A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGH ACHIEVING BLACK MALES AT A PROMINENT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION IN THE SOUTH

Clifford Omar Simpson

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Approved by:
George Noblit
Sherick Hughes
Juan Carrillo
Darrell Cleveland
Hilton Kelly
Abstract

Omar Simpson: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of High Achieving Black Males at a Prominent Predominantly White Institution in the South (Under the direction of George Noblit)

Black males have the highest college attrition rates of all races and genders (Harper, 2006a). Federal reports indicate that 54.4% of White males finish their college degrees, compared with 33.1% of Black males (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The 21.3 percentage point disparity leads many to believe that Black male students may need special attention in order to close the gap. Vincent Tinto is the most prolific, and possibly most respected, of the theory-based attrition and retention researchers, but his model (1975) has been criticized for not addressing the experiences of minority, and other non-middle class, students. Tinto’s theory has maintained its credibility over two decades, but the experiences of marginalized students, specifically Black males, are an essential part of the college attrition puzzle, and their voices have been largely absent from the research to date.

In an effort to add to and enhance research on the attrition and retention of Black male students at PWIs, this study extends Tinto’s (1975, 2000) retention theory through an exploration of the experiences of five high achieving Black males at a prominent PWI in the South. By utilizing qualitative methodology to present students’ perspectives on their collegiate experiences, this study advances our understanding of the retention theory.

This qualitative study utilized individual, semi-structured interviews framed by a narrative inquiry to answer two primary research questions. First, what are the factors
which contributed to the retention of black males who have successfully obtained a baccalaureate degree from a prominent predominantly white institution? Second, what are the factors which contributed to the academic success (above a 3.0 gpa) of Black males from a prominent predominantly white institution? The results of analysis of the narratives describe the thematic structure of five Black males’ experience of persistence and completing their baccalaureate degrees between 2013 and 2015. The data analysis yielded six themes which contributed to the retention and success of five high achieving black male graduates. The six themes included; a) the importance of high impact practices, b) the black male academic identity, c) self-motivation, d) pre-college exposure, e) familiarity with White educational spaces, and f) competition. The findings of this study should serve as a starting point for the formation of any programs or practices designed to increase Black male student graduation rates at predominantly White colleges
DEDICATION

To my family, future family, and those consistently working for positive change.
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Blessed! Thank you Jesus! I am beyond thankful for the many people who have made this conceivable. This dissertation is possible because of the prayers, words of encouragement, support and love from countless amazing people. In addition, my faith has guided me through and allowed me to endure this journey. I am grateful to God for seeing me through and for purposely placing the right people at the right time in my life to make this possible. I am humbled and thankful.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Black males have the highest college attrition rates of all races and genders (Harper, 2006a). Federal reports indicate that 54.4% of White males finish their college degrees, compared with 33.1% of Black males (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The 21.3 percentage point disparity leads many to believe that Black male students may need special attention in order to close the gap. Nearly 4.5 million Black men ages 15 to 29 represent 14% of the United States male population and 12% of all Blacks in the United States. Black men attend and graduate from colleges and universities at very low rates (Boyd, 2007; Cuyjet, 2006a; Harper, 2006a; Kaba, 2008; Warde, 2008). High rates of death, incarceration, unemployment, and relatively low levels of graduation rates of Black men raise concerns for Black families and the nation’s economy (Warde, 2008).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data indicates a slight increase in the number of Black males attending college in recent years. Between 2000 and 2010, the enrollment rate of Black males increased three percentage points, from 7.3% to 10.3% suggesting some progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Among the Black males who do make it into college, however, two thirds drop out, leaving only one-third to persist to graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).
Within the Black student population, Black women outpace Black men in college completion. In 2010, the graduation rate for Black women was 44.8%, compared to 33.1% of Black men. This should concern all Americans, as high attrition rates detract from the economic health and well-being of the entire nation (Boyd, 2007; Seidman, 2005).

Prior research focused on the graduation rates of Black male college students has tended to approach the issue from a deficit perspective, emphasizing dropout rates and noting the causes of Black male attrition (Boyd, 2007; Cameron & Heckman, 2001; Warde, 2008). However, an emerging trend is to highlight the strengths witnessed in the significant number of students who persist and graduate (Cuyjet, 2006a, Harper, 2005; Snipe, 2007; Warde, 2008). Understanding how Black male graduates succeeded and avoided obstacles which could have potentially contributed to their attrition will help colleges take a proactive stance and implement strategies to support and safeguard other Black male students facing similar challenges (Warde, 2008). Toward this end, the focus of this study is to determine the factors which contributed to the success of Black men in obtaining baccalaureate degrees from a prominent PWI in hopes to extend the retention theory to include the experiences of Black men in higher education.

The publication of Vincent Tinto's (1975) landmark student integration model marks the start of the current, national dialogue on undergraduate retention. The model theorized that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 1975). While Tinto's model has been supported, attacked and revised over the last 30 years, it has significantly
influenced how researchers and practitioners view undergraduate retention and graduation (Swail, 2004). Tinto’s seminal theory created a base from which thousands of studies have proliferated in the ensuing years making undergraduate retention one of the most widely studied areas of higher education today (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Tinto, 2007).

Tinto’s student integration model has changed over the course of the 35 years from when it was originally introduced. Its more recent versions have included motivational variables including goal commitment. However, most notably is what has not been included. This study seeks to extend Tinto’s theory to include the unique experiences of Black males.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Background of the Problem

College enrollment rates have increased dramatically over the last 30 years. Today, more than 19 million students are enrolled across 4,200 colleges and universities in the USA, making this the largest system of higher education in the world (U.S. Department of Education 2011). Enrollment rates vary by race/ethnicity. Blacks, specifically, represent 12% of college students nationally, and Black women outnumber their same-race male counterparts by more than 2 to 1 (Cuyjet 2006). Even when they do enroll, Black men are more likely than their peers to begin their postsecondary careers at 2-year community colleges (e.g., Flowers 2006; Hagedorn et al. 2007), earn lower grades (Bonner and Bailey 2006), devote less time to campus activities and studying (Flowers 2007; Harper et al. 2004), take longer to complete their degrees, or drop out altogether (National Urban
League 2007). Indeed, two thirds of all Black men who enter higher education leave before completing their degree—the highest attrition rate among all races and both genders.

Black males are often categorized as a population at-risk in education (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Davis, 2003; Moore, 2000). In many social domains of American society, they hold a peculiar but uncertain status (Austin, 1996). Endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous are many of the terms often used to characterize Black males (Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Billson, 1992; Parham & McDavis, 1987). Such terms often evoke unsettling emotions and perpetuate negative stereotypes. Nevertheless, it is apparent, based on the dism al national statistics on unemployment, education, incarceration, and mental and physical health, that Black males face numerous challenges in American society (Hoffman, Llagas, & Synder, 2003). It is likely that the aforementioned depictions of Black males can negatively impact the perceived ability and subsequent behavior of Black males (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Moore, 2000; Moore & Herndon, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that Black males often experience difficulty in social domains, such as education (Jackson, 2003; Jackson & Crawley, 2003; Moore, Flowers, Guion, Zhang, & Staten, 2004; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003; Nogurea, 2003). Throughout the educational pipeline—elementary, secondary, and postsecondary—in the United States, many Black males lag behind both their Black female and White male counterparts (Ferguson, 2003; Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998; Polite & Davis, 1999). They are often more likely than any other group to be suspended or expelled from school (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1998), to be underrepresented in gifted education programs or advanced placement courses (Gran tham, 2004a, 2004b; Hrabowski et al., 1998), to underachieve or disengage
academically (Ford, 1996), and to experience the most challenges in higher education settings as both students and professionals (Flowers & Jones, 2003; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Jackson, 2003; Jackson & Crawley, 2003; Steele, 1997).

Today, education is arguably more important than at any other time in American history. It determines, in large measure, the degree of social mobility one has or will have in American society. Quality of life tends to be highly correlated with one’s educational attainment (Austin, 1996). Moreover, many people see education as the “potion” for achieving social mobility in American society. For the last two decades, Black males’ educational achievement has received serious research attention as it relates to their experiences in education (Bailey, 2003; Grantham, 2004b; Moore et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2003). Thus, a corpus of research is forming that examines Black males in education, both as students (Grantham, 2004a, 2004b; Moore et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2003) and educational providers (Jackson, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999). In general, the existing body of knowledge is both limited and disjointed. It neglects to examine collectively the educational experiences of high-achieving Black males throughout the educational pipeline. This dissertation will address one of the neglected areas – Black males who have been successful in higher education.

Statement of the Problem

The retention of African-American male students and other marginalized (non-White and non-middle class) students is of great concern to university administrators and others who perceive a college education to be of benefit to general success in life. Despite decades of programs aimed at improving the retention of Black male students, the attrition
rates are still consistently high, and higher than their White counterparts. Vincent Tinto is the most prolific, and possibly most respected, of the theory-based attrition and retention researchers, but his model (1975) has been criticized for not addressing the experiences of minority, and other non-middle class, students. Tinto’s theory has maintained its credibility over two decades, but the experiences of marginalized students, specifically Black males, are an essential part of the college attrition puzzle, and their voices have been largely absent from the research to date. William Tierney (1992a, 1992b) advocates a more multicultural framework for investigating college attrition, and suggests that we must consider the nature of all students’ participation in college if we are ever to substantially improve their graduation rates. Tinto proposes that students undergo a process of cost/benefit analysis when trying to decide whether to stay in college. To what degree is this true? What counts as a cost for a marginalized student? What counts as a benefit? Do students who stay in college weigh these considerations differently than do students who leave?

Tinto suggests that influences outside the university environment are only relevant to college persistence as they are reflected in the students’ changing commitment to the goal of completion. What events happening outside the college are significantly impacting students’ likelihood of staying or leaving, and why? Social integration has become virtually the most important aspect of college retention in the perspective of many attrition researchers (e.g., Lang, 1991; Stage, 1990; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985) and college administrators. However, the process of integration cannot be identical for members of subcultures and members of the mainstream culture. It is important to learn from the
experiences of high achieving Black males at a predominantly White university to understand the factors that affect their social integration and overall persistence.

**Significance of the Study**

The attrition of African-American male students in higher education is of great concern to university administrators and others who perceive a college education as contributing to general success in life. Despite decades of programs and other aid aimed at improving the retention of Black male students, the attrition rates are still abysmal.

To understand retention or the lack thereof, researchers have utilized Tinto's (1975, 2000) student departure theory to explain the attrition of students at the institutional level. However, I assert that Tinto's (1975, 2000) theory of student departure does not adequately account for the unique experiences of Black male students.

Research efforts have examined the retention of Black male students in higher education, yet have done so from a deficit lens. Harper (2012) has begun reframing the dominant lens to move beyond deficit perspectives on achievement by highlighting persons, policies, programs, and resources that help Black men succeed across a range of college and university contexts. The anti-deficit framing moves from viewing the Black male as an entity that has to be indoctrinated, de-cultured and re-cultured into the dominant White culture to viewing the Black male as valued, resourceful and collaborators designing, implementing, and assessing higher education initiatives. Thus far, this is the dominant alternative construction of the Black male and retention.
Furthermore, there has been an insufficient amount of focus on high achieving Black males in higher education. More than two-thirds of all Black males who begin college never finish (Harper, 2012). This and a legion of other discouraging facts about Black males are the usual headlines. But what about those among this population who beat the odds, make the most of college and achieve greatly inside and outside the classroom? Who are they and what can they teach us?

Through this study, I have gleaned insights regarding the factors that impact Black male students’ persistence and the factors that contributed to their academic success. During this investigation, I explored the factors that contributed to the success of Black men in obtaining baccalaureate degrees from one prominent, public White institution. This study examines:

- pre-college factors that affect college persistence for these Black males;
- factors that influence these Black male students’ retention decisions;
- institutional structures and partnerships necessary for these Black male achievement; and
- factors that influence academic success for these Black males

The results can assist faculty, staff, and other campus leaders at PWIs in determining the institutional structures, diversity initiatives, programmatic configuration, partnerships, and resources that are essential to assure successful retention of Black male undergraduate men and to enhance their adjustment to the college environment. Campus
leaders and administrators charged to manage retention initiatives can use the information presented in the study to focus their Black male initiatives on factors identified as essential to retaining Black undergraduate males and possibly other at-risk student populations identified at their institutions. Finally, institutions that have yet to develop retention initiatives for Black undergraduate men, or are examining the possibility of specialized programmatic initiatives for this population, will have information on effective practices that help to promote the learning and development of Black undergraduate men.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of a set of high achieving Black males at a prominent public White institution (PWI)\(^1\). It was my intent to explore how pre-college experiences as well as institutional experiences at a PWI defined and shaped Black male students’ realities and how those realities influenced their decisions to remain at the PWI through degree completion. Research indicated that many of the Black students who choose to attend PWIs are aware that they may be faced with problems of isolation and alienation at those institutions (Freeman, 1999; Flemings, 1984; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Pifer, 1973). However, it is my belief that Black students entered those PWIs with the hope that the isolation and alienation would decrease as they progressed toward degree completion. As a result, it is important that researchers discover from the Black students’ perspectives how they combated the sense of isolation and alienation and continued to reinforce their retention decisions. In addition, researchers have utilized

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\(^1\) ‘High achieving’ is problematic because it assumes that being successful in white institutions should be a goal for people who are racialized by these same institutions.
Tinto’s student departure theory to explain the attrition of students at the institutional level. As cited earlier, I assert that Tinto’s theory of student departure does not adequately account for the unique experiences of Black male students.

Therefore, this study is designed to elicit Black male students’ perspectives on how they made sense of their educational experiences and how those experiences influenced their retention decisions.

Although previous studies have assisted researchers and educators in identifying factors related to the attrition of Black male students, additional studies are needed. In an effort to add to and enhance research on the attrition and retention of Black male students at PWIs, this study extends Tinto’s (1975, 2000) retention theory through an exploration of the experiences of high achieving Black males at a prominent PWI. By utilizing qualitative methodology to present students’ perspectives on their collegiate experiences, I will advance our understanding of the retention theory.

**Research Questions**

The main research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the factors which contributed to the retention of Black males who have persisted and successfully obtained a baccalaureate degree from a prominent predominately White institution?

2. What are the factors which contributed to the academic success (above a 3.0 gpa) of Black males from a prominent predominately White institution?
Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined as listed below:

African-American - (Afro-American) of or pertaining to American Blacks of African ancestry, their history or their culture (American Heritage Dictionary, 1991). Also called Negro and Black.

Minority — any person residing in the United States that is considered nonWhite (Examples - Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Eskimo).

White - of or relating to the White race, as defined by law (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983). Also, persons of the majority race in the United States.

Non-traditional Student - any student age 25 or older at the time of college enrollment.

Traditional Student - any student between the age of 18 and 24 years at the time of college enrollment.

Persistence - the continuous enrollment in the same college and a four-year degree program through graduation.
High-Achieving – graduating with a cumulative grade point average of above a 3.0. A GPA of 2.0 is the requirement to stay enrolled at the institution and 3.0 is commonly the GPA to qualify for graduate school.

Retention - was defined as the act of maintaining enrollment, where students who enrolled at an institution continue to re-enroll at that same institution until a degree had been completed. An institutional measure exemplifying this concept was students who re-enrolled from one semester (or year) to the next.

The first three chapters of this dissertation are designed to: (a) outline the direction and scope of my research on Black male students at predominantly White institutions and (b) explore and reveal key issues related to the importance of this research. The study itself involves five high achieving Black male students who have persisted and graduated from a prominent predominantly White institution. The last two chapters of this dissertation report the findings, conclusions, discussions, and recommendations.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The nature of this study required the investigation of three distinct fields: a review of the literature regarding Tinto's (1993) model of retention, upon which this study has built its theoretical foundation; the retention literature for Black males; and the literature on the Black male experience in higher education.

I have selected the literature reviewed in this chapter to enhance an awareness of the need for additional research on the experiences of Black males at PWIs and retention decisions of Africans American male students. In addition, the following review of literature discusses existing retention literature with a focus on some of the problems related to retention of Black male students and contributors to Black male achievement.

Review of Literature Procedures

My review of the literature involved a four-tier process of reviewing, locating, reading, and evaluating research on retention and methodology research. To develop a concept of the type of research I wanted to conduct, I reviewed the retention research I had previously studied. This earlier literature was fundamental in the development of my desire to conduct research on retention of Black students at predominantly White institutions. Once I decided to conduct a study on retention, I began compiling a reference list of primary and secondary sources on the Black male experience in post-secondary institutions, specifically PWIs.
The articles reviewed in this chapter were identified through a search of the following databases: Academic Search Premier; Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC); Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection; and TOPIC search. The following key words and phrases were used singly or in combination to search for and locate recent, relevant studies: Black and academic, Black achievement, Black male achievement, Black male attrition, Black college students, Black student engagement, ethnicity and achievement, gender and achievement, Black male graduates, males in higher education, Black males and education, Black male persistence, race and higher education, Black male retention, self-determination, Black student success, Tinto, Vincent Tinto, retention theory and models of retention. This search process resulted in the identification of numerous articles and books. These sources were then narrowed to include only the most recent, relevant information regarding the topic. Literature relating to the topic of retention of Black males published within the last ten years was given priority over those published earlier. Literature which was published earlier was only included if the information was vital to the topic and the information could not be found in more recent publications. Older sources which related to the topic of retention, but did not focus specifically on Black males were excluded with the exception of those authored by or pertaining to Vincent Tinto. The literature was then reviewed and analyzed. This included grouping the sources into categories and noting major trends and patterns. Finally, the literature was synthesized, prior to writing this review.
BLACK MALE RETENTION AT FOUR YEAR PWIs

Over the past 30 years, much attention has been devoted to investigating various aspects of the Black student experience on predominantly White college and university campuses. While some studies have focused on improving Black student access to higher education, others highlight and continually confirm the often adversarial relationships that these students have with the predominantly White institutions (PWIs) they attend. Specifically, researchers have found that many Black students must contend with feelings of alienation and isolation, racism and discrimination, and environmental incompatibility at PWIs. It should be noted that in 2002, 87.5 percent of all Black students enrolled in higher education attended PWIs (Harper 2006). Among the more than 844,000 respondents to the National Survey of Student Engagement, Black students were the group least satisfied with their college experiences. Despite a 91.6 percent increase in Black student enrollments between 1976 and 2002, many of these students still report being the only (or one of few) non-White students in most of their classes on predominantly White campuses (Harper, 2006).

The publishing of critical works on race and higher education by Cuyjet and his associates (1997, 2006) and other scholars (Majors & Mancini Billson, 1992; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Garibaldi, 2007) most notably in the last two decades, has encouraged student affairs and academic affairs professionals to gain an understanding of the experience of Black undergraduate men in American institutions of higher education. Over the last two decades, these published works have defined a more accurate perception
of problems related to the undergraduate Black male population for faculty, practitioners, and administrative leaders to consider when designing programs and services that help retain Black male students to graduation. These programs and services generally fall within an institution’s diversity agenda or initiatives due to the historical and very present issues that this underserved population faces while matriculating through college.

Although institutional leaders are focused on creating more inclusive campuses, challenges remain in designing and implementing programs to retain Black undergraduate men. Specifically at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), challenges relate to implementing and assessing the success of the programs created to aid in Black male retention and persistence towards graduation that have yet to be explored systematically and empirically. Other challenges consist of institutionalizing the programs in order to ensure the longevity of these retention initiatives and services that enhance the persistence of Black males and achievement of their educational objectives. Especially in times where institutions are experiencing economic hardship and public scrutiny, these programs must use data and present results in support of claims that they make a difference in the experiences and success rates of Black males, or risk the possibility of funding cuts and discontinuation.

Instituting and maintaining effective retention initiatives in higher education are neither immediate nor effortless. Creating changes on college campuses that lead to better climate and positive learning outcomes for students is a slow progression that requires strategic planning and effective leadership on all levels and in all divisions of the
institution, especially when tackling issues affecting student populations with historical persistence problems and low retention rates. Diversity initiatives, particularly those focused on improving the experience and retention of historically underserved students at PWIs, are challenged by these institutions’ long-established culture, governance, and structures. These underserved student populations need appropriately structured and sufficiently funded institutional support to adjust effectively to college, to engage positively with the college environment, to be successful academically, and to persist to graduation.

The growth of the underserved population of Blacks and other students of color at PWIs is a direct result of higher education systems attempting to rectify past inequities. From 1976 to 2004, undergraduate enrollment for minority students increased to 32% of the total enrollment, rising to almost 4.7 million students (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007). This number is projected to continue to increase according to NCES calculations. Although totals for all undergraduate students of color increased in number and surpassed the rate of increase of White undergraduate students, Black students had the lowest percentage increase of enrollment for minorities.

In more recent years, issues related to the Black undergraduate male experience have been a focus for practitioners and researchers due to the low retention rates recorded year after year by colleges and universities of all classifications across the United States. When data are disaggregated by gender, Black males compared to their female counterparts only comprise 36% of the total undergraduate enrollment of Black college students. This gender gap is the largest of all racial and ethnic groups (NCES, 2007). Black males are among the least retained groups of college undergraduates. The numbers are
startling. Black male undergraduates’ attrition rate is the highest of all student populations, and statistics have revealed the national crisis of retention that all institutional types are struggling with, especially at PWIs (Leger, 2012). Harper (2007) reported that 68% of Black undergraduate men do not graduate within six years, and an overwhelming majority of enrolled Black undergraduate men are enrolled at PWIs. Faculty and administrators developed programs, services, funding opportunities, and other incentives to draw students of color to their institutions and to help them successfully navigate and graduate from PWIs. Since the campus environment of PWIs can contribute to the low retention rates of Black undergraduate men, academic leaders are creating initiatives to diversify and support campus populations of Black students and other students of color to help them adjust and succeed. To create inclusive campus climates that foster success for historically underserved Black undergraduate men, institution leaders need to promote major transformational changes. Eckel and Kezar (2003) defined transformational change, “as affecting institutional cultures, as deep and pervasive, as intentional, and as occurring over time”.

These efforts to diversify and create inclusive environments for Black undergraduate men at PWIs require time to develop, and strong leadership to bring about deep and pervasive change to affect this population’s experience. A critical step in the process is assessing the efforts for effectiveness in terms of students’ overall success. Without proper evaluation and assessment practices in place, many of these retention initiatives will not exist long enough to show sufficient impact. The likelihood of
institutionalization for Black male retention initiatives is reduced when programs are short-lived.

**How retention is constructed**

Retention is being constructed as an assimilation and indoctrination of Black males into a White dominated culture and way of being at predominately White institutions. In essence, Black males are injuriously being “de-cultured” and “re-cultured” into the dominant White culture which in the research is known as deculturalization (Spring, 1994).

Broadly conceived, deculturalization is a process, by which the individual is deprived of his or her culture and then conditioned to other cultural values (Boateng, 1990). Anthropologist and sociologists define culture as a way of perceiving, believing, and evaluating (Goodenough, 1976). Culture provides the blueprint that determines the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves in society. To deculturalize Black children is, therefore, to deprive them of that which determines the way they think, feel, and behave (Boateng, 1990).

It is important to note deculturalization does not mean a loss of group’s culture but rather failure to acknowledge the existence of their culture and the role it plays in their behavior. For example, “when a French child speaks English with a French accent and says ‘ze man’ instead of ‘the man’, it is accepted that the child is influenced by the French cultural background” (Boateng, 1990). However, “if an Black child says ‘de man’ instead of ‘the man’, the child is accused of speaking a substandard version of English” (Boateng, 1990). No acknowledgement is given to the fact that West African languages do not have the “th” sound, and that the children’s African background, according to the scholars of
Ebonics, exerts influence on the way they speak the English language (Stoller, 1975). Essentially, there is recognition and value placed on the culture of the French child and a complete denial of the culture of the Black child. Many Black students and other culturally different students are still made to feel that they must reject the culture of their homes in order to succeed in school.

In addition, cultural integration to the institution can prove to be vital in the retention of Black males. Much of the integration or lack thereof, happens during the first year for Blacks. Structural explanations for Black male attrition rates are compelling, though other explanations of Black male academic outcomes emphasize their cultural responses to structural barriers. Using a cultural ecological model, Ogbu (1998) explains that the awareness of White racism and limited labor market opportunities creates a sense of distrust among Blacks towards institutions espousing White middle-class ideology. As an act of resistance, the Black community embraces a cultural identity in opposition to White identity including the behaviors, values, dispositions and styles associated with middle-class White dominant culture (Ogbu, 2004). Black students in particular may resist the behaviors needed to be academically successful in school such as studying in the library, participating actively in class or doing homework because this is deculturalizing. Student resistance may also include opposing school ideology, teacher practices and behavioral expectations. These practices of resistance by Black males can make the campus environment uncomfortable and ultimately lead to decisions to leave the university. In addition, endemic racism is a legitimate reason Black males could feel frustrated with the
barriers predominantly White institutions can create and these students then choose to leave the institutions due to such circumstances.

These individuals are made to believe the first step in education is to convert all first graders to replicas of White, middle-class suburban children. This ideology has been adopted at many PWIs in respect to Black males. Once they arrive on campus, the universities situate them in a retention programs that intend to convert them into White, middle-class suburban students. Once this is achieved, PWI staff believe Black male students will persist and succeed.

**How the Black male is constructed in these practices**

*How does it feel to be a problem? ~ W.E.B. Du Bois (1903)*

In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) begins his chapter “Of our spiritual strivings” with a provocative question, one that has important relevance for Black males attending PWIs today: “How does it feel to be the problem?” Du Bois frames this question within the context of how Blacks, striving for social, economic, and political inclusion at the turn of the 20th century were persistently seen as a “problem” for the country (Howard, 2014). In many ways, Du Bois’ question precisely speaks to the manner in which Black males at the turn of the 21st century might feel if they were to peruse much of the social science literature, popular press and mainstream media.

In the retention practices at predominately White institutions, the Black male is seen as a problem. It is important for predominately White institutions concerned with Black male achievement and retention to engage in a paradigm shift in how Black males are
viewed, studied, taught, and understood. Thus the focus is not centered on how to fix Black males; rather, the suggestion is that these data may lead us to question how we can fix schools and practices that serve Black males. A shift in a paradigm seeks to move to a new set of views, understandings, and types of knowledge constructed (Kuhn, 1970). A paradigm shift also attempts to change the basic assumptions or norms within the ruling theory of science and leads to new understandings of concepts, ideas, and knowledge (Howard, 2014). Banks (1993) contends that the “knowledge construction process describes the procedure by which social, behavioral, and natural scientists create knowledge and how to implicit cultural assumptions, frames or references, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways that knowledge is constructed within it”. In the majority of retention programs and practices at predominately White institutions, the Black male is viewed as the problem.

**PWIs with an alternative construction of the Black male and/or retention**

The University of Pennsylvania (UPENN) under the leadership of Shaun Harper are utilizing an alternative approach to retention and the construction of the Black males. Instead of focusing on the exhaustive literature and conversations about why Black male enrollments and degree attainment rates are so low, they have focused on those Black males who have achieved and succeeded in the collegiate system and leveraged their experiences to reframe the construction of the Black male and of Black male retention. Dr. Harper has deemed this practice the anti-deficit reframing of the Black male (Harper, 2012). The reframing moves beyond deficit perspectives on achievement by highlighting
persons, policies, programs, and resources that help Black men succeed across a range of college and university contexts. The anti-deficit framing moves from viewing the Black male as an entity that has to be indoctrinated de-cultured and re-cultured into the dominant White culture. Thus far, this is the only alternative construction of the Black male and retention. In Harper’s work, the experiences of the Black males are leveraged and the power is placed within them. Harper explores their academic success and allows the Black males to construct their story. This is much different than what most retention programs and practices have done.

COLLEGE RETENTION THEORY

Numerous factors have been identified that have an effect upon attrition and retention in higher education. Researchers, however, have not reached a consensus on a single set of factors affecting retention in general, let alone factors that affect specifically Black male students at predominantly White colleges and universities. In the hundreds of studies that have been conducted, a wide range of variables has been examined, including demographics, aspirations and motivation, personality and values and institutional characteristics (Bean, 1982).

The major theories which frame this study derive from Tinto’s (1975, 2000, 2005a, 2005b) theoretical postulations on the factors that influence student retention. While there is a significant amount of research on the problems of college attrition, there appears to be a gap in the literature with regards to the factors which contribute to the successful completion of college for Black men (Cuyjet, 2006a; Harper, 2005; Snipe, 2007). Retention
literature indicates that student’s perception of belonging and their involvement in extra-curricular activities contribute to their motivation to persist (Seidman, 2005). Bean (2005) further asserted that students’ interaction with their institutional environment affects their intent to persist. Based on Tinto’s (1975, 2005b) theory of college retention, this study seeks to ascertain the factors which contribute to the retention of Black men in college.

Detailed descriptions of the retention theory which frames this study follow, because it is important to gain a thorough understanding of the theoretical contributions to the field, prior to assessing the factors which support the successful retention and graduation of Black men.

**Tinto and the Model of Institutional Departure**

Tinto’s (1975, 2000, 2005b) theory on student departure is the most studied, analyzed, and cited in the area of student departure and retention (Seidman, 2005). It is almost impossible to read the literature on student retention without encountering the work of Vincent Tinto. His name and his theories are frequently invoked by other researchers working on student retention issues, and he has made a singular contribution to the field. Berger and Lyon (2005) called Tinto’s “interactionalist theory of student departure . . . one of the best known, and most often cited, theories” on the subject (p. 19).

Expanding upon Durkheim’s (1951) theory of suicide, to explain student departure, Tinto posited that students’ decision to leave college is effected by their perception of their experiences in college (Seidman, 2005). Tinto (1975) postulated that academic and social
integration influence a student’s commitment to the institution and to the goal of college graduation. Tinto (1975) further indicated, “The greater the students’ level of academic integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the focal college or university” (p. 110).

Tinto combined psychological and social-organizational principles in his theory that student retention in college stems from the interplay of a variety of forces including the student’s pre-enrollment background and beliefs, the student’s attitude and feelings about the institution, and the student’s commitment to graduating from the degree program. These forces are shaped by a variety of other significant factors, such as the degree to which the student experiences social and academic integration into the college life.

