the responsibility to make sure that all students are serviced and provided with the supports they need to plan for the future that is best for them.

According to the literature, many students identified effective caring school personnel as having an impact on their academic resilience or success in school (Morales, 2010). In their research investigating counselors as agents for change for Black students, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) found that they can play a significant role in the success of such students in many ways, such as: (a) helping students and their parents to prepare for the change in social climate of college life; (b) educating parents on what is expected of them both financially and emotionally to enable their children’s success; and (c) serving as role models to students, providing the example of the completion of college resulting in achievement of the well-respected career many students desire (2010).

**Implications for School Psychologists.** A school psychologist, much like a counselor, can be a catalyst for change in the school environment. Enhanced training and skills enable them to educate other staff about issues students face and, as with this sample, how best to create the environment in which students feel comfortable seeking out the supports they need to pursue their continued education. A school psychologist can also be one of the professionals in the school who serves as a role model, inspiring

students to pursue a higher education. Thus, in addition to their traditional roles of case management, assessment and testing, crisis intervention and counseling, school psychologists can set the stage for school-wide support for those students who have the knowledge, skills, and ability to pursue higher education. Another aspect of the role of the school psychologist is their training to direct students with a range of abilities, not just the most academically advanced, to the higher education option that would be the most appropriate fit. As a number of the participants in this study indicated, starting at community colleges gave them the confidence to pursue a four-year college. Although this population was not studied in the current research, children who receive special education are also candidates for higher education, and it is the role of the school psychologist to assist such students with finding the appropriate resources to achieve their goal. School psychologists, like counselors, can be instrumental in the process of ensuring that each student who has the ability can successfully pursue higher education.

**Implications for Parents and Families.** There were several questions within this research that explored families as a piece of the motivational puzzle, and found that family support was the one component involved in each of the participant's decisions to pursue higher education. Support ranged from communicating pride at their child's achievement and giving encouragement; helping with the practical tasks required for college attendance, i.e., filling out forms, etc.; and offering financial assistance, for some, to the extent of paying for their all of child's college education expenses. The universality of family support among the participants suggests that it was the primary motivational factor in the student's pursuit of higher education. Many participants suggested that their parents and family members "expected" them to go to college following high school and they could not see themselves doing anything else. For two participants, the need for

higher education was motivated by their family's financial situation: the good, well-paying jobs that are available for college graduates would enable them to help provide for their families.

There is extensive research indicating that parental and family support is a major influence in the success of African American students. For high achievers, emotional, academic, and financial support from families is a factor in success. Low achievers often feel the lack of support from families, which often contributes to attrition (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Morales (2010) found that high expectations, along with parent input and parental involvement, are invaluable for resilient students. As the current study found, supportive parents offering emotional, financial and practical help, were necessary for many of the participants to be successful in their pursuit of higher education.

According to Strayhorn's (2010) study on the role schools and families play in the achievement of African American high school students, having parents with a college education was a positive factor in the students' success. Such parents were often better able to cultivate the talent of their children, and also had firsthand experience with the process of applying for college and could thus be of greater help to their children (Strayhorn, 2010). Several students in the present study reported their parents as having graduated college or in the process of attending college when the participants were young children. It is important for parents who do not have a college education to recognize that they also can help their children through support and high expectations for them, and by finding other adults who may be able to assist in the application process. Investigators have recognized the need for policy and research to build partnerships for parents who have less formal post-secondary education (Strayhorn, 2010).



**Implications for Community Organizations and Mentoring Programs.** A few participants were involved in organizations which supported their educational activities throughout high school and applying to colleges. According to the literature, students who are involved with academic mentoring programs were success oriented and put forth significant efforts toward school and achievement (Morales, 2010). As suggested by the literature, and reported by the participants in the study, having a mentor who completed college is important to helping students stay motivated and choose college for themselves. Mentoring has been shown to encourage minority students, in particular, to pursue and continue in higher education. The influence of mentors is so strong that such students are more likely to continue their education after college graduation by enrolling in graduate school, becoming professionals, and becoming mentors themselves (Strayhorn, & Terrell, 2007). Participants who were involved in college preparatory mentorship programs in community organizations, such as nonprofits, churches and sports clubs, reported both practical and emotional support from their mentors.

The church was influential for a few participants in this study. The Black church has served as a buffer and a bridge to uplift African Americans for generations (Douglas & Peck, 2013). According to the research, the Black church has always offered educational enrichment and support for Black youth, as discussed above. One participant reported that the male mentors in his church presented such a positive image of educated Black men that he wished to emulate them.

