Persisting in Unfamiliar Grounds: A Study of Black Males Living in a Learning Community While Attending a Predominantly White Institution

Ngozi Taffe  
University of Connecticut - Storrs, ngozi.taffe@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/2624
Persisting in Unfamiliar Grounds: A Study of Black Males Living in a Learning Community While Attending a Predominantly White Institution

Ngozi Taffe, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2020

Abstract

Black males encounter significant microaggressions and race related challenges as students in Predominantly White Institutions. These encounters negatively impact their college learning and social experiences. In the face of these challenges, college retention rate of Black males falls behind those of other racial and gender groups (Toldson, 2012). Notwithstanding, statistics point to the success and persistence of Black male students in such oppressive environments. Using an Anti-deficit lens and Community Cultural Wealthy framework, this qualitative study explores the learning and social experiences of eight Black males living in a same race same gender learning community while attending a PWI. In addition, it inquires whether participation in formal and informal support structures influences the social and learning experiences of the Black male students. Findings from this study highlight social factors including peer and cultural inclusiveness, belongingness and mentoring relationships as contributing to the success, persistence and retention of Black male college students.

Keywords: Black male college students, Anti-deficit, Community Cultural Wealth, Learning Community, Microaggressions, Formal and Informal Support Structures.
Persisting in Unfamiliar Grounds:

A Study of Black Males Living in a Learning Community

While Attending a Predominantly White Institution

Ngozi Obiocha Taffe

B.S. University of Connecticut, 1997

M.B.A. University of Connecticut, 2001

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the

The University of Connecticut

2020
Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Persisting in Unfamiliar Grounds: A Study of Black Males Living in a Learning Community
While Attending a Predominantly White Institution

Presented by

Ngozi O. Taffe, B.S., MBA

Major Advisor

Casey Cobb

Associate Advisor

Suzanne Wilson

Associate Advisor

Joseph Cooper

University of Connecticut

2020
Persistence is not enduring death by a thousand cuts. Persistence is staying the course, in pursuit of your goals and knowing when to realign and shift from a space where you are tolerated to a space where you are celebrated. In the end, the battle’s victory is not measured by the cheering or jeering of those on the sidelines but by the nature of the road travelled by the weary.

I dedicate this work to my parents, Fyne and Margaret, who always emphasized the importance of education and whose love, support and encouragement has been an immeasurable gift. To my husband Marlon, for being my biggest cheerleader, for the many laughs, encouragement and for embarking on this amazing journey with me. To my children Sidney and Ashley, my source of inspiration, the world will be a better place because of you. To my friends, for their patience and support. To Dr. Erica Fernández for inspiring me to pursue this work. I also dedicate this work to Dr. “Vines” and others, who have created a space for Black male students to thrive. Finally, to Black male students in PWIs, you continue to thrive in spite of the challenging experiences you have been dealt. Your strength, reliance and brilliance inspire me. Continue to shine, continue to use your voice, pursue your purpose. Persist!
Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the support of the Neag School of Education faculty and staff. I am especially indebted to my dissertation committee members, Dr. Milagros Castillo-Montoya, Dr. Jennie Weiner, Dr. Joseph Copper, Dr. Suzanne Wilson and Dr. Casey Cobb for their guidance throughout this journey. It has been my pleasure and honor to work with each of you. I appreciate your time, and dedication to seeing me through this work. I especially thank Dr. Wilson for her personal and professional support as well as her candid feedback through this process. You opened my eyes to the immense value of qualitative research, the power of voice and the strength of a narrative in depicting the story of others. To my advisor Dr. Cobb, it has been an honor to work with you. Your academic and professional guidance, support and encouragement has been invaluable, thank you.
# Table of Contents

Dedication .................................................................................................................. iv  
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................... v  
Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................................... 1  
  Background ................................................................................................................ 2  
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework ........................................ 7  
  Introduction ................................................................................................................ 7  
  Research on Successful College Experiences for Black Males .................................. 8  
    High-Impact Practices .............................................................................................. 8  
    Social Support Groups ........................................................................................... 12  
      Black Greek Fraternities ....................................................................................... 14  
    Religion and Spirituality as Support Mechanisms ................................................. 15  
    Familial Units as Support Structures ..................................................................... 16  
    Mentorship ............................................................................................................ 18  
      Positive Black Role Models ............................................................................... 19  
      Faculty Relationships with Students .................................................................. 20  
    Sport and Athletic Engagement .......................................................................... 21  
    Micro Communities .............................................................................................. 22  
      Learning Communities for African American Males Students ......................... 24  
      Black Cultural Centers (BCCs) ........................................................................... 25  
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................ 26  
    Anti-Deficit Framework ....................................................................................... 27  
    Community Cultural Wealth Theory ..................................................................... 27  
    Storytelling: CRT ................................................................................................. 30  
Chapter 3: Methods .................................................................................................... 32  
  Research Questions .................................................................................................. 35  
    Question 1 ............................................................................................................ 35  
    Question 2 ............................................................................................................ 36  
  Setting ...................................................................................................................... 36  
  Participants ............................................................................................................... 42  
  Data Collection and Analysis ............................................................................... 45  
  Trustworthiness ...................................................................................................... 47  
  Credibility .............................................................................................................. 47
Chapter 1: Introduction

Of the nearly 2.3 million students who entered higher education in 2013, approximately 1 million will leave their first institution within six years, without receiving a college degree (Shapiro et al., 2019). That is, almost 50% of students drop out of college. And while the college enrollment of Black men is proportional to their representation in the U.S. population, the college retention rates of Black men fall far behind those of other racial and gender groups (Toldson, 2012). According to Harper (2006), the college retention rate of Black males is 33%, compared to the 57% retention rate of the total population of U.S. college students.

These are worrisome statistics, as there is persuasive evidence that completing a college education positively influences an individual’s quality of life in the short and long term. Short-term benefits include enjoying learning, growing personally, learning to lead, building friendships, and creating the foundation of lifelong social and professional networks. Long-term benefits include higher lifetime earnings, building wealth for future generations, better health, lower probability of unemployment, better educated children, and longer life expectancy (McMahon, 2009).

A 2017 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine indicates students who enter but fail to complete a two or four year degree program are in a worse position than students with a high school diploma. This is because they are likely to have accumulated student debt for the portion of college attended, but having not completed, they lack the credentials to demand a higher pay. In addition to lacking the credentials of a completed college degree, they are also burdened with the opportunity cost in the form of potential lost wages and unattained work experiences.
The low college retention rate of Black males is no accident. Instead, it is an outcome linked to a wide range of factors, from students’ initial underpreparedness to their college experiences - both those that enhance college persistence and those that constrain it. Exploring and illuminating experiences and structures that have led to inequitable levels of college retention of Black males is extremely important (Harper, 2015), as it sheds light on structural, personal, and environmental challenges that influence educational outcomes. In the same regard, identifying practices, academic, and social support structures that contribute to the college retention of the one-third who persist is equally as important, for it can highlight and document practices that higher education might scale up to reach more students at risk.

The purpose of this study is to document experiences of a group of Black male students who belong to an undergraduate learning community aimed at exploring and supporting the academic achievements of male students who identify as African American/Black.

Background

Many factors have negatively impacted Black male college attainment, the low levels of which have persisted for decades. According to Rury (2009), while the period of 1950 to 1980 saw an uptick in college enrollment, Black males did not benefit from this trend. The G. I. Bill, which aided their White counterparts, was not as accessible to many Blacks due in part to the lack of educational resources devoted to Blacks (Turner & Bound, 2003). Turner and Bound (2003) state that while the statutory terms of the G.I. Bill was race neutral, the limited college investment in southern states where majority of Blacks resided restricted the extent to which they could leverage the Bill and further their education. This created additional barriers to employment and would continue to have downstream impact on Black males, such as lower incomes levels, lower education levels, and higher unemployment to this day. Throughout the
20th century, college attainment for Blacks, especially Black males, continued to be limited by multiple factors, from access to quality education and resources in K-12, to adequate funding for college educational expenses. This educational trend persists today and with an average retention rate of 33%, Black male undergraduates are the least retained group in higher education (Harper, 2015).

Even when Black males get to college, the challenges continue. Brooms and Davis (2017) highlight challenges they face and endure during their college education in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Some of the challenges include social isolation, racism, and academic underpreparedness, all of which can negatively affect students’ learning, social experiences, and ultimate persistence (Brooms et al., 2006). Studies conducted on college campuses by Allen and Solórzano (2001) and Swin, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, and Bylsma (2003) suggest Black students struggle to survive academically while battling microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as intended or unintended slights, snubs, or hostile messages that demean a marginalized group and create physiological stresses (Steele, 2010). For example, thinly veiled slights like, “You are so articulate,” imply it is unusual for someone of that race to the intelligent; or “You must be here on affirmative action,” imply the student did not earn their admittance to college.

According to Kim et al. (2013), students’ perceptions of, interpretations of, and reactions to microaggressions contribute to their level of success, thus these microaggressions can hamper students’ ability to excel academically and earn degrees (Ervin, 2001). To combat these microaggressions and persist through to graduation, Harper (2012) argues successful Black male students develop meaningful peer and mentor relationships on campus, engage in leadership opportunities, including culturally relevant experiences, and receive support from family members and others. Clearly, though, this is a systemic problem, and one that needs to be
addressed on multiple fronts. There exists no one solution, no panacea to redress the abysmally low college retention rates of Black males. Instead, institutions of higher education employ a range of strategies to address low retention rates in their colleges. Some strategies combat stressors and microaggressions while others aim to attract and retain a diverse group of students. One example of these strategies is “themed” housing or learning communities (Lum, 2008).

At the turn of the 20th century, educational philosophers John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn initiated the early concept of learning communities (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Dewey and Meiklejohn believed learning should be an engaging and collaborative effort, where students “drive their own discovery” (Fink & Inkelas, 2015, p. 25). The first known themed community was the University of Wisconsin’s two-year living-learning community, founded in the 1920s (Meiklejohn, 1932). Later, other learning communities were established at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-1960s (Trow, 1998) and at Evergreen State College in Washington in 1970 (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). These communities were created to be interdisciplinary groups with shared interests who engaged in active learning in formal and informal settings. This concept of learning through self-driven discovery has evolved over the years, pulling from the humanistic movement in the 1950s and 1960s to include principles of creating a failure safe space and making sure each student has a legitimate place within the community where they can be seen, valued, and have the freedom to explore their interests (Hod, Bielaczyc, & Ben-Zvi, 2018).

Students typically participate in learning communities during their freshman and sophomore years in college and the communities are typically set up around a theme, e.g., social justice, ecology, women in STEM, engineering, foreign languages, or culture (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). According to Tinto (2003), the current day practice of learning communities has three
things in common. The first practice is shared knowledge. Students engaged in learning communities are encouraged to take similar courses, usually around a central theme. In so doing, they foster a higher level of “cognitive complexity” (p. 2) working and learning together. He argues this high level of cognitive complexity would not easily occur if the courses were dissimilar. The second is shared knowing: learning communities enroll students in similar classes and often times the students reside in designated residence halls, so “they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately, in a way that is part of the academic experience” (p. 2). By asking students to live and learn together, students engage socially and intellectually in ways that promote their learning and discovery of self when engaged with other experiences and thoughts beyond their personal experience. The third is shared responsibility. Learning communities ask their students to be responsible for each other. Collaborative groups are encouraged, and the emphasis is on the success of the collective group.

In addition to spending time together in class, learning community students spend more time with each other outside of the classroom than students in non-learning communities (Tinto, 2003). According to Tinto (2003), the collaborative efforts inside and outside the classroom enables students to bridge the gap between academic and social life on campus, which positively influences the students’ experiences on campus. The overriding objective in creating learning communities is to create a structure for more intentional learning and provide an environment for intellectual and social support systems, with the goal of improving undergraduate education (Dunn & Dean, 2013).

An innovative interpretation of this learning community movement is “affinity housing,” which has enabled students who share common identities, or cultural identities, to live together. For example, some universities promote housing communities for students interested in Latino
and Latin American cultures, as well as students who are interested in studies related to Black/African American males’ experiences. These learning communities are designed to build social networks and act as a conduit for engaging in scholarly discussions relevant to the communities. In some cases, these communities attract and cater to same-race students and provide an avenue for same-race students to find respite from microaggressions they face while engaged with the larger campus community (Grier-Reed, 2013). These affinity communities or culturally relevant spaces (including campus cultural centers), combined with mentoring programs and other student engagement groups, create peer support systems for students, thereby offsetting challenging environments students face and increasing their persistence and retention.

Despite the promise of affinity communities, many PWIs across the U.S. do not use them and, among those that do, in some cases these are met with resistance. In part, this is due to debates concerning the value of “clustering” and concern over segregating students in college campuses. Indeed, the concept of creating culturally relevant, on-campus housing, themed by race or culture, in a higher education environment that should offer a rich liberal education can be interpreted as anti-democratic. However, in-depth studies on the effects of such communities are needed to inform these debates.

Both the arguments for and the concerns about creating a learning/themed community that is distinguished by the racial identities of its members are noteworthy. It is well documented that students of color can feel marginalized and isolated in White-dominated environments. Universities have experimented with themed communities to counter this marginalization and isolation, including communities that are themed by race or culture. My study focuses on a learning community of this type.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

The US educational system - K-12 and higher education, fails to meet the needs of many of its children. Whether labeled as an achievement gap, a learning gap, or an opportunity gap, the persistent disparities in educational performance among subpopulations of U.S. children are well known. The education of African Americans and Hispanics lags behind those of other U.S. race and ethnic groups, such as Whites and Asian Americans, as reflected by test scores, grades, urban high school graduation rates, rates of disciplinary action, and rates of conferral of undergraduate degrees (Howard, 2014). The problem is multidimensional, and there is considerable disagreement about the root causes. According to Harry and Anderson (1999), Black males are consistently placed at risk of failure in on all metrics of school attainment. They lag in academic test and performance, they are referred for special education placement at a much higher rate than their peers, and lead their peers in school infractions. Slaughter-Defoe and Richards (1994) assert that as early as kindergarten, Black males are treated differently from White males and female students. Some of this treatment reflects negative cultural messages that position Black males as violent, unintelligent, and threatening. These perceptions carryover into schools and influence the way Black males are treated, the way are they positioned to learn, and the way learning opportunities are distributed in class (Belton, 1995; Blount & Cunningham, 1996; Harper, 1996).

Scholars alternatively argue that family background and culture, the provision (or lack thereof) of resources (human capital, social capital, financial support), and the existence of systemic social structures perpetuate the achievement gap and account for these striking
differences. Davis (2003) challenges the perception that high rates of school attrition, poor academic performance, and college persistence are in part due to Black males’ inability to fulfil their roles as conventional learners. Rather, Davis (2003) asserts colleges are not meeting the needs of Black male students in ways that allow them to thrive academically, socially, and developmentally. Many solutions have been offered at levels of practice and policy for K-12 schools and higher education. The study reported here focuses in on one strategy that has been used in higher education: a themed learning community dedicated to the support of African American male students. The purpose of this chapter is to, first, summarize relevant research on structures within a college community that foster positive college experiences for Black males and, second, to describe the theoretical framing of the research.