Given the interaction among these forces and the potential for student experience to change, Tinto framed student departure as a longitudinal process. It is arrived at over time, and the ultimate decision to leave reflects the culmination of these forces working on each other, and on the student (Braxton & Lee, 2005). Seidman (2005) summed up Tinto’s retention model saying, it “posits that individual pre-entry college attributes (family background, skill and ability, prior schooling) form individual’s goals and commitments; the individual’s goals and commitments then interact over time with institutional experiences (the formal and informal academic and social systems of an institution” (p. 296).
Tinto’s (2005) interactionalist model of student departure postulates that academic integration is comprised of both structural and normative features. The structural refers to the expectations associated with the institution itself -- the rules and standards of the college or university. The normative features of integration refer to the student’s recognition and acceptance of the normative standards of the institution. Social integration, as opposed to academic integration, captures the degree to which the student feels comfortable working within the social subcultures of academic and student life. The interactionalist model proposes that the more integrated a student feels in the academic life of the institution, the likelier the student will be to commit to graduation from the institution. Further, the greater the degree of social integration, the higher the potential for fostering student feelings of commitment toward the institution and therefore toward their own graduation. Persistence in college is thus connected with higher levels of academic and social integration, and Tinto posited that the two forms of integration support and enhance one another. Among the factors impacting student academic and social integration and their institutional commitment, Tinto identified individual characteristics such as family influences, personal interests, and pre-college academic experiences (Braxton & Lee, 2005). Students’ initial commitment to the institution and to the idea of graduation is also identified by Tinto as having a significant impact on student retention. To this end, Tinto proposed the inverse of this relationship, the institution’s commitment to the student, is a critical “condition for student success,” (Tinto, 2005a, p. 321). For Tinto, institutional commitment to the student entails finding meaningful ways to offer incentives for student engagement and to provide supports (formal and informal) for struggling students and create involvement. Critical to this is having expectations of students and outlining the
institutions values and objectives so that students have a clear sense of what is being asked of them when they commit to a degree program. In turn, Tinto argued, expectations “validate” students’ participation at the institution, creating a form of buy-in to the work of the institution (p. 322). Feedback is another critical element of this relationship, Tinto stated. Schools must maintain open communications with students and let them know when they’re slipping off course or failing to meet expectations. When feedback is provided immediately in the classroom, with learning portfolios for example, faculty members have the opportunity not only to identify where students are struggling, but they also have the chance to improve curriculum delivery through the student feedback to them.

Tinto (2005a) cited Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement when he observed that the features of his interactionalist model, academic and social integration, reference the fact that student involvement is a critical condition for student success. Research findings demonstrate that students who are genuinely involved in the academic and social life of their institution are likely to persist in their education, despite obstacles, and graduate from their degree program (Elkins, Braxton & James, 2000; Tinto, 2005b; Veenstra, 2009). Tinto prioritized classroom involvement as the first link in the chain, noting that engagement in learning is a hook that can catch new students quickly, and will allow for communities between students and with faculty to be created, leading to greater opportunities for social integration (DeMaris & Kritsonis, 2008; Tinto, 2000).

Components of the Model
As noted above, there are a number of characteristics that Tinto’s (1975) model considers in determining dropout behavior and academic and social integration. Many theorists have concurred with his findings that these characteristics shape dropout behavior. Tinto (1987) maintained that student’s experiences must be understood within the institution and with faculty and fellow students (p. 192). If available and appropriate, Tinto recommended including information about external experiences in the community. Data should be collected on intellectual development as well as social development. Essentially the assessment should focus on the "total character" of the student experience (Tinto, 1987, p. 192). Tinto (1987) recommends a number of methods for collecting data, including survey questionnaires, and both structured and qualitative interview techniques. According to Tinto (1987) "institutions have sometimes employed a variety of unobtrusive indicators in order to gain insight into the character of student views and the likely direction of future student behavior. The most commonly recognized of these are repeated class absences, lateness in completing assignments and/or frequent visits home very early in the student career" (Tinto, 1987, p. 193). In order to effectively assess student departure, Tinto (1975) recommended that as many data points as possible be obtained in each of the following five categories.

1. Family Background

Socioeconomic status of parents tends to influence dropout behavior. Studies have found that "family’s socioeconomic status appears to be inversely related to dropout" (Astin, 1964; Eckland, 1964b; Lembesis, 1965; McMannon, 1965; Panos & Astin, 1968; Sewell & Shah, 1967; Tinto, 1975; Wegner, 1967; Wolford, 1964). For example, children from lower income families tend to have higher dropout rates
than do children from higher income families. Sewell and Shah (1967) found that even when intelligence was taken into account, children from lower income families still drop out more often than children from higher income families. Children who come from families with educated parents who have a high interest in, and high expectations of their children, tend to remain enrolled and complete college.

2. Individual Characteristics (Skills and Abilities)

While family characteristics are important, it is clear from the research that individual ability is even more important (Sewell & Shah, 1967; Wegner, 1967; Wegner & Sewell, 1970). Academic capability as measured by high school grade point average is related to dropout behavior. Both GPA and SAT scores are important, however, research reported in Tinto (1975) by Astin (1972) indicates that, "past grade performance tends to be the better predictor of success in college, if only because it corresponds more closely to the individual’s ability to achieve within an educational setting with social and academic requirements not too different from that of college" (Tinto, 1975, pp. 100-101).

3. Past Educational Experiences

Students who succeeded in high school perform better in college. Those who attend high schools with excellent resources and whose high schools set expectations for college attendance were more likely to stay enrolled in college. As reported in Tinto (1975), “The ability level of students in the school, and the social status composition of the school, affect not only the individual’s perception of his own ability, but also
his expectations for future college education; in this sense, they affect his commitment to the goal of college completion” (pp. 102-103).

4. Goal Commitment

After taking into account an individual’s academic ability, one must look at commitment to the goal of college completion. It is commitment to the goal of college completion that is most influential in determining college persistence. Goal commitment can be measured in educational plans, educational expectations or career expectations. The higher the level of the plans, for example plans to attend graduate school or professional training, the more likely the student will remain in college (Astin, 1964; Bucklin & Bucklin, 1970; Coker, 1968; Krebs, 1971; Medsder & Trent, 1968; Sewell & Shah, 1967; Spaeth, 1970; Weigand, 1953; White, 1971).

5. Interaction Within The College Environment

Dropping out is taken to be the result of the individual’s experiences in the academic and social systems of the college. The experiences that students have in the academic and social environments on campus affect their commitments to the goal of college completion. Academic integration can take the form of good grades and also intellectual development. Social integration is seen as an interaction between the individual with given sets of characteristics (backgrounds, values, commitments, etc.) and other persons of varying characteristics within the college, social integration, like academic integration, involves notions of both levels of integration and of degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). Social integration is measured by peer group relationships and relationships with faculty and administrators.
In his book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*; Tinto (1987) suggested that successful retention programs should have six principles in place.

1. **Institutions should ensure that new students enter with or have the opportunity to acquire the skills needed for academic success (p. 138).**

If students do not enter the institution academically prepared, then institutions have a responsibility to ensure that appropriate resources and opportunities are available for students to be successful. Programs that are successful recognize that if students have been admitted, then they should be given an opportunity to complete their programs. The primary focus is on the success of the student and not the institution’s needs.

2. **Institutions should reach out to make personal contact with students beyond the formal domains of academic life (p. 139).**

In order for students to be successful academically and socially, they must be connected to aspects of the institution that reach beyond the classroom or the formal aspect of campus life. Successful programs provide opportunities for students to be integrated into the social and intellectual communities on the campus. Institutions should strive to introduce students to other members of the community outside of the traditional settings. The goal is to create on college campuses what many healthy families and
communities have, members reaching out and assisting one another to establish a network of support socially and intellectually.

3. **Institutional retention actions should be systematic in character (p. 139).**

   The programs, actions, and responses of institutions to retention should be systematic. Many students who leave have had unique individual experiences in both the formal and informal life of the campus. Just as students’ experiences are unique, institutions should strive for institutional actions and programs that address the full range of student experiences. It is important to understand that the experiences in the informal setting can affect the experiences in the formal setting and vice versa.

4. **Institutions should start as early as possible to retain students (p. 139).**

   Once institutional retention actions have been identified, they should be initiated as soon as possible in the student’s career. The leaving characteristics of students suggest that there are different stages and times when students leave. The sooner the retention actions are implemented, the more likely they will reinforce student persistence. Understanding that there are different stages and times when students leave suggests that institutional actions should be designed to be sensitive to the varying times and designed to effectively meet the changing needs of students.

5. **The primary commitment of institutions should be to their students (p. 140).**
Programs successful in retaining students understand the importance of being "student-centered". These institutions have a high priority of serving students’ needs and interests even if the needs and interests are contrary to the institutions needs and interests. The central component of their success is a strong sense of commitment to serve the students they admit. Tinto (1987) has found that "institutional commitment demonstrated in the daily actions of institutional members is the source of the development of student commitment to the institution" (p. 140).

6. **Education, not retention, should be the goal of institutional retention programs (p. 140).**

The guiding principle of retention programs should be to educate students and not simply to retain them. Students should have continued opportunity to learn and mature both socially and intellectually while in college. Successful programs do more than retain students on campus, they focus on the quality and character of the student’s experience in both the formal and informal environment.

In summary, Tinto’s model is designed to address the longitudinal process of dropout that occurs voluntarily and involuntarily in higher education, with primary attention given to the events that occur within the institution (Tinto, 1987). Secondly, the model addresses the interactional relationship between the students and their experiences within the institution (Tinto, 1987). This emphasis on the interactional relationship between the students and the environment is important because it illuminates how
students with different characteristics and background traits may withdraw prior to degree completion, depending on their academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987). The more a student is successful in the social and academic environment, commitment to the institution and degree completion will increase. Tinto (1975) suggested that future research should be conducted to further test the relationship of race and dropout (p. 119). According to Tinto (1975), "We simply do not know enough about the processes of interaction that lead individuals of different racial backgrounds to drop out from higher education. Nor do we know enough about how these processes relate to differing patterns of academic and social integration or how they vary between institutions of different academic and social characteristics" (p. 119). He also suggested further research be conducted on urban institutions. "Given that most students in such institutions do not live near the institution itself, it is unclear to what degree participation in social groups external to the college influence persistence in the institution. Nor is it clear how such social groups overlap and intersect with the social system composed of one’s peers in the college environment" (Tinto, 1975, p. 119). Two additional areas include exploring more the question of students and faculty subcultures in persistence and "examining the longitudinal process of dropout as reflected in longitudinal follow-up data rather than cross-sectional data" (Tinto, 1975, p. 120). The unique and distinctive population of the high achieving Black males at a prominent public White institution provides an opportunity to further test Tinto’s model in areas where it is still unclear of what contributes to the persistence and successful graduation of Black males at PWIs. To better understand Tinto’s theory, it helps to examine the model diagrams themselves. Two diagrams are discussed in what follows.
Figure 1. Tinto’s Model of Student Departure

(Tinto, 1975)
Figure 2. Tinto’s Model of Student Departure adapted by Draper.

(Draper, 2002)
Figure 1 above is Tinto’s (1975) original theoretical model of dropout from higher education institutions. Tinto’s (1975) argument was the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems (as measured by normative and structural integration) continually modify their goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout.

The figure also takes account of the attributes individuals enter higher educational institutions with. Some of the attributes are as sex, race, ability, prior experience, academic background, and family background. The background information affects the aspirations and commitment to the goals set by the students. Those goals and institutional commitments can be vital factors in whether a student drops out or completes their college education.

Figure 2 above is an adaption done by Draper (2002) of Tinto’s original theoretical dropout framework with an attempt to extend the theory. In regards to institutional commitment by the student, finances, medical issues and family events were added as factors that contribute a student’s dropout decision. In addition, teaching, learning support (academic support programs), facilities at the university contribute to the goal and institutional commitment of the student which therefore contributes to their decision to
As useful as this framework set forth by Tinto is when exploring college retention, it does not account for the specific and/or relevant issues that Blacks may experience that can lead to dropout from higher education institutions. My personal experiences as a Black male graduate student who has developed and worked with Black male leadership and retention programs aligns with some of the emerging literature. The Black male personal narrative can be very enlightening to issues such as retention. Their narratives can inform issues related to them as well as other minorities. Given this, a qualitative study in which gives voice to their stories is imperative. This study will attempt to extend the retention theory as well as use the narratives of Black males to inform retention programs at higher educational institutions in hopes to change the overall rhetoric and outcomes for the retention of Black males.

**Factors That Impact Black Male Students’ Persistence**

While there are factors that have the potential to impact the retention of all students, there are some factors which are unique to Black male students. Numerous students arrive on the college campus academically unprepared for various reasons. However, Warde (2008) offered that many Black male students matriculating onto campuses are grossly unprepared due to having previously attended inferior P-12 schools in terms of academic preparation. Aside from academic unpreparedness, Cuiyet (2006a) asserted that the experiences of Black men are less than favorable, compared to other students. Harper
(2006a) contended that Black males have been overlooked in the educational process, compared to their White student counterparts.

*Internalized Feelings of Inadequacy*

Based on the premise that Black men have unique needs which have been overlooked, Hall and Rowen (2001) conducted a study to determine the rationale for the decline in enrollment and graduation. From their study, they concluded that Black men were valued less by college faculty and staff than their White college student counterparts. Additionally, college faculty and staff had lower expectations for Black male students. Some Black male students internalized these lowered expectations as not being capable to succeed, which impacted their decisions to leave college before obtaining their degrees. Aside from having lowered expectations, some college faculty and staff view Black men as threatening, thus treating them differently from other students (Cuyjet, 2006a). In general, the image of the Black man as a threatening figure “has been so institutionalized in American culture that most Black males perceive themselves as being part of a permanently marginalized population” (p. 17). This perception that Black men are threatening becomes internalized to the extent that Black man feel “less than” and matriculate onto the college campus with a psychological disadvantage. These negative feelings turn into de-motivation, which is reflected in poor academic performance and influences their decision to drop out of college (Cuyjet, 2006a). Cuyjet (2006a) offered that one way Black males cope with their internalized feeling of inferiority is by seeking out activities such as sports which are culturally acceptable by Blacks (and other ethnic groups) as a means of establishing manhood. While engaging in sports is a means of
integration, the extra time and energy dedicated to sports often interfere with academic pursuits, thus hampering their chances of retention. For Black men who “come from a high school background in which academic success was devalued, the problem of devoting adequate time to studies is exacerbated” (p. 18). Therefore, helping Black men become involved with activities which enhance their opportunities for leadership, strengthen their racial identity, and enrich their academic experience will increase their chances of persisting to graduation (Cuyjet, 2006a; Harper, 2006b; Harper & Harris, 2006; Messer, 2006; Warde, 2008). Since sports play an important role in the masculine development of Black men, those who choose to participate in athletics may need to have additional academic supports in place, such as mentoring and tutoring, to aid in their retention.

Black Misandric Experiences

In comparison to White students, Black students are far more likely to encounter racial hostility and stereotypical attitudes (Fries-Britt, 1997). Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano (2007) introduced the concept, “Black misandry,” which they defined as “exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black men created and reinforced in societal, institutional and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors” (p. 559). In their study of Black men from four universities, through the use of focus groups, they found that Black misandric beliefs abound in both social and academic arenas of the college campus, thus negatively impacting the collegiate racial climate and the manner in which college administrators respond. Moreover, Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) contended that Black males’ effort to resist and succeed against Black misandry has been tremendously ignored and underreported. They further purported that Black males’ exposure to misandric behavior
(constant anti-Black male oppression) leads to fatigue, causing physical and psychological emergencies. This stress alone is enough to cause some Black males to drop out of college. Snipe (2007) offered that many Black men feel an intense sense of isolation, as they tend to feel left behind and are forced to take a defensive posture when facing personal threats and attacks on their psyche. He further indicated that there is a need for spiritual healing among Black men in order for them to press beyond the intense feelings of alienation and become successful. With such pervasive issues as stress and feelings of personal threat facing Black men, it is little wonder that keeping them interested in academics has become a challenge.

CONTRIBUTORS TO BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT

Programs Designed to Support Success

For the purposes of this literature review, retention programs are defined as organized institutional interventions in the form of programs and services to help increase the likelihood that Black males remain enrolled and persist toward graduation at four year predominately White institutions. Retention initiatives provide students with resources to make the necessary academic and social adjustments to succeed in the college environment. These programs and services help ensure student success, which Kuh, et al. (2007) defined as “academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, and acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies, persistence, and attainment of educational goals”. There are a variety of models for
Retention initiatives based on the leadership and management of the institution. Retention programs are one of many ways that institutions create an atmosphere encouraging student success along with successful recruitment and satisfaction of qualified and engaging faculty.

Programs and services incorporated in retention initiatives are based on empirical research that identifies areas of student development and are found to improve the integration and adjustment of college students. They are also designed and supported based on the values and culture of an institution demonstrated by the resource allocations, institutional structure, and actual espoused institutional goals. Torres (2003) stated that retention programs “are more likely to work when they are seen as a vital part of the college mission”. Many programs included in an institution’s retention initiative incorporate peer and faculty mentoring programs; faculty-guided, undergraduate research opportunities; academic success programs that focus on advising, tutoring, and supplemental learning; and student support services that include leadership development, residential learning communities, student organizations, and multicultural programming. These services and programs help students navigate the options to engage and the opportunities that are available to them inside and outside of the classroom. Retention initiatives are best executed when the institutional structure supports a collaborative effort to bring these programs and services to the students.

Retention initiatives play a vital role in the successful academic and social adjustment that is necessary for persistence, especially for students of color. With
structurally diverse campuses now more common, it is important to focus retention efforts on the minority student population in need of an inclusive campus environment for successful academic and social adjustments. Retention efforts are best executed as a concerted effort from the top administrators to the staff working directly with students. Torres (2003) clarified the importance of the collaborative effort, specifically for underrepresented students, stating, “institutions that truly wish to address diversity issues must see this [student success and retention] as a complex process that involves the entire institution”. The main purpose of retention initiatives has always been to help increase the level of persistence yet there is an overwhelming gap in the research regarding the effect that institutional retention programs have specifically on persistence. Braxton, Brier, and Steele (2008) synthesized previous research to provide guidelines improving professional practice of retention initiatives. Reducing departure of students was a goal shared by many functioning divisions of the institution. Specifically they suggested “institutions need to demonstrate respect for students as individuals, being sensitive to their needs and concerns” and “practice institutional integrity by assuring the congruence of institutional actions with the goals and values espoused by the institution” and concluded that “no single domain of a college or university bears responsibility for reducing student departure”. An institutional effort is necessary to retain students of color that calls on faculty and administrators collectively to devise a framework that ensures consistent improvement of programs designed to improve the academic and social adjustment for students of color.

Retention Programs and Best Practices
As there are many programs and practices created at predominately White institutions to assist in retaining Black males, I will highlight three programs and three practices that are prevalent in the research. Of the many programs, I will highlight the (1) Student Black Brotherhood (SAAB) program, (2) the Black Men’s Collective (BMC) and (3) the Black Men of Arizona State University. As for best practices identified in the research, I will highlight (1) learning communities, (2) mentoring initiatives, and (3) student involvement/leadership participation. I chose these programs and practices to showcase a range of ideas and suggestions in the field.

*Student Black Brotherhood (SAAB)*

First, the Student Black Brotherhood (SAAB) organization founded in November 1990, by Dr. Tyrone Bledsoe to address the academic challenges to Black males at Georgia Southwestern State University (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006). This program focuses on assisting males to excel academically, culturally, personally and professionally. To accomplish the goals of the program, educational and cultural activities are offered to all student participants. Services such as tutorial assistance, career planning and counseling, cultural and social activities, personal development opportunities, community service and service learning, and spiritual enrichment opportunities are offered (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006). All of the organization’s programs are designed to promote positive thinking and high self-esteem in Black male students. The primary objective of the organization is that all Black male members will be role models for each other as well as for other Black males in their community.
According to Bledsoe and Rome (2006) perhaps the most significant reason SAAB is effective as an organization is the development of incentives for its members to make active commitments to one another and to their own personal development. Each chapter of SAAB has a personal development committee in which is committed to connecting day-to-day life of the organization with the goals of the committee.

SAAB now has approximately 100 chapters in across the country. Their chapters are established at predominately White institutions as well as community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities.

Black Men’s Collective (BMC)

The Black Men’s Collective (BMC) was created in 1992 to address the high attrition rate of Black males at Rutgers University. According to Catching (2006), the BMC was formed for the expressed purpose of increasing the interaction and dialogue among Black males (students, staff, faculty, and alumni) around academic and life issues ranging from retention to economic empowerment. The BMC includes students, faculty, staff and alumni from throughout the university.

The Black Men’s Collective seeks to provide a multigenerational forum for Black males to connect and discuss issues pertinent to their success through the use of diverse cultural, political and sociological perspectives. The BMC coordinates a series of initiatives and collaborates with other university departments to provide resources and supports for Black males at the New Brunswick-Piscataway campus.
The Black Men of Arizona State University (AAMASU)

In fall 2004, Arizona State University (ASU) formally launched the Black Men of ASU (AAMASU) program in response to the low retention and graduation rates of its Black male student population (Jones & Hotep, 2006). AAMASU is both a high-school-to-college-program and a college student organization committed to increasing the recruitment, retention and graduation of Black male students at ASU.

According to Jones and Hotep (2006) data for fall 1995 revealed that Black students made up 2.7 percent of the total ASU enrollment. The Black freshman persistence rate for the same year was 65.8 percent, compared with 71.2 percent for all students. The six-year graduation rate for Black students entering 1995 was 37.8 percent compared to 49.6 percent for all students (Jones & Hotep, 2006).

AAMASU is one of several retention initiatives coordinated through ASU’s Multicultural Student Center. Considered a targeted outreach program within the MSC, AAMASU has a full time program coordinator and a ten-hour-a-week management intern position to staff the program.

Jones and Hotep, (2006) assert that through community buy-in and continued institutional outreach, it is anticipated that AAMASU’s high-school-to-college program and college student organization program will positively affect student success, resulting in ASU Black male students equaling and, it is hoped, exceeding ASU’s average freshman persistence and six-year graduation rates for all students.
**Best practices**

*Learning communities*

Tinto and Enstrom (2008) made a powerful point when they stated that access without support was not really an opportunity. This lack of support was a major factor that was causing many Black male students not to persist and graduate from college (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008). According to Russell (2008), students should have not only been involved in collaborative learning communities, but should also have been assisting in forming community service learning and community groups. These alliances and groups could be motivating factors that caused the student to stay on track and persist (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Learning Communities needed to be established, specifically, to target and meet the needs of Black male students, if they were to persist and graduate. Students involved in some kind of learning community were more likely to continue to persist from year to year (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008). In one school, Lancer (2002) found that African-American students formed a collaborative learning environment for studying calculus, because many of the students were struggling. The students were later quoted as saying that they motivated each other and kept each other on track. Their group discussions were often times more powerful than the instructor’s lecture.

Tinto’s (1997) persistence theory leaned toward collaborative learning, learning as a community activity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and learning as a total organization
Classroom experience and collaborative learning shaped experience in the classroom, which in turn led to improved persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In order to support all learners, including those from low-income socio-economic backgrounds, colleges had to become learning organizations that reorganized academic activities in such a way that they encouraged and promoted shared and connected learning experiences (Tinto, 1997). Those types of learning communities should have created blocks of similar courses where students were grouped together in cohorts early within their freshman year and remained together over the next few courses (Tinto, 1997).

Learning communities and collaborative learning should have had at least two components. First, the shared learning component enrolled the same students in several courses in an effort to allow them to get familiar with each other and begin to know and support one another. Second, the connected learning component organized shared courses in such a way that students completed a theme of courses that are related to each other in some way (Reynolds, Livingston, & Wilson, 2006). Reynolds (2010) later reassessed learning communities and collaborative learning and reaffirmed his support of them both.

*Mentoring Initiatives*

Mentoring programs enrich the careers of education and business professionals as well as the welfare of minority youth. The composition of most minority mentoring programs is coeducational, but a growing number of mentoring programs are evolving specifically for Black men, to address the critical issues surrounding their academic
welfare. As noted by Hall (1996), such mentoring programs are desperately needed because Black men are likely to encounter many challenges to adjusting to the traditional education system.

*Student Involvement/Leadership Participation*

Involvement is central to the success of the Black male collegian, as he is highly likely to reap a return on the investments he makes in his experience. The theory of student involvement is primarily concerned with how college students spend their time, the effort they devote to activities that are designed to produce desired gains and outcomes, and how various institutional resources and opportunities facilitate student development. According to Harper (2006), joining clubs and organizations, holding major leadership positions, spending time in campus facilities, interacting with faculty in class and outside of the classroom, and socializing with peers about academic and nonacademic matters are all included in the definition of student involvement. Kuh, Palmer, and Kish (2003) contend, “one thing about the college student experience is certain: students learn more when they are engaged at reasonably high levels in a variety of educationally purposeful activities, inside and outside of the classroom, over an extended period of time”. Being a leader in student government, residing on campus learning community, attending diversity workshops and cultural events, participating in academic honor societies and service organizations, and interacting with faculty and staff outside of the classroom have all been shown to have positive effects.

**Conclusion**
Over two thirds of the Black men who enroll in college do not persist through graduation (Harper, 2006a). Such high attrition rates challenge educational economies (Kim & Otts, 2010; Schuh, 2005) and they challenge the economic well-being of the nation (Cabrera et al., 2005; Seidman, 2005). Various obstacles that Black men may encounter in their pursuit of degree completion (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Pinel et al., 2005) range from a legacy of racism that marginalizes the cultural and historical experiences of this population to a lack of necessary structural supports such as financial aid and adequate primary and secondary school academic programs (Bean, 2005; Campbell & Fleming, 2000). Many researchers have noted that there has been a tendency to approach the Black male’s experience from a deficit perspective, focusing on the disadvantages encountered as a result of entrenched racism, economic and educational inequities, cultural attitudes and assorted other factors (Cameron & Heckman, 2001). However, a deficit approach to the question of Black male retention may insidiously contribute to the problem by reinforcing negative stereotypes (Harper, 2006d). An emerging research trend is focused on the strengths in the students who do persist and achieve their degrees (Cuyjet, 2006a, 2006b; Harper, 2005). In addition, there have been programs and practices created at predominantly White institutions to assist in the persistence and retention of Black Males. Several of these have been highlighted in the literature review.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Using Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of student departure as the framework, this qualitative study examined the factors which contributed to the successful retention and graduation of Black males at a prominent public white institution in the south.

The purpose of this study was to gain an increased understanding of the experiences of high achieving Black males at a prominent public white institution (PWI) in the South. It was my intent to explore how pre-college experiences as well as institutional experiences at a PWI defined and shaped Black male students’ realities and how those realities influenced their decisions to remain at the PWI through degree completion. The purpose of qualitative inquiry is to explore, explain, describe, or emancipate (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Currently, there is a paucity of peer-reviewed literature on the topics covered by this study. For that reason, I chose an exploratory purpose for this work. Exploratory forms of qualitative inquiry focus on (a) the investigation of little-known phenomenon, (b) the identification of meaning and categories, and (c) the generation of hypotheses to be used for future research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Each of these purposes aligns with the needs within the literature available. There is a need for more research, better understanding of the phenomenon, and guidance for future research.

This chapter discusses the constructivist epistemology, the rationale for a qualitative design and a narrative inquiry. The chapter then describes the study sample,
participant recruitment and human subjects’ protection. Next, the data collection process is described, followed by a brief discussion of the role of the facilitator and interview protocol, data analysis, and trustworthiness. Lastly, given the interpretive nature of qualitative research I provide a description of my background in order to provide readers some context as it relates to the researcher’s Positionality.

**Epistemology**

This study is based in a constructivist epistemology. An epistemology helps provide “context or a broad map for the research process” (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 451) that describes the nature of knowledge (Crotty, 1998) and the researcher’s assumptions about knowledge (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Identifying an epistemology is critical because it situates the study by influencing the researcher (Jones et al.) as well as the way research is conducted and reported (Crotty). A clearly defined epistemology helps guarantee the quality (described as goodness by Arminio & Hultgren, 2002) and credibility of the study’s findings (Crotty, 1998).

For this study, I am employing a constructivist epistemology. The constructivist epistemology assumes that knowledge is constructed as humans interact with and in the world (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Crotty, 1998). This epistemology presumes that reality is multiple and complex, that the researcher’s values underlie the research, and that the researcher’s and participant’s relationship is interactive (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Based on this epistemology, the participant is the knower. Accordingly, I proceeded through data collection and data analysis considering the participants to be the best informants on their own life and affairs when it comes to describing their pre-college experiences and their experiences through college to graduation and how they went about achieving above a 3.0
grade point average. Moreover, the stories they told were artifacts of their interaction with me. That is, the interviews were opportunities for the participants and I to jointly create a story. My role in the construction of the stories was initiating the interview and describing the topics that I wanted to cover. I also created the interview guide and questions, and in the interview I listened but also responded and probed for more understanding. The participants responded to my initiation, my questions and my comments and questions, but they also did more than respond. At times, they narrated without prompting and took over the direction of the interview. They also occasionally asked question of me and/or held out for a response from me. That is to say, the participants were constructing their accounts of their own experience as we conversed. In constructivist epistemology, stories such as those that will follow are social constructions rather than a dispassionate historical or contemporary account. They are stories in the context of this study, and not necessarily stories that would be told in another context. Together, the participants and I negotiated a dialogue that I will use to understand college persistence as it is embodied in the narratives they created with me (Jones et al., 2006). My goal was to analyze, interpret, and reconstruct (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) the participants’ perspectives in order to address the research questions that guided this study. Given how the stories were told it seemed appropriate to treat the interviews as narratives—as participant first person accounts of their experience, remembering that they were co-constructed with me in the process of doing the research. The foundation of the narrative inquiry methodology that was used is well aligned with constructivist epistemology.

When conducting qualitative inquiry there are three types of data that can be used: those being (a) in-depth, open-ended interviews, (b) direct observation, and (c) written
documents (Patton, 1990). For this study, I use data captured via the first method. These data are investigated using a thematic analytical process known as Framework (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This method of analysis was chosen for its structured system of reviewing data. As the analysis proceeded, the results were fashioned into narratives. The remainder of this chapter will discuss in the rationale for narrative inquiry and more detail on key aspects of this qualitative study including sample, data and data management, analytic approach, researcher trustworthiness, and Positionality.

**Rationale for Engaging Narrative Inquiry**

While taking into account different methodologies in qualitative research, I realized that narrative inquiry best enabled me to explore my research interest because it allowed me as a researcher compare participant accounts with the theoretical framework that emerged from my literature review, and ultimately to offer a critique of that theoretical framework. With their stories at the center of the exploration, narrative inquiry seemed to be the approach most conducive to comprehending participants’ experiences and the influence of the experiences, while also providing me with tools to understand and to explore the implicit postulations and assumptions of participants (Chen, 2009; Lu, 2005).

Therefore, this study is a narrative inquiry into the experiences of five self-identified high-achieving black males at a prominent PWI in the south. In past decades, narratives, especially, stories people tell about their lives have gained increasing status outside the fields of literature and have become the focus of the evolving interdisciplinary field of narrative study, which posits narrative as the central means by which people construct identities and give their lives meaning (Bell, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990;
Kelchtermans, 1993; Lu, 2005). Connelly & Clandinin (1990) posited that the epistemological assumption of narrative inquiry is that we as human beings make sense of our daily experience by living in story structures. The central claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives. In other words, we pay attention to those elements in ways that echo the stories available to us. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world (Chen, 2009, Lu, 2005, Park, 2006).

Polkinghorne (1988) explained that examples of narrative include “personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels, and the everyday stories we use to explain our own and others’ actions” (p. 1). Humans have long understood culture, history, and in many ways themselves through stories. Whether it is a story of how an organization leader came in on the weekend to help paint the office--indicating a value of hard work and humility, or a folk tale with a moral takeaway--for example, slow and steady wins the race. Through story, people gain insight to roles and relationships, values, customs, norms and rules, history, and for at least a moment the audience steps into another world and point of view. Narrative was an appropriate method for this study “because the approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity” (Riessman, 1993; p. 5). This study addresses identity and subjectivity in the stories of high achieving Black male graduates.

