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Swimming Upstream: A Study of Black Males and the Academic Pipeline

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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, SWIMMING UPSTREAM: A STUDY OF BLACK MALES AND THE ACADEMIC PIPELINE by RHONDA WILKINS, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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ABSTRACT

SWIMMING UPSTREAM: A STUDY OF BLACK MALES AND THE ACADEMIC PIPELINE
by
Rhonda D. Wilkins

Post secondary participation and graduation rates of Black males are declining rapidly. Black women, however, are realizing substantial growth in both of these areas and account for the majority of the increase in Black student college enrollment. This qualitative case study addresses the decline in Black male participation in higher education by focusing on six Black men who completed college programs and the academic pipeline that brought them to their degree. The purpose of the research inquiry was to determine various factors that either helped or hindered the academic progression of the six Black male participants. For the study participants the two-year college was a component of their academic pipeline and was assessed based on its function as a conduit aiding degree attainment. The common factors that emerged from the findings as influential to the academic progression of the six Black males were categorized as: (a) personal attributes and perceptions, (b) relationships and external influences, and (c) institutional factors. The personal attributes of the participants included self-efficacy, endurance and resilience, and self-regulation. These attributes were framed within the central context of personal agency. Factors external to the participants consisted of family messages about higher education, role models, mentors and advocates, early exposure to college and participation in athletic sports. The institutional factors that surfaced were insufficient college preparation in high school, contrasts between the climate and culture of the two-year college and four-year institution, the lack of promotion of the transfer function at the two-

year college. Race and gender were also considered relative to the men and their experiences with the academic pipeline. The salient factors included: (a) the general social and economic conditions faced by young Black males, (b) the perpetuation of negative or one-dimensional stereotypes in the media, (c) pre-college educational inequities, (d) the lack of assistance with college transition, and (e) the unwelcoming climates and lack of Black faculty at predominately white institutions. The study concluded that Black males may face many hurdles to postsecondary attainment and will therefore require personal, family, community, and institutional forces to push them through the academic pipeline.

SWIMMING UPSTREAM: A STUDY OF BLACK MALES AND THE ACADEMIC PIPELINE

by
Rhonda D. Wilkins

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Policy Studies
in
the Department of Educational Policy Studies
in
the College of Education
Georgia State University

Atlanta, Georgia
2005

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have spent over eight years in pursuit of the doctoral degree. This time did not pass without the generous support and encouragement of many. For this, I am so very grateful. I first give honor to the Creator for loving, guiding, and sustaining me through my doctoral study and in all things. I am thankful for the individuals who have offered their time, counsel, and general assistance in support of this project. I can truly say I have seen the very best of people who in turn have inspired the very best in me. Thanks JoAnn, Maxine, Vickie, Keisha, Sheryl, and Colletta for being such great girlfriends and for always being there to help with childcare during crunch times. Grandma Wilkins, I so appreciate the summer vacations when you cared for our son. Sissy, thank you for providing a quiet and stress-free haven for my writing. David, thank you, I am so glad we are on the same team.

I must also acknowledge my committee members for their candid and thoughtful consideration of my study. Ben, thanks for pushing me towards excellence in preparing this dissertation. Philo, I appreciate your valiant efforts in support of the higher education program and graduate students of color. Asa, thank you for your endorsement. You are indeed one of my scholarly heroes. Patti, boundless thanks to you for your encouragement, guidance, and the occasional "kick in the pants." Who knew that my very first professor in the doctoral program would be there to the very end of this process?

Finally, and most importantly, I am enormously grateful for my family who are my heart and soul. My parents, Isaac and Harriett continue to inspire me in memory as they did in life. I am also consistently reminded and motivated by my extended family's legacy of educational achievement. Lastly, Alan and Christian, you are the love and joy of my life, thank you for your patience and support throughout this journey. You have endured too many evenings and weekends when I could not be with you either physically or mentally. I love you both truly, madly, deeply.

To the six Black men who shared their lives with me, you are stalwart examples of possibility, perseverance, and passion for your fellow man. I am honored to know you. In closing, I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my friend, colleague, and fellow working-mother graduate student, Deborah Urquhart who initially inspired me to begin doctoral study. You left us too soon. This dissertation is for the both of us.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The number of Black[1] males who attend and graduate from the nation's colleges and universities is steadily in decline and now at a critical and disturbing point. Although this trend started in the early 1970s (Akbar, 2002; Trent, 1991), it has recently captured more focused attention from educational researchers, sociologists, economists, and administrators in higher education. Research indicates that this dilemma has roots that go back to elementary school and consequences that will influence future generations. This issue juxtaposes three familiar media images: a) the troubled and disengaged Black men who are often under-achieving, unemployed, or incarcerated, b) a complex, dysfunctional, and disjointed K-12 public educational system that is likely to hinder as many students as it serves, and c) the exclusive and expensive academy, that has become the gatekeeper to many disenfranchised people rather than an affordable and accessible gateway to social mobility. This study addresses the decline in Black male participation in higher education by directing its attention on six Black men who completed college programs and the paths that brought them to their bachelor's degree. Through qualitative inquiry, this study seeks to ascertain the factors that supported or undermined the achievement of this goal. There is evidence that Black males in American public education have been swimming upstream, so to speak, from the fourth grade (B. D.

[1] For this study I will refer to people of African descent as Black.

Hawkins, 1996). On average, they are more often placed in special education courses, referred for disciplinary sanctions, and labeled as low academic achievers than almost any demographic subgroup (Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999; Harry & Anderson, 1999). National averages indicate that only slightly more than half of Black males who enter the ninth grade are likely to receive their high school diploma in four years (Orfield, Losen, Wald et al., 2004). For those who complete high school with the basic college preparatory requirements, the pathway to the baccalaureate can still be fraught with challenging obstacles that block or detour their academic progression (Astin, 1982; Martin, 1997; Orfield et al., 2004; Roche, 1994).

The way Black men are often represented and characterized as part of American society is also disconcerting. Popular media, government agencies, and research organizations regularly conjure visions of Black males as dangerous predators, marginalized deadbeats, and generally deficient in many indicators of social acceptability. Industrious, educated, and stable Black men, who are not athletes, entertainers, or political icons are seldom featured or studied (Jones & West, 2002; Polite & Davis, 1999; Roach, 2001a; Trent, 1991). A skewed perception of Black men is the result, and this view contributes to limited expectations from society and of themselves.

The inequities and inadequacies of the K-12 educational system have also been regular topics on the American social agenda. The literature commonly cites school conditions that academically thwart many minority students in major urban settings: limited resources, substantial discipline issues, low teacher expectations, and a prevailing culture of intellectual disengagement (Hopkins, 1997; Harry, 1999; LeCompte, 1999;

Polite, 1999). These factors do not encourage academic excellence or college attendance. Local, state, and federal initiatives such as the *No Child Left Behind Act,* state graduation tests, and postsecondary readiness programs have been put in place purportedly to help level the playing field for all students. Nevertheless, far too many Black students, particularly males, tend to emerge from high school largely uninterested in or unprepared for college work (Orfield et al., 2004). For these students already scarred by the educational system, higher education can be perceived more as a secret society than a democratic opportunity for success (Cross & Slater, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Polite & Davis, 1999).

In the United States, which professes to operate as a meritocracy and promote the concept of social mobility, education is potent currency. Some form of postsecondary education is now almost essential for participation in a competitive labor market where technical and highly specific skills are required. Yet access to higher education seems to be deliberately inching away from the masses in affordability and academic requirements.

Ironically, a cursory look at the current national enrollment and college graduation rates offers encouraging news. The overall number of all minorities in higher education is steadily increasing (Table 1). Although still not approaching the participation percentage of White students, Black, Asian, and Hispanic students experienced significant increases in postsecondary education participation in the past 10 years. The data on the growth rates of Black students, however, indicate more of a good news/bad news scenario. Even though the total number of Black students is increasing, the gender gap between males and females in higher education has gotten wider (NCES, 2003). While Black female students are experiencing notable growth in enrollment and

graduation, the participation of Black males is declining and is the lowest of all demographic subgroups (Table 2).

Table 1

Enrollment rates of 18- to 24-year-olds in colleges and universities: Selected years 1980 to 2000

	Enrollment as a Percent of all 18- to 24-year-olds				Enrollment as a percent of all 18- to 24-year-old high school completers			
Year	Total	White Non-Hispanic	Black non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Total	White non-Hispanic	Black non-Hispanic	Hispanic
1980	26	27	19	16	32	32	28	30
1985	28	30	20	17	34	35	26	27
1990	32	35	25	16	39	40	33	29
1995	34	38	27	21	42	44	35	35
1996	36	39	27	20	43	45	36	34
1997	37	41	30	22	45	47	39	36
1998	37	41	30	20	45	47	40	34
1999	36	39	30	19	45	45	39	32
2000	36	39	31	22	43	44	39	36

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2001, based on U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, unpublished data from the Current Population Surveys, various years.

Table 2

Percentage distribution of enrollment in colleges and universities, by sex and race and ethnicity: 2000

Race/Ethnicity	Total %	Male	Female
Total	100	44	56
White, non-Hispanic	100	44	56
Black non Hispanic	100	37	63
Hispanic	100	43	57
Asian/Pacific Islander	100	48	52
American Indian/Alaska Native	100	41	59
Non Resident alien	100	56	44

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics.

Recently, the southeastern state in which this investigation takes place,[2] took an active role in the discussion about improving access and retention for Black males. In 2001, the governing board of the state's university system called together a task force of college and university faculty and administrators, school system leaders, policy makers, businesspersons, and community members to look seriously and carefully at the low numbers of Black males attending its public institutions.

The research on the participation and attainment rates of Black males in this state system revealed a somber state of affairs. Figure 1 shows that out of all Black male public high school graduates in 1997, only 22.2 percent entered the state's public colleges and universities after high school. This figure also captures the lop-sided attendance patterns between Black and White students in general. Figure 2 displays the state's equally discouraging graduation rates of Black males.