**Research on Successful College Experiences for Black Males**

A growing body of research explores a variety of structures that foster successful college experiences for Black males. This study focuses on such themes that emerge from this scholarship: The use of High-Impact practices in college campuses; social support groups and their influence on student satisfaction; the role of Black Greek fraternities in student engagement; the role of religion and spirituality as a support mechanism for Black male students; the family unit – nuclear and extended as a support structure; mentorship; the influence of positive Black role models; faculty relationships with students; the role of sports and athletic engagement; micro-communities, Black Cultural Centers as support structures, and, in influencing overall positive student experience. I discuss each below.

**High-Impact Practices**

In response to concern over the quality, and public perception of the value of undergraduate liberal arts education, the Association of American Colleges and University
(AAC&U) introduced 10 practices it defined as “high-impact practices” aimed at fostering student learning (Kuh, 2008) based on findings these practices have been beneficial to a diverse group of college students. The practices were not only aimed at promoting student learning, but were also seen as effective mechanisms to prepare students for future careers. These 10 practices are: first year seminars, core curricula, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, diversity and global learning experiences, service learning, internships, and capstones or senior projects. AAC&U researchers attributed student participation in the 10 high impact practices to personal and academic improvements (Johnson & Stage, 2018). Results from the AAC&U study also highlighted the connection between student persistence and their engagement in several practices. According to John and Stage (2018), research on student persistence is focused on the relationship dynamics between the student and on campus engagement. The 10 practices described below are intended to build and foster strong relationships between peers, faculty, and the broader university community, thereby leading to an in-depth and fulfilling academic experience for the students.

The first year (freshman) seminar is a college introductory class geared towards acquainting new college students with skills they need to thrive in a college environment. The seminar course as the name suggests, is taken in the student first year of college. Researchers have highlighted the significance of a student’s first year of college and college retention. According to Potts and Schultz (2008), the first year seminar practice is particularly important among academically at risk students or students whose high school grade point average is were lower than that of their peers. However, regardless of prior academic achievements, all freshmen are encouraged to take the class. Studies on the practice suggest freshman seminar classes that focus on helping students develop good study habits, as well as those that educate students on
health-and wellness-related topics have the greatest impact on persistence (Porter & Swing, 2006).

Core curricula are common courses required for undergraduates. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), students benefit academically from a purposefully designed sequencing of courses. In designing common curricula courses for students, they benefit from taking courses together with their peers, learning together, improving study habits and have the additional benefit of building relationships with peers, another important factor in student persistence.

Learning communities, as already noted, is a central concept to this study. Several researchers, including Kuh (2008) and Buch and Spaulding (2008), assert gains in learning, as well as positive academic and social experiences when students engage in learning communities. According to Zhao and Kuh (2004), learning communities - another form of micro communities, support intellectual growth and foster social connections among students, which help create a sense of belongingness and community among the participants. Zhao and Kuh (2004) studied 80,479 freshman and seniors randomly selected from 365 colleges and universities to determine whether participation in learning communities is linked to student engagement and satisfaction. The study results link students participating in learning communities to higher academic performance, increase in college retention and overall satisfaction with the college experience.

In highlighting High Impact practices, Kuh (2008) attributes writing to increased oral communication, information literacy, and qualitative reasoning; thus writing courses are yet another high leverage practice. According to Johnson and Stage (2018), a student’s personal writing in an important way for them to summarize and demonstrate knowledge of material, to integrate it with their experiences, and to gauge how well students have mastered the content.
Collaborative assignments, which entail students working collaboratively on projects, are associated with increased personal and academic benefits (Cabrera et al., 2002). Collaborative work includes informal study groups, research projects and team-based class assignments (Kuh, 2008).

Undergraduate research involves engaging students in independent research, which may include empirical observations, innovative technologies, and research projects, all of which are linked to gains in learning and personal responsibility (Douglas & Zhao, 2013). Typically in conducting this form of research, undergraduate students are paired with faculty members who act as mentors a conduct I discuss on more detail later on.

Study abroad programs, designed to expand students’ cultural experiences and sensitivities, develop and foster independence and improve students’ communication skills and self-awareness (Salisbury, 2011). Metzger (2006) positively linked students’ engagement in study abroad and cultural exchange programs to graduation rates, retention, and college GPA.

Service learning involves incorporating experiences such as community service into classroom learning. Prentice and Robinson (2010) assert that the benefits of service learning include increases in personal independence, self-confidence, and sense of responsibility, as well as an overall improvement in personal development, all of which are linked to increased college persistence.

Internships provide students with professional experiences in environments where they may seek work post-graduation. Studies by Binder et al. (2015) show correlations between students’ participation in college internships and their academic outcomes. An additional benefit
is that students develop a practical understanding of the work environment in their chosen profession which might help in clarifying their post-graduation goals.

Lastly, *capstone or senior projects* are usually described as culminating experiences and integration of knowledge acquired through the course of study. According to Collier (2000), students participating in capstone projects demonstrate stronger sense of responsibility, communication skills, and social skills. The capstone experience also gives students the final boost in preparation for post-undergraduate work (Johnson & Stage, 2018).

According Johnson and Stage (2018) the first four high impact practices highlighted above are suited for the early years of a student’s college career. These practices are geared towards developing the social and peer supports of incoming students, as well as helping them develop good study habits. As upper classmen, the later six practices build on students’ confidence, independence, sense of self, and increase their global and cultural awareness. Although the literature highlighted above is not specifically tied to Black males and college attainment, other literatures point to similar mechanisms and practices as effective in addressing Black males and college retention, and are also addressed later in this document.

**Social Support Groups**

As discussed in Chapter 1, Black male students confront various forms of oppressions and discrimination as part of their everyday college experiences in PWIs (Allen, 1992; Smith, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2002). These experiences include microaggressions and racist confrontations with students and university staff. The accumulation of these negative experiences can result in frustration, anger, and exhaustion (Harper, 2015). Smith, Allen and Danely (2007) point to the concept of racial battle fatigue -- a psychological stress response to frustration, anger, and exhaustion - as a symptom of Black males’ experience in PWIs. This constant stress
and fatigue can lead to both dissatisfaction with the college experience and blocked academic aspirations for many Black males (Bowman & Smith, 2002; Smith, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006; Steele, 2007).

Harper (2015) conducted a study observing successful ways high achieving Black male students resist and respond to racist stereotypes and racial battle fatigue. The study, conducted at 42 colleges and universities across the country, involved 219 high achieving Black male students. Harper defined high achieving students as students with a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher who also have extensive records of leadership. Findings from his study suggests Black male student engagement in social groups and programs provide a platform where students openly discussed issues specific to Black males, providing an avenue where students jointly craft effective responses to racism or racist stereotypes (Harper, 2015). In findings from another study, Harper (2006) showed that Black males who were actively engaged in campus organizations, social groups, and who held leadership positions had more social and academic experiences that were positive and had better college outcomes than their peers. Harper’s research shows Black male students also gain social capital, through their access to exclusive information networks (Harper, 2008), which then enhances their acumen to thrive in professional or educational settings where they are racially underrepresented (Harper, 2006a; Harper, McGowan, Davis, Ingram, Jones, & Platt, 2011).

But a program’s effectiveness depends on its form and structure. For example, there are different forms of social groups in college campuses. Some of these include affinity groups that appeal to specific cultural groups, academic and social Greek fraternities, and various pre-professional social clubs. Cokley (2001) reports Black males increasingly seek out and become associated with organizations and activities where they have access to more Black male role
models and perceived opportunities for higher success. Thus, pairing counselors, faculty, and/or advisors with students of the same race can increase the likelihood that Black students will use those services.

Research has demonstrated the interrelatedness between engaging students in social groups and student satisfaction. Engagement in structured activities, social groups, and leadership opportunities outside of the classroom, all of which build cultural capital, is beneficial to all students, including Black males (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinze & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Engaging students early as they arrive on the college campus is an important factor in achieving successful outcomes as students are more likely to use those services in their first year of college than in the following years (Trippi & Cheatham, 1991). For Black male students in PWIs, the presence of these formal structures and students’ participation in activities within and outside of the learning communities are an important mechanism for coping and thriving in these environments (Trippi & Cheatham, 1991).

*Black Greek Fraternities* are an important social structure that Black male students benefit from. According to Hughey et al. (2011), mainstream collegiate fraternal organizations in their origins served as vehicles to keep alive the spirit, self-sacrifice, camaraderie, and acted as a vehicle for maintaining American southern values. Membership in these organizations are selective, the chosen where supported and groomed to be members of the American elite by the established leaders of the fraternity (Jones, 2004). The origins Black Greek fraternities, though formed with goal of grooming members to be American elite had the issue of race and social justice, civil rights and education to contend with (Brown, 2011). Indeed Dubois (1903) in discussing the Negro problem asserts that social and cultural capital including knowledge, attitudes and behaviors when combined with economic capital would improve the socioeconomic
standing of Black Americans. Thus presented the idea of the Talented Tenth, a group of one in ten Black men who would become educated leaders and aid in uplifting their race. Black Greek fraternities became an avenue to promote success, uplift one another, drive their members to fulfilling their highest purpose and as such, were recognized as entities for promoting prestigious values and success (Jones, 2004). They also became a gateway for broadening the various forms of capital and acted as a conduit between the Black and White communities while preserving Black cultural identity (Brown et al., 2012; Langston et al., 2014).

Black collegiate Greek fraternities through their commitment to the social and intellectual growth of their members are avenues where student members develop their identities as Black males, learn how to cope with racial aggressions and build affirming strategies for persisting in White spaces (Jones, 2004).

Religion and Spirituality as Support Mechanisms

Religion and spirituality are known to play an important part in the lives of African Americans. Though religion and spirituality are sometimes used interchangeably, in this context they are viewed as separate ideologies. Whereas religion is a set of organized beliefs and practices shared by a group or community and centered on a religious institution, spirituality is an individual practice engaging in life’s big questions about peace, purpose, values and belonging (Parks, 2000). Using spirituality as a backbone to life, as a source of hope and a means to cope with and explain life’s big and sometimes painful questions has been central to the African American experience (Stewart, 2016). Noting the challenges that plagued the lives of African Americans, Dubois (1903) pointed to spirituality as a means Black Americans use to make sense of their duality as both Negroes and Americans. From the turn to the 20th century through the Civil Rights Era and indeed the current day, the Black church and spirituality among
Black people has been a cornerstone in seeking social justice, in pushing for social changes and in persisting through racial strife (Stewart, 2016). For Black college students, spirituality is used as a means to adapt, to make meaning of their identities, college experiences and to pursue their purpose (Watson, 2006). Beyond using spirituality and religion as a support system, Watson (2006) asserts Black men use it as a “creative soul force” and a “resistant soul force” (p. 114). Watson describes the creative soul force as the spiritual support which enables African Americans to transform their environments through the use of Black culture, and the resistant soul force as the drive that enable African Americans to thrive, survive and persist through oppressive systems. Watson (2016) added that the use of spirituality as both a creative and resistant force is a motivator for Black students in the persistent pursuit of their academic goals even in the face of oppression, challenges and unwelcoming campus environments. In a study conducted by Watson (2006), she found that Black students referred to the church congregation back home as their support structure. Although they were not able to attend religious services while on campus, they referred to their religious upbringing as guiding their spiritual frameworks and knew the congregation prayed for them, encouraged them and were rooting for them. Knowing they had a supportive congregation back home helped the students press on through their challenges.

Familial Units as Support Structures

“The family is a principal source of support for African American students” (Bonner II, 2010, p. 78). For African American male students and many students of color, family extends beyond the nuclear family and includes close friends, church groups and community members. The family unit provides financial support, affection, security, guidance. They booster the students’ confidence by way of providing emotional support in college spaces which can be in
opposition to the background experiences of the students prior to college (White & Cones, 1999). According to Bonner II, (2010), students juggle their academic load, life, and all the challenges that come with young adulthood. This process may become overwhelming for the student, leading to despair, and frustration and in some cases, leads to dropping out to college. The support of family acts as a buttress of support in what can be an overwhelming college experience. Family friends and church groups provide support by way of encouragement, saying prayers on behalf of the student and setting high expectations. These supportive acts help students feel affirmed and valued by the community and in so doing, gives them the needed boost to persist they hit a rough patch in their progression through college.

Herndon and Moore III (2002) assert that although academic and emotion support are important for student success, the types of support students need vary based on their college tenure. For example, the types of support a first year student receives is vastly different from the support a graduating senior needs. First year students typically need family support with issues dealing with transition from high school to college, from the home environment to campus life and with issues such as homesickness, and feelings of alienation. Graduating seniors on the other hand, need familial support as they enter the work force or prepare for post graduate work. Such assistance may include access to professional networks for help in securing work, or financial assistance to bridge the transition from dorm life to an apartment or living outside of the dorms (Herndon & Moore III, 2002).

There is evidence pointing to the importance of having familial support in positive college outcomes such as persistence and academic achievement for Black male students. Therefore, it is important for colleges to foster a climate where families feel welcome and are
encouraged to actively participate in supporting their children through the various stages of their collegiate work.

**Mentorship**

According to Saddler (2010 p.181) “a mentor is often described as one who offers advice and counsel, and helps in the overall personal, professional and social development of the individual being mentored. Mentoring relationships generally involve an experienced member of an organization providing information, support and guidance to a less-experienced member of an organization.” Aspects of mentoring include emotional, psychological, academic, career support and guidance (Baier, Markman, & Pernice-Duca, 2016; Crisp, 2009). Some examples of formal and informal mentoring programs include peer to peer mentoring, and faculty to student mentoring, which may be part of a structured program or through unstructured and informal relationships. Micro communities such as learning communities, which I will discuss in later sections provide an avenue for mentoring and in so doing, support student persistence, educational performance and self-efficacy (Baier, 2016). Mentors can be formally assigned and may last for shorter or longer time periods, or they can informally arise through engagement in organizations, events, or groups. Mentoring has been used as a strategy to increase retention across ethnic groups, genders, and Black males, as well as to enhance social and cultural capital.

In a quantitative study conducted with 237 first year students, Baier, Markman and Pernice-Duca (2016) examined the extent to which mentorship influenced students’ intent to persist. They found mentorship positively impacts students’ intentions to persist at the end of their first semester in college. Concurrently, Harper (2015) demonstrates that student mentorship by same race faculty in an HBCU bolstered student motivation and persistence. Discussions associated with mentoring and Black male students encourage pairing students with mentors of
the same cultural background as Black students. The reasoning for this pairing is to connect students to a mentor that is familiar with the challenges and pitfalls as well as opportunities for the student (Bonner II, 2010). For example, in addition to providing academic support, a socially and culturally attuned mentor may be able to provide guidance on how to navigate on campus microaggressions.

The availability of personally relatable or culturally congruent mentors who have successfully navigated the rough waters these students face increases the likelihood of a successful mentoring relationship, enabling the student to thrive, to build confidence in their academic work and to persist academically and socially through to graduation.