Two participants mentioned sports clubs as being very influential in their motivation to continue in higher education. A study on the connection between sports program involvement and the likelihood of college enrollment found that there was a correlation between Black males' engagement in sports clubs and attending four-year

colleges (Shifrer et al., 2015). One contributing factor was identified as college recruiters' recognition of talented athletes and introducing the idea of college to them, alleviating financial concerns through offers of athletic scholarships to the most talented. An additional benefit of sports participation is that it contributes to a well-rounded individual. In the present study, the two participants involved with sports teams expressed feeling the need to report to their teams their progress in their pursuit of higher education, which helped them to stay focused and persevere. Interestingly, these were the only participants who reported assuming a mentorship role themselves, in this case, with younger teammates who looked up to them.

**Implications for Students.** African American students have much to gain from this research study. The participants have revealed to educators and other personnel in the schools those factors which helped this population continue to pursue an important goal. There was a range in the amount of help that students received from outsiders, but each student had confidence that this was something they wanted for themselves, providing the impetus toward the efforts to succeed.

Another theme among many participants was that the idea of college had been instilled within them from a very early age, with some stating that attending college was something they "always wanted to do." One interesting idea expressed by participants was that college was desirable for their personal growth in one way or another. One participant reflected that college made her realize that she could no longer be motivated by what made others happy, but had to think of what was best for herself when making decisions. For future African American students, one key component is the message that this journey has to be something that is meaningful for them.

While getting into college was a very important achievement for the participants, it was the first step toward completing their goal of obtaining a degree. As important as it was to have support prior to going to college, it is equally crucial to find appropriate support once enrolled, so that students continue to perform well and graduate. Some participants derived this from peers and organizations within their college setting. Identifying sources of support at college is a very important strategy that should be adopted by future African American students to help achieve a successful outcome. Parents, family members, and counselors can encourage them in this process.

Harper's (2006) research found that peer support played a significant role in the success of high-achieving African American students. This was consistent with the results in the current study. Many students mentioned developing meaningful relationships with peers of the same ethnicity and background, and found such relationships "encouraging and validating." Students in the Harper study often found support from peers in organizations and activities in which the students participated. Similarly, most of the participants in the current study mentioned being involved in an organization at present, or having intentions to join an organization or group in the future.

## **Conclusions**

This study was designed to produce information about many aspects of African American college students' experiences in their pursuit of higher education, from the application process through their attendance at college. Through the interview process, participants reflected on the support they received and influential people and experiences they encountered. Many of the participants offered information that was consistent with the literature on the topic of what enables African American student enrollment and success in higher education.

Although the sample size was small and therefore cannot be generalized to the population as a whole, much useful information can be extracted from this research study. First, consistent with the literature, all participants found family support at some point and in various ways during the application process. Family support was manifested through both financial help and practical assistance, in addition to emotional support. It is important for research to continue to explore how better to equip parents and families to support their children throughout the application process and subsequent college journey.

There were also implications for school policies and personnel. Participants suggested that teachers played an essential role in the pursuit of higher education as students internalized teachers' consistent message that college was what was expected of them following high school completion. Surprisingly, although counselors are viewed as critical to helping students with the various practical aspects of preparation to attend college, such as identifying the proper institution for the student, facilitating applications and financial assistance, and offering advice on college life, counselors were not considered a helpful support for most participants. This may be explained by inadequate staffing, and the current study might evidence the need to increase the number of counselors in high schools. The provision of the number of counselors commensurate with the student population would improve the level of services provided to students and their families, and help them to understand the transition to college.

One final conclusion was these students' belief that college was a given, they could not imagine anything else after high school. This expectation was not only one they had for themselves but was reinforced by families, schools and peers, and key to their feeling confident enough to pursue their journey even when presented with challenges. An important concept to consider in future research is whether embedding the idea of

higher education in the lower grades, perhaps as early as elementary school, would lead to an internalization by young Black children of the goal of attending college after high school. As most participants suggested, they needed college in order to give themselves opportunities and options for their future. Higher education is important for the continued advancement of the African American community. It is our duty, as educators and psychologists, to use this research to improve the quality of the systems within which our students exist.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent Agreement**

“Motivational Factors That Influence African American  
Students’ Decisions to Pursue Higher Education:  
An Exploratory Study”

You are invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. The principal investigator, Angeline Crawford, is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate School for Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University. If you have any questions, ask the investigator. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to be in the study.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that influence the decision of African American students to choose to pursue higher education. By exploring the factors that influence these individuals, information will be added to research literature that could help education professionals direct other African American youth towards higher education.

**Participants:** This study will use a network sample of approximately 10-15 students (18 and over) and will be conducted at various settings contingent upon their geographic location. You will only be considered for participation in this study if you return a signed consent form. There is a cap on the number of participants, as this is a small study, so the acceptance into the study is on a first-come, first-served basis. You have the right to not answer questions that you do not want to answer. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.