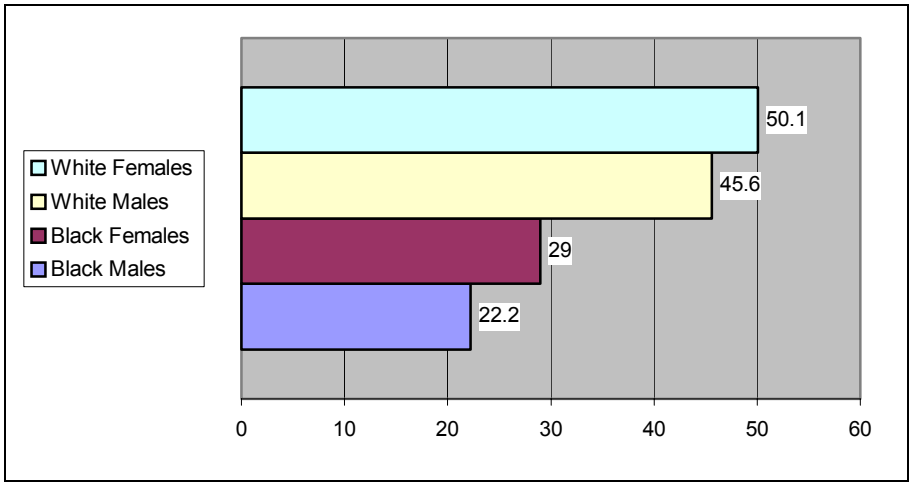
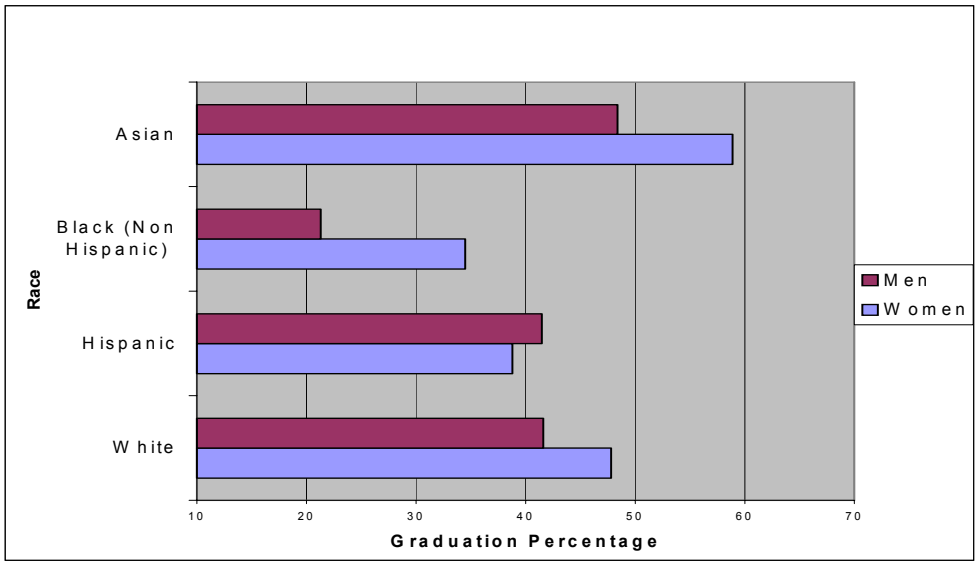


Figure 1. 1997 Public high school graduates as a proportion of 1997 state system first-time freshmen enrollment. Selected gender and race cohorts.

[2] For reasons of confidentiality, neither the state nor the report discussed above will be identified.



Source: State Department of Education, 2001 Report on Graduates. State System SIRS First-Time Freshmen Enrollment Reports, September 2002.

Figure 2. Six-Year Baccalaureate Graduation Rates by Race and Gender Fall 1996 Cohort of First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen

The task force produced considerable descriptive research, endorsed several pilot programs, and declared increasing Black male participation as an essential priority for the state university system. The reasons the studies found for the substantial shortage of Black males in its schools were high dropout rates, poor graduation rates, low standardized test scores, cultural incompatibility, little college planning information, and limited financial resources. Although the task force made several general recommendations, including public awareness campaigns, additional support programs, more rigorous standards in high school, further surveys of campus climate, and supplementary research, it fell short of committing to the long-term, substantive discourse and inquiry that could lead to meaningful reform.

This state system should be commended for being one of the few that have invested the research, resources, and development time to the study of this issue. I

contend, however, that in order to gain a comprehensive assessment of why Black males are represented in such low numbers would require three additional lines of inquiry. The first relates to how the public education and state university systems interacts with Black males with regard to policy and practice on both the system and institutional level. The second addresses how Black males experience and perceive these interactions. The third expands the concept of postsecondary participation for Black males by considering alternative pathways to the baccalaureate, including enrollment in two-year institutions before transfer to the degree granting institution. These lines of inquiry formed the basis from which this study was conceived.

Despite the dismal outlook for many Black males, there are those who successfully navigate through the higher education system to attain a baccalaureate degree. These are the men able to provide new insights about Black males who do participate in this higher education system and persist, and perhaps their experiences illustrate strategies that may assist those who do not. Given the many opportunities for failure for these men from elementary school through college, those who do graduate are exemplary and warrant careful consideration. This research study, therefore, investigates the Black males who continued to "swim upstream" until they achieved their goal.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative inquiry seeks to augment what is known about the influence of race, gender, personal characteristics, and available resources on the educational journey of Black males. The study is informed by the narratives of Black men who have progressed through various academic channels in order to achieve a college degree. A critical examination of what is referred to as the *academic pipeline* is presented as well.

The pipeline represents the educational path that leads to a predetermined outcome such as a degree or career (Martin, 1997; Roche, 1994). For Black men the pipeline often involves several transitions and possible detours, including attending more than one institution and experiencing periods of "stopping out" of educational settings (Hurd, 2000; Kazis, Conklin, & Pennington, 2004; Trent, 1991). The study reveals the personal traits, navigational tools, and external resources that six Black male participants employed during their progression toward educational goals and the characteristics of the pipeline that advanced them through.

A second yet equally important purpose of this study is to provide a more balanced view of Black males by providing a richer and more expansive representation of those who have succeeded in spite of the prevailing challenges. The media's attention seems fixated on Black males who exist either in the periphery of societal expectations or in the spotlight due to extraordinary sports and entertainment success. Yet, the numerous Black men who defy the stereotypes and who maintain sensible, responsible, and secure lifestyles while making substantial social and economic contributions are almost invisible in the public eye. This study of men who managed to achieve the elusive goal of a college degree may somehow serve to make the additional dimensions of Black males more apparent.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study is: How do the participants perceive that the characteristics of the current academic pipeline between high school graduation and college graduation intersect with their persistence strategies and personal

characteristics? Embodied in this general inquiry are the following more specific questions that are explored through the point of view of the study participants;

1. What specific personal attributes, coping mechanisms, and navigational strategies are useful for the persistence of Black males in higher education?
2. What positive or negative influence do key people, programs, or systems within and outside the college environment have in promoting academic persistence?
3. What institutional policies or practices at specific transition points are counter-productive, confusing, or de-motivating?
4. How is the pathway to the baccalaureate influenced by race and gender?

Conceptual Framework

This research is a qualitative case study of Black males and their progression towards degree attainment within a specified educational pipeline (S. B. Merriam, 1998; Stage & Manning, 2003). As such, I have approached this study from both an interpretive and transformative theoretical position (Cresswell, 1998; S. B. Merriam, 1998; Stage & Manning, 2003). Essentially all qualitative research is interpretive because it relies on the researcher's and participants' understanding, values, and biases to establish meaning related to a given topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a). This will be addressed in further detail in Chapter 2. Interpretive inquiry also explores the lived experiences of the subjects or participants in a study with the basic assumptions that "human experience is mediated by interpretation" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) and "multiple realities are constructed socially by individuals" (S. B. Merriam, 1998). In this study, my aim was to consider both the participants' interactions with higher education culture and practice, and the different meanings and assumptions they used to make sense

of the educational process. I also examined how the participants' construed their position as Black men within the postsecondary milieu.

Because of the considerable dearth of Black males successfully completing postsecondary education, I also approached the investigation from a criticalist standpoint. This involved scrutinizing the external conditions, including the systems, processes, and policies of higher education for ways those conditions may contribute to the shortage of Black men with baccalaureate degrees. The critical theory paradigm "addresses the relations among schooling, education, culture, society, economy, and governance" (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999 p. xiii). It also seeks to illuminate conditions of injustice that may exist within those relationships and affirms the necessity of personal agency in mediating the injustice. By reflecting on the ways the American system of education operationalizes and codifies its values, mission, and societal influence, its conflicts with the needs of Black males for social, economic, and political empowerment become more evident (Peca, 2000; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999).

Critical theory, particularly as it relates to the concept of agency, is an effective lens through which to analyze the topic of Black males' academic progression in higher education. It attends to cultural identity and the individual's responsibility "to reconcile the paradox of unjust social mores and affirmation of self" (Curtis-Tweed, 2003p. 402) which is a constant consideration for many ethnic minorities. The concept of human agency is also important to this study because it diminishes the perspective of Black males as powerless victims and leaves room for the possibility of self-determination and the transcendence of race and gender barriers.

Two other perspectives, related to critical theory, also aided in the discussion of agency, empowerment, and educational goals. *Self-efficacy* is closely associated with personal agency in that it refers to the belief in one's own capability to embark upon and complete a given task. Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1995), the originator of social cognitive theory, has written extensively about this concept. Bandura's work features the importance of self-efficacy in several arenas of human endeavor, from personal confrontation with addiction to societal struggle with endemic change. This concept contributed to an understanding of the mindsets and perspectives that lead to goal attainment.

Espoused by Paulo Freire (1970), the idea of the educator and the educated as agents of social transformation and personal liberation, informs the essential foundation for why this study is significant. Freire saw that educating oppressed people to critically analyze their world as crucial for societal transformation (Freire, 1970). Although Freire (1970, 1998) assails traditional education models as teaching assimilation to the dominant culture and perpetuating powerlessness, he postulates that educational experiences based on problem solving and a pedagogy that values the individual can indeed foster sustainable change in the lives of oppressed people. This vision of education is congruent with my own and exemplifies why higher education is essential for Black males, their families, and communities.

These theoretical and conceptual frameworks supported the questions that guided the study and prompted the formulation of many others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b; LeCompte & Bennett deMarrias, 1999; Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). How were the concepts of race, gender, and personal agency constructed by the participants at different

points in the participants' academic journey? Are there innate characteristics of various postsecondary institutions that are culturally or socially in conflict with Black men? Can these characteristics be changed or mediated to encourage more Black males to enter the pipeline and also push them through it?

As an academic administrator committed to social justice and a wife, mother, and sister to Black males, I began this research for both professional and personal reasons. I was curious to discover why so many Black males were not attaining the college degree and how both families and institutions could effect change to this condition. To that end, I wanted to understand the experiences, environments, and intrinsic characteristics that may lead to academic and social empowerment. I also desired a clearer ecological understanding of Black males within the higher education context. I believe those goals were achieved.

Review of Relevant Literature

The following section presents an overview of the literature related to Black males and the academic pipeline in order to locate this study within the current body of research. Three strands of research are included: a) studies about Black males in secondary and postsecondary educational settings, b) examinations of various academic pipelines and their outcomes, and c) contemporary assessments of the two-year college as a viable mechanism for academic advancement.

Black Males in Higher Education

If nothing else, the academic literature has extensively described Black males as problematic to higher education. There has been a significant amount of research done on the adjustment, academic achievement, persistence, and rates of enrollment and

graduation in postsecondary institutions. A large amount of the literature on Black males within educational environments, however, features quantitative studies comparing them with other subgroups. Such inquiries have involved academic and social comparisons based on race, gender, and institutional type (J. E. Davis, 1994; Dunn, 1988; Fuhrmann & Others, 1991; Gold & Others, 1990; National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, 2004; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Research along this vein, also tends to focus on the deficits of Black males compared to the majority culture and subsequently frames their conditions, characteristics, and habits as immutable and static (Fuhrmann & Others, 1991; Majors & Billson, 1992; Wallace & Bell, 1999; Willie, 2003). The concept of human agency as it relates to Black males is a significant omission from much of the literature.