Positive Black Role Models: According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, a role model is someone who others look to as a good example, a person that represents the inspirational ideal and one who inspires others to emulate behavioral qualities, and personal or professional success. For young adults, these role models offer a window to the future and are a living proof goal attainment. Whether intentional or unintentional, the lives of young people in a variety of ways are influenced by adults in their environment, as they look to adults to emulate what is appropriate behavior and to identify what they would want to be like when they grow up (Hurd et al., 2009). These observed behaviors, positive or negative may be replicated by adolescents. For example, adolescents who live in high crime neighborhoods tend to have an abundance of role models for criminal behaviors, likewise, adolescents or students whose role models exhibited positive behavior were more likely to be resilient, and have a higher self-esteem (Heide, 1997; Yancey et al., 2002).

Although role models are typically parents and other family members, students may also acquire role models from school relationships such as a faculty member, academic advisor or
through other social networks. Researchers, Bryant and Zimmerman (2003), Nelson and Valliant (1993) assert Black males whose fathers are not present but have a positive adult male role model like a Big brother are associated with positive outcomes, equivalent to those with present fathers. These relationships through shared learning and stories of successes and failures bolsters the students’ confidence, makes them feel worthwhile and may act as a sounding board for the student in negotiating through difficult situations. In addition, students are able to gain access to the role models social capital by way of access to their personal and professional networks therefore creating a path to engage in valued internships, research opportunities and other resources that would otherwise not be available to the student (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003; Sampson, 1997).

For Black makes, having a role model who is attuned to the nuances of higher education and who is invested in the students’ development, and helps them navigate the academy is an important factor in ensuring the retention and persistence in colleges and universities (Bonner II, 2010; Sutton, 2006).

*Faculty Relationships with Students:* Another important mentoring relationship is that of faculty with students. For Black male students, faculty mentoring is an important factor in persisting and achieving academic success in college (Clark & Logan, 2015; Kuh & Hu, 2001). Studies by Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) suggest positive links between mentoring, retention, and college satisfaction. Strayhorn & Terrell assert that a mentoring relationship between faculty and African American male students where students assist with research projects, beyond increased college satisfaction, offered additional benefits such as providing career focus, developing research skills and drove intellectual stimulation. Quality interactions between faculty members and students are strong predictors of student success, since working closely and developing a
relationship with a faculty member creates a space where students can learn, freely ask questions and build confidence (Saddler, 2010; Johnson, 2007). Students also have the ability to engage in research projects with the faculty member, in so doing, they acquire research experience and gain practical knowledge of research processes such as writing proposals, research design, and analysis. Through this relationship, students are able to learn of future career opportunities, and have their mentors act as references for graduate school applications or their job placements (Saddler, 2010). According to Comeaux (2013), the limited access to faculty members of color and negative perceptions of about Black males’ ability by faculty is a barrier that limits relationship building between faculty and Black males. The result of which impacts the students’ ability to secure internships, valuable research opportunities and the overall satisfaction of the student.

Overall, mentorships in different forms – faculty to student, peer to peer, and other forms of mentoring relationships across various racial and gender groups are important to promoting a positive student experience. Black students perceive same race peers and faculty as more supportive, sensitive, and understanding of struggles and challenges they face in college, which supports the case for same race social spaces, networks, and learning communities (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). However, access to and availability of same race faculty members who support and attend to these micro communities may pose a challenge given there are limited faculty members of color in PWIs. In PWIs, the additional burden on the few faculty of color in terms of workload is an additional concern.

**Sport and Athletic Engagement**

Sports and athletic engagement are interwoven in the American societal experience. From pee wee sports teams played by young children to division I sports teams and professional
leagues. Sports and athletic engagement is viewed as a mechanism to promote positive self-concept and social and peer group interaction and a way to build leadership skills (Harris, 2014; Videon, 2002). Honora (2003), in analyzing engagement in high school sport programs asserts that, sports and athletic engagement is an avenue to Black males who may be socially detached from the school to identify with their school community and in a sense, improve their school experiences. Several literatures highlight the positive links between school community engagement, student-faculty interaction and positive student educational outcomes - the same is true for college athletes (Comeaux, 2011). Despite the integral role of student-faculty interactions in determining positive college outcomes, when it comes to college athletes, creating these relationships are not without challenges as most faculty hold more negative attitudes toward student athletes than the non-athletic peers (Bauscom & Lanz, 2001; Comeaux, 2011). For Black male student athletes who may already feel marginalized being in a PWI, the situation is even direr. According to Gaston-Gayles and Hu (2009), student athletes benefited more and showed positive impacts on personal self-concept, learning and communication skills based on their interactions with their non-athletic peers than with faculty members. This finding is likely due to stereotypical perceptions of college athletes that challenge their intellectual abilities and their commitment to their education.

Unfortunately, these distorted perceptions along with an unwelcoming campus environment unless remedied, undermine the student athletes’ educational efforts and may even lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of low academic outcomes (Comeaux, 2001; Steel, 1997).

**Micro Communities**

Micro communities, are a collection of a small group of students who share common interests, and in this case, a common cultural heritage. Examples of micro communities include
cultural centers, student groups, learning and living communities. Micro communities exist in formal and informal structures. According to Grier-Reed (2010), these communities act as sanctuaries for coping with racial microaggressions. Micro communities, when culturally relevant have been found to address the social and psychological needs of Black students by providing social support systems, networks and resources for students. In addition to being a space where students can de-stress from racial tensions, there is also evidence participating in such groups led to the feeling of validation, connectedness, resilience, intellectual stimulation and the feeling of having a “home base” on campus (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008).

Grier-Reed et al. (2016) describe a study of an African American network group founded by two Black psychologists in a Midwestern PWI. The student network group met weekly over lunch. The meetings began with introductions and check-ins. Students shared their highs, lows for the week and openly discussed any topics they desired. There was no set curriculum, no agendas for topics, only discussions facilitated by Black faculty or by graduate students. The researchers found participating in the group gave students a feeling of a home base on campus and offset their feelings of marginalization.

In a similar study, Grier-Reed, Ehlert, and Dade (2011) found Black students who participated in a same race student network appeared to have higher retention and graduation rates than their counterparts on campus who did not participate in similar networks. They highlighted the following increases in retention and graduation rates: an 87% one-year retention rate compared to 80% retention rate for students who were not part of the network, a 53% four-year retention rate compared to a 33% rate, and a 68% graduation rate compared to a 52% rate (Grier-Reed et al., 2011). This study by Grier-Reed et al. (2011) highlights student engagement
in micro communities, including social networks and learning communities, increased resilience, feeling of connectedness and college retention.

**Learning Communities for African American Males Students.** As I have highlighted in earlier sections, one of the strategies colleges and universities use in addressing Black male college retention, is the creation of learning communities dedicated to promoting successful college outcomes for Black males. On such example is the creation of the African American Male Initiative (AAMI) in 2002. This initiative was formed by the University System of Georgia (USG) to address issues of Black male achievement in their university. (USG, 2012a; Thomas Hill, & Boes, 2013). According to Thomas Hill and Boes (2013), the purpose of the AAMI learning community is to “increase the likelihood that African American males are retained during their first year of college” (p. 39). USG accomplished this by designing a learning community with formal support structures such as mentoring, educational and social programming, academic advising, tutoring, and networking opportunities with business. Thomas Hill, and Boes (2013) conducted a study on the AAMI learning community to determine to what extent degree students participating in the learning community were satisfied with the services provided, the effectiveness of the learning community and to learn of any improvements that needed to be made. Findings of the Thomas Hill and Boes (2013) study indicate students were satisfied with the resources and services provided by the learning community. The students also reported positive relationships with other Learning community participants, faculty and staff. Finally, the study participants credited the AAMI learning community with “keeping them motivated and focused on their academics” (Thomas Hill & Boes, 2013, p. 54). These findings reported by Thomas Hill and Boes (2013) are consistent with prior research by others including
Strayhorn, (2010) and Zhao and Kuh, (2004), which report that supportive campus environments and structures such as learning communities enable successful outcomes for students.

**Black Cultural Centers (BCCs).** BCC’s are an example of culturally relevant micro communities. The first BCCs were founded at large PWIs in the 1960s as “a place where attitudes, values, knowledge and skills could be compared, debated and shared. It was also a safe haven for students, a place to retreat from the perceived hostility of an unwelcoming campus” (Young & Hannon, 2002, p. 104). In addition to being a home away from home, BCCs catered to the social and academic needs of Black students (Strayhorn, 2016). According to Strayhorn et al., (2016) Black students use BCC’s for a variety of purposes. BCC’s provide students access to resources such as books, computers and provide a collaboration space where students can study, work on projects together and acts as a safe space to hang out with friends. Given the range of challenges Black males face on colleges campuses and across social institutions, creating a space where they make meaningful connections with same race peers enhances their college experiences (Brooms & Davis, 2017). This community of sameness or culturally affirming space reduces the feeling of isolation and can offset the effects of stereotypes, and racial battle fatigue (Steele, 2007). By creating and allocating resources to these spaces, colleges demonstrate their desire to grow and foster a diverse and inclusive student body. Indeed, in the years since the emergence of the first BCC, colleges have created other multicultural centers to cater to the needs of their increasingly diverse students. The presence of these multi-cultural centers including Latinx cultural centers and Asian cultural centers affords students a sense of mattering and belonging to the larger campus community (Strayhorn et al., 2016).

It is important to note that these spaces do not address a process or mechanism for integrating minority students, in particular Black males, into the larger campus community nor
are they designed to serve that function. Studies support providing separate spaces from the larger campus community, a home base where minority students can feel at home. An opposing argument to creating culturally relevant spaces is that these spaces address the needs of a particular group but do not address proactive integration of all racial groups across campus. In an increasing diverse student body, creating culturally relevant spaces for the various minority groups pose a financial and staffing challenge for schools. Additional studies are needed to understand the mechanisms for creating a larger campus community free from stressors, one that is welcoming and safe for all diverse groups. Studies are also needed to understand limits on the effectiveness of micro communities, to understand what structures and programs within the learning communities are most effective and yield the desired results (Pike, 2000).

**Theoretical Framework**

Three frameworks inform this study. First is an anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2010) that not only highlights the challenges faced by Black male students on college campuses, but also focuses on factors that have contributed to their success in the face of these challenges. Second, is Community Cultural Wealth theory (Yosso, 2005), which I use to highlight various embodied capital or assets Black male students possess that contribute to their persistence and college retention while facing challenging environments. I draw from one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) – storytelling, highlighting how students narrate their stories in voice and use these stories in solidarity with other students to persist. I also use storytelling as a means to encourage participants to use their voice, own their stories and share their unique experiences to inform the study’s methodology.
Anti-Deficit Framework

The anti-deficit framework developed by Harper (2010) is informed by theories from psychology, sociology and education. It challenges the mode of research inquiry that explores Black male educational attainment from a deficit perspective. Cooper et al. (2015) assert that the objective of the anti-deficit achievement framework is to “shift the focus of inquiry from deficits, shortcomings, limitations, and negative outcomes to successes, facilitators, strengths, and positive outcomes” (p. 149). Challenges plaguing Black male college students in education are well documented. Successful outcomes that include persistence, academic success, and social affiliations are also evident. To better understand Black male student success in college, I will use the anti-deficit framework to examine this work.

The anti-deficit framework outlines three pipeline points for use in understanding Black male student success in college (Harper, 2012): pre-college socialization, college achievement, and post college success. Concurrent with these pipeline points are eight researchable dimensions: familial factors, K-12 forces out-of-school, college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness. In this study, I will focus on one of the pipeline points -- college achievement and two of the aforementioned dimensions: out of class engagement and enriching educational experiences.

Community Cultural Wealth Theory

Bowen (1997), Leslie and Brinkman (1998), and McPherson (1993), among others, highlight college education as a means to build wealth and seek upward social mobility. Cultural capital theory portrays how the presence or absence of certain resources can influence an individual's quest for upward social mobility (Hines et al., 2015). According to Bourdieu (1986),
there are three forms of cultural capital: embodied, institutional, and objectified. Embodied cultural capital refers to an individual’s attitudes, values, and practices. This form of cultural capital is acquired over time, through families, social groups, and community. For example, a person’s accent, dialect, and mannerisms are examples of embodied capital. Within the context of college students, this includes a student who speaks with an accent or speaks a different dialect and the students’ ability to engage with faculty and other students in a vernacular that is valued and appreciated by members of their university community. Institutional capital refers to formal credentials or titles, such as certificates received from an institution such as graduation from a noted high school, a college preparatory school, college degree, and medical license. Finally, objectified cultural capital refers to tangible assets that enable us to achieve upward social mobility, including cars, homes, and paintings (Bourdieu, 1986; Hines et al., 2015).

Using the Bourdieuan theory to examine Black males and college retention highlights how inequities manifest in an educational setting based on one’s given or acquired attributes. Black male students coming from a low socioeconomic background may be disadvantaged in a college setting without the financial support of their families (objectified capital). First-generation Black male college students may lack knowledge of the inner workings of higher education including, how to seek help from advisors, approach faculty members for mentoring, and how to access available resources like career counseling or internships which may assist in their persistence through college (embodied and institutional capital) (Hines et al., 2015). Without credentials, degrees, or prior academic recognitions, the students may lack institutional capital.

Yosso (2005) asserts these forms of cultural capital encapsulate values, skills, and assets valued by privileged groups in our society while ignoring other forms of capital possessed by
minority groups or People of Color (POC). The traditional interpretations of cultural capital listed above do not embody or acknowledge other forms of cultural capital/assets that Black males possess and leverage as college students (Yosso, 2005). For example, a student’s graduation from a noted college preparatory school is a valued form of institutional capital. However, a student’s ability to speak in multiple dialects (or perhaps their vernacular), navigate city streets, use buses, trains, run errands, or persist in settings where they are a minority, are not typically valued forms of capital within the Bordieuian context of cultural capital.

Yosso (2005), using a CRT lens, challenges the deficit view of cultural capital by conceptualizing various forms of community cultural wealth not recognized by Bourdieu and others. These forms of community cultural wealth include:

1) aspirational capital which refers to the ability to allow oneself or children to develop resiliency and maintain hopes or dreams of a better future even in the face of opposition;
2) linguistic capital, the intellectual and social skills attained through the ability or lived experiences of communicating in more than one language or style;
3) familial capital, a commitment to family – nuclear and extended, to a community that builds on shared history, a shared commitment to the communities’ resources including caring and providing coping mechanisms for members of the community;
4) social capital, including community resources, peer groups, churches, youth groups, mentoring groups that provide emotional support, financial support or academic support as the student pursues higher education;
5) navigational capital, skills of maneuvering through social or academic institutions – in particular, institutional structures that are hostile to People of Color (POC); and
6) resistant capital, the motivation to challenge inequity and fight for social justice.

These six forms of community cultural wealth challenge the deficit thinking of cultural capital as it relates to Black men in college and brings to light the various forms of cultural wealth/capital Black male students possess and capitalize on to persist through college.