**Procedure:** If you participate in the study, you will be interviewed individually during a designated time at an agreed-upon location. With the researcher, you will discuss your experience in education prior to your degree-obtaining program. You will explore many sources of support including family, peers, school, and other community organizations. If you indicate at any time that you want to stop the interview, you will be thanked for your participation and you will be excused.

**Risk/Benefit:** There are minimal risks associated with your consent and participation in this research study. It is expected that most participants will not experience difficulty with the interview. However, if you experience discomfort and it is difficult for you to continue, you can indicate that you would like to stop the interview at any time. If necessary, the contact information for a local psychological clinic will be provided. Participation in this study may not benefit you directly; however you will play a major role in helping other researchers, social workers, psychologists, and others to understand the experiences of youth who are considering pursuing higher education.

**Confidentiality:** This research is confidential. The research records will include some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about you includes: your name, age, ethnicity, and employer/school affiliation. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location (password-protected computer) in the researcher's residence. All study data will be kept for three years after the completion of the research, and all documents with identifying information will be shredded and any audiotapes will be erased by the researcher after publication.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may contact me, Angeline Crawford, at (267) 970-5728 or email me at [angelinecrawford@gmail.com](mailto:angelinecrawford@gmail.com). You can also contact my dissertation faculty chairperson, Dr. Nancy Boyd-Franklin, at [boydfrank@aol.com](mailto:boydfrank@aol.com).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey  
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: 848-932-0150  
Email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu)

I have read and understood the contents of this consent form and have received a copy of it for my files. By signing below, I consent to participate in this research project.

Participant Signature	_____	Date	_____
Investigator Signature	_____	Date	_____

### Audio Addendum to Consent Form

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled: “Motivational Factors that Influence the Decision of African American Students to Pursue Higher Education” conducted by Angeline Crawford. The Principal Investigator (Angeline Crawford) is asking your permission to allow her to include an optional procedure of audiotape (sound), as part of the research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the Principal Investigator (Angeline Crawford) and to ensure that information from the research study has been recorded properly.

The recording(s) will include the responses that you provide throughout the interview. Name and/or address will not be included within the audio recording.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to your identity and will be destroyed upon publication of study results.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Participant (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Background Information:**

- How old are you?
- What is your ethnic background?
- Where are you from?
- Describe the neighborhood/community you came from.
- What year are you in college?
- Are you the first person in your family to attend college? If not, who in your family has attended?
- What type of high school did you go to? (Public, Private, Magnet)

#### **Thoughts about College Prior to Going:**

- Why did you decide to go to college?
- At what point did you realize that higher education was something you wanted to pursue?
- Did you have help with the application process? Who helped you?
- Did you feel your high school prepared you for college?
- What types of things if any did the school do to promote higher education?
- Did your school offer SAT preparation classes?
- What types of schools did you apply to? Could you give examples?
- Did you aim to go out of state to school or stay in state?
- What were your expectations of the college experience?
- Did you have any fears about attending college?

- Did you feel the idea of college was supported in your home? School?  
Community? Amongst Peers?
- What were your feelings once you found out you were going to college?
- What were you family's thought/feelings about you going to college?
- Why did you select the university you are attending?
- If attending a historically black institution, why did you choose a historically black college or university?
- What obstacles did you encounter during the process of applying to college?

**Influences:**

- What influenced you to go to college?
- Who supported you throughout the application process?
- Was there a person that had influence on you pursuing higher education? If so, who was this person? What was their relationship to you? What is their ethnic background?
- In what ways was your high school supportive of your application process?
- Who were the personnel in the school, if any, who were supportive of you pursuing higher education?
- Did you have a person of the same ethnicity as a motivator?
- What was the ethnic background of the teachers/counselors/administrators in school who supported you through the process?
- Were there organizations outside of school that were supportive of you pursuing a college education? If so what organizations?
- Was your family supportive of you going to college? Who in your family?

- Did you stay in contact with the person or people who supported you pursuing your college education?
- What would you say has been the most motivational factor in you pursuing higher education?
- Do you view college as important?

**College Experience:**

- Now that you are in, what are your thoughts/feeling about higher education?
- What do you like most about college?
- What do you dislike?
- What do you find the most challenging?
- In what ways has college changed your outlook on life?
- Have you developed any significant relationships with students? How have these relationships impacted your college experience?
- Have you developed any significant relationships with professors/instructors? How have these relationships impacted your college experience?
- Have you developed any significant relationships with professors of the same ethnicity as you?
- If you did not have motivation before, have the current supports impacted you motivation?
- Have you joined any organizations while in college?
- What interests for work or life goals have you developed while in college?
- What has been the most rewarding part of your college experience?