Undeniably, some Black males do not display the academic and social skills required to be successful in postsecondary pursuits. The quantitative studies that identify traits, factors, or conditions necessary for college success indicate that the attrition and academic underperformance of Black males in higher education are due to a variety of factors. These include, among others, the lack of social integration, financial shortfalls, lack of academic preparedness, and acculturative stress (Fuhrmann & Others, 1991; Lardieri, 2000; Monk, 1998; A. W. Smith, 1991).

It has been noted that Black students' adjustment and lived experiences on campus can only be truly understood by qualitative analysis (Walter R. Allen, 1986). A number of qualitative studies have begun to surface that investigate Black males who persist and achieve within a variety of educational structures, including high schools, two year colleges, and historically Black and predominately White four-year colleges and

universities (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Ross, 1998). These studies offer an expanded understanding of how these students experience specific academic environments. A substantial amount of the research indicates that the perception of racial discrimination and marginalization continue to be significant influences on Black male persistence and achievement (W. R. Allen, 1988b; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Monk-Turner, 1995; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Wallace & Bell, 1999).

Price (2000) and Daily (2001) both conducted qualitative investigations of the social and educational experiences of Black male high school students from diverse socioeconomic locations. Price (2000) used a series of interviews with six Black males who were determined to attain high school diplomas, to uncover the meanings they ascribed to schooling and relationships within the constructs of power and privilege. His research revealed that each study participant's perception of their future, value of knowledge, and meaning of success was tied to how they experienced social and educational inequities in their daily lives. The study confirms the power of race, class, and gender in almost every aspect of academic life.

Daily's (2001) study was longitudinal, following five Black male students who attended the school where she taught from their junior year in high school to their second year of college. Daily used a variety of data sources including individual interviews, focus groups, and the students' written reactions to assigned readings. Similar to Price (2000), Daily also found that the young men's construction of the concept of race was related to their academic outcomes. The study also presented the parents' life experiences, early academic encounters, and discipline as consistent themes for the participants.

The parenting of Black males and academic achievement were also explored by Hrabowski and Maton (1998). Their research focused on the parenting behaviors that influenced the sons who were selected to participate in a highly selective college scholarship program for mathematics and science majors. The study found several common characteristics in how the parents of these academically successful Black male students approached child rearing. These included: (a) encouragement and unconditional positive regard, (b) strong limit setting and discipline, (c) continually high expectations, (d) open and consistent communication, (e) the development of positive racial identity, and (f) positive male identity. The study involved interviewing both single and two-parent families from middle and working class backgrounds. The findings revealed that family structure and economic status had little to do with the male's academic achievement. Although the sons living with fathers expressed a pronounced appreciation of the father's role in their upbringing, there was little difference in the messages about academic achievement, racial pride, and responsible manhood conveyed in homes where the father was not present.

Black male students' adjustment to collegiate life at predominately White and historically Black institutions have also been studied in the literature (Walter R. Allen, 1986; Bateman, 1997; Dunn, 1988; Gold & Others, 1990; Haralson, 1993; Harvey, 2002; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Lang, 1992). Ross' (1998) study of academically successful Black males focused on members of a college honors program at a historically Black College. This study, also based on in depth interviews, indicated the following factors were common among the men: (a) bonding to a person that provides guidance, (such as mother, family member, mentor or role model), (b) religiosity, (c) introspection, (d)

taking charge of their lives, (e) endurance, and (f) a supportive environment. Ross unifies the factors that emerged from her research under the theme of nurturing, which she concluded was the essential component in the success of her study participants. The perception that caring was demonstrated by the people and institutions they encountered also surfaced as vital for some but not all of the participants.

Pointing out the scarcity of retention research on community colleges and their students, Mason (1998) conducted a study on the factors that encouraged the persistence of Black male urban community college students. His findings suggest several personal and external factors as important for increased persistence including: (a) a high degree of "goal internalization", (b) the outside encouragement, usually from a significant female, (c) an understanding of the particular benefits of the program to their future, and (d) the ability to overcome what Mason terms as the "helplessness/hopelessness factor" that leads to discouragement and inactivity. Mason also concludes that more proactive advising and counseling about transferring was needed at the community college. I found this study particularly relevant because of its consideration of the two-year college setting in relation to Black males.

The reality of unwelcoming climates at some predominately White institutions has also been addressed in the literature. Harris' (1999) and Dixon's (1999) research or Black males attending predominately White universities revealed that campus climate was a significant factor in their college adjustment. Harris (1999) interviewed twelve Black male undergraduates at a predominately White university about their perceptions of the effects of the university's environment on their academic and social success. They were also asked to describe additional factors that they felt contributed to their success.

Similar to several other studies (W. R. Allen, 1988b; J. E. Davis, 1999; Hall & Rowan, 2000), Harris found that racism and the subsequent feelings of alienation were a common theme among his participants.

Dixon's (1999) qualitative study looked at Black male graduates of a predominately White state college. His findings uncovered that out of 16 external variables that were cited by the respondents as either contributing or discouraging to their college persistence and subsequent graduation, ten variables were related to the institution's climate, resources, or services. One of the most prominent discouraging factors identified by the men was the sense of not being valued as students by the institution. Further, Dixon found that most of the prominent retention and persistence theoretical models (Astin, 1982; Tinto, 1987) failed to consider inclusive institutional climates as retention factors.

The cited studies feature several similarities to my research. They all have qualitative components, they primarily study non-cognitive variables leading to achievement or persistence, and they all consider both personal and external factors. There remains, nonetheless, a lack of focus on the students' perspective of the systems and ideologies emanating from various junctures along the path leading to a college degree.

The Academic Pipeline

The academic pipeline has been featured in the literature within a variety of contexts. There are pipelines to various careers, such as teaching and business, for various populations such as women, minorities, or U.S. born scientists, and within various academic ladders such as high school to college, college to graduate and

professional schools, etc. (Atkin, Green, & McLaughlin, 2002; Cokley, 1998; Evans, 2001; Gallien & Peterson, 2005; Hopkins, 1997; Lang, Ford, & Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University., 1988; Opp, 2002; Susskind, 1997; van Anders, 2004). For example, much of the current literature referring to pipelines decries the shortage of women and minority scientists and university professors, minority teachers, and nurses and technology workers in general. The concept of the academic pipeline primarily relates to supply and demand of a profession and how the individual, institutional, and societal factors may assist, hinder, or divert its "flow" through a given system. It is also a useful concept from which to analyze the dynamics and transitions of an academic path in its entirety.

There is limited literature available about the academic pipeline for undergraduate education. This is perhaps due to the assumption of a straightforward passageway from high school graduation to college graduation via one of this nation's four-year colleges and universities. For many members of under-represented populations in higher education, however, the pathway to the baccalaureate is less than routine, straightforward, or even obvious. Ample research has been done on components of the pipeline such as college choice factors of high school graduates, transfer rates of two-year colleges, and graduation rates of specific populations. There has also been a proliferation of studies on the retention measures, attrition causes, campus climates, faculty-student interactions, and student service initiatives that promote academic progression (Gallien & Peterson, 2005; Hopkins, 1997; Jackson, 2003). Yet, observation and inquiry about the various transitions encompassed within the academic pipeline from high school to the

undergraduate degree is scant. Studies along these lines related to Black males specifically are particularly rare.

Two veins of pipeline research have emerged, however, that I found germane to this study. The first involves descriptive statistics that identify the number of members within a given population who are eligible to move on to the next step in a given pipeline. These studies illustrate where substantial leaks in the pipeline occur. One such study analyzes the educational path leading to administrative positions in higher education for Black males. Jackson's (2003) study, based on several national databases, reveals the varying gaps between Black and White male participation at successive levels of education. Beginning with high school, Jackson reports that 68 percent of Black males graduated compared to 79 percent of White males, representing an 11 percent gap. The gap widens significantly to 68 percent when considering bachelor's degree attainment. The author points out that while the gap narrowed significantly in terms of doctoral degree attainment (27 percent), the difference between the number of Black and White males holding faculty positions represents a huge gap of 81 percent. Jackson's research not only provides a picture of the limited number of Black males that progress through this educational pipeline, but it also indicates where the pipeline needs to be repaired. This study was helpful in situating my research on the pipeline to the baccalaureate within a larger context.

The other research related to the academic pipeline that informed my study, reflected deliberate efforts to uncover the processes, programs, and policies that aid seamless academic transitions for underrepresented populations. Suarez (2003) conducted a qualitative examination of the individual, institutional, and environmental

factors that propelled Latino community college students towards transferring to a four-year institution. Suarez (2003) interviewed students who had already successfully transferred and graduated, in order to gain a comprehensive perspective of the transfer process. Administrators, counselors, and instructors also provided interview data for the study. The results of the study led to five salient conclusions about the transfer process:

1. Personal and financial hardships often served as motivating factors instead of barriers for the students.
2. Palpable institutional commitment to the transfer process leads to increased transfer rates.
3. The transfer process should be a shared responsibility between students, faculty and student support services.
4. Programs that focused specifically on helping minority students with the transfer process were not perceived as useful by the students,
5. Popular assumptions about what promotes academic success with underrepresented populations may need further examination from the student's perspective.

Suarez's (2003) research along with several other studies about academic transitions confirmed the complex nature of moving through postsecondary systems and validated the importance of qualitative methods in understanding the different meanings these systems have for students (W. Lee, 2001; A. P. Smith, 2005; Susskind, 1997; Trujillo & Diaz, 1999; van Anders, 2004).

The Two-Year College as Conduit

The specific pipeline investigated in this study begins with preparation for college attendance and goes forward to high school graduation, to enrollment in a two-year college, to completion of basic core requirements, to transfer to a senior institution, and finally to graduation with a baccalaureate degree. This pathway to the baccalaureate is particularly complex and allows for the consideration of several different transition factors, including the two-year-college as an intermediary step between high school and college graduation. This step is consistently portrayed in the literature as the least productive route to degree attainment (K. J. Dougherty, 1994; Monk-Turner, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). It is, however, a route that many students, particularly underrepresented groups, see as a viable point of access to higher education (Dixon, 1999; Glenn, 2001; Laanan, 2001; V. E. Lee & Frank, 1990; Phillippe, 2003; Townsend & Twombly, 2001). As an example, forty-one percent of all Black college students begin their academic career at a two-year college (Phillippe, 2003).

Community and junior colleges with articulated transfer programs can serve as legitimate gateways to four-year colleges and universities. They offer many disadvantaged populations an option for degree attainment and the possibility of social mobility. They are also popular destinations for students because of their comparative (to four-year institutions) accessibility and affordability. They can, however, also be departure points for these students as well (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 1996; K. J. Dougherty, 1994; Phillippe, 2003). A major criticism lodged at the two-year college sector is that numerous students leave without earning an associate's degree or transferring to a four-year institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989; K. J. Dougherty, 1994; L. I.

Rendon, 1993). Some studies further suggest that even after the transfer to a four-year college, a student is not as likely as a native student to attain his or her degree (V. E. Lee & Frank, 1990). Perhaps the most serious indictment of two-year colleges comes from the argument that beginning at a two-year college instead of a four-year college will actually decrease the chance for degree attainment (Monk-Turner, 1995).