**Storytelling: CRT**

CRT emerged in the 1970s through the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Bell and Freeman proposed the theory in response to the slow pace of U. S. racial reform. They argued the traditional approaches of filing briefs, conducting protests, and appealing to the moral sensibilities of decent citizens produced few gains (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT, which is an offshoot of Critical Legal Studies, challenged the scholarship that focused on doctrines and policy analysis. Rather, it emphasized social and cultural contexts and how laws and policies affect specific individuals and minority groups (Gordon, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

There are no “canonical set of doctrines or methodologies to which all CRT scholars subscribe” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). However, CRT scholars subscribe to four notions: (a) that racism is “normal, not aberrant in American society” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv); (b) storytelling empowers the oppressed to name their reality by using their voice to tell their story and it is used to “analyze myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv); (c) CRT argues combating racism requires sweeping changes rather than the slow process of arguing legal precedence; and (d) interest convergence (Bell, 1980), change occurs when the interests of Whites and People of Color intersect rather than based on the moral sensibilities of the powerful (Ladson-Billings, 1998). A significant amount of CRT scholarship focuses on the use of voice or storytelling to inject cultural
perspectives and minority viewpoints to compelling stories involving racial injustice (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

According to Ladson-Billings (1998), a primary reason stories or narratives are important in CRT is they add voice and context to others’ experiences. Stories give credence to the experiences of others. They provide the context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Everyone has a story. In this study, the young men tell their stories in affinity groups to empower themselves and the peers. They use the stories to recount and repair broken dignity; their stories are colored with a glow of strength, hope and persistence.
Chapter 3: Methods

In this qualitative study, I use a phenomenological design to inform the experiences of Black male students living in a learning community while attending a PWI. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), phenomenology is “an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (p. 91). Essentially, this method of inquiry focuses on the study of an individual or a set of individuals’ lived experiences in the world and allows researchers to describe what certain experiences are like for participants (Neubauer, et al., 2019; van Manen, 1990). The goal of this type of inquiry is to describe the meaning of the experience from the perspective of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The concept of phenomenology has evolved over the years. There are a broad set of phenomenological approaches.

In this study, I draw from two contemporary approaches to phenomenology – the transcendental and hermeneutic. Husserl and Heidegger are credited for defining the transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenological approaches (Kumar, 2012; Neubauer, et al., 2019). I describe each briefly.

Transcendental phenomenology: This approach to phenomenology stems from the work of Edmund Husserl, whose approach to philosophy was to reject the absolute focus on the objective observations of an external reality. Rather, he argued that studied phenomena should include objective and subjective observations, as perceived by the individual studied. He argued that “to understand the reality of a phenomenon is to understand the phenomenon as it is lived by a person” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 92). The use of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenological approach, also known as descriptive approach, requires the researcher to set aside their own
perceptions and preconceived notions, to focus only on the participant’s experience of the phenomenon and identify the themes of that lived experience. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), the researcher’s goal in this method of inquiry is to “achieve transcendental subjectivity” – a state where the researcher’s biases, and preconceptions are assessed and neutralized, so they do not influence the study” (p. 93). To achieve this position of a “blank slate” or tabula rasa, the researcher uses a process known as bracketing, setting aside previous knowledge, assumptions, understandings, and personal views of the phenomena. To ensure appropriate bracketing is maintained, the researcher may have other researchers review and cross validate the data collected through a process called triangulation to determine whether the data corroborates the researcher’s analysis. Once this is done, each participant’s experience is considered individually, and the meaning from these experiences highlighted. The researcher also conducts member checking, a process whereby study participants review the validated data to ensure the essence of their experiences are accurately captured and represented.

*Hermeneutic phenomenology*, also known as interpretive phenomenology, originates from the work of Martin Heidegger, Husserl’s student. Heidegger’s prior career in theology influenced his work and ideologies, which states that an individual’s realities are influenced by the world they live in, and these realities influence the choices one makes (Neubauer et al., 2019). For Heidegger, interpretative phenomenology takes into account an individual’s personal history and the culture in which they were raised. A difference in transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach is that transcendental phenomenology focuses on human experience and how it is lived. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the relationship between an individual and how they are influenced by the world they live in (Neubauer et al., 2019). Another difference in hermeneutic phenomenology is the role of the researcher in the
inquiry. Instead of bracketing off the researcher’s perspective, hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the researcher cannot get rid of their personal history -- which is referred to as lifeworld (Neubauer et al., 2019). Instead, Heidegger regards the researcher’s past experiences and knowledge as valuable aids in the inquiry. Rather than take an unbiased approach to the research inquiry, the hermeneutic approach asks the researcher to openly acknowledge their understanding and preconceptions and reflect on their perspectives as part of the analysis process (Moran, 2000; Neubauer et al., 2019). Essentially, the interpretative work of hermeneutic phenomenology begins with the identification and investigation of a lived experience, and reflection on the themes of said experience. The researcher then analyzes the data by engaging in an iterative process of reflection and writing, while maintaining a strong focus of the studied phenomenon and the different factors that influence the experience. The final step of this analysis -- called the hermeneutic circle -- involves integrating all the different parts of the data and factors that influence the understanding of the phenomena (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Although these two phenomenological approaches are distinct on their own merit, there are significant similarities. This study draws from concepts in transcendental and hermeneutic approaches, in investigating the lived experiences of Black male students in Webster House, but also speaks to the historical and societal factors that influence their experiences as students in a PWI. Though I bracket my subjectivity in this research, I also understand that – as with any research -- the researcher’s lens is reflected in the study. Thus, beyond engaging in member checking with study participants, I also acknowledge my subjectivity as a characteristic of this study.
Research Questions

To explore the experiences of Black male students living in a culturally relevant and gender specific learning community, and to understand how academic, social, cultural, and gender specific institutional structures can influence the retention of Black males in PWIs, I framed two questions, using an anti-deficit perspective. These questions highlight the interconnectedness between retention rates, mentorships, social groups, and micro communities. Using an anti-deficit perspective, these questions shifts the framing of the study from a limitation focus to that of a positive/strength focus (Harper, 2012). For example, a deficit-oriented question asks, “Why do few Black male students have mentors?” However, an anti-deficit-oriented question asks, “How do Black male students go about fostering relationships with mentors?” The framing of these questions capitalizes on the successful experiences of other Black male students.

**Question 1.** What are the learning and social experiences of Black male students living in a Black male learning community while attending a PWI?

a. How does participation in programs and mentoring influence Black males’ learning and social experiences?

b. How does participation in programs and opportunities [within this Learning Community] influence Black males’ satisfaction in the PWI?

The objective of question 1 and the sub questions is to explore, understand, and interpret study participants’ college experiences. Study participants shared their experiences and voiced their realities within the context of their participation in learning and social micro communities, as well as their interactions with the larger campus population. The question further explores whether the presence and participation in micro communities, social groups, learning
Communities, and mentoring sessions enhances participants’ college experience. And it explores whether - and to what extent, participants find respite because of the presence of these programs.

**Question 2.** In what ways does participation in these programs influence the belief or perception of self for Black males in this PWI?

According to Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992), the more capable students judge themselves to be, the more challenging the goals they embrace. Improving self-efficacy may have a lasting positive impact on students, encouraging students to set higher goals and envision their future possible selves, which is a skill that is beneficial during and after college.

The objective of this question is to explore students’ experiences while participating in programs tailored to Black males and how these experiences influence the students’ perception of self. It explores whether participating in these programs altered Black male students’ perception of their abilities, goal setting, and future possible selves.

**Setting**

The setting for this study is a Black male learning community, in a large U.S. public research university, which I refer to as Webster House. The subject PWI enrolls approximately 18,000 undergraduate students. An estimated 15,000 students are enrolled in the main campus and about 3,000 at other locations within the state. The university includes several schools and colleges with various undergraduate degrees and over 100 majors, as well as graduate and professional degree programs.

The stated objective of Webster House is to support the scholastic efforts of male students who identify as African American or Black. Freshman or sophomore male students interested in researching or engaging in topics related to the experience of Black males in higher
education can apply and join Webster House. Webster House supports the scholastic efforts of these students by providing academic and social support, professional development, mentoring, and building of professional and peer networks. In addition, the learning community provides students access to research opportunities. This multidimensional approach is intended to increase the retention, academic and social success, of Black male students by augmenting their educational and social experiences, and to foster success in graduate and professional schools.

The Webster House learning community, which was established four years ago, consists of freshmen and sophomores, a cohort of 40 to 50 students split somewhat evenly by graduating class. Members of Webster House reside on a single floor in Bryant Hall, an eight-story building dedicated to housing various learning communities on campus. This approximately 200,000 square foot residence hall provides students many opportunities to engage with each other and pursue interests based on their academic majors, interests, or background. A team made up of a faculty director, graduate assistants, peer mentors, and student leaders lead the learning community.

Application to join Webster House is through an online form. Once accepted, new students are welcomed during a pinning ceremony. Alumni, upperclassmen, and parents are encouraged to participate in the welcoming ceremony. The faculty director Dr. Vines, welcomes incoming students, using the opportunity to set the vision for the new class. The vision is focused on promoting a culture of excellence, accountability, brotherhood, and the pursuit of purpose. Upperclassmen pin new students, an experience a participant described as “passing of the torch” to the next class, “We are keeping the legacy going.”

As a member of Webster House learning community, students are required to participate in several functions. There are mandatory two hours of study hall each week. The actual hours
spent in study hall may increase or decrease depending on students’ academic standing. Students with a GPA of 3.0 or higher may opt out of study hall. However, most students who are eligible to opt out of study hall do not. Rather, they choose to participate and act as mentors to other students. Students study collectively, offering assistance to their peers when needed. As one student commented during a Webster House meeting, “I have already taken organic chemistry, biology, calculus and physics, if any of you need help in those classes, I got you.” There is an emphasis on accountability to each other. “It is our duty to look out for one another, to ensure that we are all successful together and so, if you are studying with your Webster brother late at night and you notice he has an early morning class but is still asleep, it is your duty to wake him up,” explained Stanley, a graduate student and Webster House advisor.

In Stanley’s role as Webster House advisor, he is part advisor, part big brother, part mentor, part coach, part role model and part advocate. He holds regular house meetings, weekly or as needed. A large room on the first hall of Bryant Hall is reserved for Webster House use. This approximately 20ft x 32ft room is filled with round tables and chairs and serves as their meeting room. House meetings, study hall sessions, and social activities are held in this room. Stanley has an office attached to the large meeting space where he holds 1:1 meetings with students and holds meetings with other advisors, success coaches, and hall advisors that make up Webster House leadership team. The role of each member of the leadership team is distinct but intertwined. Success coaches work to enhance students’ study habits. They assist students in course selections, navigating academic structures on campus - course registration, adding/dropping a course, establishing relationships with faculty members, and self-advocacy. In addition, they guide students in time and schedule management and in maintaining good study
and note taking skills. They also work with the students to ensure there is an appropriate balance between class time, study time, and fun/recreational activities.

The hall leader’s role is similar to that of a residence assistant (RA) in on campus residence halls. Hall leaders are responsible for handing the daily operations on the residential floor. They are peers of the residents and available to counsel students on academic, social, and personal matters; they assist in crisis management and refer students to appropriate university departments for assistance when needed. The hall leader is also responsible for developing and carrying out activities to promote a sense of community among members of Webster House and the university. Some of these activities include, basketball games, movie nights, and other campus activities such as homecoming weekend.

Advisors are comprised of Webster House alumni who make themselves available to meet with and offer advice to current students. Essentially, they are peer advisors, upper classmen who have successfully navigated through the challenges the underclassmen will face. They know the campus community, they know faculty members, and can offer practical/insider information on what class to take, what to avoid, and how best to succeed. Advisors send emails to “check-in” on students. According to Randall, a Webster House alumnus, “they see beyond the academics, and care about me as a person. In meetings with my advisor they are engaged and ask questions like, how are you? How is your family? They understand my struggle.”

Stanley executes his advisory role with the help of this team of success coaches, advisors, and hall leaders. Stanley’s role is hands-on. No discussion, issue or challenge is off the table for him to address. Discussions range from how to prepare and pack for an upcoming trip to how to tie a tie and how to network and follow up with senior professionals at networking events, which members of Webster House are required to attend.
Participation in networking and culturally enriching trips such as to the nation’s capital, the National Museum of African American History, and to network at the Congressional Black Caucus are required. Prior to such trips, students meet with Stanley and their team of coaches. Stanley and his team coach students on professional networking, what to wear, what to say, and how to approach professionals and potential mentors attending the event. Stanley advises:

Talk to them, walk up to them confidently, ask them some key things about what they do. Find out their interests. Tell them who you are, what you do and your interests. Ask for their business cards and present them with yours as well. Do you have a business card? If you don’t, make one before the trip! When we return to campus, send a follow up email. In the email, make sure to highlight some of the things that were discussed in your meeting. Thank them for the opportunity to meet and inform them you would like to keep in touch.

There are optional study abroad trips to South America, where students learn about the local culture and history, and engage with other students. For many students, it will be their first time on an airplane and leaving the U.S. While preparing for the trip, they learn practical skills, such as steps needed to acquire a passport, a visitor’s visa – required for travel, items needed to board an airplane in a post 9/11 society, items that will be confiscated by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) if brought to airport check-in. After their arrival in South America, students interact with South American students on location and learn about their experiences, including challenges unique to living in South America, as well as discuss the commonalities of their experiences as Black students in South America and the U.S. as Elvin, a member of Webster House described:
They are just like us. Going through some of the same challenges. Some of these [South American] students face similar microaggressions as we do, but they look at us as lucky because we are from the United States and they think we have all these opportunities. One of South American students told me he wished he could come to the United States, so we can work and send money back home to support his family. I guess I am lucky because while I’m in college, I only have to worry about myself and I don’t have the added pressure of supporting my family.

As part of their academic enrichment, Webster House members are required to attend a weekly seminar class where guest speakers address the group on a variety of topics. This provides an opportunity for students to engage with and possibly develop mentoring relationships with faculty members and other professionals. Past speakers include researchers; faculty from the medical, dental and law schools; and campus police. Through engagement in this seminar class, students report they gained access to internships, research assistantships, and career coaching.

At the end of their second and last year in Webster House, students have the opportunity to work as advisors, hall leaders, success coaches, and mentors of the next cohort of students, and may hold other leadership roles. Students are not permitted to join the community as residents after sophomore year, but they may choose to live in other residence halls across campus. The academic year ends with a closing ceremony. The rising juniors reflect on their academic journey and their experiences at Webster House. Family, friends, mentors, and advisors are thanked for their support. Dr. Vines reminds students to “pursue their purpose,” “build a culture of excellence,” go to graduate school, or pursue a professional degree.
**Participants**

As the study is targeted towards a specific group, I used purposeful sampling to select study participants. Purposeful sampling is used to identify and select individuals or groups who are knowledgeable and have experienced the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The participants were selected from the PWI’s population of males living in a learning community for Black males. During the 2018-19 academic year, Black undergraduate males comprised of about two percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in the main campus of this university. Of this number, 40-50 students lived in Webster House.