To illustrate the pathways high achieving black male students take through postsecondary education and to understand the possible reasons for their success, the voices of these students are important. Qualitative research assigns value to the voices of
participants in a study (Watson & Terrell, 2002). By including the voices of participants, qualitative researchers can acquire an in-depth understanding of the co-construction of knowledge. This means they can share their stories in the context of their lived experiences, constructing meaning to create an understanding of the world they have encountered.

Schram (2005) provided a set of assumptions that guide qualitative research. The first assumption stated that understanding of the social world is gained through direct experiences in a real-world setting. This approach underlined the importance of the participants’ perspectives. The second assumption maintained that the construction of knowledge is both interactive and intersubjective, which means that the rapport between the researcher and the participants of the study is fundamentally linked. The third assumption was that sensitivity to context is an integral part of the inquiry, thus the phenomenon under study was examined in the context in which it occurred. The fourth assumption was that the researcher must pay attention to particulars, which in this case related to the in-depth understanding of Black male students’ experiences of academic success. The fifth assumption stated that qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive; this implies that the meaning of human action is inherent and the task of the researcher is to discover that meaning. All of these assumptions informed the research design of this study and were in concert with the narrative inquiry methodology I utilized. Specific to this study, narrative inquiry provided a methodological framework to analyze the experiences of high achieving black male college students. By asking these students to share their experiences and by exploring the commonalities and major themes in those
stories, I worked with participants to re-construct the significance of their pre-college experiences and their experiences of success in higher education (Creswell, 2007).

**Participants**

Participants of the study were self-identified black males who graduated with a 3.0 or higher grade point average from a prominent PWI in the south. From August 2014 to September 2015, I searched for prospective participants. Due to the nature of my study, I wanted to get acquainted with prospective participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). My professional acquaintances at the institution in which the participants graduated served as contact persons in trying to recruit prospective participants. Through the help of my contact persons, I used an e-mail message, which was sent to all black male graduates who graduated with a 3.0 or higher in 2013 or 2014, to initiate interest in prospective participants. The email requested that interested students who met the study’s eligibility requirements contact the author. In addition, my contact persons in student affairs and residential life recommended students who were potential participants for the study. There were a couple students who were interested in participating in the study but did not have the required gpa. It was difficult to find participants that fit the total criteria for the study. From the emails sent from my contact persons at the university, five eligible participants emerged after 13 months of searching. Upon contact with interested participants, the researcher had initial conversations with the participants to build a rapport before the in-depth interview and to obtain a consent form from study participants to partake in the study. By September 2015, I had five prospective participants interested in my study who fit the selection criteria.
The sample for this study was drawn purposefully. Patton (2002) identified criteria based sampling as a method to acquire a purposeful sample. He enumerated sixteen different types of purposeful sampling. Of the sixteen types of purposeful sampling, the criterion sample strategy was utilized for this study. According to Patton, in criterion sampling, the researcher decides upon certain criteria and chooses participants that meet those criteria for the study.

All study participants met three criteria: (a) Black male (homogenous sample group) (b) who graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill between 2013 and 2015, and (c) graduated with over a 3.0 grade point average. I chose the most recent graduates with the most immediately relevant experience of college.

The sample consisted of five Black male graduates. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) stated that samples for qualitative studies are much smaller than quantitative studies, because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements. Additionally, qualitative research is labor intensive; therefore, analyzing a large sample can be impractical (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) asserted that more data does not necessarily lead to more information, since what is important in qualitative research is data saturation. Qualitative researchers continue to collect data until data saturation is reached. Charmaz (2006) asserted that saturation can be reached within a small sample size, provided that thick-rich descriptions (in terms of qualitative data) are provided. Further, unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers analyze their data throughout their study (Merriam, 1998).
Saturation is achieved when the researcher is no longer hearing or seeing new information. According to Patton (2002), “there are no rules for sampling size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 244). The sampling size depends on the time frame, resources available, what is accessible, and the nature of the research project (Patton, 2002). For this study, I aimed for between four and eight participants. I chose a smaller sample size for a number of reasons: (a) participants are a minority group within the University and I was concerned about having trouble finding more than eight participants willing and able to participate, (b) the nature of this research was exploratory and so I aimed for depth as opposed to breadth and representation, and (c) four to eight participants seemed feasible given my resources and timeframe. Five participants proved to be sufficient in providing data that allowed me to understand participants’ experiences, highlight emerging themes, and retell meaningful stories.

**Primary Data Collection**

*Data*

The study proposal was submitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the Human Subject Protection Office. The release form/consent letter, instruments, and lay summary outlining who the researcher is, the purpose of the research, and the participants’ role were submitted to the IRB for approval prior to conducting the study. After receiving clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the author set out to collect data for the study.
Data Collection

In a qualitative research design, data collection and data analysis is a simultaneous process (Merriam, 1998). After obtaining consent from participants to partake in the study, the researcher obtained a signed consent form from each participant and gathered demographic information relative to their tenure in college.

The method of data collection for this study was individual, semi-structured interviews. Interviewing allows the researcher to gather a significant amount of data within a 75-minute to 120 minute time period (Patton, 1990; Glesne, 2006). Morgan (1997) proposed that setting the length at 90 minutes, but suggested that telling participants to plan on two hours is the best approach. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to ensure that the questions were fully covered in one-on-one interviews.

Semi-structured interviews

Given the limited peer reviewed literature on high achieving black males and high achieving black male graduates at PWIs, it was important to utilize a technique that allowed me to use constructs derived from available theories and empirical research to shape the discussion, while also allowing for the introduction of additional considerations from study participants. Using a semi-structured interview schedule allowed respondents to not only respond to the pre-determined questions, but also elaborate on topics and potentially introduce topics and questions that they feel are important to the conversation (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Because I used a constructivist approach to this study, there were
some considerations when designing the interview schedule. As previously stated, questions focused on experiences with different actors or environments encountered by the study participants. As I was interested in gaining insight into the supportive and challenging experiences during their pre-college and college education in order to understand how they might affect decisions to persist and graduate, broadly constructed questions were used to allow for the study participants to include whatever they felt was appropriate in describing their experiences. Additionally, probing questions were included in order to assist respondents in thinking about topics being discussed.

*Interview administration*

Due to the disbursement of the sample across the United States, participants were offered a variety of telephonic and internet based technologies for conducting interviews. Along with the option to conduct the interview via telephone with an audio recording device, participants were also given the option of utilizing Skype with a computerized audio recording device. Of the five participants, two opted for in person interviews and three opted for over the phone interviews.

*Role of the Facilitator*

The researcher arranged and conducted interviews. When conducting interviews, the researcher must be able to both conduct the interview, and note discussions (Morgan 1997), but often this is challenging (Glesne, 2006). To compensate for this challenge, the interviewer utilized a tape recorder to record the discussion (Glesne, 2006). This researcher conducted the telephonic interviews in a private room in the campus library. In
person interviews were conducted in a conference room in the Education building on campus as the building was familiar to the researcher and participants.

**Data Analyses**

*Coding and Analysis*

Coding is the process of defining what the data mean (Charmaz, 2006) and is the means by which aspects of the data are assigned shorthand designations that allow for easy retrieval of data (Merriam, 1998). It includes chunking and making meaning of data (Rossman & Rallis, 1998), and is the critical step that leads the researcher to the conceptualization of data (Charmaz). Codes must be grounded in the data and are based on the research topic (Charmaz). The data for this study were analyzed through contextual analysis and focused coding that was conducted for the transcripts of each of the five participants.

For my first step of analysis following transcription, I conducted what I am calling “contextual analysis.” I went through each transcript printed out as a hard copy, and re-read the transcript as I wrote notes in the margins on my reactions, themes that stood out to me, connections/contrasts within the interview as well as in relation to other participants, and at the bottom of each page noted the themes that had emerged. For example, I might note, “Derek, like Cory and Devon, began attending a predominantly White school, contrasting with his predominantly Black/Latino neighborhood, as a kid. Although Cory and Devon are twenty years older than Derek, they still have this experience in common.” This approach allowed me to first contextually analyze the data and pull out
high-level themes along with my thoughts. This approach is in line with Riessman (1993) who noted that while there is not one method for narrative analysis, “traditional approaches to qualitative analysis often fracture these texts in the service of interpretation and generalization by taking bits and pieces, snippets of a response edited out of context” (p. 3). Even when beginning my thematic analysis, and later when presenting findings, I kept this in mind as I wanted full meaningful stories to emerge.

I then went through each transcript and pulled out themes and the text that corresponded with them. Themes were often full stories or an entire subject, as I did not want the data to appear fragmented. As I worked my way through each transcript, I either created new themes or moved the text into existing themes. This in effect led to some reorganizing of the interview but followed the storyline offered by the each participant.

For the final product, I believe that I met my aim in both making sense of the data as well as preserving the integrity and meaning of participant stories. The narratives that follow are made of the words of the participants, except where noted. The narratives are essential “meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents’ ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished” (Riessman, 1993; p. 4).

*Qualitative software*

Although there are advantages to conducting qualitative research manually there have been significant technological advances in the area of software assisted qualitative analysis. Dedoose was used for data analysis. This software is an accepted tool in
qualitative research and provides a robust suite of features that lend themselves well to data analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Part of the qualitative research process is the planning and completion of steps to enhance the trustworthiness of findings and the interpretation of the findings. In this study, I used three actions to support the trustworthiness of the analysis and discussion of findings. I took all the necessary steps to keep all participant information confidential, I utilized peer debriefing to ensure my interpretations were grounded in data and I disclosed my Positionality.

Credibility was established through peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is the process of exploring various aspects of the study with a colleague. Peer debriefing is most effective when the debriefer is truly a peer and is knowledgeable about the content area and methodology being employed (Lincoln & Guba). My peer debriefer was an Black male with an advanced degree and experience with Black males in higher education. My peer debriefer played devil’s advocate and challenged the meanings and interpretations of data and potential biases I may have held (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). He was familiar with the college-going patterns of Black males and retention issues. My peer debriefer and I spoke after the first round of interviews, after initial coding, and again after focused coding. Conversations with my peer debriefer extended my thinking because his perspectives were often different from mine, and I began examining how grounded my interpretations were in the data. He acted as a sounding board for potential concepts, categories, findings and
interpretations, and encouraged me to think more deeply about the inquiry process and elements of it that I had not explored (Lincoln & Guba)

Given my closeness to the topic being researched, it was important for me to disclose my positionality, as seen in the next section. This disclosure was the result of a constant and iterative process of reflection on my motivations for conducting the research, my experience as an administration professional, as a graduate student, and as an Black, first generation college and graduate student. Glesne (1999) stated that: “Reflexive accounts, for many researchers, demand more than personal tales of research, problems, and accomplishments. They require thought about the researcher’s position and how the researcher is affected by the fieldwork and the field relationships” (p. 177). To this end, my positionality statement provides information on my personal background, education and work history, and how I came to be interested in topics related to this research.

**Positionality**

As stated in the previous section, I engaged in an iterative process of reflecting on my position in relation to the research I was conducting. This reflection included taking into consideration my personal background, my educational and professional experiences, my motivations for conducting the research, and my views as an Black male who was the first in his family to graduate from college. Thus, I must posit my Positionality as it will have an effect on the research and furthermore, an effect on my choosing to engage in the research project. It is important to note, since an early age I have been a high achiever
academically and have attended three predominately white institutions. The totality of my experiences affects my objectiveness in the study.

Dimensions of Positionality include one’s demographic positioning within society, one’s ideological positioning, and how one discursively positions the other and oneself (Brisco, 2005). In my own discernment of my Positionality, I plan to address my demographic positioning and ideological positioning. Demographic positioning includes ethnicity, wealth, age, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation and so on. I identify as a black male currently in my late 20s. These identifiers are more apparent than others. I am able bodied and minded, I do not possess any physical or mental disabilities. I am a heterosexual male. My background is marred with grave poverty. Education has given me a pathway to economic mobility however, currently I identify with the lower socioeconomic class. Educationally, I possess a bachelors and masters degree and am in a doctoral program in pursuit of a PhD in education. This experience offers me social capital and provides me an educational lens in which to view different situations and scenarios.

Ideologies are largely constructed according to one’s experiences, which are influenced by one’s demographic Positionality (Brisco, 2005). The community I grew up in relies on faith heavily due to the economic and social disparities. In particular, Christianity is largely the religion practiced with varying denominations chosen. I identify as a Christian and even more specifically, of the Baptist denomination. This affiliation has much influence on my ideologies and belief system. This ideological positioning has not consciously influenced my research thus far yet, unconsciously I am unable to definitely say
it hasn’t. In this particular project I do not believe this ideological positioning has played a role in my choosing and/or conducting the study.

My experiences with poverty and education as a black male have also shaped my ideologies. These experiences have dictated the research I have chosen to conduct and factored into my analysis of data. My current position as a graduate student at a top public institution affords me social privilege. Brisco (2005) asserts that many of those in privileged positions have experiences that allow them to develop their ability to empathize with those experiencing oppression and some choose to do so. Critical researchers who are in a privileged position have access to social power and thus, strategically, their work may be especially useful in the attempt to stop oppression. Overall, I am leveraging my social power as a graduate student and researcher to affect the retention of black males at public white institutions by way of exploring the experiences of high achieving black males who have graduated from a prominent PWI in the south.

In my position as a black male from a poverty stricken background who found education to be a vehicle for social mobility, I passionately advocate for black males in similar situations. Driven out of my interest for equitable education and my belief in education as a key component of social mobility for black males, I am particularly motivated to conduct research on black male retention. Furthermore, I chose this particular study because I wanted to answer the question, what are the contributing factors to high achieving black males to persist and graduate from a prominent PWI in the south? This question enticed me to further analyze the data and look closer at Tinto's (1975, 1993) retention model.
**Ethical Considerations**

Conducting ethical research was of the utmost importance throughout this study. In order to protect the participants’ confidentiality, I ensured that all information they shared with me and all paperwork associated with the study remained confidential. Participants signed a consent form that described the measures taken to maintain their confidentiality. I also verbally reviewed this information with participants and reiterated the option they had to opt out of the study at any time. During all interview sessions, I treated all participants with respect, created a comfortable environment, and remained non-judgmental in order to facilitate participants’ sharing of their experiences. No ethical dilemmas arose as this research was being conducted.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I described the constructivist epistemology and qualitative research methodology. I described narrative inquiry as the methodology for this research and explained how this methodology aligned with the data.

Next, I described the sample and data collection methods utilized in this study. I explored the experiences of five self-identified Black male students through individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. I analyzed the data utilizing contextual analysis and thematic ordering.
Finally, I described the trustworthiness and rigor for this study. I used qualitative criteria for rigor including credibility, positionality, and ethical considerations. I ensured rigor in the study by using multiple forms of data collection and providing safe spaces for participants to share their experiences as high achieving Black male graduates.
Chapter 4
Participant Narratives

Introduction

The primary data source for this study was the oral narratives from the study participants. In this chapter I present the detailed narratives of each of the five high achieving black male graduates, Deangelo, Devon, Antwan, Derek and Cory. This chapter will show the five participants precollege experiences, their rationale for choosing to attend UNC at Chapel Hill, their experiences at UNC at Chapel Hill and a snapshot of where they are now.

I have reduced the transcripts to the below. I worked to reduce the text with minimal disruption to the stories. Some of the text has been moved to a new location in the stories. Some things told later in the interviews are moved earlier so context and continuity is easier for the reader. The stories are in their own words. These are their stories. At the end, I will offer a commentary on their respective and collective experiences. I begin with a brief introduction to each narrator.
Overview of Participants

DeAngelo

DeAngelo is a 35 year old male who graduated with a degree in biology in the Summer of 2014. DeAngelo was a transfer student and also a non-traditional student in that he began at the university after the age of 25. He graduated with a 3.9 GPA. He was selected by several instructors in the biology department to conduct research in the department’s lab. DeAngelo was a member of the Carolina Exemplary Students Program for minority males. Currently he works in a Research Center and hopes to obtain a PhD in biology soon.

Devon

Devon is a 22 year old male who graduated from UNC in May 2015. Devon majored in computer science with a minor in philosophy, politics, and economics. Devon graduated with a 3.68 cumulative GPA. While at UNC, he was a member of a Greek fraternity, a Williams scholar, a Residential Assistant and a Community Manager. He is currently working in direct sales and looks to further his career in the field.

Antwan
Antwan is a 24 year old male who graduated from the Business School with a degree in business management in May 2014 with a 3.2 GPA. Antwan was a transfer student and was involved with the Toastmasters club and became a Mason during his time at UNC. Antwan currently is a commercial investment broker and looks to further his career in the field.

**Derek**

Derek is a 23 year old male who graduated in May 2014 from the school of journalism with a 3.2 GPA. Derek was an out of state student from the North. Derek was involved with Carolina link, the Latin dance team and the hip hop nation. Derek currently works as a freelance writer and has previously worked for a major newspaper as a sports and music writer.

**Cory**

Cory is a 24 year old male who graduated in May 2013. He started as a teaching fellow and changed his major his junior year to screen writing. Cory graduated with a 3.1 GPA. While at UNC, Cory was a resident assistant and a community manager within residence life. In addition, Cory was a member of the all black acapella group and a participant in the National Cinema advertising competition. Currently, Cory works in film as a script and story producer.

**DeAngelo’s Narrative**

“I had issues coming over here as a transfer student from community college for my first year. I felt like they let me on campus, and they let me see the buildings, but they didn’t let me into the school.”

**Today**

*Well, I work at UNC doing research at Center for Excellence in Community. That’s over in Carr Mill. That’s social work research, biology research, and a couple other things. I’m hoping to go into ... I’m hoping to get a PhD in biology, I think. Maybe public health, we’ll see. I’m building up my research experience right now. I’m working on a couple projects there. I’m also working part time over at Duke doing more Bio focused projects. That way it’s even more relevant. I have more responsibility, and pay, and benefits at UNC, but I’m also getting things a little bit closer to my interests over at Duke. Then I’m married, and my wife is expecting, or we’re expecting. First kid. The Duke job is supposed to expire, sometime around May. Hopefully I can transition off of that, and have my new second job. Then start applying to graduate schools, and that’s that.*
Growing up

I'm a Navy kid indirectly, but I'm mostly from the southeast. Southeast Virginia. I was there for kindergarten and preschool years, and then most of my high school years. Also, I was born in California. I've been around, but mostly the southeast. Then I've lived here for the last eight years or so, give or take.

[Growing up] I wanted to have every job. My Mom is real low income. I'm from a low income family, like section eight housing, and food stamps, and welfare, and things like that. My Grandmother ... People say that grandparents are big indicators of people's success. Most of the family, they're military and things like that. She [grandmother] even retired from the Navy Exchange. My mom actually met my dad at the shipyard.

I have my Mom's last name, my Mom and my Dad were never married. I was conceived in Virginia, as far as I know. I was born in California. What I can remember is ... I don't remember my Dad at all from my childhood, but I do remember having special feelings for a couple toys and not really knowing why. I remember my mom was a tomboy. That growing up I was a dare devil, I'd jump off roof and stuff. She does not cry. She bottles up. I remember when I was a little kid she was crying because of some man when I was like five years old. That's how I remember it. I don't remember if it was because of my Dad.

They've had a custody thing and my Dad has had ... Telling all his stories, but he's all right with it. I'm the third kid with the third woman. Me and my closest sister are less than nine months apart. So, he had a lot of stuff going on, and he was hey... I can't pay ... I can't have this kid on child support. She's well, if you don't put this kid on child support, you're never going to see him. He was like I can't do that. Then I was gone. I didn't even know his name until ... My Mom never said anything bad about him, my Mom never said anything good about him, and I didn't ask. It wasn't until I saw my birth certificate in 7th grade, that I knew his name. Then I remember talking to my grandma about it a little bit. She's yeah, well when you're 18 we're going to find him. He's around here somewhere in Virginia. We're going to find him.

My Mom ended up [finding him] right before I turned 18, she introduced me to him. I had to take a blood test to make sure I was his, because they'd had some situations with that too. People were spreading rumors and stuff. I met him, then around that time period ... I really do have serious memory loss around when I was like, 17 to 22 or so. I don't remember much of it at all. It was a real dark place. My Mom ended up moving away to Florida when I was 17, 18, 19, sometime around then. I don't know where I moved, but eventually I ended up living with my Dad. I ended up living with him for, I don't know, about 2-3 years. I try to see him every holiday, and stuff like that, that I can. It's a little bit tricky.

They've been real welcoming of me and my wife, more and more through the years. He always gives me $50, or $100, for my birthday. He's retired from the shipyard. He's in a predominately Black
neighborhood. It's low income, so he's paid. In that neighborhood he's rolling in money. He's got a house on the corner and all that. He's cool.

I do miss having a father. It's a big thing. I don't suggest anybody do that with their kid, where you just rip them away. It affected me in sports, I think, the most, honestly. I didn't have anybody to throw with. I'd throw with my friends, but I was in a neighborhood of kids where none of us had dads. The one thing I can say is that my Mom didn't do stuff that other kids' Moms would do, like maybe this is your new Dad. Or, you're going to go see your Dad this weekend, and then they don't get to go see him. Or, any of that kind of stuff. Or talking bad about their Dad, and not realizing that the kid is half of his Dad. None of that stuff that I had to go through. My mom only dated one person that I know of. Twice, in like 10 years apart. It was all about the son, almost too much a little bit.

My Grandma had a little bit of money, she would help us out. That's part of why we moved, is we often moved to different family people. I moved to Pittsburgh for two weeks when I was like, five. We moved there, it didn't work out, and then we moved to Florida. It was that kind of a thing. My Mom always had me in ... Even though she didn't have any money or anything, she always put my education first. The neighborhood I was in would get beat up a lot when I was five and under. All the time I would get beat up. Also, to further complicate this whole picture, my mom is at least bi-racial, and she's very light. I'm light for a Black person, but my Mom looks Hawaiian, or Hispanic, or that kind of ... Or, light Hispanic, I should say. That's a weird thing in some of the neighborhoods we can be in too, where you have that colorism thing happening. Where people were you think you're something, this and that. So my upbringing was very integrated, but also weirdly segregated in different ways.

My male role model would be my grandfather. He moved to be by me, to teach me how to be a man. My Mom was always trying to teach me how to be a man. Every time they say be a man it was always something that sucked. My Mom would make me walk on the outside of the street when we carried groceries home. We didn't have a car most of the time. There weren't sidewalks. So I'm just walking on the side of the road. I'm 7 or 8 years old carrying groceries, and she's got me on the roadside. You're the mom. She's yeah, but you're the man. She tells me that people in the old days, people used to throw chamberpots out of the window. The man had to walk on the outside so the chamberpot would hit him. Then the road was flashing and all this stuff. It was always people trying to teach you how to be a man.

My grandfather emphasized learning more than grades. He said that schools are dumbed down, and if I'm happy about getting an A I need to check myself. If I'm going to school to get an A, there's something wrong with me. I'm missing the point. I need to learn the lesson. I need to learn books, even beyond. If I'm satisfied with learning what they're teaching me in class, and I'm not reading something else, then I'm messing up. That's not good enough in other countries, and it's not good enough in other times, so why is it good enough for me, just being happy with my A? My thing is, the A is the highest grade I can get? Why you stomping on my dreams. He's a little harsh, yeah. I'm 7, 8 years old. He was hard. He'd say stuff, I'm not pussy-footing. Stuff like that. He's say kid and stuff ... he's from New York. He's very mixed too. I just say he's New York. Where you look at him and you're, you're something, I don't know what it is. You got a little curl, you could pass in the south in the 50s, because
he could, literally. He’s still got all kind of different things going on. He’s the one that emphasized education, and then my mom as well. Those are the two that emphasized learning. My mom liked grades, but everybody was always [pushing me] … There was no doubt in my family [I’d go to college].

Experiences in School

My Mom got me into Friends School for preschool because she took a job at the local … It was this thrift store kind of place where they had costumes, called Stuff Unlimited. She got me in. They gave money to the local Friends school for preschool. If you worked there your kids got to go to the preschool. So she got me into that. She’d get me books that were used, and things like that. She paid a lot of attention to me. Then when she was a maid she would take me to the jobs and things like that. I remember, she likes to talk about how I helped teach the doctors’ kids how to read. They are, but that’s the maid’s kid. People were really supportive of me being smart. I’m talkative and my mom is not talkative, so when you’re in that kind of a relationship, being in that duo, I always had to be whatever she wasn’t. She’s a little bit grumpy, I need to be a little bit nicer. That was the way I took it. I would be her representative and things like that.

When I got into school and things, teachers really lit up. Jacksonville in particular is a really segregated school system. We were always in the best … We were in the worst neighborhood [but] in the good school. That was always my mom’s goal. The cheapest house in the good school setting. Everywhere we would go I was in the best public schools of whichever region I could get in. She would switch me from teacher to teacher. She would get the ones that liked boys. But now, I’m looking back on it and there might have been a little bit more to that equation.

She would ask the guidance counselor, she’s like, be real, which teacher is going to like my kid? I was the first Black kid that I know of, in my elementary schools’ gifted program. I think I passed to get in the first year, they said, but they said it was full. Then they put me in the second year. I loved that class. I keep thinking about writing that teacher. Miss Ware. I can remember so many of my teachers, a lot. Because I loved school, because part, I wasn’t getting beat up. And two, people thought I was cool.

I was like, this is nice. You get cookies and stuff. I knew I wanted to be something. This is before Barack. There was that whole big push of who’s going to be the first Black president? All the teachers would throw their dreams into you, and stuff like that. I remember standardized testing, they were saying things like we’re going to go against all the kids in the rest of the country. You know? We want our team to be the best, oh we were way ahead. I remember getting 99s back then and thinking, how come I didn’t get 100? How come I didn’t get 100? I didn’t understand the way the scoring went. I would get mad about it because I really wanted my team to win. I was very competitive about it. I loved just learning for learning sake, and I also liked winning.

One year my Mom … I started lying and saying I didn’t have homework. It was 3rd grade, or 2nd grade. It must have been third grade, because that was the last year I got straight A’s for the whole year for a long time. She started assigning me extra homework … Sometimes she would assign
me more work than the teacher really assigned. Sometimes she would assign the odds, and the teacher actually assigned the evens, and if I’m already doing it I’d be doing way more work.

I wanted to be everything, because I saw low class stuff, but I respected everybody doing it. I wanted to be a computer programmer after I saw the Superman movie and it said you could get big bucks from Richard Pryor. Then I also saw my Mom being a maid and stuff like that. It wasn’t like I wanted to be a maid, but I was oh I want to be a cook, or I want to be ... Just any kind of random job. I’ve done most of them. For a long time wanted to be an engineer. I got into some engineering magnet programs. Then in middle school and early high school things started to change. My habits loosened. I felt less comfortable about things.

Then people treated me differently too. In high school my grades were not good. I kept moving a bunch around that time too. I was in one school in kindergarten in Virginia. Then we moved to Pittsburgh, then in the 1st grade I was in three different schools in Jacksonville, Florida. That’s three different states in one turbulent time. Then I stabilized for a while, and that’s where I really liked my learning, maybe that has something to do with it too. Me and my Mom, in high school, we lived in a studio apartment together. I had the front part of the studio apartment, she had the ... They had a second door. She had the bedroom/bathroom, and I had the living room/kitchen. That was it.

Just me and my mom. I think I had a hide-a-bed or something like that. I don’t really remember it that well. When I got older in high school I didn’t want to be a part of the problem, is what I felt like. I felt like going to college, a lot of those college jobs, and corporate jobs especially, were ruining the world. I was like I don’t want to do that. I’m a working class person. I started working really young too, about 14, a lot, in restaurants and things. I liked that atmosphere. I had a brotherhood, and people valued me for my work, I felt. There’s more to it than that, but I thought that was it. They liked me for me working cheap. Other people would like me for my work and for me, but the bosses were a little different. I thought it was merit based.

I was getting real disillusioned with all these rich kids in the honor society that were cheating on all the papers and stuff like that. I can’t get into the honor society. One year in high school I lost one of my textbooks, my math book. In the first or second week I lost it, because I’m just a disorganized kid. I didn’t tell my Mom because man, she can’t afford it. The whole year I didn’t do any homework, unless I could borrow somebody’s book before class or get it done after in class. Then I didn’t do any homework that whole year. Which is stupid. That’s a stupid thing to do. My mom would’ve got the money. I know that now, but that’s like a 16-year-old brain.

I got really into my friends, and I got really into punk music, just hanging, just being all about us, and kids, and getting real upset with the world. I was like I don’t want any of that. I don’t want to go to college. Then my grades just went down. I got real depressed, too, around that time. A lot of relationship stuff wasn’t working out. Honestly, one of the big things was related to race, so this might be relevant. I felt like, when I was a kid everybody treated me ... Gave me all these greeting cards/Martin Luther King kind of speeches about things. It was content of character, it’s not anything, and all that. I bought into it 100%. I tried to do my friends that way. I tried to do all that kind of stuff.
My best friend is James, and he's White. We're still best friends. He was in my kindergarten class, but we didn't get along. I liked him, but he had failed kindergarten the first year. When he got held back I think he said in retrospect his mom put him in there for day care, so he wasn't in a position to succeed. He's got a memory like crazy, and he's smart. If you give him the information, he can make good decisions, but he's got a couple learning disability things. He's got a memory like nobody's business, and he's funny. We were the letter people...that was what taught us the alphabet. They teach you the ... They've got M for munchy mouth, and T for Tall Teeth. A, all the A's were ... All the vowels were women. Now they've got it split up more evenly. All the vowels were women, and all the consonants were men. The first word you get is mm-at, mat. You got H, horrible hair. They all had something. You're like let's go be the next letter. It was sweet. You should look it up someday. S was a super hero. X was messed up. X and Z. You had a head here. It was just all kinds of that stuff. He's at the end of the year, because you don't even know X early on.

Then when it comes to dating, or when it comes to getting pulled over, or when it comes to all these other things that aren't in your control...that you're relying on someone else, then all of a sudden you find out that these things aren't true. Having to deal with that, about this conflict of your ideals that you thought that you signed a contract for, and you bought into. Or it's not about the money, then you see all these rich people getting by. Or it's not about this. It's just all these lies at once. I can't deal with any of this stuff. I didn't want any part of that world, none. I failed. I started off my first senior year of high school, I think I had seven classes? It's real fuzzy, I have a lot of memory loss from that time. My house and everything looked like I was on drugs, but I wasn't. Everything about my situation looked like, oh this kid's really having trouble with drugs, and stuff like that. I started off with ...I wasn't listening to my Mom, or anything like that. At one point I had a log holding up the window in my car. The dress, and just my attitude, and the decline too, the steep decline. When people see it, they're like, all of a sudden they're shocked. But I wasn't. I really wasn't. I was actually among the straight edge kids that weren't doing drugs, but I just was done. I did do a paper that my teacher kept reading, and using as the model paper, about how the good guys don't get the girls. It was about what your experience was last summer, or something that changed your life, or something like that. It was real good. It was pretty smooth. I wish I still had a copy. I might ask that teacher for it. That's Mr. Kavinski.

I always liked my English teachers. Well, except for one. Looking back I know why...we had a big term paper to do. This was my first college class officially, that wasn't an AP but it was like a first college credit with a grade kind of thing. It was a high school class at the same time. I just refused to do it. I just didn't do it. I kept procrastinating and procrastinating. I don't know if it was the pressure of me trying to be great, because I kept wanting to do papers where people will remember me. This has to be the best.