The role of the two-year college's transfer function as part of the higher education landscape has been a topic of great debate over the years. A survey of the history and development of two year colleges suggests that changing social, economic, and political priorities have shaped the missions of these institutions usually with little regard to the diverse students they serve (Herideen, 1998). Although most two-year colleges have both transfer and career programs, there is often an imbalance in their funding, promotion, and enrollment depending on community, business, or political pressures. McGrath and Spear (1991) assert that an increased focus on occupational education has led to transfer programs with lower academic standards. In addition, as early as 1960, Burton Clark (1960) asserted that two-year colleges only served to "cool out" or pacify students of lower socioeconomic classes by giving them the illusion of attaining a college education. This remains a prevailing perception used to justify why two-year institutions are a marginalized sector of higher education.

Two-year colleges have come under attack from critics for having low transfer and graduation rates (Brint & Karabel, 1989; B. Clark, 1960; K. Dougherty, 1987; K. J. Dougherty, 1994), yet the literature also indicates the difficulties in clearly identifying how these rates are determined. A central problem with the study of two-year college transfer and graduation rates stems from the often non-sequential nature of the students'

enrollment patterns. Students attending two-year colleges are often engaged in a "transfer swirl" where they transfer to a four-year institution then back to a two-year college. Or, they begin at a four-year institution and then transfer to a two-year college. Some students maintain concurrent enrollment at both a community college and a baccalaureate degree granting institution. Also, what may be considered as “dropping out” at a four year institution may actually be “stopping out” with the intention of returning for two-year college students (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Laanan, 2001; W. Lee, 2001; Zamani, 2001). It is consequently difficult to assess transfer as a finite occurrence and measure graduation rates within specific timeframes.

Advocates argue that the two-year community college offers a broad entryway to educational opportunity. By providing both short-term vocational programs and courses for transfer to senior institutions, these colleges are allowing virtually any student access to postsecondary education and thus upholding a democratic ideal (K. J. Dougherty, 1994; Eaton, 1988; Herideen, 1998; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Rendon (1993) a critical advocate of two-year colleges, cautions that simply looking at access from a “color-blind point of view” and not acknowledging the deficiencies in the transfer function fails to recognize the socioeconomic and cultural realities of the disproportionate number of under-represented populations that attend two year colleges.

As Eaton (1988) predicts, two-year colleges will become more central to the postsecondary enterprise as more academic seats are needed to meet the demand for highly skilled and specialized workers in a competitive global economy. These ideals can only be realized, however, if the academic and cultural transitions involved in going

from two-year colleges to senior institutions are void of intentional or unintentional hindrances. The current investigation of the actual experiences of Black males who have entered higher education by way of these colleges addresses the transitioning process from a student perspective, and adds to the body of knowledge about the goals and purposes of two-year colleges.

Assumptions and Limitations

This investigation was based on several assumptions and limitations I wish to acknowledge. The first assumption is that the participants in this investigation were sufficiently accurate in providing detailed perceptions of their educational experiences for the sake of analysis. I was aware that the perceptions and experiences of the participants were recounted from the past and that time has a way of altering one's understanding, appreciation, and even representation of certain lived experiences. Although I believe the participants were essentially forthcoming with their recollections, I also realized the lessons learned from these experiences as reported by the men most likely came as a result of many intervening circumstances and choices. Their comments now may actually reflect introspection and insight that may not have been available immediately following their graduation.

Secondly, the participants were selected for this study based on certain criteria, including their attendance and transfer from the two-year college at which I am employed. Although my employment allowed me ample access to a pool of potential participants, it also identified me as a stakeholder in the very system I was investigating. I was also aware that as a known entity at the institution certain assumptions could be made about my income, education level, and hierarchal status at the college. Because of

this I took steps to ensure that any differences related to gender, educational level, and positional power between me as researcher and the participants were sufficiently mediated so as not to skew the findings. This issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Lastly, I assumed that because this study focuses on a specific population, that the findings would indicate that some commonality existed among the study participants. I did not assume, however, that Black male college graduates who have attended two-year institutions are a homogeneous group.

Significance of the Study

According to the prevailing research, the path for Black males from high school to college graduation with a baccalaureate degree is one that is extremely narrow and treacherous. There are endless opportunities for failure and multiple reasons to abandon the endeavor. The Black men of this study, though, overcame the obstacles that have thwarted so many others. This research offers educators, policy makers, and other Black males additional insights into how and why Black men persist to college graduation or why and how they fail to do so. Two-year and four-year college practitioners are also informed of what institutional factors are perceived as enhancing or diminishing the academic experiences of Black students who are passing through their institutions. This will hopefully inspire effective interventions. Finally, the study examines the two-year college as a viable access point for Black males in higher education.

Black academicians and political leaders have called for a thorough research agenda concentrated on the social, educational, and political issues plaguing Black men in America (Roach, 2001). The lack of Black males in science and technology fields,

academia, and the upper echelons of business and industry will only be ameliorated by higher education (Jones & West, 2002; C. C. Lee, Holcomb, Walz et al., 1994; Polite & Davis, 1999). Moreover, a sufficient number of Black males able to adequately compete in an increasingly competitive global economy is imperative for the Black community and the nation at large. This study seeks to contribute to this agenda by giving voice to those who are perhaps the most familiar with these issues: Black male graduates.

Summary

This chapter put forth the current conditions, general purposes, theoretical frameworks, and essential arguments that guided this research study. The purpose was to establish the relevance and need for a qualitative analysis of the experiences of six Black males who progressed successfully through an academic pipeline. The literature revealed that all is not well with Black males in higher education. Underachieving, endangered, culturally deprived, and academically disengaged are terms that are regularly ascribed to Black men (Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Billson, 1992; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003; Willie, 2003). Unfortunately, those who do not fit these statistical stereotypes are seldom acknowledged. Black males are likely to find that the collegiate path is thorny and degree attainment may be elusive. The two-year college, with all of its contradictions and critics, was also assessed as a functional conduit that can carry Black males to college graduation.

The plight of Black men and their low participation in higher education cannot be overlooked. Meaningful inquiry, however, must expand beyond these realities to uncover new paradigms and perspectives (Bailey, 2003; Pollard, 1989; Ross, 1998). Regardless of circumstances, characteristics, or conditions, there are those whose vision, restraint,

perseverance, or fortune, guide their trajectories toward a desired aim. Thus, this study seeks to enrich the current literature on Black males by analyzing those who succeed.

CHAPTER 2
RESEARCH METHODS

In light of the diminishing college participation and graduation rates of Black males, this research study was undertaken to learn more about how some Black men experience and respond to various postsecondary transitions towards the college degree. As with many social issues, one of the initial steps towards transformation begins with a clear foundation of the various empirical and interpretive dynamics surrounding it (Weis & Fine, 2000). The purpose of this chapter is to outline the investigative methods that were used for this project. It includes four key areas related to the overall methodology of the project: (a) research design, (b) site and participant selection, (c) data collection and management, and (d) data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Research Design

Research that goes beyond the describing traits and conditions or comparing outcomes of Black males in higher education is relatively scant (Harvey, 2002; Roach, 2001a). Even more limited are studies that address the actual lived experiences, perceptions, and reactions of Black males who have progressed in the academy. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the factors that contribute to or detract from Black male enrollment in postsecondary education, a deeply personal, insightful, and multi-layered investigation was required. A qualitative research design was chosen for this investigation so as to explore "what events, beliefs, attitudes, policies are shaping this phenomenon" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995 p. 41). Unlike quantitative studies,

qualitative research is a confrontation with social phenomena without artificial or predetermined structures. It honors the natural, the contextual, and the socially interpreted. It is, hence, through qualitative research that stories of Black men moving through the academy emerged (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b; Weis & Fine, 2000).

The specific qualitative method employed was the case study. Case studies focus on aspects of a bounded or integrated system and have distinct utility when "investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon" (S. B. Merriam, 1998 p. 41). Characteristic to case studies is their ability to allow dense descriptions and recurring themes to emerge within a specific context or setting (Cresswell, 1998). Congruent with this methodology, Black male participants are located within the complex bounded system of higher education. For the purpose of this study, the system of higher education includes the specific institutions attended by the study participants and the linkages and conduits that were necessary to complete the baccalaureate degree.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) explain that the researcher must take descriptions and themes and "fashion meaning and interpretation out of an ongoing experience" and yet be careful to identify the influence of his or her own values as part of the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 p. 362). In other words, as researcher, it is my responsibility to present my own multidimensional findings, while at the same time providing the reader with enough information to enable him or her to construct the "lessons to be learned" from the study as well.

Although the qualitative tradition is predicated on loosely constructed, evolving research processes, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that for a new qualitative researcher, a more structured strategy would lead to a more manageable research experience. To that end, I produced a proposed plan of action for the study that helped to order my research tasks and maintain the focus on my research questions. For example, before I began the interviews, I developed broad themes and subcategories based on my initial review of the literature and the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; S. B. Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998; Spradley, 1979). I also prepared a detailed guide for each interview, outlining the specific questions that I would ask and at what point in the interview I would ask them. However, as Marshall and Rossman (1995) advocate, my plans and guidelines were flexible and responsive to the unanticipated themes and concepts that emerged during the course of gathering and organizing the data.

Participant and Site Selection

The site of the study is the academic pipeline and consists of the various postsecondary institutions where the six men received their postsecondary education. This pipeline is located for the most part within the public educational system of a U.S. southeastern state. Each man received much of his collegiate education within this state system. Several of the men, however, either attended high school or completed their degree at institutions that were not part of the specific state system referred to above. The one common point in the pipeline was Suburban Junior College (a pseudonym), which all study participants attended immediately before transfer to the institution from which they received their baccalaureate degree.

The southeastern state where this study took place (hereafter referred to as State) has attracted a fair amount of business and industry since the late 1960s. While State's pleasant climate, moderate cost of living, and thriving metropolitan areas have encouraged a substantial migration of professionals and eager workers from across the country, a dramatic need remains for highly skilled and educated workers. Outside of its major cities, State is, like other southern states, predominately rural, inhabited with large pockets of low income and minimally educated citizens. The State K-12 and postsecondary public education systems have wrestled for some time with increasing the average educational level of its citizens and meeting the demands for educated workers. As a result, State has implemented several reforms and initiatives related to strengthening the curriculum, raising academic standards, encouraging college attendance of underrepresented populations, and developing a state program of merit-based college scholarships. Despite State's efforts, the relatively low educational attainment rate of the state continues to exist.

The majority of all State's public postsecondary institutions are part of a university system governed by a state board. The university governance system has at least two distinguishing characteristics. First, it is a highly centralized, unified system with state constitutional authority and autonomy. The system establishes institutional missions, fund allocations, new academic programs, and enrollment benchmarks for all system institutions. It also appoints the presidents of all institutions under its jurisdiction. Second, the system governs all public, degree granting, colleges and universities (including two-year institutions), with the exception of those only offering technical or vocational career training. Technical and career colleges are governed by a separate state

agency. The bifurcated nature of the overall state postsecondary system results in two types of two-year institutions: those having primarily articulated transfer programs at the associate's degree level and those having primarily terminal career programs designed to lead directly into employment. This is contrary to the traditional community college model described in the literature (A. M. Cohen & Brawer, 1996). The traditional model houses both transfer and vocational programs within the same institution, allowing for some course sharing and student movement between the two program types.