Prior to initiating the interviews for this study, I requested and received approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I received approval from the IRB, first I contacted *target recruitment participants* (Appendix D) who consisted of faculty, staff, and students in the target institution. Some of these individuals I met previously, and I identified others based on my familiarity with the Webster House. I purposefully targeted these individuals, because: 1) they worked directly with potential study participants, 2) knew students who would be interested in conducting the study, and 3) could provide me with information about peer group and mentoring sessions where I would conduct observations. Using information obtained from target recruitment participants, I used snowball and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007) to contact potential study participants via email. In my initial contact with participants, I introduced myself, the study, and asked if they were willing to participate (see Appendix E). After I received a positive response from participants, I followed up with an email thanking them for their willingness to be part of the study, and I validated their eligibility. Eight students agreed to participate in the study. I received informed consent from participants, which also informed participants their names will not be used in the study. Instead, I use pseudonyms.
Below are the demographics of study participants, including graduating class, ethnicity, household income, and parental education attainment. Eight students participated in the study: one sophomore, two juniors, one senior and four students currently in graduate school. The distribution of the graduating class in this study is significant because it speaks to the length of time the students have been in the PWI and potentially the breadth of their experiences. As Webster House was established four years ago, the inaugural freshman class graduated with a four-year degree in May of 2020. Seniors and graduate school study participants who were members of the learning community from the onset of the program spoke of their experiences prior to, during, and after participating in the learning community.

Three of the eight participants self-identified as African American, one as African, one as Caribbean, and one as “other.” I collected ethnicity data with the understanding Black Americans are a polythetic group. The diversity among Black people and Black males in the study may account for potential differences in experiences. Participants self-reported their GPAs, which ranged from 1.9 to 4.0 with a mean of 3.17. The demographic data are self-reported.

Half of the study participants self-reported engaging in pre-college experience programs. In this study, pre-college experience is defined as any academic program participants engaged in on a college campus as a high school student prior to enrollment at the university. Five of the study participants reported living in a dual parent household, while the remaining three reported belonging to a single parent household. Six grew up in urban settings, two in a suburban setting. Lastly, all participants reported coming from low or middle income households (see Table 3.1).
Table 3.1
Demographics - Household Income Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Income $20,000-$44,999</th>
<th>Middle Class $45,000-$139,999</th>
<th>Upper Middle $140,000-$149,999</th>
<th>High Income $150,000 +</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of Participants = 8

(Table HINC-01, 2018 Household Income Survey, U.S. Census.)

Income level distribution (Low income, Middle income, Upper Middle and High income. Participants self-reported their family income levels.

Table 3.2
Demographics - First Generation College Student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of Participants = 8

Table 3.3
Demographics - Mothers Education Level - Highest Completed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc./Undergraduate degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of Participants = 8
Table 3.4

Demographics - Father's Education Level - Highest Completed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc./Undergraduate degree</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of Participants = 8

Family education level of participants ranged from no formal education to graduate degrees. Participants pointed to mentors, counselors, faculty members, success coaches, and parents as sources for inspiration and but relied on student support services and mentors from the learning community to navigate the nuances of academic structures.

Data Collection and Analysis

This phenomenological method of inquiry involved interviews and observations. Using Seidman’s (2006) interview techniques, I conducted separate interviews in private offices or spaces with each participant. In the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, which enabled the participants to engage in the interview process freely, articulating their experiences in voice and on their terms (Creswell, 2009). In the initial interview, I discussed the context of the study with participants. This allowed me to build rapport and allowed the participant to feel at ease prior to delving into the interview questions.

Following the first set of interviews, I reviewed collected data and interview protocols, for the benefit of modifying subsequent interview protocols if needed (Creswell, 2009). After each interview was completed, I transcribed the audio recordings, reviewed the transcription for accuracy, and using file locker, I then made available the transcribed interviews to participants.
for the purpose of member checking. About half of the participants accepted this offer, while the other half did not.

The second interview allowed participants to follow up on the initial interview and expand on questions I had asked in the initial interview. The third interview was reserved for any follow up questions I had. However, I achieved data saturation after the second set of interviews. Each interview ranged from 45 to 180 minutes.

Using techniques by Miles and Huberman (1994), while reviewing and analyzing the transcribed data, I made notes of repetitive key words, phrases, sentences, highlighting or underlining them in the transcribed documents, and making remarks alongside the margins of the printed documents. I repeated this process for each interview and all transcribed data. Then, I created a table linking key words, phrases or sentences to common themes and then to broader categories. I also looked for possible connections, and linked key words and phrases from the research questions – such as satisfaction, mentoring, perception of self and social experiences to the transcribed data. With this process, I noted the connections and documented common themes and categories.

In addition to interviews, I conducted two informal observations. The first observation was at a Webster House team meeting. The team meeting was in preparation for an arranged trip to D.C. The meeting, which lasted for a little over an hour, was used to discuss details of the trip including the specific functions the group was to attend, networking opportunities, and instructions for preparations the students had to make in advance of the trip such as informing their professors of their whereabouts and staying on top of their academic work while traveling. The second observation was a three-hour community building retreat at the start of the academic year. This retreat consisted of a series of activities. Participants congregated in smaller groups
and were asked to engage in a series of team building activities. For both observations, using memoing techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I drew parallels between themes or salient concepts in the data collected from my field notes, highlighting key takeaways from discussions, and capturing student-to-student interactions and interactions between students and their advisors. Outliers or unusual experiences were noted, documented and highlighted in the findings and I repeated the same process outlined above.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a way that researchers can assure themselves and their readers that the research is valid and reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, two limitations are apparent credibility and transferability. I consider each in turn.

**Credibility:** According to Tobin and Begley (2004), credibility addresses the synergy between the study participants’ views and the researcher’s understanding and interpretation of those views. As in all qualitative and quantitative research, the researcher’s personal biases, lens, or perspectives may influence the research methodology, interpretations, results and – therefore – affect the credibility of the results. This takes several forms in this study. First, my same race positionality to the study participants as a Black person, presents benefits and challenges. One benefit of a same race match between me and study participants is that the study participants may relate better to me, knowing I can better relate to their experiences. Knowing that I can relate to them may increase their openness and honesty in speaking openly about microaggressions they have faced at the hands of staff members and students in a college they still attend.

In the same regard, participants with unpopular or divergent perspectives may be reluctant to divulge their opposing views, if they perceive their views to be controversial (Patton,
2002). I had no affiliation with the program, which might have served to minimize this concern. Additionally, the names of study participants are withheld, as well as the names of the schools and colleges involved in the study. Steps such as these ensure the confidentiality of the students and institutions. This practice also encourages participants to be honest in expressing their views, perspectives and in telling their stories.

Of course, sameness in race or gender of the researcher and participant does not guarantee similar experiences or perspectives. Alternatively, my personal experiences as a member of the studied social group may have influenced data interpretation. To address this limitation, I used bracketing technique to limit assumptions and preconceptions I held prior to engaging in this study. The address this credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest techniques such as a prolonged engagement with study participants, observation, triangulation, and member checking. In this study, I used member checking, study participants were provided access to transcribed copies of their interviews to review and make corrections when they deemed that appropriate.

**Transferability** concerns a study’s generalizability (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Several limitations may constrain the study’s transferability. First, it was conducted using a small sample size involving eight Black male students living in a specific learning community and involved a limited number of interviews and observations. Additional institutions were not sampled for this study nor were other geographical locations studied. In addition, the study was conducted over a three month period. In inquiries with small study samples and a condensed timeline, the objective is not to generalize; rather, by providing thick descriptions documented from observations and interviews, a certain degree of transferability can be drawn from the
detailed account of study participants’ experiences and readers can assess transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In sum, this chapter provides an overview of the research design and the rationale for the qualitative and phenomenological methods used. It also discusses the methods for participant selection, presents a demographic overview of study participants selected and discusses the methods of interviewing used. The research questions are also presented in this chapter, and the trustworthiness of the study discussed. In the next chapter, I present a detailed overview of study participants and their experiences, and present findings.
Chapter 4: Learning and Thriving in a PWI

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the experiences of Black males living in a same race learning community while attending a PWI. In this chapter, I present the results of the inquiry. I begin the chapter with an introduction to the eight research participants, all Black men who have been involved in Webster House. I then move to a discussion of five themes that arose in our interviews. Participants discussed their experiences in Webster House, which highlighted Webster House as a respite, they describe a sense of brotherhood felt with other members, their ability to make connections within and external to the community, experiential learning, and the pursuit of one’s purpose. They credit mentors, advisors and the Webster House faculty director for providing guidance, academic support, and for driving them to seek out and stay focused on their academic and professional goals.

Participant Profiles

Eight Black males participated in the study. Each currently live, previously lived, or held leadership positions in Webster House. Seven of the eight held leadership positions and were members of other on-campus student organizations.

Theo a first-year graduate student in engineering, is a first generation American of African descent and has strong ties to his African culture and community. He considers himself a strong leader. Over the years, Theo has held several leadership positions as president, vice president, and senator of various campus organizations. Theo joined Webster House after his first year. In his first year living in on-campus residence halls, he found it difficult to connect with and meet up with friends of similar backgrounds.
There were so few of us, and we were spread across campus and rarely saw each other. If we wanted to get together, it would take like 20 minutes for all of us to get together and do something.

Prior to college, Theo considered getting a law degree or getting a master’s degree in business. He credits his father for setting a high educational standard. In Theo’s words, “My dad told me at the age of seven, ‘None of my kids will not get a master’s degree.’” After being part of Webster House and meeting other Black men through the program who are doctors, lawyers, engineers, and sociologists with Ph.D. Theo decided to pursue an undergraduate degree in computer science. He is considering getting a doctorate in computer sciences and engineering.

*Dwayne*, a first-generation college student and first generation Caribbean American, is a first year chemistry Ph.D. student. He joined Webster House as an undergraduate student mentor. He has held several leadership positions as a mentor, a community ambassador, and residence hall advisor. He has also taken advantage of several programs offered on campus to study abroad in South Africa and Brazil. Prior to his participation in Webster House, Dwayne was part of other learning communities and organizations. In describing his college experiences, Dwayne expresses that while navigating the university, he is constantly reminded he is a Black male:

Coming into the university, you are told to make sure you stand out because you are going into these large lecture halls and you are going to get lost in the crowd of 300 faces. However, I go in and yes, I am lost in the crowd, but I also stick out like a sore thumb. If I happen to not be in class for some reason, the professor knows I was not in class. You kind of have to be on your Ps and Qs because, if you are messing up, it is on display. If you are doing as well as everyone else, it does not matter. Unless you’re number 1 in the class, then it is like, snap, I didn’t think you could actually do this.
Dwayne credits his family with providing him with support and encouragement. He feels he has to work twice as hard and must continuously prove himself. To him, Webster House is a place where he can “take his mask off,” a place free of judgment, a place where he can be himself and relate to others like him. Dwayne has dealt with several forms of microaggressions at the university, including being suspected of things he did not do, and being racially profiled. In those situations, he felt that speaking up to the school authorities would only draw unwanted attention to himself and could potentially backfire, and so he turned to his peers and advisors at Webster House who could relate to his experiences and provide guidance as to how best to deal with the specific situation. When asked how he handles the burden and pressure of having to be the best academically and on his best behavior, he says he lives his life by two proverbs. The first, an African proverb that says, “If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do us no harm.” The second is a verse of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, “to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.”

Darryl describes himself as an African American. Darryl is a senior, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. Prior to his first year at college, Darryl attended two pre-college summer programs, including one at Yale University. Darryl describes his path through college as nontraditional. He considers himself a high achieving student, having graduated from high school with a high GPA and coming into university with several college credits. However, he struggled to find his place on campus. His GPA suffered, and he was later dismissed from school for academic reasons. He describes his time away from school as a period of reflection. While away from the university, he enrolled in a community college, earning a 4.0 GPA and, with the help and support of the Webster House faculty director, he was able to return to campus.
Since returning, Darryl has continued to excel academically, earning a 3.7 and 3.5 GPA. Prior to joining Webster House, he lived in on-campus residence halls outside of the learning communities. He joined Webster House his sophomore year, and held several leadership positions including treasurer of a professional organization and a mentor for first year students. He has seriously considered going to law school after completing his undergraduate program, but is still weighing his options. Darryl is also a coach, mentor, and uses his experience to inspire and encourage other students. Darryl admits he has challenges in communicating with and developing academic relationships with non-Black faculty members:

If all my faculty members were African American, I would not have to think about how I speak to them. In communicating with professors, you are never sure what the other person thinks, when they see me or how they see me. I am not sure of how they speak to me or think of me or through what lens they see me and what their intentions are… so that always concerns me. Perhaps, I always think the worst, but I am not sure to what extent they care for African Americans, so why would I even try?

Darryl credits Webster House with this improved communication skills, his ability to be accountable for his actions, being honest, and having the ability to reflect. “When I communicate with others, the information is clearer, more pointed and directed.” After he graduates, Darryl would like to go to graduate school or law school.

Matthew describes himself as African American. He is a first-generation college student and a first-year graduate student, with an undergraduate degree in finance. In 3rd or 4th grade, Matthew was tested for and categorized as a gifted and talented student. This distinction enabled him to benefit from several enrichment programs and opportunities outside of the classroom. One such program was the Ulysses S. Grant summer program offered at an Ivy League
university. Upon graduating high school, he was awarded two full scholarships, one to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and the other to a PWI. He ultimately chose to attend the PWI because their scholarship offered more flexibility in his choice of study. After enrolling as an honors student, Matthew joined several student organizations on campus and quickly became part of the executive boards of all the organizations he participated in. As part of his leadership activities, he hosted panels, galas, fashion shows, and developed what he describes as a strong network of “brotherhood.”

Matthew credits advisors, counselors, and mentors for his success. The most significant person in his life is his grandfather. Matthew expressed his most impactful moment in college was when he delivered his college commencement speech:

I told my mom to get to the graduation early because we were to sit in a separate section. I did not tell her I was one of the commencement speakers. We stood there and she had tears in her eyes. There is a picture, taken as I delivered the commencement speech. In this picture, every graduate was in front of me. The picture was taken from the side, you see my face in front of the microphone, and every face beyond me is a non-Black face. I would say, the majority were White faces. I do not know what it is about that picture or that image that stood out. For me, many times, as a Black male, you have to be twice as good to get half the credit… I have sat as one or two in my classes of 30 or 40 and to speak and have all those people listen silently as I spoke… and for them to take that picture, just meant a lot.

Randall is a first-generation Caribbean American and a first-generation college student. Prior to coming to college, he participated in a pre-college summer experience, which he credits with helping him adjust to living on campus. Also prior to college, Randall was part of a pre-
nursing high school program, where he earned a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) license. When he applied to college, he decided to major in allied health because his goal was to graduate from college and get a job. Randall’s mother, who is also a CNA, introduced him to nursing. In Randall’s words, prior to coming to college and participating in Webster House, he was focused on getting in and out of college, but when he came to college, he found his passion and purpose.

Finding his passion led Randall to switch his major from allied health to communications, with the hopes of attending graduate school. Randall hopes to work in higher education in some aspect of mentoring students, especially students from underrepresented backgrounds. While still a student, he has found his niche as a community leader, mentoring students, and holding several leadership positions in the various organizations he participates in. Randall credits his peers and the support provided by Webster House in helping him deal with microaggressions on campus.

I have been in situations where people bring up affirmative action. Like, they say, Oh, you are just here to fill a quota. I always have to prove to myself, that I am better than the next. Even though I am qualified, I have to look better, we are not looked at the same. So, I have to prove to myself, I am here, I belong here, and I am qualified.