I had a lot of trouble with in class papers for that reason. It took me a long time to get over that, just write something okay. I just didn't do it. I know it broke his heart to fail me. It's not like he wanted to fail me. But I failed, and everything else failed. I ended that year with two classes. One, you had to pass Government and English to ... that's your grade level. You have to pass those two. I wasn't
in one of those two. I think I wasn't in Government anymore at the end of the year. I had to come back to school the next year. It was so embarrassing. That was the first time I had a teacher fail me.

I came back the next year. I had the teacher fail me that year. She's like, you're not passing my ... You're smart, but you're not going to pass my class. I will not let you pass my class. She told me that. This was in a meeting. Then I had another teacher pass me. Where they had no business ... The Government teacher failed me, and the English teacher passed me. This is a different English teacher after I got kicked out of that one class. He passed me. I just remember thinking that's so weird. He was what are you doing here, the next year? I was well : 'it didn't work out'.

[After that] I put my head down, I did my work. And then I graduated.

Community College

Then I went to community college and had five F's. People were like you need to withdraw. I was like "No I’ll just re-sign up." They are that's not the way it works, man. So I think my first 15 or 18 credits are ... But I didn’t want to go to community college. It was like the biggest failure. I was in the college track, the regular college track. I didn’t want to go to community college. I wanted to go to film school at that point. Everybody was oh that film school's a lot of money, and it’s a waste, and stuff like that. So I just kept flunking.

Then eventually my mom started listening to me. She gave me good advice so I started listening to her too. She was why don’t you just start taking classes you like? Yeah, I’m going to take classes like I’m retired, gardening or something. I took a bunch of creative writing, and print making, and things like that. I liked that, but I didn’t have any plan. I flunked the college prep class that they put you in to do course planning. I was in Community college off and on for 8, 10, I don’t even know how many years. Off and on ... For a two year school, for forever. It was rehabilitative to me, where it made me not hate school. But I still wasn’t into it.

Then it was years later where I finally realized that ... I finally realized that my Mom ... My mom started becoming physically disabled. She’s already mentally borderline disabled. She gets disability now for both. I didn’t realize ... One of the things she told me when I graduated ... I didn’t want to go to graduation. I was this isn’t even my graduating class, why would I want to go hang out with these people? She’s like, the graduation is not for you, it is for me. It is for all the parents, it is for all the teachers. It has nothing to do with you.

My mom is mean, you know? She’s tough. She always tries to train me what to do when she’s gone. She’s you get the diploma, you get the education, I get the graduation. That's for me so you are going, and I went. That idea carried through with a lot of different things in my life, with my wedding and stuff like that. I was well, the wedding’s not for me. It's for all the people that come to the wedding. I get the marriage. My wife gets me and I get the wife, but the wedding, it’s for everybody else. For the grandparents, it's all for them. I started to realize that ... Also, I kind of plateaued in restaurants. I
worked in restaurants a lot. I’d done construction work, a lot of different jobs. My hands started to hurt.

The discrimination started to become really apparent. Especially when I moved here. Seeing the way that Spanish speaking people in kitchens … I’m sorry, couldn’t progress but so far. Some of the time, they would get passed over for promotions. Somebody that’s just a white guy, English speaking, will just automatically be slotted over them, and stuff like that. There’s just so many discrimination things. Then I started … Really the thing in my head that I really want to be a … Because my Mom’s … I really to be a parent. Even though my Mom did it poor, in government, and all that stuff. I was I don’t have to do it that way. I started realizing if I break my arm, or I break my leg, or something like that, my kid might not eat. Even though I wasn’t going to the doctor and stuff, my kid should go to the doctor.

Obligation and Transition

I started realizing I owed something to other people. At the same time I started realizing that so many people invested in me and I haven’t given anything back, nothing. All these teachers have helped me, all my Mom has helped me, my grandparents have helped me, a lot of my friends have helped me, and stuff like that. If you have a gift, and you don’t share it, then that’s selfish, to me. That’s part of why I talk. If you’ve got something to say, and you can pass it along … I hate it when people know the answer, and don’t say anything. Then go I knew the answer. Why? That didn’t help me none. You’ve got to let that out. You’ve got to let it out. I mean, maybe not as much as me, but there’s that middle in between. Even if you’re wrong … If you talk enough you’re going to be wrong. That’s just a part of it, it’s going to happen. I might have been wrong once in my life, maybe, but it’s okay.

Also, I start working in retail when I came to Carolina. Me and my girlfriend moved here. Our relationship was real rocky at first. I was like we’re only going to date for two weeks. I put that in my mind. We’re married now. We’ve been together like, 10 plus years. The last 5 years or so have been pretty good. Where I’m taking this seriously, but the first few years were terrible. She was in college and I was that’s stupid. Man, she went to William and Mary, it’s so boring. I hated it. But then coming here I worked in retail when I got out of the restaurants. I started working with women. I love working in kitchens. I worked with a few women in restaurants that were real good, but usually when you’re working in kitchens you’re working with the same ugly guys every day. Looking at the same walls every day. They’re like your best friends.

You don’t get to see much of the world beyond that. So your view is shortened by that. When you’re waiting tables you get to see and interact with people more, and you get to see more out there. Well, retail, I was really able to interact with people. I worked with all women. I worked with people from Chapel Hill, born and raised kind of thing. People from UNC. I realized how nice people were, and stuff like that. I started to be like, this is kind of good, and I can use some balance. I met a couple people where I was still thinking about trying to become a parent. I was I’d like to have a daughter like that person. They go to UNC. I kept and I still keep in … They’re the first person I visit in Philly, the person I was that’s a good daughter kind of thing. We still keep up.
Another one of my friends from that retail job, they just had their baby. We've been delivering them food the past few weeks, and visiting with them. They're real excited about having a kid and stuff. Working with these women, working in a different environment, made me realize maybe college is okay. I was well, I think I can do it. I started to also realize how much I'd hurt my Mom with my failure. One of the things she mentions ... This is one of the things that stand out for me, she says that I think we've got a Black mailman. I kept getting all these college things when I was in high school. She was oh yeah, he's going to go to college. My grades weren't that good. I started doubting I could pay for it.

I've already messed up my grades to the point where I can't get a scholarship. Who's going to take me? Making all these reasons in my head why it can't happen, but if I would've just started, even at my junior year, just getting straight A's, that would've made a huge difference. I didn't realize that at the time. I thought I was already disqualified, and because we had a lot of money troubles. Anyhow, she said that even the mailman was heartbroken and upset when I didn't graduate. That's how big of ... I think that's something different for minorities and not minorities. I mean, maybe if you're from a real small town, and you're white, you might have that extended thing of belonging to something bigger than just the people in your home. That's a big thing to have on you, that pressure.

I went to Davidson Tech and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I passed up an apprentice opportunity for the shipyard. I told my Dad I wasn't going to be living there for 2 years. I ended up living there another 8 years at that place. I thought I was too smart. Finally I was-I'm going to be stupid. I'm going to take this little class while I'm working full time. I'm going to take a math class because I want to ... I ended up with math, you've got to get a running start. You've got to make sure you know what you already are supposed to know good. I went back one math to pre-calc, or something like that, and then tried to get a running start. I took a college success skills class.

I was going, oh man. You've got to be kidding. I'm sitting here at Davidson Tech and going back to community college it was like everybody was about to make a mistake, like I did the first time I went through, or they already made a mistake. Something didn't go right. Maybe the mistake wasn't even theirs, maybe it was something in the past in their family and they've actually did everything right. This is as far as they could go to get to where they needed to go next. That happens too, from so bad circumstances, that is the next step. It was weird. Kids with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles backpacks and stuff. It was just tripping me out. I've got to listen to what they say. I took the computer test and it said, be a journalist, be a biologist, or be a therapist, which, I didn't even know there was a difference. I knew the newspapers were going out of business and I didn't want to be on TV, so I was well, I guess it will be in biology. That's how I chose that. That's the long version of how I chose biology.

Then once I started I liked it. In high school I didn't like it because I thought it was just... The girls in my high school class, they would just judge people. They said oh we're going to tell you what's wrong with you, and stuff like that. I was "blank" you, and I don't want anything to do with biology. My Mom was very wary too. She's come around a little bit, but at one point she said, "How come you be a real doctor, like a chiropractor?" She meant it. People do not respect chiropractors but my Mom holds them higher, she really does. That's probably one of her favorite doctors. Now she's starting to come around a little bit.
Once I got into biology I found out that you can’t do that much with a bachelors in biology, so you’ve got to keep going. That’s how that plan came about. I’ll get to be a teacher maybe, and also might be able to give back to my country, that whole being from a long line of military people. It really is a long line of either ship builders, or ... All my dad’s brothers are on the shipyard. My Mom’s side, all of them are military. Some of them are double retired from the military and things like that. I’m the one that broke that chain. If I can treat soldiers then that would be really awesome. I do try to have a sense of duty.

The one thing I would say is that ... This is unrelated, but related, this is the end of this whole thing. When I started doing better, my Mom started doing better physically. She used to crawl upstairs and crawl downstairs. She’s heavy, but she’s not that old. It wasn’t even embarrassing. I mean, that was like it too, but it was sad. It was just you didn’t even want to be around her. She was really negative around people. No plans for the future, none. Then as I started improving, she started getting better. It vindicated all the stuff that she has done. People made it seem like she failed, it wasn’t I failed, she failed as a parent. She put everything into me, she put all the chips in, and I just blew it.

Now she’s had two knee replacements. People don’t get knee replacements if they don’t care about the future. She’s had two knee replacements. She doesn’t have to walk with a cane anymore. She can go upstairs, she goes a little slow, but she can go. She’s got to cut that weight down a little bit. She’s trying to get ... She’s working a disabled job where you can work like eight hours a week or something. She wants to pay off my student loans. I kept telling her, I don’t need you to pay off my student loans. I don’t know if you’re going to make enough money to make that payment. It’s not that bad, because I went to community college for two years and I came here. Still, I don’t want her messing up my credit like that. She’s insisting. When people talk about family systems and things like that, that’s the way I’ve seen it.

School -- College Connections

I was in the advanced track from the beginning, so college was always talked about. I remember people would talk about PSATs and stuff like that. Then in middle school I was in a Pre-IB. International Baccalaureate. It’s not that popular. It’s like if the whole school was AP, with a hint of philosophy. It’s hard to remember where everything was, but I got to go to a college for the summer in middle school, it was for 7th and 8th graders. They had robotics, they had computer programming with hexadecimal, or something like that. They had just different stuff going on, just to give you a taste of what it’s like. That was the first time I was ever in a dorm. We had a water fight in the dorm. We got to meet different kids from all over. I liked that. I would always do extra school in the summer. Some kind of a summer school program until I started doing work. Once I got to the age that I could work, I started making money and I stopped doing the extra education things. That’s a route when the gap started to widen even more so, where I’d have all my kid friends ... They mostly were white friends at the advanced school things. I was in white school systems, which is a big deal, for socialization especially. In the advanced classes you’re the one Black kid in each class.
I had a pretty good relationship with guidance counselors. My first guidance counselor in high school was not good. She retired the next year. She kind of messed me up when I transferred. When you transfer schools a lot they think the school you came from is a bunch of idiots, every time. They always try to make your classes ... they always try to down your record. Some of your credits don’t transfer or whatever. Yeah, that helped me out. I will say that I was kind of lost compared to my peers in the APs. I knew to take AP classes and things like that. I knew that college costs money. I knew I had to take an SAT, and I did well on that. I didn’t take a prep course that I know of. My first senior year when I failed they called me over the loud speaker for my SAT score at the beginning of the year. There was five of us that they called.

I didn’t know anything about how many types of majors there are. I didn’t know about college essays, how to write a good college essay. I didn’t know that you could write things about your story for instance. That would’ve been good for me to know. That you could write about your story as long as I actually improved my grades, then I could write away the past. That would’ve been really good to know. I didn’t know as much as I know now. My wife’s brother, he does a program for kids like me at his school. I hear about what he’s doing. They visit schools and stuff like that. I didn’t have anything like that. No, nothing like. I’m the first one to go to college.

UNC

I graduated, officially, this past summer. I finished all my requirements for graduation, so not the summer, not the spring, but the fall semester before, I finished all my requirements for graduation. Except for one thing for my minor. But I had enough credits and all, because I transferred from community college. I took a crazy amount of classes while I was here. When I came to UNC they said, it’s very hard for a transfer student to study abroad. That guy was talking about challenges. I was I going to have to study abroad then. Don’t tell me I can’t study abroad. That’s why I did so much of my credits, because they said that only so many things could transfer over.

I was at some meeting, I think this was an overall transfer student orientation thing. They have a bunch of different orientations here. I did that and then I applied. It’s funny that it was in front of Gerald Unks because I got the, Dr. Unks Fellowship to study abroad. I was one of the three people that won that. Then I got another one for ... Basically it’s for non-traditional students, people from community college, people who haven’t studied abroad, something else. I said “If I don’t win this, I don’t know who they’re looking for.” They’re like, we want it to be diverse people, and all that. I got that one too, and that helped me to go. I had to delay my graduation that way of school could pay for part of my trip. I got to go to England, Denmark, and Germany. I studied Black people in England, and had my actually study abroad program in Denmark and Germany. That’s why I delayed my graduation, which affected my job search. Then also I had to try to stay in the area because I didn’t want my ... Even though my research interests are kind of specific, I don’t want to make my wife move more than one time, too many times with all that. I was we’ll probably move when I get into graduate school, so let’s stay here while I’m working to get to it.

Elements and Detractors of Success
My male role models were my coworkers in restaurants and work. I really valued work. Every once in a while I’d have a teacher. I had two Black male teachers here. No, in total, the whole time I went back to school. The whole time I was in any college classes. I’ve taken a lot of college classes. I’ve got two Black male teachers. Dr. Terry in Linguistics, and I would go talk with him after class, for 20-30 minutes just about life, or whatever, or linguistics too. Then Dr. Khan over in the bio department. He studies discrimination, how the stress affects people physically. I had him for just 2-3 weeks, but it was great. It was great. That’s it.

[One thing I’ve learned is]... It’s a crazy way to put it, but how Black you feel, and how Black you’re made to feel. That’s one of the things that Dr. Khan talks about a little bit. That if you feel like you’re not part of a group, and you’re treated like you’re not part of a group, then you don’t need that social support. You’d be I’m just me. I’m just DeAngelo. I’m not a race, or whatever. That’s fine, but if you feel like you’re ... If you’re being treated like you’re part of a group, often for worse, and you feel like an individual, and you don’t have that social support, that will squash you. I always use this example. One finger, versus one finger, versus one finger, versus a hand. That’s when people are treating you like something else. For those people you need to have that support. I was involved in a lot of different programs here to me that helped make me feel more inclusive, and included, and helped give me social support. For me it was a weird situation, because I’m 35 years old. I came back here at 33, 32 years old. On some of the papers it says 23 and up, or something like that, it’s as high as it goes at UNC. It’s like are you 17, 18, 19, 22 and up or something. I’m like, damn. So people were surprised at how old I was. It’s not that I didn’t look my age, it’s that they didn’t know that that was an option. From the get-go I’m not an insider. I’m already an outsider, but I’ve been an outsider everywhere I’ve gone. I’ve been a minority. I’m not one of the kids that came from a predominately Black school, and has suddenly gone into a school where I don’t know how to deal with this. I’ve dealt with this everywhere I’ve gone. I’m often the only Black person.

For instance, in the African American Sociology class I took there were about 30 to 35 students. There were three men, and I was the only Black male. That’s in African American Sociology. Now think about how my cognitive psychology classes are? Think about how my human memory classes are. Think about how I don’t look like the other people. I don’t match up on age like the other people. I’m doing peer mentoring. I’m working in the peer relations lab. I’m doing peer tutoring and I’m like I’m not a peer. I don’t feel like I fit in. For me, I had to find allies. It’s almost like the underground railroad or something. You have to find allies, and some of them will find you. I mentioned Dr. Terry, I mentioned Dr. Khan but there’s white ladies that I could identify with too, or there’s whomever.

The first person that met me at an orientation was Dr. Esther John over at the biology department. She saw my name on the name tag. I was at orientation, she sought me out and met me. I was so awkward at that orientation. I did not want to be there, because it’s kind of embarrassing coming back to school. As weird as it sounds. It seems like something I should be proud of, but why didn’t I do this a long time ago? You don’t really fit in. Then also I got married right before I came here, too. So not that anybody wanted to be with me, but I have somewhere to be. I can’t just go to the
football games and stuff like that the same amount. I went to a game or two, but it's not like ... I'm not fully in.

I had issues coming over here as a transfer student from community college for my first year. I felt like they let me on campus, and they let me see the buildings, but they didn't let me into the school. My first semester I got one bio class, and that was 8:00 a.m. because all the classes were already full. They let us in after all the classes were full, from community college. They don't do that for the first years. At the time, as far as I know, I couldn't get into the first year seminars or anything like that because I'm not a freshman, I'm a junior. They had one class that was for junior transfers, that was taught by Dr. John. That class helped me out too.

Diversifying my identity, and looking at the different parts of my identity that I could relate to. When I talk to this person, oh, you're another transfer student. Or sometimes there's another older student in the room where you're okay, well I can talk to that person. This is a male in a class of almost all females, so I could relate to that point. This is a Black woman, we can relate on this point. Looking at the parts of my identity where this person comes from a poor background, or this person cares about discrimination regardless of what ... They care about gender and sexuality discrimination. I care about racial discrimination. It is those things, but you can find bonds. Finding ways to really examine who I was, which I was comfortable doing because I'm older, and then trying to find ways to connect was important.

Then just finding activities, which was tricky being a transfer student. Again, I'm coming here as a junior, I don't know about research. I didn't know how to get into research. I didn't know that research was necessary for graduate school. But the one person, honestly ... I'm meeting with her next week or the week after, who helped me the most is a graduate student that I had as my teacher for my first biology class here. She's a white woman. I just showed promise, it was her first class ever teaching. It was my first class that I was taking here. I put all my work in, and she appreciated good writing and things like that.

She connected me with the lab. She helped me get into a lab even when the application cycle was dead. On the last day of my first year here, to get into Dr. Frank's lab. That helped me get the jobs I have now. She's been a big time mentor for me unofficially. She would tell me stuff off the record that I need to know, and on the record. UNC also has a diversifying biology weekend. I think she was involved with that, but a lot of people were involved with that. That was really helpful. Dr. John's lab people were really helpful. He's the one who studies the racial discrimination. All his graduate students, for the most part, smile, which is something to take note of, especially in the bio department. I think I chose a good department, to be honest. If you're going to have a department that going to actually care about you as a person, the biology department would be one of them. Should be. Hopefully. There's a couple people I ran into, but overall it's pretty good.

Then I was in the Exemplary Students program here. There was one other old Black guy in there too. That was a really helpful group for me. It was just starting, sometimes it was a little disorganized. Sometimes I was, man, this is taking up so much time. This takes up so much time. I don't
have time to do my work, or whatever. The other part too, it’s that old saying where you have to work twice as hard for half as much. I’m hoping it’s not half as much but I still try to get that twice as hard thing. When I went to Davidson Tech I worked full time while I went to school full time, and I was getting married.

To me, I’d been slacking off so long where I was I can do this. I know how to work 80 hours a week. This is just doing something I need to do. I also realized that people want you to do well, so communicating to teachers and doing whatever I can for them to know my name for a good reason, that was huge. Versus just, oh, that’s the Black guy. I want them to know that’s DeAngelo, because they’re more likely to give me a break. There were a couple times where I was right on the line. A couple times where I might have been at an A-minus line, but they were like no, this guy participates in class, he knows the material, those kinds of things. He put in all this effort...that was just one bad day or whatever. So boom, that’s how real life works.

Diversity and Overcoming Failure

Well, so many people say they don’t want to be a statistic. That’s already a part of it, where you know that you don’t want to be something. It’s not just that you don’t want to be Black, that’s not it. You don’t want to be bad Black. You don’t want people to look at you like that’s your limitation. Like this is a feature, and this is a source, maybe a strength and things like that. You don’t want it to be a limitation, like that’s all you are. I got quoted on something like that, and it was so misquoted, I was so embarrassed. Man, that’s the thing I’m going to have on the internet? Anyhow, that’s already a part of it. Then my name’s DeAngelo. I was never DeAngelo R in a classroom. I wasn’t Michael P, or Michael C, there was always only ever one me. Then in my home life it was like that. Where my Mom was a little bit heavy, very light, and a woman. I’m a skinny little Black boy. So for me diversity was always a positive. When I look at X-Men I don’t want two Wolverines. Why do you need two Wolverines? You only need one Wolverine. To me, being diverse is an asset, and it was framed that way. Sometimes when people limit you that way, it’s not an asset, but that’s a different situation. I’ve always been brought up with that kind of a vision of being outstanding, and part me as being able to stand out. I don’t know where ... I liked Gonzo in the Muppets. In Muppet Babies he was the weird one. I also liked Kermit too. I’ve just always been drawn to being my own person. In part because if I’m the same ... This is just kind of tough. Well my name is the God of Death. I don’t know if you know that. That’s a tough name. I didn’t pick it, my Mom picked it, but it’s the Egyptian god of death, resurrection, and fertility. We just say God of Death in the US because that’s the short version. It’s like the Nile River, when the river floods, things die, that’s what’s going to happen. Then when it recedes you’ve got fertile soil. It’s a reason for the season’s story.

I have a part to learn from my previous failures. I still have a fear of papers that I’m going to not turn one in. It’s something that still ... Because it shook me. From those failures, especially going to community college, I know that somebody had to get an A. The teacher must give somebody an A, it may as well be you. If you need help speak up. I let people know about it... I have another friend, she went back to school after I went back to school. She’s similar, she failed. She’s a white woman, she failed too, or just dropped out. She went to Boston though. She didn’t fail school, or high school, but
she's from a family of geniuses. I can't say their name but they have a distinguished professorship here, named for somebody in their family. When you get those little titles and things like that. She failed out, or stopped, and now she's coming back here. She's here now in her 30s. Talking to other people ... Because it's just like when you try to stop smoking, you have to tell people. That's what they tell you to do. That way you feel, oh, I can't smoke in front of that person, I already told them. You have to tell people when you're doing things well. You have to tell people when you need help, using all the resources that were available. The Exemplary Students really helped me to see what resources were available. Sometimes I might have already gone over it in the orientation or something, but walking to the place, and seeing it a second time. You hear about what ... Oh yeah, if you need tutoring it's over there. You hear that your first day, you don't even think about it again. Then when you actually need it you don't remember. That was really helpful.

Devon’s Narrative

Today

Right now I'm living in Virginia so it's in the eastern part of Virginia. It's about 30 minutes south of DC working for Geico as a business development consultant and a sales rep. Basically just working in direct sales for Geico. It was a good opportunity coming out and yes, so it's just seeing where this is going. It's about a 12- to 18-month program. It's something where I can definitely grow within sales. It also provides a lot of networking capabilities for me to do something outside of Geico afterwards if I don't want to try to aim for promotion within that sales pipeline, so yeah so that's where I'm at right now. [Once I] Got over there, some of my fraternity brothers, 2 of them actually work at the same office so I got to talk to them a little bit about some opportunities there but I actually got the main connect from the campus recruiter. They actually came down during some of the career fairs and some open hall type things at university career services during spring.

Growing Up

I'm originally from North Carolina. It's hard to describe it. It's a mix of kind of everything, it's a mix of urban, suburban, rural also at the same time. It really depends on which side of town you're at. Me personally I grew up as far as like the neighborhood and surrounding neighborhood, definitely more on the urban part. Yeah, so I mean I grew up around ... I don't know. Me and my brother, we grew up, we're rough kids but I don't know, I guess some of the neighborhoods we were in, definitely pretty urban so I'm pretty rough but at the same time you could go 3 miles down the road and you'll be in the most suburban part of Gastonia. You go 5 miles in any direction and you would be on a farm or something like that, so it's a mix of everything.

So I grew up in a single household. It's my mom, my dad, me and my brother. My dad, he got remarried in 2001 and he got remarried again in 2007 with his current wife. Yeah, so basically it was me and my older brother and my dad basically in Gastonia, but my mom started when I was 5. I would start
going up every other weekend to be with her in so that continued until I was pretty much ... that was mandatory for me basically until I was pretty much like 14, pretty much until I got to high school. She would always come down for the big stuff, so she would always come down for my football games and stuff like that. When I hit high school, I would be able to ... if I have a friend's party I wanted to go to or something like that, she would be ok if I would say I can’t come this weekend so I had more freedom as far as that. Definitely when I was a junior and senior in high school, she would just tell me “Just let me know when you want to come up”. It was always flexible as far as that goes.

Yeah, so as far as social economic that is, I would definitely say I don’t know if I’d say middle-middle class or like high-middle class I’d probably say middle-middle class growing up definitely. I don’t know, it’s hard to judge between middle-middle class and high-middle class but I’m definitely in that middle space. Definitely didn’t grew up wanting for anything, dad always provided, mom always provided like when I was little and me and my brother were with her when we were younger. Never wanted for anything, thankfully grew up in a great household. It’s definitely my dad, my mom, definitely taught us right as far as how to live and how to treat each other as young men and how to treat others. Yeah, I mean just definitely was bliss as far as how I was brought up. Not the easiest thing, having your parents divorce when you were very, very, very young but something to learn from and take as a tool and not use as something negative.

Yeah, so that was my experience but both of them ... My mom, she has a masters in nursing now but she got her bachelors I want to say like 2004, 2005 in nursing. She’s been a nurse for ... had been for over 20 years, but now she teaches. Yeah, basically I think she had her like associates or something like that in nursing before 2004. My dad went to trade and technical school. He’s been a tool and die maker for almost 30 years and now he still does that, but he does a little bit more to his current workplace. They are just supposed to go to college, but honestly my dad was also in the Army in the late ’70s. They are just pushing us to do better than what they did.

Myself and my brother are self-motivators, like it wasn’t even an option. We knew from the time we were probably 9 or 10 that we wanted to go to college. It was just a matter of fact where we would go and what we will do. My brother knew he wanted to be a dentist when he was 9 years old. I mean it's a definitely a challenge for him as far as the whole dealing with school while playing football and doing all of that, but once he saw his lane the top priority was he went after it and now he’s about to graduate to pretty much near the top of his class for the number two dental school in the country. It’s those things, like we’re very motivated just by each other and just by ourselves as to do great in whatever we do. Our parents did nudge us. They never had to push us. It was just something that was innate.

**School Experiences**

I still remember my kindergarten first grade, I wasn’t a bad kid but I got into a lot of fights. I didn’t really care, I didn’t care at all about school work. I didn’t do it because if I didn’t when I went home, I will get a whooping from my dad so I just recognized that. My brother, at that time he was in
middle school. He was in sixth or seventh grade, he would come home and his report card will be like all As, B pluses and all that. I bring home my report card and it was like couple of Bs, mostly like Bs and B pluses. Right before I entered second grade, I realized my brother was doing so well and he was the coolest guy in middle school, he's like a football star, basketball. He did all this stuff and he had good grades, so I was like man, I need to be doing the same thing too. I told myself, for some reason it just clicked. Right before second grade, I was like "I'm never going to make a B ever again." I'm just going to make it a point for that to happen. Second grade throughout senior high school, I've never made a B on my report card. It was all A or A-. I think I only made A- on my report card in high school I think 2 times and they give out like 8 report cards a year or something like that and I got like 2 A minus in high school. Basically I got my report cards and I just tell myself when I'm upset and I was just like "I'm not going to settle for less anymore. I will be just as good, if not better, than what my brother's doing." He started as a source of motivation just for me to better in school when I was doing just ok and just bettering how I saw myself as far as that goes. Yeah, it started with that and then as I got older in my teenage years I realized that I'm not actually doing this to be competitive with myself or with my brother. I was doing this to better my future and to reach my highest possible potential.

At UNC

Yes. I'm a Williams scholar at Carolina, so thankfully, thank the Lord, I was able to have some amazing summer experiences every year throughout my undergrad experience so-Yes, so the Williams-Cain scholarship is the first mayor scholarship founded in the US or created in the US, whichever one you want to call it, and it's still the most prestigious 'til today. Basically it's pretty much the most competitive major scholarship program in the country. Every March between 50 and 60 high school seniors are chosen as Williams-Cain scholars, like very competitive and rigorous selection process that starts that previous November. Basically the scholarship and foods, like all your tuition, housing, all that paid for years as well as opportunities for summer experiences that each have different things to them.

The application process started I believe October and November of last senior year so basically the application it felt was very important because that was obviously the way that you get your foot in the door. One of my friends that graduated from my high school 2 years before me, she was on scholarship when I was a sophomore and so I thought that she had won, and once she's won I know just how big of a deal it was but I didn't exactly know why because I didn't know what all the scholarship entailed, but she was all over the newspaper. She was around school and stuff like that so I talked to her about it. I just researched it on my own and just went from there so I knew by the time I was a senior. I came in as being number two in my class, but I've been number two in my class in high school for like from the time I was a sophomore until the time I graduated.

I graduated salutatorian...good standing, but basically the application, it basically shows that she had to be great all around. Of course she had to have good grades, SAT scores, AP or IB exam scores. Of course she had to have all that, but she had to be very well involved in your community. Like have an impact in your community and your school in a variety of ways. You had to be physically active whether
that's playing an organized sport or whether that's just doing stuff for fun. You have to do all that and you have to portray high moral aptitude through all of the things that you're involved in. It's hard to test for them when you're doing the application, but the way that they make the application and they choose the right candidates basically, which I don't know how they do it but they have a method to the application. I went through a few drafts of it.

My guidance counselor worked with me on it for about a month, a month and a half, but we probably went through like 5 drafts of the application before I submitted it. I prayed about it and came back and told me I got to semifinal interview in Charlotte which was in December I think. Went to the semifinal interview, felt really comfortable about it, probably the first time I was nervous but it went smoothly and then I think probably a week after that, probably like 2 weeks after that, probably closer to Christmas time ... Oh no, it was actually when I was in DC for the first time, one of my extracurricular activities I was a part of -- called the Mayor's Youth leadership council. I was a part of it for 2 years and basically we were ... the group was basically dedicated to serving the community and county with our mayor and coming up with community service initiatives and stuff like that.

As a trip for the whole group, we went to DC for a weekend. That weekend, I actually got the email that said that I was a finalist for the Williams. I was excited about that. At the same time I had applied for a similar Mayor's scholarship at NC State called The Park. Just like similarly structured but there are differences. Basically I was a finalist for both the Williams-Cain and The Park so that was a big deal. Basically by the time that it was, was it February, by the time it was February I had a lot of stuff going on because I have played 4 years varsity football. I was 3-year all conference of a line backer. I always wanted to play football in college so I had a lot going on as far as everything I was involved in from like student body president to being involved in 2 or 3 community service groups to being president of the honor society and being in the IB program which was very, very rigorous in itself. Doing all this stuff plus football and plus trying to apply for these scholarships, so in February I had 2 things. I had an official visit to Davidson College where Steph Curry went. I had official football business there and then later on in the month, I had to go to the NC state for The Park scholarship finalist weekend.