Suburban Junior College

Suburban Junior College (SJC) is a large, multi-campus, public, two-year unit of the state system with various campuses surrounding the largest city and metropolitan area of the state (hereafter the city will be referred to as Metropolitan). Like most two-year colleges, SJC is composed of several student populations, some of which vary significantly from the traditional-age college freshman. Large numbers of minority, international, older, and under-prepared students are typical at SJC campuses. SJC is chiefly a transfer institution and has few terminal occupational programs. It serves as a major transfer source for colleges and universities in the immediate area and several other colleges located throughout the state. Because of its broad service area and the variety of four-year institutions it feeds, SJC offers an expansive common ground for students who come from diverse high schools and who transfer to different four-year institutions.

During the time the participants of the study were enrolled, the college had four campuses, two satellite sites, and a collective student population over 18,000. Over the years, college governance vacillated between various centralized and decentralized organizational models. Between 1996 and 2004, SJC migrated from a highly centralized

model to a substantially decentralized system, with each campus having its own provost, executive administration, faculty, and affiliated students. The college as a whole (all six locations) is led by a college president and assisted by several centralized "district" functions.

The men of the study principally attended classes at either the West or the East campus of SJC. Both campuses are located near a major Metropolitan highway and are only ten miles apart. West, one of the smaller campuses, has a predominately Black student population and an enrollment hovering around 2000 students per semester. This campus also physically houses the college president's office and many college-wide administrators who are not directly associated with any one campus.

West campus is artistically landscaped, well maintained, and relatively small, consisting of three major three-story buildings joined by covered breezeways. The campus is located in close proximity to both moderately affluent and lower socioeconomic Black communities. Many students come from middle-class homes where attending a two-year college was more of a reality check than a preferred choice. These students were many times detoured from 4-year institutions because of grades or finances. Other less-advantaged traditional-aged students attended SJC because it provided the financial conveniences of lower tuition costs, schedules that would allow them to work, and the option to live at home. In addition, as at most two-year campuses, there is a sizable population of older students who are seeking to upgrade or refocus their education for employment purposes. The average age of the students on West campus is 26, which is slightly higher than on the other SJC campuses.

As a typical commuter campus, students are often rushing to full or part-time jobs after class. This leaves little time for library study, campus activities, or close involvement with faculty and staff. To encourage more student involvement on the campuses, SJC invests generously in stipends and supplements for students in leadership and service positions. Each campus has its own student government, programming board, and new student orientation leaders.

Over 60 percent of the new students that attend the West campus require some form of remediation and more than half attend part-time. The large number of remedial courses offered on the campus and the comparatively lower number of full-time students makes it difficult for the campus to offer a full schedule of the higher level courses needed for transfer and the associate's degree. Thus, many West campus students must eventually attend other campuses to complete their studies.

The full-time faculty at West is highly diverse, with a fairly even mixture of Black, White, Asian, and Middle-Eastern members. The professional and administrative staff of the campus (excluding the college-wide officers) is also racially mixed, but Black staff members are in the majority. The West campus culture is an odd mix of formality, due to its coexistence with the college's executive officers, and familiarity, due to its small size. Employees and students often comment about the friendly, family-like atmosphere of the campus. They seem to have the sense, however, that they are scrutinized more intensely by the executive team and visitors to the college than other campuses. This leads to campus administrators, service providers, and faculty members being much more inclined to adhere rigorously to established policies and business practices related to office decorum, attire, and appearance.

Although only 10 miles and three highway exits apart, the West and East campuses are substantially different in terms of culture and facilities. At one time, the East campus was the largest campus at SJC in terms of enrollment and remains the largest in physical size. This campus typically maintains an enrollment of 6000 students each semester, which now makes it the third largest. When the participants attended, it had nine classroom buildings, a performance auditorium, a state-of-the art library and resource center, and a recreation facility that housed a weight room, swimming pool, and gymnasium. Because of its size, facilities, and central location, East campus is often thought of as the "main" campus of SJC. It also has a history of hosting many significant college-wide events, such as opening convocation and commencement before the college outgrew the campus facilities several years ago.

Situated in a burgeoning international community, East campus is the most ethnically diverse campus of the college. SJC enrolls students from over 120 different countries and boasts the largest international student enrollment in the state. The majority of international students typically attend the East campus because of its admissions and immigration support services and its English as a Second Language program (ESL). Since 1996, the White student population at the East campus has been steadily declining. At the time the participants were enrolled, approximately one-third of the campus population was White, but currently, White students make up one quarter of the overall population with Black, Asian, and Latino students together constituting the majority.

Students and college employees have commented that walking through the campus courtyards is much like a visit to the United Nations. It is common to find

students gathering in small groups with their fellow countrymen or women throughout the campus. East campus also has arguably the most developed and comprehensive campus activities program at SJC. In addition to the standard student-sponsored activities, there are a large number of student interest clubs and organizations, dramatic and musical productions offered by the fine arts program, a variety of family programs for students and the community, and a wide-range of wellness and recreation activities.

East campus is also home to the college-wide disability services office and thus has a sizable population of students requiring physical, pedagogical, and technological accommodations to complete their course of study. East is also the campus that most closely conforms to the American Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations on access equity. Academically diverse, East campus enrolls slightly less than half of its new students in some form of remedial or ESL instruction. The campus also houses a three-year associate's degree program in nursing, one of the few terminal programs at the college.

The diverse student population shapes many aspects of the East campus. Student programming (international festivals and celebrations, disability awareness programs), food service menus (ethnic food items), curriculum offerings (ESL courses, a wide-range of foreign languages), and several major college events (diversity forums with prominent keynote speakers) are all reflective of the varied cultures and populations represented at the campus.

The faculty and administrative staff, however, are not as diverse as the student population. Although the campus employs people of many races and ethnic backgrounds, 70 percent of the instructional staff is White. Many of the faculty members at East campus have taught at the college for over 20 years and thus are considered instructional

leaders in their respective disciplines. These seasoned faculty members are also most likely to represent East campus on the faculty senate and other high profile faculty committees, giving them considerable political and curricular influence as well. The faculty, coupled with the reputation as the "main" campus of SJC, often situates the East campus as the standard for practice, policy, and procedure.

In addition to Suburban Junior College, the participants attended or referenced during their interviews, several other postsecondary institutions as part of their academic journey. In Table 3 these institutions are described briefly, based on the demographics that existed during the time the participants were enrolled.

Table 3

Pseudonyms and descriptions of postsecondary institutions featured in the study.

Institution		Description
Suburban Junior College	SJC	A large public multi-campus two-year college that primarily offers transfer programs.
SJC West		A predominately Black campus of SJC.
SJC East		A racially/ethnically diverse campus with a sizable international population.
Urban State University	USU	A large urban research university 36% Black student population 10% international population.
Regional State University	RSU	Mid-size regional university offering primarily liberal arts programs. 25% non-White population.
County State University	CSU	Small to mid-size regional university on the outskirts of major city. 40% Black and other minority populations.
International Business University	IBU	A small, private, proprietary university with campuses in suburban areas. Predominately White population.
State Technical University	STU	Large Research I technical university with prominent programs in science and engineering. 10% Black and 28% Asian populations
State Research University	SRU	Flagship state university, located in small college town. 5% Black population. 13% total minority population
Historic University	HU	A historically Black university, located in a southeastern state.
Legacy College	LC	The historically Black all-male college located in a major urban area.
Church-Affiliated College	CAC	A small Christian liberal arts college located in a neighboring southeastern state. 20% Black and other minority population.

The state's public higher education system and SJC, as the common point of convergence for the men, proved to be what Marshall and Rossman (1995) described as a "good site." They recommend that the choice of site be one that has accessibility, a mix of people that will yield sufficient research participants, an environment conducive to developing trusting relationships, and an opportunity for gathering quality and credible data. As an administrator at a State system institution, I am generally familiar with most public postsecondary institutions. I am also associated with a large network of professionals within SJC, including faculty, alumni affairs officers, athletic coaches, registrars, counselors, advisors, and student life directors. These colleagues were instrumental in identifying participants and suggesting the relevant issues for exploration in the study.

Study Participants

The main unit of analysis for the current study was a sample of six Black male students and their progression through an academic pipeline, that is high school through college graduation. The extensive nature of the analysis for each participant suggested that this participant number was appropriate (Silverman, 2000). Because I was interested in gleaning conceptions and assumptions about the postsecondary experience through a variety of lenses, I employed a purposive sampling model (S. B. Merriam, 1998). Purposive sampling refers to selecting study participants based on specified criteria essential for a thorough analysis of the topic (S. B. a. A. Merriam, 2002). The basic criteria I initially established for participant selection were: a) a Black male, b) former SJC student, c) who had transferred to and graduated from a four-year institution. As

with many institutions, the demographics and culture of SJC had changed dramatically over the years. For the sake of comparison, it was important to select study participants who attended SJC within the same general timeframe. After receiving referrals of several prominent and older SJC alumni, I added that the participants had to have attended SJC between 1996-2002. Also, in order to reflect the wide diversity in the types of students who attend the college, I intentionally selected a sample that represented assorted combinations of the following variables:

- Low and middle socioeconomic levels (for the family of origin)
- Ages (between 21-30)
- Years spent in the pipeline from entry to graduation
- Enrollment in remedial education courses
- High school and college characteristics (location, racial mix, etc.)
- High school and college academic performance

Table 4 provides basic demographic and academic information about the participants.

When I began the study in the fall of 2004, I knew of only two Black men who I believed would be suitable participants. I was acquainted with Ebraham who attended SJC during my employment; and I met Carlos after he had left SJC and returned as a professional staff member. Carlos was the first person I contacted to be a part of the study, and he agreed without hesitation. Ebraham, who would regularly visit the campus to keep us informed of his progress and accomplishments, had moved out of state by the time the study began, and was difficult to locate. After almost a month of searching for current contact information, I was able to locate him through a colleague who was also a friend of his family. After hearing about the study, he also agreed to participate. The

Table 4

Selected characteristics of study participants

Participant	High School Type/Location	H.S. Grades	Transfer Inst. Type	College Grades	Years in Pipeline
Carlos	Urban/RM Western U.S.	Avg.	Urban/ RM State of study	Good	6
Ebraham	Suburban/PW State of study	Good	Rural/PW State of study	Good	6
Gary	Private/PB West Indian	Good	Public/Urban-Selective/PW State of study	Good	4
Julian	(1)Suburban/PB State of study (2)Suburban/PW Northeast U.S.	Avg.	Private/ PW Southern U.S.	Avg.	10
Nephron	Suburban/PB/ Northeast U.S	Avg.	Proprietary/PW State of study	Good	8
Ty	Various Suburban and Rural/W and RM/State of study	Good	Public/Urban/ RM/State of study	Good	9

NOTE: High school and transfer institution type: RM: Racially mixed (Black White Hispanic), PW: Predominately White, PB: Predominately Black. High school and college grade descriptions were self-reported by participant. Years in pipeline represents the years from high school graduation to college graduation

other participants were referred by various colleagues at SJC in response to my written appeal and were selected based on their willingness to participate and the diverse dimensions I believed they would bring to the project.