I overheard other students talking about me being here to fill a quota. It gets to me and I develop the imposter syndrome – like, am I here because of that? Am I here because of a quota? Am I here because of diversity on campus? Because, I do not see myself represented on campus. However, through Webster House, through my peers there, I see myself as belonging here, I see my abilities and I do get good grades.

Randall feels the burden of being constantly watched. He feels like he always has to be on his best behavior, as he is always being judged by the wider campus community. To deal with
this burden, he relies on the support from Webster House and other support services on campus. He emphasizes that his mentors, advisors, and peers look beyond the academics and inquire about how he is doing personally. “How are you? How is this? How is that? They have worked with students like me and they understand my struggle.”

Randall believes participating in Webster House has helped him pursue his purpose. After completing his undergraduate degree, he hopes to continue his education and obtain a doctoral degree.

*Nick* is a first generation American with ancestry from South America. Like the other participants, he is a leader in all the campus organizations he participates in. Being a part of Webster House has helped Nick develop good study skills and leverage peer study groups in his learning and test preparation. Having attended a predominantly White high school, Nick admits he was not able to bond with or get close to his high school peers. He credits Webster House with providing a space where he can meet and bond with other students who share his interests.

In high school, I did not share the same similarities with my classmates. The cultures were different. Whenever I was with my White friends, they were like, “Oh, your food is too spicy or why don’t you listen to country music?” However, over here, I was able to have hot sauce in my food and share it with others. They do not mind it. I listen to my dance hall music and everyone here knows the lyrics to Kevin Lyttle songs and everything. It is a lot homier here.

Nick notes that he has not had any difficulty connecting with different race peers or professors on campus, but has benefited from having same race advisors and professors.
My organic chemistry professor took me under his wing. We kind of look alike. He has the same hair as me and we connected with that. He is a really good professor. He helped me a lot when I went to his office hours for help. I really benefited from his one-on-one teaching during his office hours.

Nick credits Webster House and the faculty director with providing him the opportunity to network and participate in internships and programs. He admits he probably would not have been able to participate in those programs if not for Webster House. He says he has developed lifelong friendships with his Webster House brothers, but laments on the lack of professors of color in STEM fields.

For a paper assignment, my friends and I had to interview a professor of color in our fields. I and my friends who were in one of the allied health programs did not have anyone to interview, because it was all White professors in that field. This was very disappointing. We practically had to interview professors in a different field to fulfil the assignment.

Elvin is a first-generation Jamaican American, and first-generation college student. Like other participants, he is involved in several on campus organizations, including the campus chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and he holds several leadership positions in these organizations. Elvin came into college as a STEM major but changed his major to English. Elvin credits his mother with his strong work ethic and strong need to push through difficult situations.

My mom was a nurse and took care of elderly people. Therefore, it was my responsibility to get myself ready for school and ensure my siblings got ready and went to school on
time. In high school, I did not have a lot of mentorship. I applied to college myself, filled out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) forms myself. Prior to coming to Webster House, I literally did everything on my own. If I had not been part of Webster House, I would not have done many things. I would have never left the country, been on a plane, travelled to Washington DC, gone to conferences or conducted research. Webster House has enabled me to participate in all these experiences.

According to Elvin, his experience in Webster House was shaped by the faculty director, who strongly emphasized accountability. Members of Webster House are first accountable to themselves and them to the other House members.

The faculty director wanted us to be our brother’s keeper. We were inspired and pushed to watch out for one another and to hold everyone responsible and hold ourselves responsible as well.

Elvin credits the high expectations from the faculty director and mentors at Webster House with giving him a vision for his future self as a graduate student and possibly a future doctoral student. At Webster House, attending graduate school was heavily emphasized. Students in Webster House have access to professionals and industry leaders who provide them with a longitudinal view of their education. In addition, Webster House provides resources to ensure students are planning for graduate school and are ready to take steps to attend medical school, law school, or any postgraduate schooling of their choice.

John identifies as an African American. He credits his father, who has a graduate degree, with inspiration to attend college and persist. Unlike the other participants, John is not involved
in organizations or sports activities. In the prior year, John was involved in several on campus activities like homecoming, but discovered his grades slipped as a result.

It was fun being involved in these activities. However, it was time consuming. I learned I need to do what I need to do instead of what I want to do. My dad is my mentor and he went through the same thing I am going through. When he was in college, he was on the football team, he was cheerleading, a member of the choir, and doing all this stuff. His grades slipped also but he got it together.

John finds that being the only student of color or one of the few in his classroom is challenging. “It feels like you are being isolated, like you are being picked out. You know they are not trying to, but it just feels that way.” He expresses that being part of Webster House, finding people that are “like him,” people he can relate to, and having a brotherhood, people he can trust has helped build his positive experience in his university. As a result of the brotherhood experience in Webster House, he reaches out to his peers for assistance with classwork, accessing opportunities and programs on campus and developing a strong network of alumni. After graduation, John hopes to further his education by earning a master’s degree. He sees his future self as a sports broadcaster, either in television or radio. A critical skill he has gained from Webster House is time management. John takes classes at both the main campus and a regional campus, 45 minutes away. He relies on public transportation to travel between both campuses and admits he spends a significant amount of time away from the main campus. His short-term goal is to improve his grades and ensure all his future classes are on the main campus, which will eliminate his commuting time, thus providing additional time for him to study and participate in campus organizations and activities.
In sum, the young men who participate in Webster House were clear in expressing their lived experiences. Resonating with Critical Race Theory, from their perspectives, they see microaggressions and racism as embedded in their surroundings. They hear comments that they are on campus to fill a quota, they feel unwelcome in certain spaces, under-appreciated and feel as though they are negatively profiled and looked at with suspicion. They do not see a significant number of people like themselves and feel they have to be twice as good at whatever they are asked to do as their White counterparts.

The participants see Webster House as a place of respite. A place where they can “lay down their mask,” a home away from home. In Webster House, they see themselves in their compatriots, and while they are held accountable to their brothers, they know that students and mentors alike “have their back.” Their brothers understand what they are going through, their brothers share their struggles, they trust their brothers and advisors in looking out for their best interests and with the bonds they have formed, with their ability to pull together their collective resources and leverage resources of their networks, they know they well equipped to thrive in college to continue pursuing their purpose.

Navigating and Thriving in a PWI

Five salient themes emerged across the participants’ experiences. The themes are (1) brotherhood, (2) respite, (3) making connections, (4) experiential learning, and (5) striving for excellence and pursuing purpose.

Theme 1: Brotherhood

A common theme among study participants is the role Webster House played in supporting their holistic development as students, including the support of their academic,
intellectual, emotional, and social needs. In particular, by being a space where the students can return to after navigating uncomfortable or unwelcoming spaces on campus, Webster House is a place of refuge, a place where Black male students can meet with and develop friendships with students that are like them, students and advisors who understand the unique challenges they face, and a safe environment where they can recount their experiences, gain affirmation, and receive guidance. For the study participants, Webster House catered to these needs by providing formal and informal support structures, which filled a gap that was largely unmet by the larger campus community. By filling this gap, Webster House positively altered students’ experiences in the institution.

In this study, I define formal structures as a carefully organized network of resources woven together for the benefit of creating an environment that enable student success. Some of these formal structures provided by Webster House include organized study hall sessions, tutoring sessions, freshman seminars, participation in study abroad programs, opportunities for engagement in faculty led research, and weekly meetings proctored by graduate assistants or the faculty director. In these spaces, students can express and address their concerns. Indeed, the structured program provided by Webster House is in concert with the High Impact Practices introduced by the AAC&U (Kuh, 2008).

In addition to the formal structures, Webster House provides students the ability to engage with each other informally, outside of the organized events or activities established by the learning community. Informal structures include group texts, chats, informal peer mentoring, informal peer tutoring and advisory, as well as engagement in various sports games or activities. Although the support structures provided were formal and or informal in nature. Study participants felt that there is strong emphasis on academic excellence in Webster House. To
ensure students devote time to their academics, there are structured study hours. All members are required to participate in study hours for a minimum of two hours per week. Students assemble in a designated study area, at set times. A graduate student proctors the study hall, and students sign in/out upon entering and exiting the study area. As Theo, a computer science and engineering student, describes it:

We are taking Calculus 2, Physics 2, and Chemistry 2 at the same time. Some of us are taking Biochemistry or Calculus 3 and something else, usually about 18 credits, so we are hammered. We have to find the time and space to sit down and do work and get the help needed. Sometimes it is hard for students to get help from the professor, but we have our faculty advisor who can say to the professor –“Hey, I have some students here who are part of this learning community. Can you come here on Tuesday or Thursday for an hour or two to tutor them?” That usually carries more weight than coming from the student.

Webster House students are also required to take a freshman seminar class. Randall describes the freshman seminar class as instrumental in helping him get acquainted with a faculty member, one of the invited guests to his seminar class. This relationship with the faculty member, in turn, yielded an opportunity to participate in research conducted by the faculty.

During our weekly seminar class, we have invited guests attend and talk about their various professions. Sometimes we have doctors from the medical school, professionals, or faculty members attend the sessions. They give a presentation and, at the end, they make themselves available for questions or follow up. This professor talked about his research that seemed pretty interesting. So I met with him after the seminar session and talked more about his work. I was really interested and he invited me to participate in the
research, which I did. It was not part of the course of study for my major, but I really enjoyed it and gained a lot of experience from it.

All participants expressed the importance of a strong academic performance. As Theo stated, “our faculty director, Dr. Vines was not in the business for us to be mediocre”.

We were expected to perform well academically, our success coaches are there to help us organize our schedule, manage our time appropriately, ensure we have enough time to meet the demands of our academics, time to have fun and engage in social activities. We learned how to reach out to and communicate with faculty members. Who and how to ask for help and learned studying techniques that enabled us to study efficiently. Beyond being responsible for ourselves academically, it was also emphasized that it was our responsibility to help our Webster brothers. We studied together, tutored each other, and if we were studying till the late hours in the morning and one of our brothers had an early class, it was our duty to make sure they woke up and made it to class on time.

Although not explicitly stated by study participants, these attributes of group accountability, group uplift – ensuring all members of Webster House succeed together, is akin to practices, and the spirit of brotherhood, characterized in Black Greek fraternities (Hughey et al., 2011). Like Black Greek fraternities, Webster House participants drove themselves and members of their community to strive academically and fulfil their highest purpose – improving their aspirational capital, in ways such as becoming leaders in the campus community. As evidenced in the data collected, seven out of the eight participants held leadership positions in various organizations in the university. They saw themselves as strong contributors in promoting the experience of other
Black male students on campus and acted as conduits in ensuring incoming students successfully bridged academic and social gaps between high school and college.

In addition to receiving academic support from their professors, Theo and Darryl describe Webster House students as supporting each other by sharing class lesson notes, as well as engaging in informal tutoring during study hall sessions and outside of study halls. While academic support was central to the Webster House mission and appreciated by staff and students alike, also important were the different kinds of social support that students received to get through their daily lives, which I explain below.

**Theme 2: Respite**

An important factor in shaping students’ educational outcomes is the social support present at the academic institution (Hallinan, 2006). Social support systems include friends, family, peers, and advisors who play an important role in supporting and encouraging students in times of stress, and also celebrating with students in times of triumph. The mere presence of a supportive peer group is a source of comfort to the student – knowing that the support structure is there when it is needed.

At the start of the academic year, Webster House organized a retreat, a team-building event aimed at fostering relationships between the incoming freshmen and returning sophomores. I observed this event. All participants highlighted the social support in Webster House as one of the factors that has contributed to their positive experiences in college. Randall, a junior, describes his experiences:
I was so excited to start school here. However, when I went to freshman orientation, everyone in my orientation group was White. There literally was not a single Black person in my group. I felt alone and out of place… like I did not belong because I could not relate to anyone there. But when I finally went to Webster House, it was welcoming. It was filled with people that looked like me, that have the same culture as me, that understand where I come from. It was move in day and the older students helped us move in. It was a very welcoming experience. I got to meet everyone on my floor and learn about their majors. I also had help from the student support center on campus, so it made my transition from high school to college a lot easier. Being able to have a conversation with someone and to have that person relate to you on some level is very important.

Being a first-generation college student, I did not have a lot knowledge as to how things work on campus. The advisors and older students at Webster House would provide guidance on when to add or drop a course, how to change majors, they would reinforce that I belong on this campus, but they also saw beyond the academics. They would ask how you are. “How is your family? How is this? How is that?” They have worked with students like me and they understand my struggle. If I did not have Webster House, or the support, I definitely would not live on campus.

Randall’s engagement with Webster House enhanced his navigational capital. It helped him access student support services, learn from other young Black men about their majors and their experiences on campus, offered him emotional support and access to resources.

Study participants regularly referred to Webster House as a place of respite. Dwayne describes this as the sense of “I see you.”
I understand you. I am here to listen, I support you, not necessarily that we are going through the same thing, but I acknowledge that you are going through something. You are not invisible. Your pain is visible, it may not be visible to everyone, but I see you, and you know that I see you, you can talk to me.

“You are not invisible.” “Someone cares.” These messages – “we’re family,” “here’s how you do this,” “here are the resources you need,” address needs of these young Black men that might be ignored by the larger university. Webster House strategically uses formal and informal interactions to build social cohesiveness. Consider one meeting I attended, which was held to reconnect with the students after the first week of classes and to prepare them for an upcoming networking trip to Washington, DC. Punctuality and personal accountability are highly emphasized. The meeting was mandatory. As students filed into the meeting room, they signed in using an iPad passed around from student to student. The graduate assistant, Stanley, facilitated the meeting. In preparation for the upcoming trip, no detail was spared. Stanley went through a detailed agenda for the entire multi-day trip, including arrival times, departures, and the itinerary of various events students were expected to attend. The students learned what items on the trip agenda were optional, and which were mandatory.

You will need several dress shirts, ties, dress pants, and a suit or dress jacket. Make sure your shirts are ironed well! Do not forget your tie! Who needs a tie? Do you all know how to tie a tie? I need a couple of volunteers to help tie ties.

One student suggested, “You can look up on tying ties on YouTube! Once you have it tied, when you take it off, loosen it a bit and slip it off your neck, then hang it up so you do not have to tie it again the next time.” Steven continued,
You can certainly look up tying your tie on YouTube, but if you need help, I and these other folks (pointing to the volunteers) can help you tie your tie. I will also bring extra ties and shirts in case you guys forget to pack them. If you need any help on the trip, come see me.

Students’ navigational capital is built by learning to prepare for and engage in a networking event. Students are engaged in discussions and are taught how to approach professionals in a networking event, how to engage in meaningful conversations during the event, how to dress, and what to wear. But there’s a back-up plan, as well. A staff member will be there with extra ties and the knowledge of how to tie them – there a system of support to help them whenever help is needed. The advisors and Stanley counseled students on conduct at the networking event:

Do not be afraid to approach people. They will love to talk to you. Remember, the people you are meeting are potential mentors. Ask for their name and learn their interests. Strike up a conversation with them, get their business cards and when we return to campus, send a follow up email to the individual.