I liked Davidson. It was pretty close to home but I left the football staff and everything like that so that was that. Then I went to the NC State for The Park finalist weekend. It was cool and everything but it was very boring to me I think so I got a real gist of what life was like as a NC State student. I didn't really know how to conceptualize that. That was like the last week of February for that year and the very next weekend was the Williams-Cain finalist weekend. When I went up there, with The Park finalist weekend they told us that our parents have to stay with us and have to go to every session with us and stuff like that. As soon as they told me that I was a finalist for the Williams-Cain, they called me the week before. They were like "Make sure your parents just drop you off. Your parents aren't allowed to stay here."

We walked into the first general type thing. They said you're out to do whatever, you want to do this weekend but be conscious that your behavior reflects on us and reflects on the school even though
you don’t officially go here at the moment so it gave us a lot more freedom and treated us like adults or young adults, and everybody was very embracing. Like my older brother graduated from Carolina in 2010 for undergrad, played football there for 2 years, and now he’s back in Carolina. He’s in his fourth year of dental school so he’s about to graduate next May there.

I’ve been up to Carolina a lot as it was but being brought around from current Williams-Cain scholars at that time and they showed me around and shown me love--that definitely showed me the vibe there as far as that went. Loved the weekend, taught me a lot as far as North Carolina has to offer and what the scholarship program offers. They went in-depth about everything and just really treated us like family. As soon as I went there, I think the last full day I was there was my interview day. They had the interviews to where I had 3 different interviews that were like 20 minutes a piece. Each of those 3 interviews had 5 people at the table.

I was nervous before that one but my mom gave me a pep talk because she came back up just to help me relax for the interview. She lives in Huntersville so she lives about an hour away so it wasn’t too bad of a drive from Chapel Hill. Yeah, but I felt good afterwards. A week later, I got the email right after the school saying that I got the scholarship. I was ecstatic but then I had to tell the Park scholarship because I actually got the Park scholarship too. I had to turn that down. Yeah, so that was definitely tough. I didn’t know how to approach that but the tougher thing, tougher than that, was calling the coach at Davidson. He was a really great guy that I really got along with, and I had to tell him that I was going to go with the Williams other than Davidson because Davidson doesn’t offer full athletic scholarships. They offer grants of aid so I would still had to pay like $40,000 a year even if I still went to Davidson and played football. It’s just me being smart and just taking the better opportunity and go for my heart as far as that goes. Yeah, so took the scholarship. Again it was a huge deal. My face got plastered on in front of the county newspaper one Saturday morning. I had no idea that was going to happen, but yeah so it was a huge deal and it was just history from there. That definitely set the tone for college at Carolina. Like it was definitely top priority and something that I’m definitely thankful for.

After I graduated high school in June of 2011, I think ... 2 weeks after graduation, I had a ... it’s not necessarily an internship but that was sort of the purpose of outdoor leadership. That was funded by the Williams Foundation. That was 3 or 4 weeks of me being in Colorado and Utah. Basically it was just like I guess coming to adulthood or like coming to pre-adulthood type of experience really. It’s not like survivor type of methods, so that was very interesting and it’s just a lot in different ways because I've always been athletic and stuff like that but they’re testing me in some different ways mentally and stuff like that. Put me in uncomfortable situations and seeing how I’d come out of that but the next time or after my freshman year at Carolina, we had a little bit more leeway or flexibility with what we wanted to to do so that summer most of us scholars in my class chose to do, what was it called, it was a public leadership, public service. Yeah, it was like public leadership/service or something like that so that was the thing for it and basically we had a choice of not just the US but the entire world to try to find the opportunity to have like an internship that’s based in that kind of area or category.
I was fortunate enough to find opportunity with an organization called Clarity which is stationed at Raleigh, North Carolina. Basically they own a plot of land in Ethiopia and they offer individuals state-side the opportunity to come to Ethiopia and to work and to get back in a variety of ways as long as they can fundraise money enough to stay in the house that Clarity has built. Thankfully I didn’t have to worry about fundraising because the scholarship provided for it. Me and 4 other scholars stayed there that summer for 2 months and I actually worked as a social worker at the largest orphanage in Ethiopia, which is in the capital city of Addis Ababa. I did that for 2 months and that was by far like the best learning experience, best trip, best everything I’ve ever taken, taught me a lot and I did a lot of stuff... And that’s why that was really a studying abroad experience for me because even though I wasn’t taking actual classes, it was definitely an internship in the very sense of the word because I did pretty much everything from managing the organization’s website to actually being a social worker and teaching English classes, doing psychological counseling, planning recreational events, all that stuff. That was a very, very rewarding experience.

Then next summer, again it was more options as far as the type of work I can do. At that point I was thinking about being an attorney but I wanted to actually get some internship experience with that... that’s what I wanted to do after undergrad. I was selected to be in the internship program for the public defender service for DC, and that was a very, very competitive internship program because it was only 50 people I think out of thousands of applicants that got selected to do it. Yeah, so that was ... how long was that? That was also a 2-month internship in DC so that’s after my sophomore year, loved it and that’s a big reason why I’m in DC now even though not at law school or anything like that right now. Maybe in the future not really sure, I’m just seeing what I’m passionate about right now but it’s the its great being back here because I love the DC area and so staying there really influenced that.

Last summer, last year before my senior year is started, I interned in San Francisco. I’ve been looking for internship opportunities everywhere and it was kind of harder for my last summer experience to find something outside the box. I wanted to take advantage of having a pretty... explore and do something different and learn something different. At the last minute I actually learned that a fellow Williams alumna, she graduated in the ‘80s. She just founded a new startup company in San Francisco and the financial district of San Francisco. It’s pretty much like a hybrid sports social media app basically. It’s focused towards middle schoolers and high schoolers. Yeah, I was like the first college intern for them along with 4 other interns, either 2 or 3 of them also in the Carolina along with the UCLA and one went to Duke. We’re the first college interns and it was great. It was definitely weird being out in the West Coast but it was cool to see how startups work, really see the satisfaction and the stress that goes behind it and all the uncertainty that goes behind it, but basically for them I was a content manager and curator. Also it helped to direct the marketing strategy of the entire app because that startup company was like brand new. By the time I got there that summer, they were only 5 or 6 months old. I think they’re 5 months old. The total deployment count was probably maybe 10 people in total. Some of those people were in Philadelphia but they still work on the team, and so younger people like me were able to tell the older people that were in charge, “This is going to be where you want to drive the marketing strategy. This is probably what worked best.” We’re not kids but we’re closer enough to that age where
we can show you what they like. I had a big hand in that and actually was able to train some of the high school reporters that we had because we grabbed 2 high school reporters that interviewed D1 athletes. They interviewed D1 athletes, taught D1 prospects in the California area, interviewed girls volleyball players from Stanford, and I actually trained one kid to get him ready to interview one of the starting offensive lineman for the Green Bay Packers from the Bay Area basically, like the San Francisco-Palo Alto area. I did a lot in that road too. That was really rewarding stuff to do, taught me something too. I've had a diverse mix of like summer and internship experiences during undergrad so definitely grateful for those.

[The Williams Scholarship] was a huge reason I chose Carolina. That was definitely ... I mean if I can put a percentage on it, that was definitely like 50% of the reason for sure. Another good reason was definitely my older brother. He's 5 years older than me. As he went to Carolina, I came up there. I'd visit and hang out with his older friends like when I was a junior in high school, I'd hang out there. I was there a lot when I was a junior or senior high school. I was already cool with people that he went to undergrad with and stuff like that. He just showed me around and it was just somewhere I felt very comfortable. Somewhere I felt like I would be able to fit in, meet new people, and enjoy myself and do well. Just from the social scene and stuff like that, I felt comfortable there.

The social thing was already solidified before I even looked into the Williams a whole lot, but then when I got to Carolina, I knew that I would be challenged academically as well so it can't get better than that. Then the location, like the campuses and everything was just like a perfect fit. It was largely a reason why I didn't apply for that thing at school because I applied to Carolina, NC State, and Davidson. I didn't want to spend a whole lot of money on application fees and once I got the scholarship I knew that I was likely going to go to Carolina, but if it wasn't Carolina, like it was going to be one of the other schools. Yeah, I pretty much already got my mind made up as far as that goes for the most part. It definitely played out like I wanted it to...

As far as my experience at Carolina just overall, I am not sure how I would describe it. It's pretty much everything I wanted in a college experience. I found lifelong friends there and the great thing is I found lifelong friends like my first year there. My freshman year was unusual for me because I was coming from Gastonia from my high school where I won all these major scholarships, won all these awards, was really talented on the football field and it was hard in my position not to let my head blow up because it seemed like everybody was doing it for me. It was tough going from that environment from being like Mr. Big Shot to going to a completely new environment where I know a few people, but basically I'm at the bottom of the totem pole again my freshman year.

That was the most difficult part for me. It wasn't the school work because I got acclimated to school work within the first 2 to 3 months there. School throughout college honestly was never a worry of mine. There were maybe I'd probably count 3 classes to where I was struggling at the beginning of the semester for maybe like first 1.5 months. Then I would always ... everyone in those classes was smart, I would talk to my mom, my dad after I got a bad score on the exam or something like that or less that I
thought. I'd talk to them on the phone and be like "I'm kind of worried about this," but they'll correct me on that so they pray about it and just figure out a way. Like I said I'm a self-starter so somehow I was never afraid during high school or middle school, but especially college was to ask for help. I'll be the one kid in the 250-person class that go and meet with the professor after class and meeting with them in their office hours and go to their office hours every semester. I would always do that.

In that class, it looked like I was about to end up with like a C-minus or a D ended up at the end of the semester with like A- or a B+ just by taking that initiative and putting in extra work in for that class. By me doing that, I knew what I was capable of academically but I never really worried about academics in college because I knew what I was capable of, but definitely those first couple of months, that first semester socially in college was definitely hard as far as I got to find my place and my friend group. I met prior groups, trying to count, prior group of 6 guys, specifically it's like a a group of 6 guys but an inner group of 3 other guys. Inner group of 3 other guys within that group of 6 guys, like that definitely come out as lifelong friends and I met them my first semester. From there, I knew who the people I could trust would be. We have fun together. I don't know, it was just how it was from there which was easy.

Then sophomore, junior, senior year, it was just all about growth and development and just learning from mistakes, from girls, from just everything. Just hiccups in other areas of life but learning from those things, that was the greatest thing about college that one, you've learned how to finish something is I definitely learned at Carolina, and two, you just learn from your mistakes and you grow as a person. From being 18 starting out, turning 22 after graduation like that definitely helped manifest my growth a whole lot. Yeah, so I pretty much got every type of experience from every high and low that you can get in college so I feel like that was great. I wouldn't want a college experience. That was just like full of highs and I didn't learn anything from it because I didn't have any lows to balance that out, but I definitely had a fair share of things. Yeah, I mean it was a great experience.

Challenges

I would say one would be just as far as coming in as a first semester freshman, finding your place. When I say finding your place, that means socially with friends, it can mean academically, but I would say mostly social with friends and then finding your place just in like social groups or extracurricular groups on campus, because there's too many at the University. Too many things you can be a part of and you'll feel overwhelmed if you tried to join everything and so it's definitely a challenge as far as that and to find something that you're passionate about. That's something I thought I would never find my first semester there, but I obviously got past that and found very interesting things that I was passionate about there. I will say other than that, definitely as far as being a black male and just knowing your role in classes, knowing that you can speak out, you can be outspoken. For example in one class, I said, It's a small class, I'm sitting here and I'm going to talk excessively just to show you how intellectual I am-- it's that type of class.
Me walking in there, even though I was a Williams scholar but if I didn’t know something I would just up and tell everybody but again I knew I was smart but these people were just my equals. A lot of the stuff that they would say, some of the stuff would fly over my head but I wouldn’t be embarrassed to ask what something meant or ask a question about a certain topic or say something about reading. Just being around people like that helped me to prepare more for class the next day. It helped me to get all my stuff more so people can look at me and be like "All right, he knows what he’s talking," or "He’s asking a really profound question," or "He’s not afraid to be outspoken in class and just say what he thinks or state something." I always did that from the first day but it’s something that is challenging though. It can never be challenging for any student but especially minorities on campus because in classes like those, I was only either the only black person or one of the two only black people out of about 20. Those honors classes were all small.

That was a pretty big challenge, but other than that I would just say I feel like every Carolina student stressed out just like every kind of student stressed out, just trying to balance everything. I went through a few interesting experiences just with girls like most guys do. That was definitely testing because the college environment just looked like dating and whatever you want to call it. It’s just a whole different world coming from high school and stuff like that and just meeting new types of people and stuff like that. Just trying to balance that with the pressures of school and other friends and stuff like that. I only have one actual relationship my senior year but yeah I would say overall that was a definite test. Other than that, I would say the biggest challenge was probably just trying to balance everything out as a part of my junior/senior year. I was involved in a whole lot and it got to a point where it’s kind of overwhelming. Thankfully I was able to balance it out.

Racism at Carolina.

I mean that’s something that pretty much every black person that goes there or pretty much any school in the South is going to encounter. Not anything that I was surprised by. Me and my 2 of my fraternity brothers, we went out one night and went to this apartment called The Warehouse. We’re going to a pre-game before we actually went out to one of the bars on Franklin Street. We saw some white guys who were in some fraternity, I forgot which one, but we asked them where the apartment we were looking for was at and they said “All right, my nigga” or something like that. I turned back and me and my 2 fraternity brothers turned back and I asked them "What did you say?" and then they said "No, we didn’t say anything." It’ll be stuff like that.

It’s one of those things on campus where you definitely experience racism but it’s either colorblind racism or it’s subtle racism, so doing things subtly. The social media app Yik Yak, after the Trayvon Martin thing and just after all those series of killings happened, the black student movement on campus and some other predominantly minority groups organized sit-ins and peaceful protest and stuff like that, and you have white people come on Yik Yak under anonymous names call people niggers and apes and saying "If you don’t like it here, you should go back to Africa" and just all these other different stuff.
Yeah, so that happened in my senior year. I mean you'll always have your fair share of cowards, but I mean that's pretty much what it is. There's no white person in North Carolina campus that's going to come up to ... There wasn't any white students that was going to come up to me and say something blatantly racist to my face, but they would do it behind the keyboard. They'll do it to their other white friends. That stuff will happen. There's some instances, I heard of some peers, some black associates that I went on Franklin and then some white people will be rolling down Franklin down the other side of the street in a truck and would yell something like "Get off the street, nigger," or something like that and it would just be ... just kind of random blatant acts like that. It's usually never somebody that will come up to your face and just blatantly say it. Yeah, I would say it's definitely racism on campus. The racism is within the institution as well. Some of the main founders of the institution were racist, they were slave owners. The university was built by slaves so it's embedded within that kind of Southeastern, definitely Southern culture so that's part of the game.

Experiences with Faculty and Staff at Carolina

... For the most part, the faculty and staff were great at Carolina. Very supportive, very helpful, always look out for your success and all you got to do is that you got to take that initiative. They might as well try to come and grab your hand at least for the most part, but yeah, they're very helpful. I could name a couple of professors that I definitely kept in contact with. There are probably about 3 or 4, but I always talk to professors, I always talk to them. I talk to them about life too and tell what I was up to just in general and just how life was going because I knew the game as far as how it works and that professors don't just want to talk to you... just talk about school ...or they just want to talk to you as a person and see how you're doing. If you take the initiative, so yeah, definitely.

I only met maybe one professor I didn't really care for. I only met one professor that like wasn't real ... Yeah, I'm not even going to say... Other than that, all the professors I encountered were definitely helpful. I think the people that were most helpful as far as like staff were definitely people within the housing staff. That's how I met Reggie so I worked for Reggie (the Residence Hall Director) for 2 years as a RA. I would definitely say Reggie was probably the most influential faculty or staff member that I ran across at Carolina just because I was around here for so long, 2 out of 4 years. Actually it's more like 2.5 because my senior year I was a community manager at another dorm but he was still there for the first half of my senior year so we would grab lunch and catch up. He would just always invest in a person first instead of worrying about you as a student or employee. He would see how you're doing as a person and that's the most important thing I got from him. He would always look out. He would always stop by to check in on me and just see how some of us were doing.

I really appreciate that and that stuff doesn't go unnoticed, so he definitely ... having to speak at certain things just to give my input. He would hit me up just about different opportunities that were beneficial for me. I always talked to him about career development and what I want to do after college. Just kind of different stuff I was going through, he was somebody that I can always relate so yeah, I would definitely say Reggie was the most influential person.
So, university career services have their own job site. Basically that students can sign up for and it'll basically shoot out different job openings as far as like going to applications or preliminary interviews for different companies and stuff like that so all that's focused towards seniors basically. It's the same thing with the internships too for undergrads but yeah, so that sends things out and tell you when they will happen at an open house at the university career services building or just tell you when other things like info sessions or preliminary interviews and stuff like that. I think that's a big outlet especially being a senior on campus as far in the know whether it's looking for jobs or internships, post-grad or trying to get help with grad school applications or stuff like that, pretty much getting all of the career services.

Elements of Success.

... I don’t know, it was just preparing and just having that self-motivational factor. It’s not something that a lot of people have, a lot of people might do well in a high school or at middle school or at elementary school because their parents are so hard on them and force them to do certain things. Like they force them to certain things. A testament to that is at Carolina, there’s a lot of people who did very poorly because their parents weren’t around. That forced them to do something, but I learned at a very young age through my parents, through my brother that hard work beats talent any day.

I guess the other thing is that seeing my experience from beginning throughout. It takes a lot of hard work, but where I am now is a testament of faith and praying and having parents and a family that prayed for me and wish and pray the best for me, so definitely a strong faith is what led to all of that. Just give all the praise to God for those talents and for being able to be successful, just recognizing that that was the starting point, just to get off, just to springboard me into something deeper.

Antwan’s Narrative

“Someone told me ... I heard this twice... ‘It’s so easy to get in if you're black because they need to fill their quota’. Their ‘quota’. Ultimately, when I transferred in, I felt like I was just filling in a quota, you know what I mean? If they didn't need me to fill that quota, I probably wouldn't be in.”

Today

I'm a broker. I'm a commercial investment broker. What I do is, I create relationships and through those relationships, I can get people to invest their money into real estate, whether that be a hospital, industrial property, apartment building, shopping center, mall. Whatever it may be. I create relationships and from those relationships I make people money. Long story short, I’ve been doing this since ... I started in September, got my license in November. Not a
full year yet, but it's going well for me. I've been working hard and I'm not going to let anything or anyone stop me.

Yeah. I've always wanted an unlimited income model. I always saw myself in a sales role. This is...I had a long conversation with my grandmother and determined that real estate is... When the mortgage bubble happened, I saw these things pointing towards real estate. I figured why not? I've been doing it for longer than I thought I had. My grandmother’s has been on real estate. It just seemed natural for me.

Antwan went on to speak about his experiences as a child.

My father was a single parent. My mother died when I was 13. You know, single parent... Because my mother passed. It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t... Like I said, I had a home to come to, had a big house. It was always something for me to eat for dinner. I always grabbed my lunches when I’d go to school. If I wanted something, I could just go buy it with my own money. But if I needed something, I could ask my father.

He did not deny it. It’s not like I’ve never not had. I didn’t have everything, but I had what I needed. [As far as academic resources at home] None whatsoever. I went to the school central library if I needed to type. At home I didn’t have a computer until way later on. We had a family computer, but it was always slow as hell so I just went to the library. Did my work. I remember my dad always took me to the library. Yeah, that’s just how I did my work.

My dad went to school for engineering. My grandfather went to college. They knew I was going to go. They expected me to go after all that private school and it was always the expectation that I would go. When I went to North Carolina, they were like, "Wow, that’s really far, but whatever you want to do. We’re behind you."

Out of all my other sisters and all, I’m the first one to go to college. On top of that, I was the first one to actually go away, like out of the state of Pennsylvania, and go to college. The rest of them didn’t get their degrees until later. I think everyone knew I was going to go. No one... He didn’t push me. I told him I couldn’t wait to get out of there, my home. To make something of myself. I always had this idea that I was going to be bigger than I actually am. You know, in my mind. My mindset. Bigger than life itself, which you can’t be, but I always had that mindset that I will be bigger than life itself.

... Think about it, all the schools that I went to were predominantly white. It's just like, I was always that black guy. The black guy with the curly hair with the braids. Always that guy. I wanted to be bigger than that. I wanted to stand out from the crowd. Not because of my race, but because of what I'd accomplished or what I'd done.
Ultimately, I want to bigger than my father. My father, he was an engineer. He went to school for engineering, but he delivered sodas for a living. He made good money and he could send me to private school but I always wanted to be bigger than that. My mother always pushed me to be bigger than what I ... To open up more potential, or to see what other types of potential I could have. When I was a kid, she’d give me anything. She loved me, and she always kept pushing me and pushing me. I kept that going. Like now, I'm in a predominantly white industry. I’m trying even harder than everyone else. You know what I mean? I love it, because I love the competition.

Experiences in School

My sisters all went to public school. My whole family, they all went to public school. When I was born, my parents ... they was always like ... Kind of wanted a better education for me so they put me in private, Catholic schools in grade school and high school. I went to LaSalle Province High. It was one of the best schools in Pennsylvania.

When I got transferred, it was very expensive. I went to Colonel Duncan High School. They closed down like 2 or 3 years ago. Didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I was like a trouble child. But I was really smart. I was that kid that would answer questions ... I’d either come into class late ... I’d sit there and barely pay attention, but if you’d ask me a question, I’d give you a detailed answer because I did my studies all last night.

School was kind of boring for me, actually. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I know where I went to school, but I didn’t want to be like everyone else and go to a regular state school, a local school. I wanted to be different. I wanted to think outside the box. So that’s why I went to military school (for junior college).

The reason why I went there ... When I visited and when I did my interviews, they said, "A lot of successful people are coming here". I was impressed because I’m a very successful business man. I did my research. Come to find out, they were right. A lot of senators, a lot of governors, state presidents that went to Fayetteville. It was what I needed, I needed discipline in my life.

Other than the typical counselor giving basic advice ... They didn’t really help me like that. [Help or push for college] They did give me some information about college... But they didn’t ... No one pushed me to do anything, or gave me any outside influence of any sort.

I always, it was just an understanding. When you’re in school, everyone is just like, "Yeah. I’m applying to this school, I’m doing that." You’re like, "I need to get my ass in gear." This is what’s expected. It’s the next step. It is what it is. There was no other way around it,
which you just kind of depended on it. What school you went to and what your GPA was, what teachers liked you. So you could transfer to the next school. When you want more out of life, these are the steps that you have to take. This was another stepping stone for me to get more out of life. I have a great appreciation for people who are driven to their target leads.

With military school, when I graduated, it was like, "What else?" As soon as I had a weekend, or a break ... Whenever I could get in my car and drive back to the community, I would just drive around the hood and remind myself as to why, growing up, I didn’t want to be one of these. I didn’t want to be ... I wanted to be more. I didn’t want to be 25, 30 years old traveling around the same block. Working at some little store or something. Being a just like everybody else.

All my friends growing up ... They primarily didn’t think about college, they were doing other things. All that good stuff... I had a barber who always talked to me about college. He was always telling me I should go to college, stay out of trouble. Other than that, no. There wasn’t really anyone [that pushed me to go to college]. I wanted more. I didn’t want to grow up and become like one of these rappers ... Just like, had chicks all day and smoke weed. I wasn’t that type of guy. That’s just not me. There was a race to be that type of guy. I saw the bigger picture of things.

Experiences at UNC

Yeah, I graduated from Colonel Doctrine high school. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I went to Fayetteville Military College for 2 years. Got my Associates and then transferred into UNC.

It was rough. I went to military school, all boys ... Literally 20 black people on the campus. I got to UNC and everyone’s running wild, running amok. They’re drinking on campus, and it was a completely different life. People were just so open and free. I come from a world where people wanted to pee, and asked for permission.

My grades were good, but they weren't the best. I knew I needed that little push. I said, "Let's think about this like a game of chess. It worked for military school. I might push my grades up." I was like the top ... I was like number 2 or 3 in my class. One of the ... I was number 3, I think, in my class out of 700 and some people. I was number 3. I always had this idea that I’d be bigger than everyone, you know? Maybe then all my white constituents.

At first, I applied to a few schools. Then I just went nuts and applied to 10 schools. I applied to ... Honestly; I didn’t want to apply to UNC. A friend of mine, he’s from that Charlotte area. I’ll never forget this. He’s in the military. He’s a lieutenant now. He said, "You’re applying
to all these schools. You should apply to UNC, Chapel Hill." I said, "Why would I do that?" He goes, "You never heard of UNC?" I was like, "No."

I looked it up and I was like, okay ... He was like, "You need to apply to UNC, trust me." He literally sat on my back and was like, "Go onto the website and apply real quick." Literally, it was one of the fastest applications I've ever done. I'll lay it right out there. I applied and they were the second school to get back to me. I was like, "Wow, that's it. Now what?"

I waited and I waited for the other offers, or potential offers, to come in. Between UNC and Emerson ... Emerson and UNC were the top 2 schools I got into. I also had a Cornell as a top pick and Emerson was 2. Then UNC ended up being the cheapest school. It was an easy decision, especially during the whole recession era. It was an easy decision for me. All 3 of them are great schools, but at a certain point it came down to a financial standpoint. UNC was the best choice looking at their financials. It's actually funny, when they tried to do the run around with giving me money, I literally pulled that whole statement out, about "UNC vows to help you with your financial questions." They were actually taken back that I had remembered that, that I had it quoted in the market service.

I had 3 jobs during school. They gave me a lot of funding. They gave me loans. Even then, the loans are just so ... There's still tons of money out there... No matter how many jobs I had, it's like ... It was very difficult for me, financially. I was living on my own. I was living all of it on my own. My father couldn't help me whatsoever. I thought about going to the military. They would help pay for it. Yeah. Here we are.

My first year, I had like ... My first semester, I had a low GPA. I mean, 1 point something. It was horrible. I literally had to grind just to get my GPA over 3.0. I ended up being a 3.1, or a 3.2. I had to grind hard for that. Do you know what I mean?

The whole time I was there, I felt like ... I can't remember ... Someone told me ... I heard this twice, "It's so easy to get in if you're black because they need to fill their quota. Their 'quota'." Ultimately, when I transferred in, I felt like I was just filling in a quota, you know what I mean? If they didn't need me to fill that quota, I probably wouldn't be in. It's like ... You take the good and the bad, you know? There's two sides to the story. They had to fill their quota, but I get into a school.

[The transition to Carolina] It was ridiculous. I drank too much. After my first semester, I got that all out of my system and I buckled down and did what I had to do. You had ... you had the Southern culture. Everyone thought that I'm coming from the north, I was
just like really aggressive. But I was just forward about what was on my mind. I said it in a nice way, but I was forward. In the military, it’s like when you have something to say, you say it. It was weird. I could just eat when I wanted to, do whatever I wanted, have company whenever I wanted. It was a different world for me.

[The Military School taught me] Leadership, confidence, being able to listen. Slowing things down and ... I think one of the most important things is really understand it’s not always about me. It’s about other people that are involved with ... what you were trying to say. There’s always other people to consider. It’s not always about me. I guess that selfish attitude. It’s like it just went away after a while. They beat it out of me.

...when I got to UNC, I was in this stage where things weren’t that organized. There was a ton of different personalities to deal with. I had to learn how to ... I don’t know, alter the way I think of relationships a little bit because at military school, it was all about chain of command. Normally, people like ... If you doubt them on something, they just talk it out with you. UNC’s a little bit different. A little more cliquey. A little more of this and that between these relationships.

I wasn’t in a fraternal organization of any sorts. I was just this new, transferred-in, black guy with a Northern accent. I had to change the way I speak. I couldn’t be so direct. I couldn’t ... I try to have a different approach on things. The old military, militant attitude, it just wasn’t acceptable in that atmosphere. It just didn’t help me solve things.

... at the military school, we had a time to study and we had a time to do homework. I could lock my door. Everyone knew what time it was. No one bothered me. Everyone knew it because it was time to get down to work. At Carolina there’s plenty of distractions, moving, things to do, food, friends, alcohol. Always something at the bar, something going on. There’s just different distractions. I overcame that and worked through it. I turn my phone off and basically disappear. Nobody knew where I was. I wasn’t in the library. I just found my spot. It was my spot and no one could bother me. No one knew where it was. It was just what I needed to ... For my brain, this is what I needed. I just went away. Nobody knew where I was in my dorm. I disappeared. I wasn’t in any of the black dorms... It was kind of like one of the quieter dorms. It was really quiet and I would disappear. I remember I didn’t have any type of distractions. It was nice.

So if you go to the south campus, that’s where all the ... most of the black dorms... that’s where all the parties are. Anything like... It’s all where everything happens. That is where I went to hangout, down the hill, down to the apartments over there by the UNC hospital. There was always something going on. Plenty of distractions, plenty of women roaming down the
halls. I was that dorm with all athletes, so ... When it was time to do work, they were in their little study halls, study periods. They weren't in their dorms, so my dorm was always quiet. It's student athletes so they have to be on top of their grades their first year. Or you find older students there, who want their peace and quiet. It's also literally right in the middle of campus. I can walk to parties and be in another person's dorm. Literally go over the hill. It was perfect.

I graduated with a degree in Management design. Originally, I wanted to get into the business school, but because I was a transfer student, working really hard to get all those credits and to get into the business school. It just didn’t... I didn’t do it. But I’m doing what I wanted to do.

Going to school at Carolina that was the first time in my life that I've been to a school where there was many African Americans in one city. Remind you, I went to military school. I went to all private Catholic schools. I’d never seen that many black people, all looking at the same thing. They’re all smart. Everyone’s smart at UNC. I thought I was smart. When I got to UNC, I was like, "Wow. I'm kind of average here." Overall, it was great. I had a great time and it was full of competition.

I don’t like losing. I don’t like when people try to tell me I don’t belong. I’m human. Everyone gets it. That’s not human, but I’ve lived life. I didn’t want to experience some type of over-excessive dependency like ... To me, personally, it was just like with the frats. I wasn’t a frat boy, but I was in a house full of frat boys. Some of them were just like, "Why are you here?" For me, that felt like they were telling me, "Why am I here? To fulfill a quota?" Well, no, I’m actually here to interact in school. Come back like 10 years from now and so you can look at my billion dollar empire. I always kept that in the back of my head, you know? Again, I always feel like I’m competing. Even if I’m not competing, I always feel like I’m competing.

Yeah, first semester ... That was the semester for me. It was all about grades. I was ... This is not okay. I remember I was in Maryland. It was like Christmas. I was talking to one of my best friends at school. I said “what are you working on in school”? He said, “We're talking about the hedge fund. I was like, "Hedge funds. What the hell is that?” I did my research. That’s when I got a little competitive and I was like, "Why not me? Why can’t that be me?” I got really competitive in school and I just had to start working. Then, eventually, once we were all done with school, I was like if I don’t eat, so be it. Whatever it takes. My mentor, he'd always tell me, "You have to learn to play their game and beat them at it, and then smile later." That’s like what I’m learning to do now. It’s beginning to learn to do it in balance. Playing their game and just smiling. And then beat them.
[What it takes to be high achieving] For me, personally, it was late nights. It was grinding to learn, and grinding some more. I don't know, to be honest with you. I think that a lot of... It's a step... Like a, made yourself stick out a little bit because everyone has a 3.0, it's not bad. What makes you better than the person next to you, or the person next to them?