Data Collection, Management and Analysis

Data Collection

My primary method for data collection was face-to-face interviews using a scheme suggested by Irving Seidman (1998). This scheme "combines life history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing" with the goal of eliciting the interpreted meanings of an experience from each participant (Seidman, 1998 p. 9). The interviews

were semi-structured and followed an interview guide. They were also flexible enough to allow for a natural exchange and unforeseen themes to emerge.

Seidman (1998) proposes that three interviews, each with its own goal and function, be conducted as part of his model. Because of logistical or scheduling difficulties, the goals of the interviews were accomplished at either two or three meetings. (For example, one of the participants was only in town for two days.) The interviews were conducted from November to December 2004 and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length. I spent an average of three and a half hours with each participant. Most of the interviews took place on the SJC campus, and the others were scheduled at convenient public venues such as libraries, restaurants, or shopping malls. There was one instance when the original location selected proved not to be conducive for a tape-recorded interview. In this case, the interview was moved to the participant's nearby home as an alternative. The interviews were generally scheduled one to two weeks apart, primarily at the participants' discretion.

At the first meeting with the participant, I began by reviewing the nature of the research, the rights and expectations of the participant, and the informed consent document that was presented for the participant's signature. The first interview was designed to gather a basic life history of the participant (Seidman, 1998). I asked the participant to describe his family background, his family's educational and occupational level, the messages he heard about higher education while growing up, and an overview of his academic journey starting from whatever point he felt comfortable. A critical task for this interview was the development of rapport with the participant. Borrowing from feminist thought (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a), my goal was to help the participant feel

comfortable with me and the interviewing process. I also addressed the issue of confidentiality and frankly acknowledged gender and status (college employee vs. student) differences to avoid a staged or stilted interview environment. This also contributed to the reliability of the study because approaching the "respondent as an equal, allows him or her to express personal feelings, and therefore presents a more realistic picture" than can be obtained with more formal interview techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a).

After reviewing what was gleaned from the first interview, I often modified the second interview protocol to follow up on the key issues that surfaced previously. Following Seidman's (1998) model, the goal for the second interview was to hone in on the specific experiences each man encountered while moving through various transition points at the institutions he attended. I generally inquired about the perspectives and attitudes he held about the different phases of his academic experience and how he felt the significant actors perceived him in that phase. Also explained were the relationships and encounters with other students, faculty, family, peers, administrators, as well as key motivators, mentors, or role models during the various phases in the pipeline.

For the third or final interview I focused on each man's academic progression towards the degree in holistic terms, asking him to focus on his encounters with overall college systems, policies, and procedures and to comment on any symbols, cultural messages, unspoken codes, and hidden curricula. He was also asked to address the meanings and lessons gleaned from his experiences (Seidman, 1998). How did specific encounters shape who he was today? How did he think he had influenced those he encountered? What did he think were the reasons he succeeded when so many others

have failed? How had he developed as a result of his experience? I also specifically inquired about how issues of race and gender influenced his perceptions of his academic journey.

Role of Researcher

As part of the qualitative tradition, the role and function of the researcher is subject to careful scrutiny and evaluation. Given that participant interviews provided the bulk of the data, I served as the primary instrument for data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; S. B. Merriam, 1998). As such, my perspectives, assumptions, biases, and skills were integral to the construction of this qualitative research project and are presented here as part of the overall research design (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

I was attracted to this research topic on two different levels. First, as the mother of a young Black male and a former elementary school teacher, I have already observed American public school's preference for socializing and restricting students (particularly male) at the expense of motivating and challenging them. It is easy to see how young, bright, and enthusiastic Black boys can have their thirst for discovery diminished in such an environment. I am concerned for my son and the many other Black boys in many other schools who may become discouraged about their educational possibilities before they leave elementary school, so I wanted to learn more about the origins and outcomes of this condition.

Second, as a senior administrator at a predominately Black campus of a two-year college, I have become increasingly aware of the unbalanced numbers of men and women students. I have also observed the lack of males in student leadership positions, honor societies, and graduation exercises. It is perhaps because of their relative rarity that some

of the most memorable students I have encountered have been young Black males. Several of these students have remained in touch with either the college or with me personally long after they graduated from four-year institutions. These men are unique in terms of background, life challenges, talents, and disposition, and although we never discussed the specifics of their individual academic journeys, they apparently were able to persist. My encounters with them have inspired the questions that drove this research.

As the researcher, I began this investigation with certain perspectives and expertise related to my interaction with the selected participants. As an essential component of this study, I used my professional experience as an educator for over 20 years. During the course of my career, I have worked at many educational levels and institutions. I have taught elementary school, counseled high school students on postsecondary options, and worked or taught at a large research university, an HBCU, and a two-year college. I have also created a career awareness program for a proprietary vocational school and developed computer-training programs for senior citizens for a social service agency. Through these experiences, I have not only gathered a wealth of information but have also formulated a broad understanding of life-long learning. Most importantly, serving in both academic and student affairs roles at various postsecondary institutions, I am aware of how higher education works. Knowledge of the systemic, political, social, and organizational aspects of colleges was an inherent source of data and informed all aspects of this project.

My interviewing skills, developed as a trained counselor and student affairs professional, also assisted with building rapport and conducting thorough, in-depth discussions with the participants. I acknowledge, however, that my position as a college

insider may have had both facilitative and restrictive effects on the study. On one hand, as a college employee known to work with students, I believe I was able to establish a level of trust and credibility from the outset of the study. On the other hand, I was also aware of the possible perceptions of the participants towards me related to power and position as the study progressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Weis & Fine, 2000). This awareness helped to structure my approach to the study.

I realized that I am a Black female with a higher level of education than the Black male participants. Embedded in that fact is the familiar tension that exists between Black men and women related to economic and social mobility in America. There is a presumption by many Black males, which is supported by the literature, that females are less likely to be racially targeted and are more able to adapt to a hegemonic environment within colleges and universities (Cross & Slater, 2000; Harris, 1999). In addition, I was aware of a possible suspicion for my research on Black males. I was also aware that I interacted with the participants as a professional educator who is part of the system that was assessed. My role as an administrator in a two-year college may have allowed me to implement or enforce policies or practices that may have been seen as clogs in the pipeline. For example, some participants may be reluctant to reveal their true perceptions of specific institutions or systems to someone affiliated so closely with them.

In that regard, I made a point to disclose the reasons I was attracted to this topic, my personal orientation towards critical theory, and my overall support for the empowerment of the Black community. Most importantly, I wanted to articulate clearly my assertion that Black males not only *can* succeed in higher education but also *must* do so in increased numbers to sustain families, build stronger communities, and participate

fully in the American economy. I also framed my insider's vantage point of higher education and the typical educational progression as an enhancement to the credibility and appreciation for the research project.

As one who embraces a critical viewpoint of the American postsecondary system, I recognize my natural bias is in support of the individual rather than the system. I also assume the existence of prevailing codes that privilege some groups while oppressing others (S. B. Merriam, 1998). My research, therefore, was conceived and conducted in an effort to put forth the men's authentic voices and experiences in comparison to any presumptive conventions or erroneous perceptions.

Data Management and Analysis

All interviews were recorded using an Olympus 480 digital recorder with computer connectivity. This allowed the interviews to be saved on the computer and uploaded to a password protected website site. I contracted with a transcription service that retrieved the tapes via the Internet, transcribed them in a word processing format, and returned the transcripts to me by e-mail. I also took field notes during and immediately after the interviews in order to describe non-verbal cues, settings, and other relevant data (Cresswell, 1998). The field notes were not transcribed, but instead were used to identify key concepts and relevant observations and noted on the interview transcript (Cresswell, 1998; S. B. Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998). Transcripts, field notes, interview guides, datasheets and the signed informed consent form from each interview session were sorted by participant, placed in individual files, and secured at my home office. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on computer disks as well (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; Silverman, 2000).

Qualitative research generates large volumes of data, considerably more than I originally anticipated (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; S. B. Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2000). I recorded a total of 15 sessions with each transcription yielding between 25-40 pages of double spaced text. In order to make sense of this large body of information, I also employed a basic database software for data storage, organization, and retrieval (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Miles and Huberman (1994) indicate that the fundamental phases of qualitative analysis are data reduction, data display with conclusions, and verification. The purpose of data reduction is "selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions" (p.10). After reviewing the transcripts and taped recordings several times, I was able to select relevant, unique, or provocative portions of each participant's interview. The selections were then categorized using a coding system (Miles & Huberman, 1994.). My initial coding scheme was based largely on the research questions of the study and the major concepts that emerged related to each question. The following are the major concept categories I used for initial coding:

- Self-perceptions and aspirations
- Personal attitudes about education in general, K-12 school systems, postsecondary education, and institutional types (i.e. two-year colleges, large universities, etc.)
- Personal values, coping mechanisms, and academic strategies
- Setbacks and obstacles encountered
- Motivating factors

- De-motivating factors
- Family characteristics and value systems
- Key interactions with people and institutions
- Effects of race
- Effects of gender

I entered the coded passages into the computer database program, indicating the participant, interview number, page where the passage was located, and an alphanumeric code. This proved to be a time intensive yet useful way to organize pertinent passages for retrieval and allowed for comparisons of themes between participants. The limitation of the database software, however, was in regrouping and changing the codes which happened often as the codes were consistently modified, reconceptualized, expanded, and reduced as different themes emerged.

Trustworthiness of the Data

In order to meet the standards of critical research, qualitative studies, like experimental designs, must be scrutinized for credibility or trustworthiness. Thus, the final stage of qualitative analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) is verification. This not only involved ensuring that my data collection and analysis methods were consistent and reliable, but also that the data accurately represented the intended meanings and perceptions of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; Silverman, 2000).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Merriam (1998) refer to two basic underlying principles in establishing the trustworthiness of a study: transparency and thoroughness. Transparency speaks to allowing the reader to clearly discern the basic process of the

research in order to assess the biases, assumptions, and research skills involved in the study. To this end, all pertinent information related to the methods, resources, personal ideology, high points, and challenges central to my subsequent conclusions have been outlined in this chapter.

Thoroughness contributes to the validity of the study by ensuring the researcher is closely involved with all components of the investigation and has invested sufficient time in the field and with the data. As I was on professional leave for one year to complete this project, I was able to work on it on a full-time basis. This allowed considerable time for data analysis and interpretation, and the opportunity to carefully expose any of my preconceived expectations, covert agendas, or ethical transgressions that could potentially contaminate the data (Merriam, 2002). In other words, my diligence, integrity, and ethical standards were tantamount to the quality of this research process.