After the students and their advisors returned from the trip, Stanley sent an email to students, reminding them to follow up with the individuals they met during the series of networking events. In his email, he embedded a written template with prompts on how to conversation with prospective mentors.

The social support structure in this community of Black male students includes providing students a safe space with mentors and advisors who share the same or similar experiences as members of the learning community. The sense of brotherhood, all for one and one for all, “I got
you,” “I have got your back” was evident. The unspoken creed of Webster House was that of solidarity, trust, and unwavering support - *I will provide all the necessary information to you but if you fall short, I am here for you*, as evidenced in Stanley’s actions and words. “Do not forget to bring your dress shirts and your ties, but if you forget, I will have extras for you.” Participants saw the level of caring and mentoring provided by their advisors as further evidence of strong investment in the group’s success, helping to make it cohesive. The support structure fostered a feeling of belongingness, an expected standard of excellence, and a space where students can “let their mask down,” open up and share their personal and academic concerns with peers and advisors, knowing that “they will not let them fail.”

Recall the earlier discussion of the concept of “letting one’s mask down” - the ability to be in a space where one is comfortable enough to share one’s voiced accounts and narratives of racist incidents targeting Black males such as incidents dealing with microaggressions, false accusations, or stereotypes. Dwayne describes his experience:

Sometimes, the day-to-day life on campus can be challenging. Even as a leader in various campus organizations, there have been times when I found myself falsely accused, I am the default suspect when things go awry. Each time I have to make a conscious decision to put these incidents behind me and not let it escalate or physically affect me. I don’t want to draw unwarranted attention to myself and I worry about repercussions because I want to go to graduate school so, I do not report these incidents - especially when they are at the hands of an authority on campus, who may retaliate. However, I share my experiences with my friends, and my advisors. In sharing these experiences with my advisors, they suggest ways I can respond to or deal with those situations. I also share my story is a way to de-stress. It also provides an avenue for other students like me to learn
from my experiences and hopefully develop their own mechanisms of dealing with it. When I share these stories, my friends and advisors usually encourage me to report the incidents or take other actions, but almost always, I just lean on them for support, and put the incident behind me. We know these micro aggressions exist, it is part of our society. But my job is to focus on my school work, and be the best I can be, in spite of what is happening around me. I go by a motto: “If there’s no enemy within, the enemy on the outside can do me no harm.”

Harper (2015) asserts social support groups provide a haven for high achieving Black male students, a place where they can gain peer support, commiserate with others and develop mechanisms for responding to racism or racist stereotypes. Beyond acting as a respite and creating a sense of brotherhood, Webster House helps members gain social capital through exclusive information networks. I discuss access to information networks in the next theme.

Theme 3: Making Connections

“It occurs to me that our survival may depend upon our talking to one another” - Dan Simmons

Harper (2008) asserts Black male students gain social capital through their access to exclusive information networks. This access enhances their acumen to thrive in professional or educational settings where they are racially underrepresented (Harper, 2006a; Harper, McGowan, Davis, Ingram, Jones, & Platt, 2011). As members of Webster House, students are encouraged to expand their social and professional networks. To help students build their professional networks, Webster House organizes annual trips to the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) conference. At the conference, Webster House students participate in conference breakout sessions where ideas are exchanged, critical issues affecting them and their communities are
discussed, and they have the opportunity to engage with and network with various professionals, lawmakers, and industry leaders. Matthew describes his experience at the CBC:

I feel like the networking is unparalleled. To be able to see Black professionals in an environment of suits, ties, impactful conversations, and in an environment of leadership, was very eye opening for me. To engage in the reflections of that event, to get those business cards and send out follow up emails to those professionals. To be there and to be present, I feel was very impactful to me. It showed me it was possible to be in spaces and share your thoughts and to have people understand your point of view. It showed me that it is possible to network with people that look like you and not to code switch and to feel more comfortable having those conversations.

Participants explained that they have leveraged their newly developed networks to secure internships, job opportunities, and job shadows, opportunities that they probably would not have had without their networks. Nick described his experience as follows:

While at one of the breakout sessions at the CBC, I got there 15 minutes early because I wanted to get a good seat. We were doing introductions, and I mentioned the state and town I am from. They tell me my congresswoman was there and so after the session, I met with my congresswoman to get a picture. My congresswoman’s office posted the picture on Instagram and mentioned they would like to have more people like me working in her office. So, over Christmas break, I reached out to my congresswoman’s office and I got an internship. This internship turned out to be a really great experience.

Beyond this type of formal networking experience, industry leaders, faculty members from various departments, researchers, and representatives from the medical and law schools are
invited to the seminar class offered to Webster House students. These professionals showcase their work and provide ample time for question-and-answer sessions after the presentation. Students interested in those fields are encouraged to meet with and follow up with the professionals. Several participants noted that, through participating in this seminar and meeting with the professionals, they became aware of and enrolled in courses they would have not normally enrolled in. They also became aware of and were able to collaborate with researchers as research assistants.

In addition to the informal networking events, participants created peer networks to keep in touch with past and current Webster House students. Participants described an online group chat which they used to keep in contact with peers and alumni. The online chat group was also used to advise and remind peers of upcoming events, course registrations, last day for adding or dropping a course, job and internship opportunities, and other academic or social activities. Study participants emphasized they were there to support each other academically. The online chat group served as another forum outside of their daily in-person interactions to solicit tutoring, mentoring, and academic assistance for peers who may need help.

The chat groups, job shadowing, as well as formal and informal networks represented opportunities for Webster House members to have effective role models and mentors. The peer chat groups aimed at mentoring other students, and networking events at the Congressional Black Caucus, are examples of opportunities that provide personally relatable or culturally congruent mentors that Tinto (1993) describes as enabling students to thrive, build confidence in their academic work, and persist academically and socially through to graduation.
Theme 4: Experiential Learning

According to Kuh (2006), co-curricular experiences such as study abroad, service learning, civic engagement and internships have powerful positive effects on students and their success in college. Engagement in enrichment programs such as field trips and study abroad is strongly encouraged for Webster House students. In addition to annual trips to the CBC conference, students have the opportunity to travel to DC, to the White House and participate in an arranged tour of the White House. They have also benefited from visiting the opening of the African American Museum in Washington, DC Matthew describes the trip to the African American Museum as follows:

When you tour the African American museum, the exhibit starts at the sub level of the museum, which traces the African American experience from the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. It starts from the continent of Africa and travels through the history of slavery and then goes into some of the more modern history in the upper floors. I and some of the Webster students followed this experience from the sub level – the very beginning. We walked through models of slave cabins, saw pictures and videos from the civil rights and emancipation movements, as well as quotes from the leaders of those movements. The look on everyone’s face was surreal.

Matthew went on to describe that the trip gave everyone a sense of purpose, a sense that they were part of a bigger journey in the African American experience. The experience showed them in concrete terms what others before them had endured for people like him - for African Americans to be where they are today. In addition to grounding the students, Theo expressed the trip was a good bonding experience for members of Webster House. “After we went to DC, we were all brothers.” Spending time together outside of campus gave us all time to bond.
We were touring the place, meeting people, learning about ourselves and our history. We had to rely on each other to get from point A to point B and make sure we all got there on time. Also, we had the bus ride back to campus and after that, the rest was history.

Students also had the opportunity to study abroad in Brazil. The study abroad program in Brazil is unique because the specific location in Brazil had strong ties to the West African identity and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to Theo, these groups of people in Brazil, shared a similar history with students of Webster House having been brought to Brazil as a result of slave trade. They had similar skin color and suffered from similar oppressions such as racism, micro aggressions and education gaps African Americans faced in the United States. Theo describes this experience as further highlighting the need for education. “A lot of the kids there wanted to get their undergraduate degree. They wanted to come to the US, work for a bit then go back to help their families.” Theo described the experience as helping him realize the power of education, how fortunate he is, and the importance of heeding his faculty director’s guidance on striving for excellence and being able to define his own greatness.

The presence of and participation in enrichment programs is highlighted in the literature review as a High Impact practice. The structure of off campus trips and study abroad experiences created by the Webster House is geared towards providing students with positive culturally relevant experiences they can connect with. In addition to the experience students gained from traveling abroad, and experiencing other international cultures, the process of participating in the various trips, and spending time with other members of Webster House, creates the opportunity for students to form cohesive bonds with each other as such, developing strong peer groups and peer networks.
The experiential learning students gain from participating in these programs is invaluable. In one sense, Webster House participants are being taught and socialized to be a future leaders and citizens who belong to a broader community of activists working on multiple fronts – building their economic capital, and improving the socioeconomic standing of Black Americans, reforming the educational system, seeking social justice system, and creating minority-owned businesses among other things. This work of building socioeconomic capital, overseen by the Congressional Black Caucus, is also part of a historical story of oppression, perseverance and achievement in spite of systemic racism. These learning and growth as future leaders require one to have a global perspective, informed by meeting and collaborating with peers from other parts of the world, for example, in South America. The trips are designed not to fill in the gaps in the young men’s education but instead to flesh out their already considerable aspirational, linguistic, cultural, and social capital.

Theme 5: Striving for Excellence and Pursuing Purpose

“’He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.’” – Friedrich Nietzsche

I refer back to the two research questions that inform this study, the first: What are the learning and social experiences of Black males living in a Black male learning community while attending a PWI? And the second: Does participation in these programs influence the beliefs or perceptions of self for the sample of Black males in this PWI? Recall also the purpose of phenomenology, which I use as a research approach to explore the lived experience of Black males in Webster House from their perspective, and how these experiences influence their day-to-day decisions, views and how they perceive their existence in a college campus environment (Neubauer et al., 2019).
The first four themes – a respite, brotherhood, making connections, and experiential learning – are directly related to the first research question and tie closely to current research. Previous studies conducted by Harper (2015), Tinto (1993), Baier (2016), and others point out how specific structures and experiences can foster a sense of belongingness, build social and cultural capital, enhance navigational capital, and add to positive and better academic outcomes.

A fifth theme - striving for excellence and pursuing purpose, begins to address the second question: In what ways does participation in these programs influence the young men’s beliefs and self-perceptions? Across the interviews, it became clear that striving for excellence and the pursuit of purpose, of a cause beyond one’s self outweighed the barriers study participants faced. Knowing there was a cause worth fighting for, knowing they were on a path to achieve, and believing in their individual goals was an important source of motivation. Seeing education as a path to achieve this purpose, in service beyond self was an intrinsic motivator for study participants to be more invested in learning.

“Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential to the world beyond self” (Damon, 2009, p. 33). According to Krzesni (2015), purpose is a source of resilience. It is also a motivator which contributes to a student’s identity, drives their investment in learning, and better equips students to overcome barriers to their success. As Theo expressed:

Our faculty director, Dr. Vines, is not in the mission for us to be mediocre. Whenever he spoke to us, he said “strive for excellence, define your greatness, be great, and pursue your purpose.” And so, we understood part of our journey here at Webster House is to find and pursue our purpose.
This pursuit of purpose was reinforced in activities and communications associated with Webster House. Email communications ended with the words “pursue your purpose” or #pursuepurpose. In advisory sessions, students were encouraged to seek out and engage in activities and career choices they are passionate about, where they find meaning in enriching their abilities and in service to others. As Randall explains:

I received my CNA license while in high school. I originally came to the university to get a degree in nursing, graduate and get a job. But when I came here, I saw beyond that. During the weekly seminars, I would see Black professionals, Black male professors and counselors. They are coaching and guiding the next generation and so when I started mentoring my younger Webster House brothers, I realized, I really enjoyed doing that. I was giving back and hopefully, I would make a positive impact in someone else’s life, which I think is my purpose and so I switched my major to communications and I plan to go to graduate school and hopefully get a degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs. With that degree, I can work as a counselor in a college and hopefully help other first generation students like me, because I feel like I can relate to them. I have been there and I know what they are going through.

Participants reported that, beyond growing academically, time spent in Webster House enabled them to grow holistically, broadening their interests, and enhancing their capabilities. This perspective is, in part, due to the example set by their faculty director, their success coaches, and the various support structures provided to them. As participants reflected:

Our faculty director is there for us in any situation. He is like our father, big brother, and counselor. We reach out to him and our success coaches if we have questions about anything, like speaking to our professors, questions about what classes to take, or just
about any life questions. During our initial meeting as Webster House residents, he showed us he had confidence in our abilities. He would say, “You are already in college, you will graduate. I’m not here to get you to graduation because you will do that, but I am here to get you to graduate school or to any other professional school you choose. Now that you are in college, the goal is to take the necessary steps – including your GPA, the right internships, research opportunities, study abroad and whatever else you need to get to graduate school.” The faculty director made sure we had the opportunities to explore our interests by way of meeting with and speaking with people in various professions, exposing us to different professions and a different way of life.

Darryl, who separated from the university for underperforming academically explains that after he was dismissed from the university, Dr. Vines kept in touch with him, first urging him to enroll in a community college and then guiding him through the re-application process to return to the university.

I was a strong academic performer in high school, but when I came to the university, something happened and I became disengaged. Several folks tried to reach out to me, but I wasn’t responsive. My grades began to slip. I ended up on academic probation and was eventually dismissed from the school as a result of my grades. Dr. Vines was persistent in reaching out to me. Encouraging me not to give up and to find my way back to the university. In the end, with his direction, I enrolled at a community college, where I performed well academically and then, with his guidance, I was able to process why my initial time at the university was not successful. I re-applied to the university and got in. Now, I am performing well academically, in the last two semesters, I earned a 3.7 and 3.5
GPA. I am engaged, I mentor students and I look forward to possibly going to law school.

The young men’s increased exposure to various programs offered through Webster House, such as job shadowing, internships, study abroad, field trips, and professional networking opportunities enabled study participants to envision their future selves in such roles. Overwhelmingly, they noted that the underlying motivator for their resilience was the pursuit of positions where they could assist others, especially other minorities who face similar barriers to their own. For example, Randall noted a driving force in his academic endeavors was the need to provide future generations with the same level of guidance and support he has received while engaged with Webster House. Other participants expressed the same sentiment, noting that was important they succeed because other Black males are looking up to them. Dwayne, a future STEM professor, said

A lot of my friends started off in STEM programs. But there are different factors that push them to do something else. They have not seen anyone else doing these things. It is important they see Black males in these roles so they can feel more comfortable being in these roles, engaging with professors and coming to office hours for support when needed. Just one office hour would make a world of difference.

Knowing family members, in some cases, younger siblings, and peers are counting on them to succeed, knowing if they succeeded, they will assist future generations, and knowing their faculty directors, mentors, and coaches expect “great things” from them, helps them overcome barriers in their university.
Discussion

In sum, Black male students in Webster House are actively engaged in their learning community. Referencing the first research question, the formal and informal structures such as study halls, formal networking sessions, freshman seminar classes, and study abroad programs create a feeling of connectedness with the campus community and belongingness with their peers. The structures including peer mentoring, culturally relevant out-of-class experiences, engagement with same race-same gender mentors, and opportunities for faculty engagement, positively influence their experiences in the PWI. In addition, the presence of same race, same gender mentors who can relate to the students’ experiences appeared to help offset and assist students in navigating microaggressions and other unpleasant experiences the students endure while attending the university.