I think that constant thought that you have to fight... For me, personally, really groomed me and I just wouldn't quit. I don't know about other people, but I know about myself. I don't know if they weren't prepared. At the end of the day, it's not all about the grades. The grades are like a small symbol. They're a small factor... then it's just a letter. It doesn't make you a better person. All colleges like to do is to make you grow up.

Employers see that quickly. They see that when they're dealing with someone who's 21, 22, 23 years old. If you have potential in a certain field, that's what makes them want you to work with their company. You have to prepare yourself, in your own ways. No one can teach you about life better than life, itself, right?

[While at UNC] I became a Free Mason. My senior year, my junior year. Excuse me. I had some interests in some of the fraternal organizations. I began the process, but I figured out it just wasn't for me. I became a Free Mason instead. Toast Masters helped me a lot with my confidence, my ability to speak. Get my point across without saying "um, uh, but", and all that good stuff. It really helped me with my... I still do it now because sometimes I speak so fast, I'll say a word a little bit. Free Mason kind of gives me a different perspective on life and how we're all involved in it. We're all going toward the same goal. It's not a secret. I mean... It helped me... It helped me understand that in order to make the world better, I have to make my brothers better. In order to make them better, I have to make myself better.

I had a couple internships while at Carolina as well... For instance, my freshman year of college at UNC, I had a good internship. I worked for Wells Fargo bank. I was like an executive assistant. The following year, I worked with a company... The year following that, I worked for Iroquois Insurance. Then I became an employee.

Faculty at Carolina

They always seemed like they were just confronting issues. They always seemed like they were too busy to talk to you about some of your issues with either homework, or reading, or just being new. Listen, your hours don't meet my free periods whatsoever. Can we make an arrangement? See what's going on.

That was my only problem with all that. Sometimes they just didn't give a shit. They don't give a shit. Sometimes I went to class. I'd just do my own readings or... Their student
evaluations, I’d give them all F’s, give them all 1’s. They treat us like a nuisance. A lot of them, not all of them, but a lot of them ... It was getting very annoying and he’d teach the same points, or you don’t even ask.

My senior year, I will say, I had a few teachers that I knew that if I had a problem, I could come to them. I could talk to them about my paper. I actually remember one year, I got ... This really hard class. I forget what it was. Everyone thought it was going to be one of the easiest classes of the year. We had a new teacher and she had this weird way of doing things. She’s actually really hard. She gave me a B+ and I asked her, "Why did you give me a B+? I don’t think I deserved it." She said, "I upped you to a B+ because your work ethic. You started as a C student, low C. I saw you skyrocket. You were always doing your work, always answering questions.” I said, "You really pushed us to not just sit there but 'soak up the information’, but to take notes. Involve ourselves in the class. You had those expectations. I always did my readings, I came to class ready. I was confident because I knew what I was talking about. It was great." That was it. She was hard. It was an African class, African American history class, or something. She was like a Russian, or something like that.

Also, there was a younger guy, I forget what his name was. He was one of the best teachers I ever had. He said, "If you ever need anything, you ever want to talk about school or anything else, come right to me. We can talk anytime." I’ll always remember that. I can’t remember his name ... Now I’m going to look it up. That was an example of a great teacher. Great professor.

A lot of them are assistant professors. We’re getting in between their lives. They were like, "Ugh" students. They’re grading a ton of papers, they have ... It might be a professor who’s got to watch over trying to get tenure. They have lives, too. I really do understand. But this is their job. At the end of the day, their success depends on my success in the class room as well. The more I give F’s, the school will look at you like, "Time for you to pack your bag. Grab your bowl and go home." At the end of the day, it’s simple.

Lack of Encouragement for Pursuing Graduate Degrees

“They don’t” (encourage graduate school)

The only reason I would even think about ... I remember talking to someone one day and saying, "Did you think about getting your Masters? I want to get you in the program. Let’s talk about ...." They talked about the GRE practicing and all that BS, but the real ... If they were smart, they would push their own students to go to their own graduate school. Like really want, and push them into their own graduate programs. I didn’t feel that push. I didn’t
feel like "Apply here". I didn't hear that on any undergrad level. We didn't really think about it on the graduate level.

The law school, they're okay. The law school's okay. But it really didn't ... To go to UNC law. I mean, just to go to UNC business school, I don't know. I think I might be better off at Duke. They didn't push me whatsoever, to really think about business school or some type of secondary education or post-graduate education.

It crossed my mind once or twice, but it wasn't really absorbed. It wasn't a necessity for me. You know? Even though, I didn't completely rule it out just because that's what you're supposed to do. It looks good on your resume, I guess. The connections you'll get from it. That was my whole reason behind it. If I had someone to really push me, gear me toward that, I don't know ... Maybe I'd be doing something differently. I'd be doing what you're doing right now.

Life teaches you. The experiences, the trials and tribulations. Your ups, your downs. Your successes, your fails. Life teaches... It's based on who you have relationships with. Overall, that is what prepared me. I can't really think of anything more. That may be kind of...but all in all, my life has taught me everything I needed to know. It's going to keep teaching me here. For me to sit here and say ... Give you some BS about how they pushed me to work harder, no. I had to push me to work harder, or I was going to fall behind. If you want these things, you've got to go get it. No one's going to give it to you, and if you can't handle it, you need to go home. That's kind of how I see things in college. Just a combination of these things. I've said to you, sometimes you either want to be ... People tell me, 'You're either one of the most angriest, or one of the most ... Honest, straight-forward people I know'. Yeah, that's me, I wouldn't give it no other way. I know what I want and I'm not going to let a teacher or any other student deter me from the things that I want from this school. God's going to make sure of that.

Being a Black Male

I mean, I had a lot of relations with different people. I have some community friends ... I think that was one of the key things to take away from school. My only thing about being in these kind of relations is I don't like putting my picture on websites. I don't even like putting my picture on LinkedIn because a lot of times people will see, "This guy is a 24 year old black man, young black man, who graduated from college a year ago. He's approaching me and my million, billion dollar firm." Whatever you want to call it. Sometimes I feel like my picture, or the fact that I'm black, makes it even worse. You know?
Yeah, I just keep quiet and do what I’m doing, but sometimes it’s difficult being a black man. Of course, there’s… It’s all about being likable. Sometimes people don’t like you just because you’re a certain color. My whole thing is, I wish I could avoid that. Get to know who I am as a person, and my work ethic. Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work like that. It’s all about relationships. Any and every one, no matter the circumstance, I always try to find the way to link with that person or connect with that person.

I’d say having someone to look up, look up to someone, in my opinion. That’s what I needed. That’s what I sought. When I got to UNC, I was still kind of lost. They had a lot going on. My freshman year in college was my first time at a real college. Everything was just so structured. I was able to find that… Older friends, teachers. Other black guys who were on campus. I just wanted to emulate them a little bit.

Derek’s Narrative

“I don’t think there’s any magic solution to it”.

Today

I’m in New York where I’m from, Lawnside, New York. Right now I am freelancing with the newspaper up here by where I live. I’m also in a job search for something else, a little bit more full-time. I was working with the TV news station here in the city for 6 months. That too was freelance, but it was freelance in the sense that it was for a 6-month period, but during that period I was working 5, 6, been there even 7 days a week. It was basically full-time during the time that I was working, but it wasn’t permanent. Right now I’m freelancing with the newspaper up here. It’s a weekly newspaper so I do sporting 2 or 3 week and then also basically I do music. I do hip hop music. I’m working on that as well. Then also running a site where I do interviews about music and sports figures on my own. I’m doing that as well, keeping busy with the journalism.

Home and School

Journalism, I think the first time it crossed my mind was sophomore or junior year of high school. I want to say sophomore year. Out of high school, my parents encouraged me to think about what I would want to do as a career other than at that time I was still wanting to be a basketball player and play that game every night. That was my first way to my parents encouraging me to think of something else. I was thinking I like to watch TV a lot because I wanted to go into especially basketball. I first got into journalism thinking as I wanted to be a basketball commentator and thinking that was, even though it’s not the journalism like be a news reporter type of thing, it’s still the role where I get to meet the guys. They went through most of, I would say, any first time thing that sometimes they tried to, maybe they were in
radio and they're reporting even the news or something before so they do the whole journalism or media track. That was my first introduction to journalism. Then my high school actually offered a broadcast journalism class right around that time when I was interested in it. I jumped on it a couple semesters that I had in high school as well.

They had a kids' school newspaper, but that did get a little bit of it, not too much. Then they had a broadcast journalism class for, I think the 2 times I took it, maybe 1 other time, they didn't have it very long actually. They only had it for like 2 or 3 years so it turned out that they decided to experiment a bit around that same time that I decided it was something I was interested in. Fortunately, I did it for a year or 2 and then we had for like 2 or 3 years. They always had a film department, but it wasn't meant specifically for journalism class type thing. They just had that for a couple years, 1 or 2 years that I did it when I was there.

I'm living with my parents right now still. I was working a lot more. I was saving up some money to hopefully move where I want. Move actually to the city, move closer to the city. I have a lot of student loans that are several hundred dollars each month. It's hard to save and pay loans and there still are some expenses that you're going to have such as paying rent. There's other expenses. I would say moving to the city, I mean then have to pay for rent and buying lunch and all that. Those are more expenses and then also the loans that are coming each month. It was hard to save up and then even parents weren't saving because their savings depleted because of the loans that have been demanding.

My parents both work, but still middle class in that situation. Then myself, I still have some money saved. I still needed some for the freelance, the newspaper. I just hope there's more full time soon so I can start to be able to pay off the loans and also save up some so that I can move out. Because the loans mostly, I have several different loans and most of them are big, the majority that I'm paying myself. There's one loan that my parents are helping me pay, but I would say 80 to 90% of the money that I owe each month is coming directly from my pocket. That makes it a little bit harder to be able to save up and pay rent and then be able to move into some place and pay rent on my own.

We're like middle class family. When I said Lawnside, I guess it's a little bit more wealthy socially where we were, but also like I was telling you, Lawnside's a village. Also the villages surrounding Lawnside is probably the least wealthy. You know you have your big million dollar houses, but you also have some apartments, people who aren't super wealthy. We were, I'm going to say, never struggling for meals or anything, well off. We'd have a car, but not always a new car. We had to afford to have a car. We were never having to go without anything.
It wasn't like some kids that I grew up with where it's like as soon as I turn 16 that I got my own car or anything like that or traveling out of the country to Europe. I know my parents haven't been out of the country at all. I've only been out of the country to Canada. That was a school trip actually so it wasn't like having 2, 3 cars and trips to Europe all the time. We lived in an apartment and now we live in a family home so we didn't have our own house like other people in the area do. It wasn't like we haven't had the extravagant stuff, but we never struggled to go without anything. If that makes sense. We lived right there in the middle so that's why I have nothing to complain about.

I had to take out several loans in school. I got some government scholarship, but definitely wasn't enough. We're talking about 4 years at UNC. I kind of built up my own debt and I actually work now and having to pay that back.

I would say that I grew up in a place where in Lawnside and the surrounding villages and stuff, when you go to a graduation, the question usually is, I guess now you're trying to be more sensitive so you might ask: is So-and-so going to college? Mostly it's natural to say where are you going to college because it's like you go to high school, then you go to college. That's what you do. I would say that a lot of it is the expectations about where you live. There's places where it's seen as a huge accomplishment. Choose not to go to college is not the expectation so you don't see as many people go to college just because it's not even thought of. Getting your undergraduate degree is thought as getting your PhD for other people. A small percentage get a PhD and it's seen like a huge accomplishment to do that. For some people in some neighborhoods just getting to a college is this huge accomplishment and not expected. I grew up in a neighborhood where you're expected in your senior year you think about where you're going to college. You're supposed to get into college, that type of thing. That definitely helped. It wasn't like a far-fetched thing to go to college. It was the natural progression.

[Growing up] I never needed a tutor. We had a computer before, one lone computer for a while. I picked a laptop, my own laptop computer sometime in high school, I think. Yeah, I think it was in high school sometime. Maybe like 9th or 10th grade, that I got my own laptop computer. Then before that I remember us having, you know the big desktop computer with the back joined and everything, at home.

My parents weren't too bad. There's one thing I know. Some people's parents might not want them to go far away for school and then try to keep them close, but my parents weren't like that. They were like: if you want to go North Carolina, if you want to go to California, wherever you want to go to, we're not going to stop you at all. It's open to do what I wanted. I know I took several college trips, well, not several, but just like maybe 3 or 4 college trips with my dad. He was free to say... Let's go and check it out. I applied to 6 different schools. I got
The decision was pretty much mine, not my parents. The way it's supposed to be anyway. They were supportive and not too pushy about where I needed to go.

I guess it's a little bit different because my dad never, he went to college, but he went to college in New York City. They both grew up in New York too. My dad went to school in New York City so he didn’t have to live on campus and didn’t get the live on on school type of experience. My mom did go to school, did go away to college. She went to Spelman in Atlanta so she had that experience. I guess going to a major university like New York here, even talking about this school that I applied to, still a commute and new territory. They said there were others that... I didn't feel pressure from my parents. I didn't feel pressure on myself to, could I choke. I guess when I got into UNC, that's where I wanted to go. I applied.

I talked to my parents; saw that while they did tell me: even though you might not be interested in this, this is something that you need to step up and do well in. It wasn't pressure to get an A in everything. It was more like you need to make sure that you do your best. Even if you're not interested in a class... even though you're not interested you better bring home an A. It's even though you're not interested, you better do the best you can. I know even my parents saw... I mean we've talked about it more since I graduated, the fact that making people study a bunch of things that they’re not interested in isn't the best way to get them a lot of students. Even when they're doing bad in classes, it's like: oh, I'm not interested. I know my parents have shown me some type of support for that idea that, okay, maybe you shouldn’t. By the time you get to college, you shouldn’t have to take a whole bunch of classes you’re not interested in. They understood when I was taking classes that I wasn’t interested in, that it might be a little bit more of a struggle, but they still pushed me to do the best that I could in it. If I get a B, it better be because that was the best that I could do, not because I didn’t try because I didn’t care for it, that's why I got a B.

I went to Springdale Elementary Schools, Lawnside Middle School, and Lawnside High School which are all the public schools.. Normal track you would follow in Lawnside out. I moved to Lawnside during the middle of Kindergarten. I grew up in Yonkers, New York and for the first time my life switched. It’s not all bad, but in spots it can get a little bit tougher. It’s a little different, not as great. I don’t know if you'd say it's like a straight ghetto or something, but it's a lot of those type of neighborhoods. Not a lot of the best school systems. There’s a lot of not-so-safe spots. That type of thing.

My parents, I guess I was somehow picked to start going to the elementary school in Lawnside before we officially moved and then we moved to Lawnside in the middle of my Kindergarten year. It obviously wasn’t my decision at 5 years old, but it seems like a conscious
decision of my parents to move me here since you’re going to be starting school like that. I did go to pre-school in Yonkers for 2 years, but once I started elementary school I did that.

Lawnside, yeah, it’s a nice neighborhood. Definitely got its more expensive houses, rich people that live here. It’s a nice school district. I went to public school. The public school is great, among the top public schools in the state and everything so I didn’t need to go to a private school to still get a good education and everything. Yeah, I grew up in Lawnside which is a village. Lawnside is a southern village within the town of Greenburgh.

Even though each village is fairly small, each village has its own public school. It could very easily have been 1 high school for all the villages. It’d be a normal sized high school. It wound up being a lot of smaller high schools so my graduating class was 125 students. Some classes around me, a little bit just ahead of me were smaller. Where everyone probably all know each other, especially when we go to the elementary school, middle school, and high school for as long as I did. You go to school with a lot of the same people for 12 years and everything.

Public schools, they’re not really wearing the uniforms or restrict that way. It’s still a good school, a majority white neighborhood. As a result of that, growing up most of my closer friends in school weren’t black, but they actually weren’t all white. I had close friends who were Hispanic and Asian and some that moved from other countries that might’ve been right from Europe and literally moved in the middle of the school year. I had a variety of friends and everything, but that’s the neighborhood and school system and everything I grew up in.

I think I did well [in high school]. I was lucky. I didn’t struggle in school that much so I didn’t need some subjects. I was always really good in math. I almost never had to study for a math test. I didn’t struggle so hard that it took me super, super long to study, but the work load was not a joke. I took a lot of the IB and AP classes that you can take, so advanced classes throughout high school so I guess that helped me some too. I think no matter where you go to high school unless you find one of those specifically college prep high schools that are very strict on that experience, you definitely experience a difference jumping from high school to college.

I had a good guidance counselor being in high school. I can’t remember exactly a specific way she helped, but I remember going into her office and I think she helped me with her admiring spirits and plugged me into a whole bunch of different college students who knew better about what each school could bring to the table. I think I found out from her about how good UNC’s journalism program was. At first, being a sports fan and knowing I
wanted to do journalism and being from New York too, the first school that came to mind that I wanted to go to school was Syracuse because they have a really well known journalism program. They’re not right there in New York. They’re like 5, 6 hours away, but they are in New York and they still have a good sports team, especially basketball and stuff I was into. It was always in my mind.

After looking more into what each college offered and talking to the guidance counselor and stuff, somewhere in that search I was able to find that, oh, actually UNC is a school that you see being into sports, the physical school. I know they actually have a really good journalism program. Maybe it’s something I should check out. Even still just checking them out, Syracuse was mostly, I still thought was going to be my number 1 choice, but it was when I visited the schools. I visited Syracuse. I visited UNC. UNC just had the feels right magic moment almost instantly. That’s why I chose that school.

Looking back on the years, there’s a fixture that sticks out more than others. I don’t remember any of those teachers specifically preparing me for college. They did a good job in those classes, preparing me. Like I said I took the AP and the IB classes so I guess when I had teachers that were able to teach that which were a little bit rigorous courses than I wouldn’t have gotten if I’d just took the regular classes for those grades which I guess again helped me be prepared for college. I guess that way they helped me. I don’t think I really had many talks or anything like that about college with any other teachers, other than the guidance counselor.

There were teachers I didn’t like, that I feel did a bad job. As a child, I had teachers that were average. I had them and I didn’t feel strongly about. Then there were teachers that really didn’t stick out based on, go back and visit the high school now, I would actually go to look for and talk to. Then there were a bunch of others that it’s like if I run into them I might say hi. It’s not a big deal. I don’t remember feeling strongly about this teacher is not doing a good job. I hate this teacher or anything. Like I said, they were a bit rather average.

Like I said, knowing about some school and knowing I wanted to do journalism and all that sports side too, I’d say that some of my decisions to look at schools that were good, that had good journalism programs, but also schools that were big sports programs and that were visible that way. I guess it does somewhat help having a good sports school that could be well known by people watching basketball and so forth whenever they see a good school for sports and an academic school.

[When choosing which school to go to] I know I used the Internet a lot. I can’t remember if there were specific, I feel like there was a specific site or sites that you can go to and plug in your interests and it shows you some of the schools that fit. I can’t remember the
names of what those sites were. I know I was online a lot checking out schools. I probably did go to the school’s specific website to look at those things as well. The Internet was big. To have these schools be visible and knowing they’re creating great students, seeing the commercials on TV and stuff, that helped somewhat too.

The majority of schools that I applied to were schools that you would know just from watching sports. The Internet was big. My guidance counselor was big. Yeah. I think those were the two. There weren’t a whole lot of people that I knew that I talked to that had a lot of different college experience that way. It was I talked to my parents. I think my parents probably did some research too and did that type of thing where they know it’s that time in my life and now supporting my life phase and did some research too. I used the Internet a lot and then the guidance counselor too.

I guess the getting the more advanced classes is one thing. As far as the whole living, I’m almost surprised at how easy of a transition I did make. I’m sure it’s because like I told you before, I went to a small high school hundreds of miles away. I went to the same schools with the same people for most of my life. I guess the expectation was me going away to school where I know nobody and it’s also a huge school. I know there are bigger schools, but a fairly huge school, that it would be more difficult because I’m starting from scratch. I hadn’t gone to a school where I didn’t know anybody since I was 5 years old up until I’m 18 years old. I’m going to a school where I know nobody. I’ve also lived in New York my entire life. Now I’m going to a school in North Carolina and I’ve only been down south once, when I was very young. I’ve never been in some place for it to be really difficult transition for me, but somehow I was comfortable.

At UNC

It wasn’t easy to get into UNC out of state, but I guess I didn’t realize just how hard it was to get into out of state which I think was also a good thing. I didn’t have the pressure when I was applying or getting nervous and then over thinking everything. It was a straightforward application. I know when I started. I mean I’d become pretty confident I could get in, but I didn’t let myself get too nervous because I didn’t know just how hard it was to get in and I know my parents would tell me after I decided that’s where I was going to go. When they told people I was going there, they were like: what? He got into UNC out of state? It wasn’t until after I got in that I really knew: whoa, this is apparently a big thing, a really hard thing to do. I think it’s good. It’s good that I didn’t feel that pressure going into it because my application could’ve been worse because of the pressure there. Yeah.
I guess one thing that helped is, sure, I did a lot of extracurricular activities. I told you with the music that was something that I did a lot in college. I really started actually after a career that started in college. My parents always said: we’re supportive, other than that it’s school as well. They didn’t say: you need to stop doing music, trying to prove that I could still do my schoolwork and everything and then still do music and that. Whenever I get out of college, it’s good if I wind up having a music career and that’s when I get out of college. Then that’s fine. It doesn’t need to be totally on the track of exactly what you want and exactly what you need to do. I just need you to do this for classes and then also help that way. I know I had some of my struggles in classes that I told you about, such as classes I wasn’t interested at all.

[Transitioning to college] It wasn’t like oh, when I got to college, oh, it’s the same thing I been doing in high school. There’s no problems, definitely more work in college. My grades were lower in college than they were in high school as a result of that. You weren’t going to turn in A’s on a majority of tests and stuff in college. That’s just not what’s happening. I had a 3.2. It wasn’t the GPA that I had in high school definitely. It took, I guess it was, a little bit through the years until you know that in college actually, you can get a C or a B and it would be considered a good grade. I only have 1, maybe 2 B’s, I got them in Art class in high school otherwise, it was all A’s in everything. That’s not the case in college. It took some getting use to different professors and having to work a little bit harder to get those higher grades in some classes. Then having to take some classes a little bit more just like in high school and college, ones you’re not interested in at all, but you have to fill in the certain requirements you’re taking. I remember there was some class, what was it called? The Classics or Ancient Something and it wasn’t something I was really interested in at all. I had to do all this reading for and tests for that I wasn’t really interested in. Sometimes with that I didn’t do the greatest at or it took a whole lot of studying, but it wasn’t something I was interested in like that. I was never, like I said, thought my struggles were just not my what I was used to, not always doing as well as I did in high school, but I was never struggling where I was in danger or having to flunk out or anything like that. It was never that. It was just, I guess, getting used to that separation.

I know if it helped that being I am an only child and so that means sometimes on my own it was fine. At first I had to spend some time on my own, but I made friends fairly quickly. It wasn’t like I was a loner at first. It was just doing that. I don’t know if there were really many other programs out. Maybe probably sports or seeing the people that way could’ve affected how I’ve joined the situation, helped some. I met people playing basketball down at school that had a mutual interest like they have student basketball and from people knowing your school interests, people helped me meet people that way. I know some of my closest friends at
school I have recorded music in the studio, in the library and meeting people there, meeting people that way, or meeting people on the basketball court or having friends I didn’t meet on the basketball court, but I found out they like to play basketball. I could always go to the gym, play pickup basketball and meet friends that way.

That’s [UNC] where I started broadcast journalism more. Electronic communication is what they call it at school. It was awesome. They have world class facilities and now they have a news, lock news room, news studio and everything which it had one with all the people there and then you go onto a professional news room. It had everything they have. I mean a professional newsroom might be a little bit bigger, but it definitely is the real stuff. It’s not like you go in a professional news room and you’re like: oh, this isn’t anything like what we’ve seen and practiced stuff on, like the same stuff to me. A little bit smaller maybe, but otherwise, yeah, it’s exactly the same thing.

The class that they had was a student-run TV station called Carolina Blue and actually also Sports Xtra. Oh, yeah. A sports show that they started on the tail end of my time there. There are actually classes like Carolina Link and Sports Xtra are classes, but it’s a lot of work with them. It’s a class that you could take 2 semesters. You could take Carolina Link 1 semester and then sign up for it again. Normally it’s something that people don’t take as a class until junior and senior year, at the end of your track. It’s something that I used to volunteer within during the first week of my freshman year I went and started volunteering day 1. Of course, at first you’re not as experienced with doing the reporting and doing all of the editing and everything so you start slow.

First, you go out and you shadow, you go out with someone that they shoot with the cameras. I knew I wanted to do sports in the beginning so when people were going out to shoot different games and wasn’t doing like football and basketball at first. It was something like field hockey or soccer or lacrosse or something just to see how they use the camera and stuff. I mean, you follow and shadow enough times, then they trust to say: okay, go ahead and shoot on your own, again one of those the last talk for sports and then you go to lacrosse and field hockey or something like that, start shooting on your own. Then you get to move up to, you get to shadow and follow someone as they shoot a basketball game or a football game. Then you learn further and then you get to shoot that. Then once you pass to that you get to shoot and edit and write the piece for it. Then you move up and then you get to do more like a reporter and put together what they call packages. You do the interviews and you’re doing the voice over on the track and it’s like a minute and a half, 2 minutes. You slowly move up. They give more and more things. I started doing that at the beginning of my freshman year so I got familiar with all the teachers and all the equipment and everything so by the time it’s my
junior/senior year and I actually did it for a class, I’d been involved with it for 4 or 5, 6 semesters, to better, to get something so I completely took advantage of while I was there.

I had a scholarship which I don’t remember how much it was for now, but whatever it was it was like a big amount for the first 2 semesters. Then after that, that ran out. For the first 2 semesters I was able to take out relatively small loans and then the scholarship covered the rest. After that, I had to take out good sized loans. I’m paying those back for a little while unless I get a lot of money soon, that will take a while to pay those off. Like I said, my parents weren’t super well off so it wasn’t like they were paying a whole semester straight up like that. Every semester had to take out some loans, every semester. As a result I have to pay back a lot now. I know there were sometimes where it was definitely getting a little bit tough to have to pay for school, but my parents never said: you may have to drop out. I know they did feel that way, because I was an adult. They didn’t hide from me that it might be hard to pay for this semester. They would tell me that. They would say: we want you to realize we might have to take out a loan. It might be tough to pay, but we’re going to make sure that you don’t ever have to leave just to keep going. That protected some. Yeah. However much it was, it was enough that after the first year it did run out. I can’t remember how much it was for. I wish I could now. After the first year, that was it. I think I got some small scholarships during school and then it was for journalism school. It was like you’re a B student scholarship that I got 1 or 2 of, but those were in the neighborhood of like 1,500, something like that. Again just a little bit to help, but nothing else paying a whole semester or anything.

Immediately the class that comes to mind is I was a French minor and even from high school, I started taking French in 5th, 6th grade maybe. From 6th grade all the way through to graduating college, there was 1 class or maybe 2 classes where I had, 2 or 3 classes where I only had another black person in class. That was like 1 in one semester, 2 one semester, and 1 one semester, and that’s it from 6th grade through and to college. That’s the only class that comes to mind. I think I would speak up as normal. What stands out to me, though, is in those classes I think the other students, white students, they had the experiences where they seemed to all have been to France already several times. Like oh, yeah, I went with my family and this on vacation and stuff. As a black student it was like I studied French. I was lucky enough to go to Canada on a school trip in high school. When you’re talking about, oh, yeah, me and my parents and I went on trips to France one fall for 3 weeks. I can speak fluently now because I’ve been there several times and stuff. That was an experience that I definitely didn’t have. Then everyone talking about an experience there, the first day, that was something that you would hear. I think that none of the black people had shared that experience while a lot of the others had that experience.
I’m trying to think if there were other classes that were like that. The journalism classes I was in wasn’t majority black, but I think there were always a few black people in those classes. The French ones are really the ones that stick out like that. That was the main difference. For the most part, like I said, I didn’t feel too compelled to participate because I was the only black person. There is one time that sticks out, though. I remember there was a French class where we had to start the day by going around and just saying something about our day or something. There was someone who had asked, who I guess had seen a movie with a fraternity or sorority or something that was a totally black fraternity, sorority. They were asking or questioning what was going on because they didn’t know. At first they had no clue what it was. Then one of the years that I had that there was another black person in my class. It was me and one other black guy and we kind of looked at each other like: do you want to take this or should I take this? I guess that was one instance it was like I was one of the black representatives in this class when someone wanted to know what was going on, one of us has to take this. In general, my participation wasn’t because I need to because I’m the only black person. Like I said, I went to a school that was majority white anyway so it wasn’t a new situation where I got to class and I was like: oh, man. Now there’s only 20 people in my class. That’s how it happened. There are probably more black people in my class in college than I ever had in high school.

I liked the journalism classes, but I guess it was a lot. One, it was especially when it got later on in the journalism, it was a lot more lessons for knowing the answers for the sole purpose of being answered in a test and more of this is a professional job and knowing what you’re doing. Not necessarily just right answer and then check A, B, C, or D. It was more so learning what you do so you can actually put them into practice type thing. I definitely liked, I liked that about those classes so I liked the classes more. The homework wasn’t necessarily just read the homework. It was actually get something done. You have an assignment of a story or something to do and get that done, not just busy work type of thing. You actually felt like you were doing something, learning something with a purpose. Some of the other classes that I didn’t want to take it was I’m reading to learn so I could get an A on the test, get a good grade on the test. That’s about as far as I’m going to learn this for is just so when you ask me about it, I can get it right in this class, but nothing further. I’d say those journalism classes were the ones that I was into the most. It wasn’t just because it was easy for me.

One of the things that I’m most proud of is that with the journalism because the class was both a TV show and it was more like we worked together, a family vibe by the end of the year, picnic things and they had awards. I remember I got the Most Improved award type thing. It wasn’t nothing like one of the worst people, but having stuff that I needed to work on to being a dependable person. You could give me a story and I could turn it in with quality and a good amount of time. That’s something I was proud of. I guess that shows that it wasn’t just
other journalism. It was easier for me, that's why I liked it. That was something I had to work towards to get better at too. I did struggle sometimes with being able to turn things around fast. I had to take more times than not and I might be behind on stuff, but I was able to work on that and get better or I should be comfortable with something. This was more practical. I guess I liked that a lot more.

**Black males at Carolina.**

I mean I know there are when I think you wall up a certain barrier with certain schools, certain school practices beforehand and you'll be less prepared or equipped to do that well in college than some other people. I don't think there's any magic solution to it. I think that anybody still can do well. There are plenty of black male, men and women at school that achieve at a high level. There might be a stereotype that not a lot of blacks go to college and everything. I saw a bunch, plenty of examples of people who were very smart, very dedicated that had great... demanding of themselves, high grades as they expected or that there was a lot of people that would thing that this is the exception, that there's actually a black person that's excelling in class. Plenty, plenty, plenty, plenty of people.