In order to ensure reliability, I conducted member checks, used peer review, and kept an audit trail of the evidence and decisions made during data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; S. B. Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Member checks involved reviewing the data with the participant to insure the intended meaning is represented (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a). I conducted such checks verbally at the beginning of each interview. Before the last interview, I prepared a datasheet for each participant, noting the specifics of our interviews such as participant and family demographic information, the characteristics of the various academic institutions attended, and their list of the top five influences on their college attendance and persistence. I reviewed this sheet with each participant to ensure accuracy and complete information. After the interviews were completed, I also asked each participant to review copies of the typed transcripts of the

interviews and note any changes. In addition, I sent each participant a copy of his personal profile when completed. The entire dissertation will be sent to each participant before final publication as well.

I relied on two competent qualitative researchers as peer reviewers of my data collection and analytical processes to provide feedback on an ongoing basis. All copies of their feedback notes and suggestions have been retained. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), I established and maintained an audit trail for the research study by keeping a research journal and both hard copy and computer files for each participant. The research journal contained my personal thoughts and insights about the study throughout the process, notes about the relevant literature indicated by the interviews, dates of specific actions taken, and a running log of themes, codes, and relationships discovered during data analysis. Each participant file contained all interview transcripts, a datasheet, copies of all written and electronic correspondence, and copies of all handwritten field notes of the interviews.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the methodology used in executing this research project. As the researcher, I was privileged to glimpse an important passage in the lives of six Black men. The qualitative nature of the study involved presenting the experiences, perspectives, and actions of these individuals truthfully, with respect, and with rigor. The principles, methods, and tools used for that purpose were discussed in detail for at least three reasons: (a) to inform the reader of the biases and perspectives of the researcher, thereby establishing a basis for a contextual evaluation of the findings and conclusions; (b) to provide a framework for the research methods employed, including consideration

of the issues that may help or harm a similar inquiry; and (c) to differentiate this research report from simple journalism by indicating a thorough and purposeful procedure for handling the data, making interpretations, and drawing conclusions. The next chapter will initiate the presentation of findings by providing profiles of each study participant.

CHAPTER 3
PORTRAITS OF SIX BLACK MEN

This chapter will present a portrait of each of the six Black male participants in this study. Each portrait is essentially an educational life story, summarizing the family background, school experiences, and life events that have informed each individual journey to college graduation. My goal is for the reader to become acquainted with these men, their goals, perceptions, and lived experiences in order to frame the research findings that will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. The names of the participants as well as the institutions they attended are pseudonyms and selected to be both descriptive and symbolic (see Chapter 2 for institution descriptions). Most of the participants selected their own pseudonyms.

The men spent their pre-college years in various places in North America. They also attended an assortment of colleges and universities located throughout the United States. The only common thread among them, other than their status as college graduates, is their attendance at SJC immediately before transferring to the institution from which they earned the baccalaureate degree.

Carlos

I first met Carlos five years ago when he was a part-time employee for SJC. He was a well-known former student who had worked with the orientation program and attended classes a year before I started working at the West campus. Over the years,

Carlos participated in many campus presentations and programs and also served as a program advisor during registration periods. He was always well received when called upon to speak to potential students, help with campus recruitment initiatives, and represent the college as an alumnus. He is tall, slender, and handsome with an understated and somewhat diffident demeanor. He is clean-shaven with short, neat dreadlocks, and he always dressed professionally when he was on campus. He speaks articulately and generally appears polished and self-assured. Although he maintained a constant presence on the campus, he was actually somewhat of an enigma who floated in and out of the SJC periphery.

My most recent encounter with Carlos before the interviews was as an applicant for an entry-level administrative position in one of the offices I supervised. He was hired only shortly before the beginning of my educational leave. Our first interview was scheduled only two days after he and his wife welcomed their first baby. We had several conversations in an effort to set a convenient time for the interview, yet I had no idea his wife was expecting or that he had gotten married several months before. Even more surprising, I discovered that many of the people who worked with him everyday had also just learned of the marriage and the birth of his son. Although I believed I was fairly acquainted with Carlos, I realized at this point that my perception of him was very limited and based primarily on his public persona. I knew little about him as a former student or employee. I knew even less about his background and personal life. I did know that he had graduated from USU and that he had taught school for a while before coming to work at SJC. As I interviewed Carlos, I was struck by the depth and complexity of his past

experiences and the fact that without this opportunity, I would never have come to know and appreciate this man's struggle.

Carlos is a Black man born in Panama, a Spanish-speaking nation. He came to the U.S. at the age of six and spoke no English. He had come to live with his grandmother, grandfather, and two other siblings in a metropolitan area of California. Other family members, aunts, uncles, and cousins also lived in the same neighborhood that was primarily populated with Blacks and Latinos. His mother was in and out of the home for extended periods, and Carlos had no contact with his father. A few years after Carlos arrived in the U.S. his mother was incarcerated for an extended period. He summed up his position in the community when he first arrived:

> I didn't fit anywhere because I was this Black kid that spoke Spanish. I didn't speak English, so at first I couldn't connect with the Black kids. I hung around the Hispanics because I think what really draws you to a person is language not physical attributes.

He later came to see his dual heritage as a distinct benefit:

> I didn't have to join a gang or be interested in gangs. I always stood up for myself…. I got along with the Hispanic kids because I spoke Spanish, and I got along with the brothers because I looked Black. So it helped me and gave me an ability to look into both worlds.

His early socialization, therefore, involved finding a cultural niche and exploiting that niche to his advantage.

In elementary school, Carlos was designated as an English as a Second Language student. He described the classroom environment as oppressive and demoralizing. He recounted that his teacher would divide the class according to the students' native language and would cater to the English-speaking students while ridiculing the others. After a time, Carlos complained to his mother about the treatment, so she went to the

school and insisted that he be placed in English-speaking classes only. He recalled how this affected his school experience:

> So at that point, it became sink or swim in school because I was now in a different environment. I really had to notice the language quicker, the ABCs and syllables…. I didn't have the luxury of having it interpreted to me or explained to me in Spanish, so I could think about it. So school was difficult. I would say that school has always been difficult.

By the time Carlos reached middle school, neither his mother nor father was in the home. His grandmother worked long hours and was seldom available to interact with the school on Carlos' behalf. (His grandfather was not portrayed as an active parental figure at this time.) He recalled:

> I got to school without anyone waking me up. I went to class because I didn't want anyone to call and have my grandmother dragged out of one day of work, as hard as she worked, so she would have to sit in front of a teacher about me. I was not motivated like that.

By necessity, Carlos proved to be responsible and relatively self-sufficient at a young age. He was not only able to maintain his own schedule, but he also appreciated the connection between time and money in his grandmother's work life. Making these connections and accepting responsibility informed his approach to both school and work.

At one point, Carlos noticed that his counselor began to schedule him for courses in woodworking, auto mechanics, and television repair while several of his English-speaking friends were taking history, science, and English composition. He explained the encounter he had with the counselor:

> So I walked in and I told [the counselor], I didn't want to be in these types of classes. I told her a little bit about myself and that I knew that my English and writing were not so good. That is why I knew that I didn't need to be cutting wood; I need to be in another English class. So we worked the schedule out.

Carlos had to "represent himself" in many school interactions that would normally involve his parents. This undoubtedly contributed to a sense of ownership of his academic experience.

Although at this point he was not sure of his postsecondary plans, he knew that vocational courses would not lead to as many options as learning mathematics, natural and social sciences, and the English language. He was also aware that because of his Panamanian heritage, the counselor had already made assumptions about his future. He explained the cultural implications and the lasting effect of that encounter:

> I never liked to work with my hands to be honest, and it's so funny because now I work so much with my hands. But I never did growing up because I always thought that, I don't know how to speak the language, and being in all those [vocational] electives left a bad taste in my mouth. I was like, I don't want to cut no wood; I don't want to mix no concrete; I don't want to do anything manually when I grow up, as a profession, not that anything is wrong with that. But I saw laborers, and you see what actually is going on and you see who's doing it . . .. My parents were laborers, working hard and making very little.

Carlos knew that most of the laborers in his community were people of color, many of whom spoke more Spanish than English. He was also able to surmise that to attain his desired lifestyle he would need to master the English language and avoid limiting educational options.

It was during his junior year that he began to think about what he would do after high school. He remembered thinking, "I just may go to college." He surmised:

> I wasn't the brightest of the bunch, but I knew that I could probably outwork anybody. In my circumstance, I had to wake up and be an adult sooner, so I was always trying to figure out what is the next move that I need to make, instead of the next move figuring me out.

Like most of the participants, Carlos described his pre-college preparation as haphazard and chancy. Although his high school offered the pertinent information about

SATs, college admissions, and financial aid, he was not always diligent with seeking it out and following through. He also confessed, "I was saying I want to go to college, but I might not have been working as hard as I should in my classes." He illustrated how he first began thinking about where he would attend school:

> Actually a few of my friends and I kind of looked at a map and decided what was the cheapest place to live. We decided we would go to Florida and go to college there and we would be roommates. But like I said, I always self-regulated myself. So when it came time to make the decision, they decided that they didn't want to leave.

Carlos, however, always knew that he eventually wanted to leave the urban area where he grew up. The above comment also speaks to how he characterized himself as an independent thinker and trailblazer of sorts throughout the interviews.

Carlos was able to visit several California colleges and even obtained a few credits from a community college as a result of playing high school basketball. It was his uncle, however, that directed him toward his eventual college choice. His uncle, a military officer living in State, encouraged him to consider coming to a well-known HBCU in Metropolitan, not far from where he was stationed. Carlos applied, gained provisional admission to the college, and moved to State, planning to live with his uncle while he attended school. He explained how this plan was thwarted by both geographic and cost factors:

> When I got here, I realized that [my uncle] was in [another city], which is about two hours from Metropolitan. And then I started looking into the cost [of the college] and how I was going to finance it. I didn't know a school would cost that much . . . .[When] I came from California, I had two pair of jeans, I never called home for money for winter clothes. So I knew I couldn't do it. That plan just went somewhere else. I told myself that I was not going to put myself in that position because while my grandmother is teaching me about savings, she is also teaching me that if you can't afford it, you can't afford it, and you don't need it. And that

> was what I took from there. I said I couldn't afford it, and I wasn't going to break myself to be there.

Carlos attributed most of his financial habits to the lessons he learned from his grandmother. Her work ethic and wisdom about money influenced many of his decisions and actions. He remembered, "I would watch her leave the house; she didn't have to go to work till 8:00 or 8:30. She left the house at 5:30 in the morning to go to somebody's house to iron." He further related how she "taught me how to humble myself, and not to be so frivolous with money. Saving, investing, not in the sense that she truly knew how to invest, but she knew how to save for a rainy day, and so I have always been like that."

After discovering the high cost of attendance at private colleges, Carlos enrolled in a two-year public college near his uncle's residence and then in another similar institution in a neighboring state. After a year of attending the two community colleges, he determined that the small southern town culture and pace were just too slow compared to what he was accustomed to in California, so he returned home. He soon discovered, however, that California did not hold the same promise as he expected. He then began to reevaluate his experiences in State:

> I didn't realize how much I really appreciated [living in State]. It slowed me down at a time that I really needed to be slowed down. Because I was 18 living on my own, and it wasn't so much you could do in [that town]. So, when I got back to California, I saw how my friends were working and not going to school. I saw that I was really more productive in State, and I moved back.