Addressing the second research question, study findings highlight that students participating in the various programs offered by the learning community are supported academically and socially as they strive for excellence and pursue their purpose. Indeed, while engaging in the various programs offered by Webster House, the young men were building on and leveraging various forms of capital. For example, in learning to strive for excellence and pursue purpose, they strengthened their aspirational capital by developing or surpassing the academic and professional goals they had prior to engaging in Webster house. The participants aspired to graduate college prior to Webster House, however after being part of Webster House, their aspirations included graduate level work and professional degrees. They compounded their social capital by networking, engaging and leading several organizations, and expanding their peer groups. In learning to effectively network and navigate the structures within their university, they strengthened their navigational capital, by way of developing the necessary skills to
maneuver organizational structures that may be unwelcoming to them. For example, navigating through their PWI. Essentially, in being part of Webster House, and engaging in various programs, Black male students leveraged their experiences to strengthen the capital they had and accrued new forms of capital.

Several theoretical concepts enhance the results of this study. Storytelling is an important aspect of CRT, adding context and providing the perspective for understanding, feeling, and interpreting the experience of others (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The study findings rely on storytelling to hear participants’ narratives about persisting through microaggressions and building solidarity among peers and advisors. In recounting their stories, I have done so mindful of the framing of the experiences, meaning, the narratives capitalize on the successes of the students. In his work, in highlighting the importance of using an anti-deficit framework, Harper (2012) asserts the study of Black male success and educational attainment, the often one-sided narrative on the challenges of low performing Black males must be offset by the study of Black males who are successful. And so, this study shifts the focus to college attainment among Black males and highlights themes salient to successful Black males in a PWI.

All eight study participants engaged in the various forms of enrichment programs offered by the learning community. The enrichment programs targeted different aspects of their learning, growth, and development. For example, the trip to the recently opened African American Museum, provided the opportunity for study participants to “learn more about ourselves and our history.” One participant described the experience as “grounding,” giving the young men a sense of self, purpose, and showing them in “concrete terms they were a part of a bigger journey in the African American experience.” Benefits from their involvement in out-of-class engagements was also evident. Out-of-class engagement for Webster House ranged from team building retreats,
where the focus was to create bonding experiences for incoming freshmen and sophomores to tactical planning and strategy meetings for upcoming trips. These activities allowed students to share their experiences with their peers, and to understand which student was taking what class and who could provide tutoring assistance or mentoring. In addition to using these tools to aid college achievement, it also helped build their social capital among their peers in Webster House and with other students in the university.

Yosso (2005) uses Community Cultural Wealth/Capital framework to describe social capital as the ability to leverage community resources such as mentoring groups, peer groups, and other resources within the community to gain emotional or academic support. The presence of formal and informal support structures offered by Webster House is consistent with this framework. While the participants brought considerable capital with them to Webster House, the formal and informal structures created, the experiences offered, and the norms and expectations established expanded the young men’s cultural capital in significant ways. In addition to developing their social capital by reaching out to peers, faculty members and strengthening those relationships, they were able to develop a web of networks with relationships spanning outside the university through the various networking engagements they were involved in. Participants described using the relationships gained from enrichment activities to gain access to participating in research, securing internships and job opportunities.

Yosso’s (2005) framework also highlights aspirational capital as a form of community cultural wealth. This capital is similar to the pursuit of purpose and refers to the ability to allow oneself to develop resiliency and dream for a better future even in the face of opposition. This cultural capital was evident as participants reported they are driven by the vision of themselves creating opportunities and support systems for others coming behind them. This intrinsic
motivation to excel, to live for a cause beyond one’s self, is a driving force that overshadows challenges they encounter in their college experience, and leads the young men to pursue their purpose.

Themes drawn from the study demonstrate mechanisms Webster House leveraged to create a space that fosters peer and cultural inclusiveness and belongingness, for Black males which was lacking in the larger campus community. They also demonstrate participation in formal and informal programs created by Webster House enriched students’ social and academic experiences. In creating a home away from home, strengthening their cultural capital and creating a sense of brotherhood among students, Webster House created a path for Black male students to thrive and persist in their academic pursuits.
Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

“Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can repair that broken dignity.” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In addition to navigating social and environmental obstacles, Black male students strive to perform well academically, develop meaningful relationships with peers and instructors, and engage in enrichment programs such as education abroad and undergraduate research. In so doing, they strengthen their academic and professional skills in preparation for life after college. Narratives by study participants highlight various challenges Black male students contend with and the strategies they use to persist to graduation. Findings from this study demonstrate some of these challenges and highlight various mechanisms students and institutions use to offset them. Contrary to studies which attribute Black male college achievement to academic underpreparedness, this study highlights social factors, including peer and cultural inclusiveness, belongingness and mentoring relationships, as contributing to the success, persistence, and retention of the Black male college students. It also points out that the needs of Black male college students are distinct from other populations, and so, efforts and practices targeted to the masses may not address the specific needs of this population of students. In addition, findings from this study point to the role of institutions in fostering the success of their students. In essence, to combat these unique challenges, it is useful for institutions of higher learning to implement intentional and empirically studied practices aimed at reducing challenges Black male students face in the course of their education. To that end, I offer recommendations for practice below, and call for additional studies that further explore these best practices and their long term benefits.
Recommendations for Practice

According to Strayhorn (2016) the best opportunities for academic development and growth occur when student social and academic experiences are in concert with an atmosphere of nurturing, inclusivity, and support. With this mind, college administrators and educators should create an inclusive and supportive learning environment by providing mechanisms and practices that aid students in successfully navigating through college. Indeed, findings from this study highlight the struggles Black male students face in the quest for engaging in quality peer and faculty relationships and in navigating through their learning experiences. However, they also offer insights on intentional institutional practices that have positively enhanced their college experience.

College Learning as a Holistic Experience. Colleges should view Black male students’ education from a holistic perspective. This includes providing an environment where students are fulfilled academically, socially, emotionally, and culturally. Support systems solely targeting the intellectual development of Black male students are insufficient. Rather, support systems should include provisions for inquiring about the physical and emotional health of the student and any stresses students may have, including financial stress and stresses from family back home. One way to do this is by inquiring about the health and well-being of the student and their family during advisory meetings. As Randall, a study participant highlighted in reference to the support he receives from his mentors and advisors, “They inquire how I am doing personally, how are you? How this, how is that? They have worked with students like me and they know my struggle.” Some students, particularly low income and first generation students, carry the additional burdens of being caretakers of their family back home, a burden that must not be ignored and one that may compound challenges students face. Understanding the unique
circumstances of Black male students may also offer insights on specific areas in which these students may need the most support.

**Creating a Home Away From Home.** Colleges should create and invest in culturally relevant spaces and learning communities that provide opportunities for Black male students to build social networks, engage in culturally relevant experiences and, as students in this study describe, a place where they can lay their mask down - in other words, a home away from home. Participants in this study describe Webster House as a place where their voices are heard, a place where they can easily seek help and have their academic needs met, and a place that offsets negative stereotypes by offering various images of successful Black males. These culturally relevant spaces also provide a place where they can self-affirm, learn from mentors, foster a sense of brotherhood, and develop peer and mentoring relationships lasting past their academic journey.

**Understanding Diverse Social Cues and Interaction Styles.** White college administrators and faculty should have a strong commitment to understanding the social and cultural cues and interaction styles of Black males (Howard et al., 2016). Social cues and interactions styles between Black males and White faculty members, for example, may be misunderstood and create a barrier to relationship building between faculty and student. For instance, an assertive communication by a passionate student may appear to the faculty as aggressive or threatening. A reserved response from a faculty member may come across as uncaring or as a sign of unwillingness to provide additional support for the student. Faculty members should be aware of their positionality as the instructor and the perceived power dynamics between them and the student. Slight modifications in meeting spaces, such as offering to set up office hours at the location of the learning community rather than in the faculty
member’s office space, may change the power dynamics and in so doing, create a space where students feel more at ease to approach the faculty for academic guidance. Therefore, regardless of the perceived guise Black male students’ project on campus, there must be a commitment to see them and hold them accountable as capable students with unlimited potential and with the ability to excel in the academic environment and in society.

Lastly, the model below encapsulates the findings from the study and illustrate the relationship between the themes derived from the study and outcomes such as belongingness and perceived overall positive campus experience. As depicted in the conceptual model below (Figure 5.1), students in the learning community point to engagement in formal and informal support structures and enrichment programs coupled with a student’s pursuit of purpose as aiding increased sense of belongingness, positive self-image, and the perception of positive student experiences. Indeed, as reported by participants of the study, persistence and retention in a PWI may not be a function of academic under preparedness; rather, it points to a sociological issue, resulting from social, structural and environmental challenges Black male students face while studying in a PWI. The conceptual model highlights that Black males attending PWIs while living in a culturally congruent learning community, report successful academic outcomes, and a positive college experience when they have access to formal/formal support structures coupled with enrichment programs and are guided by their personal pursuit of purpose.
Combating the challenges faced by Black male students in PWIs requires addressing the sociological issues, creating culturally congruent programs, such as peer, professional and academic structures that Black male students can leverage. In addition to recommending the creation of relevant spaces where students can feel seen and heard, I also recommend fostering relationships with faculty members, and leveraging concepts of high impact practices such as education abroad and undergraduate research opportunities to improve student engagement. The importance of setting high expectations for students and the encouragement of students to seek and pursue their greatness or purpose must not be minimized (Harris, 2011).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Findings from this study highlight challenges student face as well as current practices that positively influence the experiences of Black males attending PWI’s. In addition to highlighting challenges Black males face in PWIs, this study, through an anti-deficit lens, focuses on Webster House as a culturally relevant learning community, the strengths or capital students have embodied, and strategies that have yielded student success and positive outcomes. To that end,
echoing the recommendations of Howard et al. (2016), I recommend future studies continue the exploration of Black male college experience though the lens of Black males while concurrently exploring institutional structures that shape these experiences. This future inquiry through the lens of Black male students has the potential to provide insights on successful practices and systems that aid in students’ success. Similarly, such inquiry will also shed light on practices or structural impediments to their learning, social experiences, and sense of belonging.

Finally, I recommend additional studies on similar learning communities dedicated to Black male students and issues concerning Black males. Future study samples size should be increased, and a mixed methods research design used to better understand academic attainment during and after engagement with learning communities. Future studies could also benefit from increasing the geographical locations of participants to include other regions of the United States. This will allow for a comparative analysis in the experiences of Black males and success of similar programs in varying geographical locations.

**Conclusion**

An important aspect of CRT is the ability of a marginalized group to account for their experiences and tell their story in voice (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Exploring the intersections in the themes mentioned in this study and their relationship with successful college outcomes for Black male students, sheds light on best practice for addressing college retention rates of Black males. Findings from this study highlight the important role formal and informal support structures, networks, enrichment programs, and the pursuit of purpose have in fostering an environment where Black college males thrive academically and socially. In addition, this study highlights the benefits of a culturally relevant living space, where Black male students leveraging
their cultural capital can achieve success academically, increase their sense of belongingness and persistence through college.

This study also highlights the lived experiences of Webster House students by narrating nuanced and sometimes intangible factors that influence students’ experiences. Measuring intangible variables such as happiness, belongingness or rates of positive experience is outside the scope of this study; however, in reflecting on the success of students from Webster House learning community, they report over 60% of their graduates entered advanced degree programs, a third engaged in internships, co-ops or research opportunities, and the program boasts a four semester retention rate of 90%.
## Appendix A

Chart for Participant Recruitment and Engagement

### Target Recruitment participants

- Faculty and Students
- Student enrichment programs, First Year college experience programs
- Residence Hall Advisors
- Learning Communities in target institution

### Definitions

Target Recruitment Participants consists of faculty, staff and students in the target institution. Some of these individuals I have met through the course of my study. The individuals, who work directly with the study participants, may know students who would be interested in conducting the study, and may provide me with information about peer group sessions, mentoring sessions where I may conduct my observations.
# Appendix B

## INTERVIEW PHASE 1

### Interview Part 1

In this section of the interview, I will ask you a few questions about your background, activities or organizations you are involved in on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you live or have you lived in a learning community designated for Black males?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. If yes, for how long?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What degree program are you enrolled in?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Are you the first person in your family to attend college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Are you involved in campus organizations? E.g. Fraternity, social groups or study groups?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Are you involved in any mentoring activities - Peer mentoring, Faculty or staff?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a. If so, specify</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Do you hold any leadership positions on campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a. If so, please specify role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What is your GPA?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What is your age?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Part 2

In this section of the interview, I will ask you questions about your engagement with the university and your learning community.

1. Tell me about your overall experiences in this university? Please describe an incident or incidents that stand out in your memory. How has this experience influenced your view of this university?

2. Describe your experience living in this learning community. Describe an incident or incidents that stand out in your memory. How has this experience influenced your view of this university?

3. What programs or activities do you engage in as a member of this learning community? (social groups, friends, mentorships) Describe an incident or incidents that stand out in your memory.

4. Do you actively participate in any of these activities? Do you see these activities as beneficial to you academically? Socially? Explain.
5. What do you see as a benefit to living in this learning community?

6. Has your perception of yourself changed since joining this learning community?

7. Who/what, has had the most influence on you since attending this university?

8. What would you like to do after you leave this learning community? (housing options, socially, academically)
Appendix D

Initial Script for Interview invitation to Participants

Dear <XXXXXXXXXXXXX>

My name is Ngozi Taffe. I am a doctoral student in the Leadership and Education Policy program in the Neag School of Education. For my dissertation, I plan to study the social and learning experiences of Black Males living in a Learning Community.

My study will be qualitative, primarily based on interviews. I plan to conduct three interview sessions with participants with each interview lasting no more than 90 minutes.

Would you be willing to participate in this study? I am happy to meet with you at any location on campus, at a mutually agreeable time.

Participants will remain anonymous and I will use pseudo names in discussing the findings of the study.

I am happy to answer any questions you have about your role in this study. You may reach me at XXX-XXX-XXXX. In addition, you may also contact my dissertation advisor Dr. Casey Cobb at Casey.Cobb@uconn.edu for any questions.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best Regards,

Ngozi Taffe
Ph.D. Program, Leadership and Education Policy,
Neag School of Education, UCONN
Appendix E

Initial Script to Interview Participants

Dear <XXXXX>

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. I will reach out to you in the next few days to set up a mutually convenient time and place for us to meet.

In the first meeting, I will ask you a series of questions. I anticipate this meeting with take no longer than 90 minutes. I also plan to reach out to you for a follow up meeting during the month of August. I anticipate no more than three meetings for this study.

Until then and throughout the study, I am happy to answer any questions you have, and your role in this study. You may reach me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via email at Ngozi.Taffe@uconn.edu. In addition, you may also contact my dissertation advisor Dr. Casey Cobb at Casey.Cobb@uconn.edu for any questions.

I thank you for your time and look forward to working with you!

Best Regards,

Ngozi Taffe
Ph.D. Program, Leadership and Education Policy,
Neag School of Education, UCONN
References


McEwan, B. (2013). Retention and resources: An exploration of how social network resources related to university commitment. *Journal of College Student Retention, 15*(1), 113-128. doi:10.2190/CS.15.1. g