I don't think that there's any magic answer that if you're a black man you need to do this specifically. I think just expecting a lot of yourself, applying yourself, to get serious. I mean you can still have fun too. Actually plenty people had fun. It wasn't like they were boring people who are always in the books. Most of mine, actually, I had done a lot of those. As a hip hop performer, I was performing a lot and I was in basketball. Outside of that, I got to hang out with my friends, go out at night. Some nights I would stay in. I was working on music, unless I had schoolwork. I wasn't scared. I would say I don't feel like you need to go out every single Friday, Saturday night to a party. You're a loser if you do. It's okay to take a day here and there to say, okay, I know it's Friday or whatever, but I can stay in and study or do some work. I did that sometimes. Sometimes I might get a little bit of my friends like: oh, he's staying in. I may join in a little bit, but once I got always doing that, it was like oh, it's all right. I can miss out on this one night of partying and do what I need to do. Yeah. It's straight dedicating to not being afraid to do that.

I'm trying to think of the timing. Sorry to be naïve to say that it never, it's like, oh, let's get real. Being black was never big enough to... I'm trying to think of when I got stereotyped and what I did. I guess the best thing is just be yourself and not be concerned about what other people are thinking. I guess you even have the pressures too of, okay, to be acting white, to be more into the books or something, stuff like this. You need to be more cool and be more acting black to not be all about academics or something or to be in. Just being yourself, I guess, is the way you guard against that. Yeah. That's it. I would just be above it. Go and ignore people that think that way, that there are certain stereotypes. That's how I need to
address that. There are stupid people that would bring up stuff, around negative attitudes. Getting there, but it's not. That's everyone. It's come to be more about rise above that and worry about you and the people who will treat you the right way, I guess is the best thing for me. Like I said, not try to put too much energy into it, is what I would say. I think that's the best thing. Like I said, just be yourself. Not to put too much energy into it. Those type of people that will bring that type of stuff, they want that energy, they want that response. Just leave them with their stupid stereotypes because they're not even going to pay attention to you. I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing. That's the best thing to do a lot of times.

As I was saying with just even graduating college and graduating high school and going to college, how it's an expectation and it's not made as much of a big deal. This may be something that you don't need to be black, you don't need to go out of your way to find out about these things in a way that you can't pursue further education. It's right there. As you're going, it's like this is an opportunity that's presented to you. Not that you need to know before, okay, I want to pursue a Master's degree. How do I go and look around and find where I want to do it? It's like as you're going alone, it's like, oh, this is an option for you right here if you choose to take it and it being readily presented to you is a big part of it to me. You won't feel like everyone else, it's easy for them to find out how to do this. Now it's more difficult for me as a black male to find out how to do this.

I think that I probably could've done a better job of even using, when you're talking about educational resources, I know there were advisors and stuff like that. As I look back and even when I was still there, later years at UNC and looking back I probably could've done a better job of using some of those resources that way. Otherwise, I'm sure that the biggest resource that I got from school was just the people and friends that I have that have a whole lot of different backgrounds. Backgrounds and talents and everything added up, the biggest resource that I got out of being at school was my peers.

Yeah, just having that, like I said, because it's a state of the art full news studio and equipment and everything that they have in there. Instead of waiting to say it's a class so when I get to that class I'll take it, the beginning of freshman year I was getting involved because, I said, it's all the same equipment as what you'd be doing in the real world. Instead of waiting until the last year, year and a half of your time at North Carolina to get that real world experience, you want to have 4 years of that real world experience under your belt by the time you graduate. That was one of the biggest things that I'm really glad I took advantage of. There were a lot of people that graduated the same time as me, but their first experience with Carolina Link was, when I had already been involved in it for 2.5, 3 years. I felt like a veteran by the time I had gotten to that point. I was familiar with all of the
professors and the studio and the equipment and everything. It was second nature by the time I got to senior year. That was something that I'm glad I took advantage of.

I had friends who had gone onto, going towards their Master's and Pre-Med and Biology Majoring, all the hardest courses that they had to do. I had friends that I hung out with a lot freshman year and after a semester or 2, they couldn't make it through because of their academics and they had to leave, some who I kept in touch with. Some I haven't really kept in touch with. I don't think that was ever really a factor in that. I'm fortunate that I have a close group, a big, but close group of friends from people that all did well enough to graduate and get through.

Some of them really excelled academically. Some of them just did enough to get by, but all graduated. I think I'm fortunate that I did make good friends with people who were really on their stuff academically which I guess helps. There might be pressure to not put all of the time in academically that you should be. You have other people that are doing that as well, but you don't feel like you're the only one who's hitting the books with that. I think it is good to have other friends like that.

**Challenges and Resources**

I'd say some of facing some of the classes that were a little bit tougher, especially something I wasn't interested in, though. Those were some challenges that I faced. Yeah. I know there are not a lot of black male students. I feel like something that like this particular freshman class this year has the most in a while, African American black students. I know there's not a lot in there with me seeing as a challenge that there aren't as many people like you or even that there are some might even drop off and don't finish. That wasn't something that really impacted me. I just thought of myself individually in doing what I need to do. The only challenges were I guess those classes that I wasn’t interested in, having to get through those. It was something that was difficult. I guess the challenge of paying for school and everything, that didn’t really hit me like that until afterwards. Because while I was in school, I was paying off the loans some, but it still wasn't a pressure like it is now to pay then back while I was in school.

I had stuff from the journalism school, like I said, especially because I was volunteering and doing stuff even before I was in some of those classes. There were a few teachers that just interacted with all throughout my 4 years that I was close with. Even some that I didn’t know for that long, still close with and keep in touch with now. Even during school, just like I said, I wish I did a better, I had done a better job with advisors and ended up with relations with
those people, some of which I did a little bit better with the job of developing relationships with more faculty because I would say there’s been a few that I’m really close with.

Maybe even more could have made a conscious effort with some of those other classes. Not to just get through the class which then they have not interacted, go to office hours, ended off the relationship with some of the faculty. Those are good people willing to help you and have as mentors that as the years go, even after you leave the school. I did have a good few, for the most part, that was in my time and during the classes and working the Carolina Link and everything and I did develop those relationships.

With the journalism it helped because those weren’t strictly classes where it was you sit down, you take notes, and then you leave type of thing. These are classes where you were really working on the show so you’re really working on something. You’re working side by side with these people and you get a chance. It’s like a workplace. You’re serious, but you don’t feel too ground and you look forward. Then in journalism you’re also, most journalism majors start up as journalism majors. You also start to live in the school so you’re there and working on things after classes and stuff are over. Again those teachers are there.

I would say the more interested you are in a class I guess, the better it makes it to being really close with your teachers. Some of those other classes, going to office hours is a good way. There are some classes that I did actually go to office hours pretty regularly. You see teachers there. That’s an environment where it could be a little bit more laid back. You get to talk to them, get to know the teachers. That’s a good thing to do. Not just going because it’s right before a test, but just go regularly. That could help to stay fresh on the information and also develop that relationship with the teacher too.

I guess I keep going back to this Carolina Link thing. Because it gave me that real world experience, I realized a difference it was going to make even before I graduated because our teachers would sometimes show us real video samples of people who not only graduated and were looking for jobs, but had graduated and actually had jobs. This was their samples of work actually recorded and everything. You look at it and you realize if these people work, these are people who have jobs out in the field already and if they were reporters in our class they would be like the 5th, 6th, maybe even lower best reporter in our class because then you know the standards that they set and the things that we have here just in college to prepare us. You don’t realize it in college that the standards that they set real high for you there are even higher than the people that already have jobs out there. That was the one big thing. Then you see a bit of things that you would normally get a year or 2 out in the working field have experience doing, you already do. Not a simulation of what they do, but exactly what they do, you do in college. That’s one thing.
I guess music-wise, music, I think that’s the best feeling as well. As a rapper, performing and recording even that was something I was able to do in college too, recording in real studios, performing at shows off-campus and on-campus, were things that I was doing in college. It just continued after I graduated. I had those resources at the Studio. I worked for a while at Carolina at undergraduate library and then I worked on my last topics while I was in school in the Communications Building when my friends had Independent Studies. We were able to use that studio. That’s a full on professional studio. That’s another resource that helped me. I was able to develop a following while I was in school too and jump start my career once I graduated. This is the continuation of that.

Next, if we’re talking journalism-wise, I’m looking. The last job I had I was writing behind the scenes at the news station. I’m still looking to do something next, but more on camera which is what I’m doing with the site that I took that I was running on my own. I’m doing more stuff off the talent that I’ve been seeing. I’m doing interviews and everything on screen. Yeah. Doing more of that. Even doing more, you have to have an entrepreneurial mind in today’s world to even to turn the site that I have on my own into something bigger, creating more opportunities on my job for such. Not like you just have a job where you work for someone and that’s all you do. You can create your own type of thing that does what I want to do, get further too.

Cory’s Narrative

“I don’t think they do a great job of going out their way to help black males as a university”.

Today

I graduated May 2013 and my job started May 2013. I literally graduated walked across the stage and I left the next day and I was at work the next Monday. I was there for a year...I think...I moved to Atlanta in June. So about a year in Los Angeles. Right now I work at summit, it’s a production company and we do a bunch of big budget films. I’m in Atlanta right now filming a movie. The, well I can’t say what it is. This year, we released a movie that was very, very successful. I was the financial producer, doing budgets but now I am a script producer, a story producer. Basically I stay on set and make sure the actors stay on the script and are not improving. That’s it.

I’m blessed. I’ve been fortunate to be able to have met the people in college who got me the job in LA where I was making enough to live in LA because LA is not cheap at all. I mean, Atlanta isn’t as cheap as I thought it would be, it’s kind of expensive. It’s not LA but it’s getting
up there. I live comfortably; I can buy things that I want. I can’t splurge and go crazy but I do alright. And it’s just me. If I had a family, we’d probably be poor.

Growing Up

I had 3 brothers, we are all 3 years apart so we are all really close. Both of our parents live in the house. My brothers... the saying is about how the kids grow up in the same house and all turn out so different. They really didn’t enjoy education as much. They weren’t dumb, they didn’t fail out or anything, they all graduated from high school but they just didn’t...they are all in the military now. They just didn’t take it as seriously as I did. Especially around my sophomore year when I was like ok, I really want to get into a nice college. That’s when I started getting into my mode. They didn’t have that. Not to compare. They were smart guys just into different things. They were into sports and they just had different things on their minds, when they were sophomores and juniors in college. Both of my parents went to college, they both are nurses and everybody went to high school. My brothers all went through high school, I went to college and they are all in the military.

Lets see, honestly it was kinda, well I would never say it was all me and I did it all myself because my parents were definitely on me, on my back because I’m third. My brothers weren’t dumb guys but they played around in school and they didn’t really have the greatest grades, maybe C averages. So afterwards my parents were parents were like you’re doing really well, just don’t slip off. Basically the brother above me was also in honors classes until he got to high school and he just took regular classes because all of his friends were in non-honors classes. I think my parents saw that and was like don’t follow his footsteps, like they would stay on me and make sure I did my work every night. But they really didn’t have to. In mind, the way I always work, until the point I realized I wanted to go to college and all that, I’ve always had a vision of what I want in life and where I want to be and knowing what I need to do to get there. Very much self driven honestly. Like my parents really didn’t need to help me or tell me to do my homework because I knew if I didn’t do it, I was gonna fail and if I fail it would affect my GPA and I wouldn’t be able to go to the college I want to go to. So it was a lot of myself honestly. I really stayed on top of myself. I also felt like, maybe it is a result of my brothers, I felt like I had something to prove. My brothers weren’t dumb, we call each other dumb all the time, but I wanted to show everybody that we weren’t stupid people. My brothers didn’t take school all that seriously and I think maybe it was pressure I put on myself to prove for my brothers and myself that we are not stupid. I guess that’s kind of a push. A lot of it was pressure I put on myself, I took school seriously. My parents didn’t really have to stay on my back a lot like my other brother. They stay on him because he is a mess.

It goes back to that saying of how kids grow up in the same house and turn out so differently. We were all raised the exact same. We were all given the same amount of
attention. They joke that I am the golden child, that is not true. We just had different interests and one of my interests was going to school and making good grades. I don’t know honestly.

My family were ok. We weren’t rich by any means. We were comfortable. My parents, they went to college, they graduated. They both are RNs and work at the hospital. We were comfortable. We live in a nice house. I hate to call it a black neighborhood but again, we are the only black people in it. We live comfortably. The city I grew up in stone hill North Carolina, it may be below the poverty line. It’s not an affluent city and it’s not big at all actually. We live in a nice area in Stonehill and my mom doesn’t want to live in Stonehill. But, we kinda set up camp. So we live pretty comfortable. We all have cars. Every time someone got a license, my parents got them a car. We ended up sharing the car, like just passed it down. We weren’t rich but if we wanted something, we could ask for it and it would be a good chance we’d be able to get it.

We had a big desktop computer at the house. Both my parents had laptops. At school, my county, 6th grade year, my school had some kind of partnership with Apple and they gave every student laptops from 6th grade to 12th grade. So we all had laptops to take home. It was your own personal laptop, we didn’t have to share them or anything. From 6th grade to 12th grade I had a laptop from the school. But we had one at the house and my parents had laptops. My little brother had personal tutoring he would go to. I didn’t go to any but my little brother did.

Yeah we all had laptops at the school from Apple. I think they still do actually. So my laptop, the computers at home and if I needed to my parents could have gotten tutoring like they did for my little brother. One of my aunts was a teacher and there were times when she’d help me do stuff. But that was pretty much it. We all had laptops the school gave. I mean we all had laptops from 6th grade ‘til I graduate. I think we gave them back during the summer, at the end of the school year. But during the school year, you treated it as your own laptop. When we graduated, we had to give them back.

My family is from ... my mom and all her 13 siblings went through the same school system way back in whenever. So my mom and my uncles and my aunts were smart students too. All my uncles were into sports. They have all these track records and basketball records hanging down in the school. So my family had kind of a reputation going. The teachers kind of knew who I was because we all went through that school system. I think that helped out a lot because my aunts and uncles and my mom all did really well in school too. So my teachers knew that and no one there tried to hold me back. I can’t recall any teacher that didn’t help me or try to hold me back.
My educational experiences were... I went to a predominantly white school, all k-12. I was in all honors classes from the time they were offered, I think in middle school is when they started. And in elementary school we had what was called AG, I don’t know if that is a thing anymore in classes. I think they were “academically gifted”, I was in those my fourth and fifth grades of elementary school. And then sixth up to I graduated high school I was in honors classes and AP classes. I was always the only black male. In all those classes, every single one. That’s pretty much it. My parents didn’t make me do it. Honestly what it was, the friends that I had made before AG, up to the fifth grade, my friends went into those classes so I kinda followed them into those classes. At the time, I didn’t realize what honors and AP and that stuff was until maybe seventh or eighth grade. But so then my friends were in that class so that’s the class I want to be in and it worked out. I later realized, oh this is probably really good for college. And of course my parents weren’t like “you have to do it”. I mean they were active parents and they took education very seriously so they pushed me a little bit.

A lot of it was my parents went to college. My parents talked to us about college but it was never really a situation where you had to go to college or get out of the house. It wasn’t that kind of thing. They talked about college and how if you wanted to do things in this world you’re going to have to have a college degree to do it. Because they went to college and they lived a comfortable life, I wanted to be ok so that definitely played a role in seeing that my parents went to college and seeing how they were living. I wanted the same. Again, Stonehill itself isn’t a stable city, it’s an old city or town and it’s kind of run down more so now than it was then, there is a lot of crime. My parents are about to move. I didn’t want to be around there. I know people who graduated high school and are still hanging around there. I knew that wouldn’t be me. So that definitely lit a fire under me. I did not want to be hanging around Stonehill doing nothing with my life. Just seeing how my parents were living and that they went to college and they valued their education and their experience in college, I wanted that. I didn’t want to be someone hanging around Stonehill and doing nothing with my life.

I always wanted to go to college to the point where college became an issue, like junior year or sophomore year when you started really thinking about college. Actually in high school, my friends from elementary school we were all in the honors and AP classes together. I wasn’t going to get away. That was one thing for me, being “the black guy” and always feeling I had something to prove. I was like I am not going to let y’all out do me. My family... I didn’t grow up in a family where it was like “alright you’re black, you need to go in there and prove yourself”. They weren’t that way but personally it was that way. Because I just felt like, that’s how some people viewed me because I’d be the only black guy in there. So I wasn’t going to get left and that pushed me a lot. In terms of college, I was like if they’re going to college, I’m going to college. I did have a teacher, an old white guy. I think he was super hard on me. Freshmen year, he taught honors English and he was just super hard on me. I thought he was racist at first. He was just really hard. I was like why is he so mean to me, I didn’t get
it. I took that class with him and I had another class with him the next semester with him, it was like a journalism class. He was really tough on me and it seemed like he wasn’t really tough on the other students and I didn’t understand why. So I told my mom and she was like I can go and talk to him if you really want me to. And I was like no I don’t want to cause a scene. So, he talked to me eventually. He sat me down and was like I feel you have a lot of potential and I just want to see you successful. He was a really nice guy. And all the way up until I graduated he was a very, kinda like a mentor to me and made sure I was always on track. My senior year, every recommendation letter I needed for every college application, he was like “yup, I’ll write, just give me the envelope and tell me where I need to send it. I got you”. He went from being my enemy my freshmen year to one of my biggest cheerleaders besides my family and church. He became my road dog my senior year. Everything I needed he was there. He definitely played a big part of getting me to college and making sure I stayed on track and being successful. The town that I’m from, it’s a really small town in North Carolina on the eastern part of the state. It’s not a bad town but it was a predominately white, it may not be now but it definitely was when I was growing up, when I was in school. The black population in my community, it was… I don’t know how to describe it without sounding…it just wasn’t … it was like gangs… I don’t know how to describe it. I mean like it was tough. It was really… it was easy for black people to get distracted in that town. There were…more so when I was about to leave and go to college. There were like drugs and crime started to go up a little bit more and all the black guys and just like gangbangers started popping up. It was just really easy to get caught up in stuff. Teen pregnancies were a thing and like the white kids of course were getting pregnant too but of course they always made it seem like it was just the black kids. It was easy to get discouraged as a black person in that town.

**Applying to College**

Definitely the honors and AP classes help when you’re applying. I was in a bunch of different things in high school (laughter). I laugh because my dad would say that’s not true. I have this thing where I want to see if I can do things and after I say “ok, I did it, I’m done”. I then move on to the next thing. In high school I was on the track team and did one track meet. I think I got 3rd and was like “that’s good enough, I’m done”. I was in the marching band for a year or so because my mom she was a drum major so I felt like she wanted me to be in the marching band. So I did that for a year and quit. I did a lot of that. I was on the yearbook staff for two years. The two years you could be on there, junior and senior. I stayed in there, didn’t quit that. I was in a lot of stuff. A lot of that was on my application, I didn’t tell them that I quit all of it but it was all up there. I found out that writing was what I enjoyed the most and I was better at writing than I was at a lot of the other things I tried. My brothers were the sports people. I didn’t suck at track and tennis; I was pretty good at tennis. I didn’t suck but I wasn’t like my brothers. I realized writing was my thing and Mr. Clark all the
honors English classes and the yearbook staff he was in charge of so just kinda under his wing.
I think my writing skills is what really got me into college. English was my strongest scores.
My essays I wrote for college I thought were really good. One of them got published actually, I
found out later in post about voting. That year was the first time I voted and it was Obama’s
first term so I wrote my essay on voting and how important it is. Writing was just my thing
and I think that is what got me into college. A lot of that I can contribute to Mr. Clark and
him teaching me how to write.

At UNC

When I started undergrad at Carolina, I kinda had an idea of what I wanted to do. I
knew what I wanted to do but I wasn’t entirely sure. I kinda got pressured into a lot of things
in high school so I applied to the teaching fellows, a scholarship in North Carolina, I think it’s
just North Carolina. It pays part of your tuition if you agree to become a teacher and teach
for 3 years or something after school. So I applied for that my senior year (of high school) and
I got it because I am a black male. And they basically just give it to you if you’re a black male.
So I got that and I was an education major when I started school because my counselor was
like you’d be a good teacher and I didn’t really know what I wanted to do so I kinda got
pushed in that direction. Once I got to Carolina I realized that was not what I wanted to do so
I dropped the scholarship and I actually had to pay them back. And then I kinda just winged it
for a little while and found out my junior year of college that UNC had a screen writing
department. And I was like that’s interesting because I always like to write but I never given
thought to writing films or for television. Once I saw we had that kind of path at the
university, I looked into it and I applied and I got in. I met an alum and she was about... I
want to say she graduated in ’97... she came back and did a guest lecture in one of my screen
writing classes and after class we ended up hooking up and she said “when you graduate you
should get in touch with me and come out to LA.” Once I graduated I contacted her and
moved to Los Angeles, she got me my first job in Los Angeles. I was working as an intern and
then I got promoted to a script reader and then I got full summit.

[The teaching fellows scholarship] I mean...of course it wasn’t stated by anyone that if
you are a black male that you would get the scholarship, but being a student growing up and
going to school in this day and age...there were not a lot of black...there weren’t a lot of male
teachers period and black males literally, essentially I never had a black male teacher ever...in
k-12 or undergraduate. Wait I lied that’s not true...I had one professor, but K-12 I never had a
black male teacher and so when you apply for the teaching fellow’s scholarship and again no
one said it outright that ok you have a good shot of getting it because you are a black male,
but in initial interviews one of my counselors who helped me through the whole process...she
kinda of hinted at you’re smart, you’re black, you’re nice...and she kinda of hinted at it. No
one ever said it. A lot of it came from me...from observation...I know that there is not a lot of
them, black male teachers so I knew that my chances were pretty good. The scholarship itself, a big leg of it they are trying to push for more diversity in teaching and so, black and male, I kinda of felt like, ok yeah

Actually I...I said I wouldn’t do education anymore. I think I came to that realization about a semester in. About second semester my freshman year, I said I don’t want to do this anymore. I was looking around for another major ‘cause I didn’t want to be one of those people...not that there is anything wrong with being a super senior and staying an extra year, so to finish (a master’s degree was required). I just didn’t want to be one of those people because I was paying for college myself, so I wanted to get out as soon as possible. And so I started looking around and I knew I enjoyed writing so I kinda fell into the journalism school. That was my major but even in the journalism school, I was an advertising major. I enjoyed but it just wasn’t fulfilling enough. It was something I’d rather be doing. I started thinking about what I really enjoy and I enjoy movies and television and writing and so I googled it randomly in my dorm room I remember. Like screen writing programs and I came across that UNC had one and it was weird because I was at UNC and had never heard of it before. So I got the contact information, who I needed to reach out to and what building it was in. It had always been there for about the past two years. So, no one ever spoken about it, it was a random google search that I happen to find it. I think the next day I sent an email to the director asking if it was still a program that was offered at the university because I couldn’t pull a date from the website and they were like “yea, we’re still going and running strong, we just don’t have very much publicity”. I was like, “obviously”. So we talked about it and I had to send in about 10 pages of a screen play script and they let me in.

In college I was a RA (resident assistant) sophomore year. Sophomore and junior year, I was a RA. And then senior year I got promoted to community manager so I was their bosses. I did that and that took a lot of my time in undergrad. I was in the acapella group, an all black acapella group. I did that all four years. I was in the NCAC (national cinema advertising competition). It’s a business and advertising competition where universities across the country come together and compete against one another. I did that twice, my junior and senior year. That took up a lot of my time.... I can’t remember anything... hold on because I know I did a lot of stuff in college. I was senior marshal. That took a lot of time my senior year. My friend, she ran for student vice president. I was a part of her campaign.

**Classroom Experiences at Carolina**

I preferred classes that were smaller. At UNC I had classes that were huge lecture halls and I had classes that were smaller. I performed better in classes that were smaller. Classes with 10 people or less. I just learn better that way. In screenwriting classes there were times when there was more than 10 people in the class and you’re called on more so it should be
easier to pay attention and have less distractions. The classes in film are small usually. I perform better in those classes and I enjoyed those better too. It was easier to interact with a smaller group of people and when the teacher is right there in your face versus you being wall up and the teacher being in front of the lecture hall. Other than that, they are pretty good classes, I enjoyed them.

I’m just not…I’m not a quiet person. If I have a question, I’m going to ask it. I don’t feel intimidated by being in a class with white people and I think that was partially because I grew up in that environment and I was used to it. For me it wasn’t an issue or intimidating to ask a question around all those white people. But, I don’t know. If there was a time where I didn’t ask a question it was because I was being lazy or probably sleepy or something. But there was never a situation where I would be embarrassed for asking a stupid question or that it would make me look dumb or anything. I just not that type of person. I was never intimidated or afraid to ask any question. For me, I’d rather look dumb than be dumb and sit there and not ask the question. I always ask the question, I don’t really care what people thought of my question.

Actually it’s interesting, I’ll compare myself to my little brother. He I feel had that, where he felt like if he asked a question, he’d be dumb. I think that was a lot of his struggle. He struggled more so than I think any of my other two brothers in school. That’s what he had. He was afraid to ask questions. He did not want to look like he was stupid or look like he was being smart. He’s the type of guy or student that he didn’t want to seem smart. He was that guy. That was my little brother. He was more than probably wouldn’t ask questions out of fear of being perceived as a nerd. He didn’t want to be that because his friends would have dogged him out. He didn’t want to ask questions, he didn’t want to seem stupid. Because then white people would have been like, that’s a stupid question. That’s the personality he has. I’m not that way. I don’t know I just never had that. If I have a question, I am going to ask it and if you think it’s a stupid question, we can talk about it. Laugh at me if you want to but whatever.

**Being a Black Male**

This is actually pretty interesting because one of my roommates is in grad school and he works in... he actually is in Vanderbilt right now in school for educational policy or something like that. He always talked about the black kids’ experience at school. The minority experience. He used to ask me how I felt because I always was the minority in my classes. I don’t know... I just don’t have the personality where I don’t get offended by things. I definitely experienced it. Probably more so in k-12 than in college. Where people used to make fun of me in school, being the only black guy in my AP classes and it used to bother me for a little while. I was just like why are they...what do they mean but I was like “ok, you can
be dumb that’s fine. I’m just trying to get money and we can talk about it later when you’re working for me”. That was just my mentality and that’s how it’s always been. I never had the personality where it offended me. I don’t like it, I can’t stand it. I see it now with my little brother and I don’t like it. I just didn’t have the personality where it bothered me that much. It was just where I was internally, I knew I had to do what I had to do in order to get to where I had to be. So what people were doing wouldn’t make me feel any type of way, if anything it pushed me to prove a point. I guess you could say it pushed me a little but it didn’t bother me, I kind of just let it roll off. I have the personality where I really don’t let things get to me. I really don’t care what people say about me. I have to give my parents credit for it. That’s the way they raised us. They would say you have to know who you are and let people deal with their own problems when they are ready to deal with them. Obviously race was something, a challenge I faced in college but it didn’t trip me up. For me personally, it wasn’t huge but for other black males on campus, I’m sure it was probably more of a stressor than it was for me. I mean it was a thing but it didn’t bother me that much.

It was an organization that focused on black males, helping black males graduate college. I forget the name of it. I wasn’t in it but my friend was kind of in charge of it for a year. Which is kind of messed up that I wasn’t a part of it. (laughter). I can’t think of the name of that program. My friend was like the president for a year. I didn’t know about it until my senior year of college. He became the president of it our senior year in college. And he definitely started to send me emails about mentoring the incoming black males on campus. I don’t know why, I never had time I don’t think. He was always like are you gonna do it and I was like I want to but I can’t.

I don’t think the university does a good job [of helping black males]. And I don’t think they go out of their way to ‘not’ try. I believe that they... I feel like the university, they are trying to set up a system where they are encouraging everyone. I don’t think they encourage specifically black males at UNC. I can’t think of any program, other than that one, I cannot think of... Maybe the BSU, black student union but I can’t think of any program that focuses on helping black males succeed in undergrad at UNC. I just can’t think of anything. I know I didn’t have anything. I think as a university they try to make sure everyone does well. I think they just kind of fail black males, unintentionally, that’s the word. I don’t think they mean to, it’s like if you’re not motivated, you will not do well at UNC as a black male. I don’t think they do a great job of going out there way to help black males as a university. Basically, I went to college with the mindset ... I did everything myself. I just knew that I had to do well and that’s a fire I had inside myself. I don’t know, if you are not self driven as a black male, you won’t do well at UNC because they won’t do very much to help you. I don’t think they mean to not help you but the system just fails you at UNC. Because there aren’t any efforts, that I am aware, that help black males, you have to do it all yourself basically.
I think on the flip side of what I just said, UNC did a good job... being a black guy at the university... being surrounded by all... I hate to make it black and white but it definitely is. Being surrounded by all high achieving ...all the kids that came to there were the top of their classes in high school. So being surrounded by all those motivated white kids. If you can survive there, then it trains you in well for the real world. So in a career like mine where there aren’t many black people-- another issue I don’t like, but there just aren’t a lot of black people in movies. UNC kind of trained me and kind of made me aware of what I have to be in order to compete with them, if that makes any sense. I had to... I can’t remember what show that was... There was an episode of scandal where the guy was a senior in college and he gave a speech about what you had to do in the world to compete against white people. It was a great speech because it showed me that you have to work twice as hard to be half as good. It’s definitely sad, I think, that you have to work twice as hard to be half as good. That is kind of UNC, that’s kind of what my experience at UNC went by with white students. That’s kind of what you learn, they don’t put in the work as much and being black in a society where you’re always gonna...you’re always at a disadvantage as a black male but UNC trained me to go in and not play games. So whenever I go in for a job interview of when I got my first internship. My internship when I went to LA, I knew coming out of UNC I was already used to like making sure I did well in school so I didn’t look stupid. And just knowing that these other kids, these Indian kids, these European kids, they’re not playing games. So I knew I wanted a job and I was gonna have to be able to compete. So coming out of college and interning at first, I was the only black person at my job in LA. I was around all white interns who all wanted that one job. That one job that was open for a script reader and I was like, I want that job. And I’m used to having to fight for something like this job. And I got the job. And I think that is something you definitely learn at UNC. The UNC experience of being a black male at a predominately white college teaches you. That’s the biggest lesson in college you can learn from.

Resources

In undergrad, I did the learning center my freshman year in college. I remember it very vividly because I hated that experience. I don’t think that the learning center at UNC, its good but it really doesn’t cater to individuals. It didn’t do a good job for me. I went there and I stayed there for a long time to ask the question I had and worked with this lady and still got a D. So I was like I’m never going back there because clearly they don’t know what they’re doing. So I never went back to the learning center. That was the only thing that I tried in undergrad. If I ever needed help with anything, I would go straight to the professor’s office. Office hours was my best friend. I used to sit in there sometimes until... I would take up all their time. The journalism school has a...where all of the... it’s not a counseling center but kind of a counseling center for the journalism school. I used to go in there all the time and hang out with Tracy, Karla, Tina. They are in control of enrolling you in classes. I used to sit
in there and talk to them about classes all the time. They weren’t teachers or anything but I was just in there talking them up asking “what do you think I should do in this class and this class”. And they would say you probably should do this and this, your workload is going to be too high because I worked in the college too. That was definitely a resource for me. They made sure I stayed on track and wasn’t over doing it. That’s pretty much it and then there are people like Trisha who I randomly ran into that actually became like mentors. They were really like my biggest resources. People like Trisha and Karen, people like that, that I met randomly. They were black and they kept you encouraged. Those were my biggest resources I would say. Even though I didn’t feel like “oh my god I’m black”. It wasn’t that thing...It wasn’t like I was a black panther in college. It was like...those were the people who would keep me encouraged. I wouldn’t say I needed it but in fact I needed it, if that makes any sense. So, those were my resources, Trisha and Karen and there was John, a black guy. I had my black friends, in fact I had one of my professors, he and his wife taught in the journalism school and I would always hang out in there and talk about life and he talked to me about being successful as a black journalist and that kind of stuff. Like those random people that you meet and hang out with, those were my resources.

I’ve always been, I don’t compare. That’s just been a thing I’ve learned from kindergarten through 12th grade. Although I’ve had... I was in AP classes and honors classes all throughout school before college. I was friends with everybody. I wasn’t like ‘I don’t want to be friends with black people’. I was just the black guy in classes with a bunch of white people. For me, I learned then before I went to college, not to compare myself or think I’m better than anybody. I just took that mentality through college. I never brought academics up really. And when you don’t bring up academics there is nothing there. Other than our grades, we are the same playing field, there was no difference. Also, a lot of my black male friends in college they kind of had the same mentality I had. They were just about getting their grades and going on to what they were going to do after college. They were pretty focused and did really well in school. I did have some friends that were completely different who kind of played around in school. A lot of them were on the football team. They went to class but they didn’t try as hard as they probably could have academically. But again, I just... we were friends; I didn’t care what your grades are. That’s not why I’m your friend. So that wasn’t a thing for me. That wasn’t a thing for me. I was not going to not hang out with you because your grades weren’t good. I mean it’s your life, I wouldn’t distance myself from people I thought weren’t trying to advance. I knew I was going to do what I was going to do...I’m not the type of person...like I want you to do better. There have been times when I’ve told my friends like you don’t want to stay here and be a super senior. I would make comments like that but I didn’t make a big deal of it. All I knew was I was gonna get what I needed out of college and I was going to do what I was going to do. If you want to mess
around then that’s you. We can still be friends, I won’t say nothing about it but...you know that’s what it was.

Most of my experiences with faculty were positive in college. Just like in high school where I had those professors or faculty members pushing to make sure I was working hard and staying focused. And everyone else they taught, they weren’t trying to hinder me from being successful. It was kind of the same deal as in high school really. I had those faculty members I connected with and hung out with all the time, people like Trisha but no one was...nothing negative...well I did have professors I didn’t like but it wasn’t nothing personal. I just thought that...all of my personal experiences with professors were positive. I loved college, I had a great time. I wish I could go back.

My experiences were that, if you seek out the help, it’s there at UNC. And it’s all connected, like I said if you’re not self motivated at UNC then UNC as a University won’t do you any good. And as a black male, they won’t really help you. But if you are self motivated and you’re motivated enough to go find...you’re gonna go ask those questions and you’re gonna go develop those relationships with faculty, then they’ll help you. But, you’ll have to take that first step a lot of the time. I think at UNC a lot of black guys who may not be performing as well as they could academically aren’t performing well because they don’t feel comfortable because I don’t think UNC does a good job of making black males feel incredibly comfortable. It’s nothing... I mean I love UNC, I love Carolina, it was great but I don’t think the University does a good job of making black males feel comfortable. But if you are self motivated and driven and you’re like whatever I’m going to go out and I’m going to help myself, they’ll help you. There is faculty that’ll help you with whatever it is you want to do even after college if you’re building those relationships, that’s how you do it. You reach out to...they’re helping you through undergrad and over time you develop a personal relationship and after you graduate they’re gonna be rooting for you in your career and in real life. I have a ton, well not a ton but maybe 2 or 3 professors that are in my phone that I know I can just call and be like hey just wanted to ... for anything, recommendation letters, advice on life after college. I have a professor who is...my screen writing professor, I can just call him up and be like, do you know anybody that works at this place that can help me get in the door. That kind of thing. But you have to make that first step and I don’t think a lot of guys are comfortable doing that specifically black males at UNC. But I think it all comes down to being motivated and being self driven because if you’re not it’s gonna be hard at UNC. It is a great university but it’s just not...they could do a better job of going out of their way to help students who are historically disadvantaged. But you can be successful at UNC as a black male, you just have to do it yourself. Or have some other support systems because UNC is not going to go out their way to show you they want you... Like one of my friends went to a HBCU and one of things we talk about are our experiences as I went to a PWI. That’s where we bump heads a lot because she is like PWIs yatta yatta yatta... and I’m like ‘no, they just don’t offer or it’s just not as good
at helping black students as obviously a HBCU would be. If you’re at a PWI, you know you are already at a disadvantage and you have to kick yourself in the butt, no one is going to push you. The universities, the HBCUs I just feel they invest more in their black students than like you’ll see for a black male student here.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the data analysis yielded six themes which contributed to the retention and success of five high achieving black male graduates. Success for these males is equated to persisting in college and acquiring their baccalaureate degrees. These males’ experiences are consistent with the research findings highlighted earlier in the literature review of this paper. One unanticipated finding worthy of further study, however which emerged from the data but was not highlighted in the literature review section of this paper, was that high impact experiences such as study abroad, internships and research opportunities may contribute to the retention and graduation of Black males. Another unanticipated finding was that participants were pre-exposed to white dominant school culture and predominantly white environments through their elementary and secondary educational experiences. Another unanticipated finding was the importance of self motivation and grit to the retention and academic success of the participants. These unanticipated findings and their implications for future research will be further discussed in the next section of this paper.
Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an increased understanding of the experiences of high achieving black males at a prominent public white institution (PWI) in the South. It was my intent to explore how pre-college experiences as well as institutional experiences at a PWI defined and shaped black male students’ realities and how those realities influenced their decisions to remain at the PWI through degree completion. The intent was to extend Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of student departure to include the unique experiences of black males.

This qualitative study utilized individual, semi-structured interviews framed by a narrative inquiry to answer two primary research questions. First, what are the factors which contributed to the retention of black males who have successfully obtained a baccalaureate degree from a prominent predominantly white institution? Second, what are the factors which contributed to the academic success (above a 3.0 gpa) of Black males from a prominent predominantly white institution? The results of analysis of the narratives describe the thematic structure of five African American males’ experience of persisting in and completing their baccalaureate degrees between 2013 and 2015. The data analysis yielded six themes which contributed to the retention and success of five high achieving
black male graduates. Success for these males is equated to persisting in college and acquiring their baccalaureate degrees. These males’ experiences are consistent with the research findings highlighted earlier in the literature review of this paper. One unanticipated finding worthy of further study, however which emerged from the data but was not highlighted in the literature review section of this paper, was that high impact experiences such as study abroad, internships and research opportunities may contribute to the retention and graduation of Black males. Another unanticipated finding was that participants were pre-exposed to white dominant school culture and predominantly white environments through their elementary and secondary educational experiences. Another unanticipated finding was the importance of self motivation and grit to the retention and academic success of the participants. These unanticipated findings and their implications for future practice and research will be further discussed in the next section.

**Comparisons across the narratives**

The next several pages are devoted to summarizing key findings and commonalities that emerged from the analyses of the five high achieving black male narratives. Across pre-college and college experiences, respondents in this study shared many common characteristics related to their persistence, retention and academic success. Most were happy with their choice to attend the University and were pleased with the diversity they found on campus. They all experienced significant levels of academic success at their respective high schools and came to college with high expectations and aspirations. Participation in high impact experiences, familiarity with white dominant educational
spaces, pre-exposure to college, self-motivation, and competition were all contributing factors to the participants’ academic success.

**High impact experiences/practices**

Common among the participants of this study was involvement with high impact experiences. High impact experiences include learning communities, service learning, study abroad, student-faculty research, internships and senior culminating experiences. Participants of this study were involved with one or more of these practices. Several of the participants attributed their involvement with the high impact practices to their academic success in college and success after graduation.

**Familiarity with white dominant educational space**

One unanticipated finding was the participants’ pre-exposure to white dominant school culture and predominantly white environments through their elementary and secondary educational experiences. Endres and Gould (2009) are researchers who study whiteness theory. They identify white space as everyday performances of White privilege through discourse and other practices. White space involves the influences of white privilege in day to day practices. (Fordham, 2008; Jackson, 1999; Leonardo, 2004; & Sleeter, 2001). Pervasive among the five narratives were elementary and secondary experiences with being the only black male in a classroom and one of few black students in a school. These pre-college experiences were congruent with their college experiences.

**Pre-exposure to college**
Participants of this study were exposed to college academic and social cultures prior to enrolling at the University. Some participants visited family members on a college campus and most participants completed advanced college level courses in high school. Through these experiences, participants had basic knowledge of the academic expectations and social norms of the University.

**Self motivation**

Another unanticipated finding was the importance of self motivation to the retention and academic success of the participants. Participants described themselves as self-motivated and goal oriented learners. Rather than feeling like their parents or teachers pushed them to be academically successful, students overwhelmingly credited themselves as being the primary source of motivation; in other words they felt their motivation was internally motivated. Across the narratives, participants held themselves accountable for their school achievement, their positive attitudes about education and success and their belief that they possessed control over the causes of their academic successes and failures. All participants were intrinsically motivated to achieve academically and graduate from the University.

**Competition**

Every participant in the study spoke about competition in one way or another. Participants discussed academically competing in the classroom with their peers and a few spoke to specifically competing with their white counterparts in the classroom. Their competitive nature played a significant part in their academic success. In addition, some
participants were competing with family members. Doing better or being better than particular family members was mentioned by several participants.

**Relationships with faculty**

Harper (2012) found that engagement in student organizations and participation in enriching educational experiences (e.g., study abroad and service learning programs) enabled the Black male achievers to establish value added relationships with professors and administrators. Unfortunately, several of the participants of this study could not speak with any level of depth about relationships they had established with faculty members on campus. It was clear that deep connections had not been established and interactions were almost entirely confined to the classroom. A few participants expressed displeasure with their interactions with faculty members.

**Research Questions**

A summary of the findings that address the two main research questions are below.

**Research question 1. What are the factors which contributed to the retention of Black males who have persisted and successfully obtained a baccalaureate degree from a prominent predominately white institution?** Findings from the study concluded pre-college exposure, high impact experiences, familiarity with white educational spaces and self-motivation were contributing factors to the persistence and successful obtainment of a baccalaureate degree from a prominent PWI.
Pre college exposure

Participants of this study were exposed to college academic and social cultures prior to enrolling at the University. Several participants were enrolled in college prep courses in secondary school. Derek stated, “I took a lot of the IB and AP classes that you can take, so advanced classes throughout high school so I guess that helped me some too”. DeAngelo also had college level courses; he even received college credit for one. He said, “I always liked my English teachers. Well, except for one. Looking back I know why...we had a big term paper to do. This was my first college class officially, that wasn’t an AP but it was like a first college credit with a grade kind of thing. It was a high school class at the same time”. DeAngelo also was able to spend a summer at a college campus while in middle school. He mentioned, “I was in the advanced track from the beginning, so college was always talked about. I remember people would talk about PSATs and stuff like that. Then in middle school I was in a Pre-IB. International Baccalaureate. It’s not that popular. It’s like if the whole school was AP, with a hint of philosophy. It’s hard to remember where everything was, but I got to go to a college for the summer in middle school, it was for 7th and 8th graders.”

Devon was able to develop a social network prior to enrolling as a student on campus. He stated, “Another good reason was definitely my older brother. He’s 5 years older than me. As he went to Carolina, I came up there. I’d visit and hang out with his older friends like when I was a junior in high school, I’d hang out there. I was there a lot when I was a junior or senior high school. I was already cool with people that he went to undergrad with and stuff like that. He just showed me around and it was just somewhere I felt very comfortable. Somewhere I felt like I would be able to fit in, meet new people, and enjoy myself and do well. Just from the social scene and stuff like that, I felt comfortable there”.
High impact experiences

High impact experiences are defined as learning communities, service learning, study abroad, student-faculty research, internships and senior culminating experiences. Participants of this study were involved in these high impact experiences also known as high impact practices. DeAngelo participated in study abroad and won a fellowship to fund the experience. DeAngelo spoke about winning the fellowship and studying abroad. He said, “I did that and then I applied. It’s funny that it was in front of Mike Jameson because I got the, Dr. Jameson Fellowship to study abroad. I was one of the three people that won that. Then I got another one for ... Basically it’s for non-traditional students, people from community college, people who haven’t studied abroad, something else... I got to go to England, Denmark, and Germany. I studied Black people in England, and had my actually study abroad program in Denmark and Germany”. Devon was a Williams scholarship winner and through the scholarship, he was afforded a summer internship opportunity every summer of his undergraduate experience. In addition, Derek was a part of two high impact courses where students ran a TV station. He said, “The class that they had was a student-run TV station called Carolina Link and actually also Sports Xtra. Oh, yeah. A sports show that they started on the tail end of my time there. There are actually classes like Carolina Link and Sports Xtra are classes, but it’s a lot of work with them. It’s a class that you could take for two semesters”. These high impact experiences not only contributed to the participants’ persistence and successful graduation, one participant was able to obtain a job through one of his experiences. DeAngelo mentioned, “I didn’t know how to get into research. I didn’t know that research was necessary for graduate school. She connected me
with the lab. She helped me get into a lab even when the application cycle was dead. On the last day of my first year here, to get into Dr. Princetine’s lab. That’s helped me get the jobs I have now”.

**Familiarity with white educational spaces**

Participants of this study were familiar with white educational spaces prior to attending the University. The familiarity with being “the black guy”, being in predominately white environments and spaces immersed in white privilege contributed to their success at a prominent predominately white institution. DeAngelo spoke about his experience being the only black kid in class saying, “They mostly were white friends at the advanced school things. I was in white school systems, which is a big deal, for socialization especially. In the advanced classes you’re the one Black kid in each class”. DeAngelo also spoke about being an ‘outsider’ saying, “I’m already an outsider, but I’ve been an outsider everywhere I’ve gone. I’ve been a minority. I’m not one of the kids that came from a predominately Black school, and have suddenly gone into a school where I don’t know how to deal with this. I’ve dealt with this everywhere I’ve gone. I’m often the only Black person”. Antwan also spoke about being the ‘black guy’ saying, “Think about it, all the schools that I went to were predominately white. It’s just like, I was always that black guy. The black guy with the curly hair with the braids. Always that guy”. In addition, Antwan expressed Carolina had more African Americans than his previous schools. He said, “Going to school at Carolina that was the first time in my life that I’ve been to a school where there was many African Americans in one city. Remind you, I went to military school. I went to all private Catholic schools”. Cory also spoke about his experience with predominantly white
spaces, saying “My educational experiences were... I went to a predominantly white school, all k-12”. It would be interesting to know if less successful students had less exposure to whites in the pre-college experiences.

**Self motivation**

Another contributing factor to the persistence, retention and successful graduation for participants in this study was self motivation. Devon spoke about self-motivation saying, “Myself and my brother are self-motivators, like it wasn’t even an option. We knew from the time we were probably 9 or 10 that we wanted to go to college. It was just a matter of fact where we would go and what we will do. Like we’re very motivated just by each other and just by ourselves as to do great in whatever we do. Our parents did nudge us. They never had to push us. It was just something that was innate”. Participants were asked about outside influences and people who may have assisted them in doing well in school. In response, Antwan said, “No one pushed me to do anything, or gave me any outside influence of any sort”. Cory mentioned, “In mind, the way I always work, until the point I realized I wanted to go to college and all that, I’ve always had a vision of what I want in life and where I want to be and knowing what I need to do to get there. Very much self driven honestly. Like my parents really didn’t need to help me or tell me to do my homework because I knew if I didn’t do it, I was gonna fail and if I fail it would affect my GPA and I wouldn’t be able to go to the college I want to go to. So it was a lot of myself honestly. I really stayed on top of myself”. Self-motivation was a contributing factor for the persistence, retention and successful graduation of the participants in this study.
Research Question 2. What are the factors which contributed to the academic success (above a 3.0 gpa) of Black males from a prominent predominantly white institution? Findings from the study concluded competition and black male academic identity were the contributing factors to the academic success of the study’s participants.

Competition

Competition was a contributing factor for the academic success of participants in this study. Participants spoke about competing with family members such as brothers and fathers as well as competing with their white counterparts. Devon spoke about academically competing with his brother.

He said, “My brother, at that time he was in middle school. He was in sixth or seventh grade, he would come home and his report card will be like all As, B pluses and all that. I bring home my report card and it was like couple of Bs, mostly like Bs and B pluses. Right before I entered second grade, I realized my brother was doing so well and he was the coolest guy in middle school, he’s like a football star, basketball. He did all this stuff and he had good grades, so I was like man, I need to be doing the same thing too... Basically I got my report cards and I just tell myself when I’m upset and I was just like ‘I’m not going to settle for less anymore. I will be just as good, if not better, than what my brother’s doing.’ Yeah, it started with that and then as I got older in my teenage years I realized that I’m not actually doing this to be competitive with myself or with my brother”.

Antwan spoke about being bigger than his father who was an engineer. He said, “Ultimately, I want to bigger than my father. My father, he was an engineer. He went to
school for engineering, but he delivered sodas for a living. He made good money and he could send me to private school but I always wanted to be bigger than that”. Antwan also spoke about his feeling of always competing. He mentioned, “I don’t like losing. I don’t like when people try to tell me I don’t belong. I’m human. Everyone gets it. That’s not human, but I’ve lived life. I didn’t want to experience some type of over-excessive dependency like ... To me, personally, it was just like with the frats. I wasn’t a frat boy, but I was in a house full of frat boys. Some of them were just like, "Why are you here?" For me, that felt like they were telling me, "Why am I here? To fulfill a quota?" Well, no, I’m actually here to interact in school. Come back like 10 years from now and so you can look at my billion dollar empire. I always kept that in the back of my head, you know? Again, I always feel like I’m competing. Even if I’m not competing, I always feel like I’m competing”. In this study, completion was revealed as a contributing factor for the academic success of the black male graduates in this study.

Black male academic identity

Pervasive among all the narratives was the black male academic identity in which was a contributing factor to the academic success of the black male graduates in this study. In the long-standing focus on the academic achievement gap between Blacks and Whites in education, the literature is extensive regarding the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement. Participants of this study constructed achievement/success identities by seeing themselves as racial beings who are smart, successful, and good students. Devon spoke about his academic experiences saying, “Right before second grade,
I was like "I'm never going to make a B ever again." I’m just going to make it a point for that to happen. Second grade throughout senior high school, I’ve never made a B on my report card. It was all A or A-. I think I only made A- on my report card in high school I think 2 times and they give out like 8 report cards a year or something like that and I get like 2 A minuses in high school”. Antwan spoke on the Black male identity he wanted for himself. He said, “I wanted more. I didn’t want to grow up and become like one of these rappers … Just like, had chicks all day and smoke weed. I wasn’t that type of guy. That’s just not me. There was a race to be that type of guy. I saw the bigger picture of things”. He also spoke about his academic identity in comparison to his white constituents. He said, “I was like the top … I was like number 2 or 3 in my class. One of the … I was number 3, I think, in my class out of 700 and some people. I was number 3. I always had this idea that I’d be bigger than everyone, you know? Maybe then all my white constituents”. Antwan also spoke on what it took for him to achieve academic success in college. He mentioned, “For me, personally, it was late nights. It was grinding to learn, and grinding some more. I don’t know, to be honest with you. I think that a lot of … It’s a step … Like a, made yourself stick out a little bit because everyone has a 3.0, it’s not bad. What makes you better than the person next to you, or the person next to them?” Derek spoke about his academic identity and the idea of ‘acting white’. He said, “I guess you even have the pressures too of, okay, to be acting white, to be more into the books or something, stuff like this. You need to be more cool and be more acting black to not be all about academics or something or to be in”. Cory also spoke about challenges with his academic identity. He said, “Probably more so in k-12 than in college. Where people used to make fun of me in school, being the only black guy in my AP classes and it used to bother me for a little while”. Several of the participants expressed
challenges with their black male academic identity, however they all still succeeded academically. These challenges were a part of their academic identity development as black males at a PWI.

**Addition to Literature: Retention Model for Black Males at PWIs**

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of black male retention at public white institutions. None of the literature presented in this study accounts for the experiences of high achieving black males at public white institutions. In an effort to add to and enhance research on the attrition and retention of black male students at PWIs, this study extends Tinto’s (1975, 2000) retention theory through an exploration of the experiences of high achieving African American males at a prominent PWI. By utilizing qualitative methodology to present students’ perspectives on their collegiate experiences, I submit data to further our understanding of the retention theory. Consequently, this study is designed to offer greater insight into the phenomenon of black male student retention decisions.

Higher education has recently and historically been challenged to increase undergraduate degree attainment. Lately the matter of student retention has become an issue of national concern, including a focus on increasing Black male undergraduate degree attainment. Scholars like Vincent Tinto (1987, 1993) conducted research to explain student persistence and attrition well before the recent national focus. His findings identified the longitudinal process of dropout that occurs voluntarily and involuntarily in higher education, with primary attention given to the events that occur within the
Secondly, his retention model addresses the interactional relationship between the students and their experiences within the institution (Tinto, 1987). This emphasis on the interactional relationship between the students and the environment is important because it illuminates how students with different characteristics and background traits may withdraw prior to degree completion, depending on their academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987). The more a student is successful in the social and academic environment, commitment to the institution and degree completion will increase. Tinto (1975) suggested that future research should be conducted to further test the relationship of race and dropout (p. 119). The purpose of this research study was to use a narrative inquiry qualitative approach to explore the experiences of high achieving black male students at a prominent PWI in the South. The unique and distinctive population of the high achieving black males at a prominent public white institution provides an opportunity to further test Tinto’s model in areas where it is still unclear how social and academic integration work for students of different ethnic, racial, environmental and social status backgrounds. Findings from this study add to the existing literature for improving student persistence, retention and graduation specifically for Black male undergraduates.

*Tinto’s model of student departure from higher education institutions*
Figure 1 above is Tinto’s (1975) original theoretical model of dropout from higher education institutions. Tinto’s (1975) argument was the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems (as measured by normative and structural integration) continually modify their goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout.

The figure also takes account of the attributes individuals enter higher educational institutions with. Some of the attributes are as sex, race, ability, prior experience, academic background, and family background. The background information affects the aspirations and commitment to the goals set by the students. Those goals and institutional commitments can be vital factors in whether a student dropouts or completes their college education.

Draper’s adapted model of student departure from higher education institutions
Figure 2. This is adapted from Tinto, V. (1975) " Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research" Review of Educational Research vol.45, pp.89-125.

Figure 2 above is an adaption from Tinto’s original theoretical dropout framework with an attempt to extend the theory. In regards to institutional commitment by the student, finances, medical issues and family events were added as factors that contribute to a student’s dropout decision. In addition, teaching, learning support (academic support programs), facilities at the university contribute to the goal and institutional commitment of the student which therefore contributes to their decision to drop out or not.

As this framework set forth by Tinto and Draper is useful when exploring college retention, it does not account for the specific and/or relevant issues that black males may
experience that can lead to dropout from higher education institutions. My personal experiences as a black male graduate student who has developed and worked with black male leadership and retention programs at higher education institutions aligns with some of the emerging literature. Identity of self and of self within a ‘white space’, I have experienced factors a great deal within the retention of black males at higher educational institutions. Yet, identity is not accurately accounted for within the current emerging literature. In addition, the black male personal narrative is very enlightening to issues such as retention. Their narratives inform issues related to them as well as other minorities. Given this, a qualitative study in which gives voice to their stories was imperative for this study. This study attempts to extend the retention theory utilizing the narratives of black males to inform retention programs at higher educational institutions in hopes to change the overall rhetoric and outcomes for the retention of black males in higher education.
Some of the findings from this study were consistent with the current literature. Family attributes, pre-college schooling, first year integration, scholarships, social integration and academic integration have all been well researched and covered in the literature by Tinto (1975, 1993). The most compelling findings that build on and extend Tinto’s theory of student departure are black achievement identity, high impact experiences and self-motivation. In addition, college exposure and exposure to “white educational space” were significant to the pre-college experiences of the black male graduates from this study. Together these themes tie together the in-depth findings of this study and also advance our current interpretations of retention theory and the model of
student departure for higher education to be applicable for black male students at PWIs. I have arranged these themes into the model of retention for black males at PWIs to help conceptualize the practices employed to assist successful students like those featured in this study. I believe the model provides a clear and inclusive representation of the factors at play in promoting black male success. Additionally, the model allows professionals to adopt a process that is intended to promote the facilitation of increased student success in higher education.

**Implications for Practice**

Institutions of higher education are charged with creating and implementing programs, policies and practices to aid in the retention and graduation of black males. Based on the findings that emerged from this study, several recommendations are highlighted in this section. Recommendations for practice are presented for college administrators, college student affairs administrators, high school administrators and counselors. This study made clear that there are practices that are working to increase the retention and graduation rates of black male students. Based on the findings that emerged from this study, several recommendations are highlighted in this section. Findings from this study indicate that pre-college exposure, high impact experiences and first year transition programs contribute to the retention and academic success of black males at public white institutions.

**Pre-college exposure**

A focus on exposure programs for high school black males should be encouraged by public white institutions, high school administrators and counselors. Participants of this
study were exposed to college academic and social cultures and those experiences contributed to their academic success in college. Many colleges and universities offer on-campus afterschool, weekend, and summer programs for high school students, a great number of which are targeted at students from minority populations. These initiatives often articulate commitments to preparing youth for admission to and success in college. One example of these is Upward Bound, a federally funded TRiO program offered at over 800 postsecondary institutions, including Columbia, Cornell and UNC-Chapel Hill.

In addition, teachers, beginning in ninth grade, should frequently unmask for students how college works and what the academic expectations are for undergraduates. Harper (2014) asserted, “If high school teachers better clarify what is expected in college classrooms, as well as differences between doing homework and studying, we are certain that fewer students will be shocked by the expectations that await them at the next level of education”. Bronx Leadership Academy II offers a course on college that meets every year, starting in ninth grade. The course focuses on preparing for, applying to, and succeeding in college. Writing college essays, applying to a range of institutions, and searching for scholarships are required activities in the course. Making space in the curriculum for this is something every public school should consider. The exposure to college academic and social cultures would contribute to the retention and academic success of black males at public white institutions.

**High impact experiences**
High impact experiences are defined as learning communities, service learning, study abroad, student-faculty research, internships and senior culminating experiences. These experiences were vital components of the college experience for participants of this study. According to Kuh (2008) these practices report greater gains in learning and personal development. These gains included “deep approaches” to learning, which encompass integrating ideas and diverse perspectives, discussing ideas with faculty and peers outside of class, analyzing and synthesizing ideas, applying theories, judging the value of information as well as one’s own views, and trying to understand others’ perspectives.

In discussing the evidence for the success of these practices, Gonyea, Kinzie, Kuh, and Laird (2008) recommend that all students in higher education participate in at least two high-impact practices, one in their first year and another in their academic major. Yet this recommendation is far from the current reality in higher education, especially for black males. A majority of college students do not have the opportunity to participate in high-impact activities, and, as Kuh notes, underrepresented students—such as first-generation college students and African American students—are far less likely to participate.

In 2009, Brownell and Swaner completed a literature review researching the proven outcomes of five “high-impact” activities: first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, and capstone experiences. Brownell and Swaner (2009) found substantial support for the value of these programs for students in general, and more specifically, for underserved students (underrepresented minority, low-income, and first-generation students). Each practice leads to a range of positive outcomes for
students and for colleges and universities as well. College administrators should be intentional about encouraging black males to participate in two or more of these high impact experiences during their undergraduate years.

**First year transition programs**

The freshman year represents a stressful transition for college students (Lu, 1994). Despite a multitude of social, academic, and emotional stressors, most college students successfully cope with a complex new life role and achieve academic success. Other students are less able to successfully manage this transition and decide to leave higher education during or at the end of their freshman year. It is estimated that 40% of college students will leave higher education without getting a degree with 75% percent of such students leaving within their first two years of college (Tinto, 1987).

**First year transition course for Black males**

Tinto’s (1993) fourth stage of retention is “The First Year: Making the Transition to College”. He posits there is a need to help students make the social and academic transition to the new and possibly much more challenging life of the college with things such as a first-year experience course. Participants in this study identified issues in their first year of college related to transition, assimilation, and life in general as a new black male at a prominent public white institution. First year transition courses or seminars would allow new black male students to work closely with instructors on intriguing topics. The seminars would help these students academically and socially integrate into University life.
Implications for future research

This study focused on the persistence and graduation of high achieving black males in light of the reality that the Black male is vanishing from higher education and the lack of research on high achieving black males at public white institutions. This study specifically examined Black males who graduated from a prominent public white institution in the South but did not examine Black males who also persist to graduation however with below a 3.0 grade point average. One avenue for future research is exploration of the challenges Black males who graduate with below a 3.0 gpa face and the similarities and differences to those who graduated with a 3.0 gpa or higher. In addition, three themes emerged as those which could benefit from further research. One theme is pre-exposure to white dominant school culture and predominantly white environments. The findings show that the high achievers were pre-exposed to predominately white spaces and academic cultures in their elementary and secondary school experiences. Further studies should be conducted on the experiences of high achieving black males at public white institutions who graduated from majority minority high schools.

Another theme is the black male academic identity. In the development of a strong racial self-concept, students in this study also embody a strong achievement self-identity that helped them persist through graduation and develop adaptive strategies for navigating academic and non-academic domains. This study focused on the experiences of Black male students by identifying factors that contribute to higher academic achievement; however, very little research has focused on identifying factors that contribute to Black students’
having a positive academic or achievement self-concept (Cokley, 2003). A better understanding of Black male retention and academic success requires an understanding of how they construct an academic or achievement identity.

Another area that could benefit from additional research is the role of high-impact experiences on the retention and academic success of black males. Brownell and Swaner (2009) found that there is little research that looks at learning outcomes for specific populations of students, and particularly underrepresented minority, low-income, and first-generation students in relation to high-impact practices. This includes black males. As high impact practices were found to be contributing factors to persistence and retention for this study's participants, this area could benefit from further research.

Future research could also apply the same methodology, narrative inquiry, to other marginalized populations to capture their counter narratives of academic success and explore whether contributing factors to their academic achievement are similar or substantially different than those of this study. Also, this study could be expanded to include other groups that persist and graduate with above a 3.0 or higher gpa and try to identify patterns and themes that provide insight into how to succeed at a prominent public white institution. Future studies in these areas would fill important gaps in the black male student retention literature.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of high achieving black males at a prominent public white institution (PWI). It was my intent to explore how pre-college experiences as well as institutional experiences at a PWI contributed to their
decisions to persist and graduate as well as succeed academically. The motivation for this study is a desire to develop practices and research to improve the college graduation rates of Black males in general, but more specifically, those who attend predominantly White colleges. The latter is a major concern, since most Black males attend predominantly White colleges (Gallien, Jr. and Peterson, 2005). However, despite the fact that more Blacks attend White colleges, historically Black colleges and universities graduate a higher proportion of Black students in general, and Black males in particular (Galien, Jr. and Peterson, 2005). It is hoped that this foray into Black male college student matriculation will encourage subsequent studies to seek answers to the perplexing issues of Black males who embark upon their intellectual sojourn at predominantly White collegiate institutions. This study, which extends Tinto’s (1975, 2000) retention theory through an exploration of the experiences of high achieving black males at a prominent PWI, emphasizes the importance of high impact practices, the black male academic identity, and self-motivation. The findings of this study should serve as a starting point for the formation of any programs designed to increase Black male student graduation rates at predominantly White colleges.
REFERENCES