By the time he returned to State, Carlos contends that he had matured and gained a clearer perspective of his future. His uncle had moved from the small town, where Carlos had lived with him before, to the more sophisticated Metropolitan. He lived with his uncle and enrolled in SJC. Again, influenced by his grandmother's example and

wisdom, he established two financial practices that proved to have long-term benefits. First, he was able to finance his living expenses and college tuition with part time jobs and savings. Consequently, he was not heavily reliant on financial aid programs or the need to work fulltime in order to complete his education. Second, he had the opportunity to purchase a piece of investment property with a high school friend who was also attending school in the area. He explained:

> I introduced the idea to my friend I knew from California. He moved to State; he had a father in the military. So I had savings. I went into a little credit card debt, but we bought a quadra-plex when I was twenty. We managed it for a while. His father helped us get the credit established. He put us down as co-owners and I sold that property a couple of years back [for a good profit].

Upon his return, Carlos also was impressed with what he found at SJC. He believed he had located his academic niche and became involved in West campus' activities. SJC also accepted several transfer courses from the other community colleges. He conveyed his first impressions of the institution:

> When I got [to SJC], I felt that I liked the environment. Initially I could tell that people cared about me. That is why I joined [the student orientation leaders program]. I did that for a year and a half. I just thought it pays a stipend and I can do that. Also, I don't mind doing it either.

After approximately two and a half years of course work, including a remedial course in mathematics, Carlos transferred to Urban State University (USU) without graduating from Suburban Junior College. He explained in the quote below that he sometimes received well meaning, yet discouraging messages from some of his classmates about transferring to a four-year institution.

> I had friends [at SJC]. Fear traps you, and it will not let you succeed. I saw that happen [to my friends]. I didn't want that to trap me. I always

> heard [about USU]--big school, big classes, but I felt that what I got [at SJC] prepped me enough to succeed at USU.

In 1999, Carlos graduated from USU with a degree in History. He summarized the meaning of his journey toward achieving his degree:

> It meant coming from where I came from, not speaking English, and getting my undergraduate degree. No matter what I say, it was difficult to achieve from one level to the next level. But I always kept in sight that I will get there; I will get the degree and finish.

Ebraham

Ebraham is the epitome of the "hometown-boy-makes-good" character featured in the storylines of classic literature and cinema. He is the eighth of twelve children born to a Christian and financially modest two-parent family, living minutes away from a SJC campus. Since his attendance at SJC, faculty and administrators have often referenced Ebraham as a bona fide success story of the two-year college. From SJC, Ebraham not only went on to graduate from a State regional college, but he has also taught in the public schools, earned a master's degree, married, moved to another state and is presently being considered for a school principal position in a metropolitan county. His ultimate goal is to be one of the youngest school system superintendents in the country. Soft spoken and extremely earnest, this high school science teacher still looks as if he could still be in high school himself. Ebraham is 5'9" with a slim build and sports a short haircut and a slight mustache. He was casually and neatly dressed when we met for our first interview at the food court in a local mall.

I came to know Ebraham as a student leader on the West campus. My perception of him was one of a consistently dependable, forthright, and reasonable advocate for the students he served. My interactions with him were primarily business-related or

ceremonial, yet he was someone who left a positive and lasting impression. I often sought him out to be a speaker for leadership and career programs at the college. After he graduated from SJC, he would often visit the campus and provide updates on his progress in school, his plans for marriage, and ultimately his decision to move out of state.

Ebraham was one of the first men who came to mind when I decided on the topic of this study. Aware of his stellar academic career while at SJC, I was anxious to hear about the phases before and after his stint at the two-year college. Because Ebraham no longer lives in State, I paid to have him travel here to be interviewed. This provided both a chance for me to interview him at length and for him to visit his family, all of whom live in the same city of the study. I did not regret this investment.

Ebraham is aware that his educational success is a significant achievement. He now has more education than anyone in his family. Although he does not feel he was encouraged or challenged differently from his siblings, he does admit to having a "golden child" status in the family. He attributes this to the "people-pleasing attitude that I have. I realized that I could either get a whooping or I could do my work. I either did my chores or I got in trouble. I realized that if I was good, I could get what I want."

Ebraham was the first in his family to attend public school from kindergarten through the 12th grade. His older brothers and sisters had attended Catholic elementary schools and then completed the upper grades in the public school system. Ebraham's family lived in the southern part of the county, which is a predominately Black, middle-income area with substantial pockets of both low and moderately high-income neighborhoods. Yet, all of Ebraham's brothers and sisters, attended one or more schools,

located about 15 miles from their home, in a close-knit, relatively affluent, predominately White, suburban neighborhood north of Metropolitan. Realizing the differences in resources and curriculum between the schools located in the southern and northern parts of the county, Ebraham's parents had all of their children participate in a school system program that bused Black students to majority White schools.

Along with the perceived educational advantages in attending the northern suburb schools came the inherent issues related to being the racial minority. For example, Ebraham remembered White students voicing negative assumptions about Black students' academic performance. He recalled "people telling me I was the first Black student going through [the northern suburb] schools from kindergarten to the 7th grade without being held back." Ebraham's having several family members with him in school mitigated the feeling of isolation so often felt by students in the minority. He described the family's communal and structured approach to education:

> All of us graduated from [the northern suburb] high school. We all went [to school] as a family; we were sent on the early bus ride at 6:00 in the morning. On a good day, we got home at 4:30.

His parents also structured the family's activities around school:

> I had to do homework for an hour even if I didn't have homework. [My mother] said do something. I remember crying because I couldn't spell the first word on the page; crying because my math had a smudge on the paper and [my mother] made me start again. When we were in school, [we knew] when the streetlights came on, we came in. I had friends and cousins who lived across the street. At night, after school, kids were outside playing. At 7:00 we were inside, getting baths. We had to be in bed by 8:00 to go to school the next morning.

It was evident that Ebraham's parents placed a high value on education for their family. Ebraham conveyed that his mother and father felt that school was his brothers' and sisters' primary responsibility. He recalled his mother and father saying that going to

school "was our paycheck, our job. You go to school; you do well; make good grades; that is your job, your paycheck."

Ebraham said that he first started thinking about college when he was in seventh grade. At this time, he met a Black male high school teacher who would later be a major motivating force for Ebraham. The high school teacher brought some of his students to the middle school to encourage the students to stay in school. The students were part of an extracurricular, invitation-only, program for male students, most of whom were Black. Ebraham remembered:

> The day that they came to the school, I was in elementary. I was wearing a shirt and a tie. One of the guys said look, there is a future [program member]. One of my older brothers was a part of it. I wanted to be in it because of that. It was like wanting to be in a fraternity that your parents were in or something like that. [The program] was a very highly recognized organization at the school; it had a lot of clout, beating out student government and the honors' society.

Because of attending schools that were not located in his community, many of Ebraham's school friends did not live close by. He recalled an incident that happened when he visited a White friend for the weekend. The incident underscored the realities of life right outside his school's front door and influenced how he would negotiate those realities in the future.

> I went to spend the night at a friend's house; we went to [a video store], then to a grocery store to buy popcorn. I had overalls on; it was cold. I had put the video in my pocket so my hands were not cold. The guy at the [grocery] store pulled me aside when we were leaving, stopped us, and asked us to empty our pockets and basically accused us of stealing. We had our receipts and everything. Afterwards he just said, go on and get out of here, no apology, or anything. My friend was White. I don't think it would have happened if we were both White. He really came up to me [and said] empty your pockets and then secondarily to [my friend] because we were together.

During this time, Ebraham had become socially accepted and academically respected at his school. This softened any racial undertones he may have experienced. Aside from witnessing one of his fellow students driving a truck with a confederate flag in the window, Ebraham considered the world inside the high school as a relatively safe place. As he ventured out to the neighborhood community, he was confronted with a clearer and more personal encounter with racism. Interestingly, Ebraham framed the confrontation (at least in retrospect) more as a life lesson than a racist imposition. He also takes some responsibility for the incident because of how he presented himself. In response to the above incident, he said, "I think that gave me the idea there is a difference between others and me. I have to make sure that others do not perceive me as a negative. I have to change people's perception of me from being a thief to what I want it to be--a professional."

Ebraham contended in a later interview that this occurrence was a significant factor in his academic career. It encouraged him to strive for the position and power that would make incidents like the one he described very unlikely. However, Ebraham's response to what he perceived as a racially motivated event warrants a look at the self-perceptions, coping mechanisms, and persistence strategies. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Within the high school context, Ebraham absorbed the concept of college attendance as the expected course of action after graduation. In 10th grade, he received an invitation to join the male-only program that he learned about in 7th grade. This program and the men who coordinated it became motivating forces for college attendance and completion. He described the various facets of the program:

> The makeup of that group was open to all of the school, Asian, African American--many of the different men of the school. But you had to go through a rigorous process, essay writing [to maintain membership]. A lot of community service was done also. We went to a homeless shelter every week, and we fed homeless men. I talked to one guy; he said stay in school, I have two degrees, but here I am, stay in school. Stay on top of it and stay focused on what you do. I also remember Mr. A went to college, and he was always saying go to college, stick with the group and we will get you into college somewhere, even if it is just a two year college.

I noted in the comment above, the "last resort status" ascribed to the two-year college. This was important considering where Ebraham began his college education.

In addition, the general high school environment was supportive of postsecondary attainment. Preparing for college was a general expectation of the school. College and university banners and promotional materials were displayed throughout the school. The school sponsored "college spirit days," when students wore the paraphernalia of their favorite postsecondary institution. Ebraham explained how college attendance also sparked his competitive nature:

> The buzz from school was everybody was going to college. Going to my brother's graduation, I heard them announce that the class of '95 got over $2.3 million in scholarships as a class. I said, I want some of that; I want my class to match that.

Ebraham heard from his older siblings how their friends from the south suburb schools were having trouble the first year of college. He said he began to realize that not all high schools in the county system emphasized college preparation and attendance in the same manner. Years later, he was offered an even clearer perspective on the differences in the high schools in the area. After he graduated from college, he taught high school for a year in the same system, but in the south part of the county. He was then able to make an informal comparison of the schools' practices related to college preparation:

> At [the northern suburb school] everybody took the PSAT [for assessment purposes and] as preparation for the SAT. I always heard from teachers at school and my brothers and sisters that you have to have a certain score to get into school. When I taught at [the southern suburb school], I asked my class about the PSAT and the SAT, and most of them didn't know that these tests had anything to do with college admission.

Despite the exposure to many postsecondary options, Ebraham, like two of his siblings, enrolled at SJC after high school. Besides the family tradition of attending SJC, he enrolled because a state-sponsored scholarship program paid for the great majority of his expenses. He, however, did not intend to stay. He said, "when I started at SJC, I said I will go one year there and then to Xavier in Louisiana and be a doctor. But I liked it and I decided to stay there and go ahead and get my associates degree." His experience at SJC also changed the course of his future professional life:

> A counselor approached me and asked if I wanted to work in [a tutoring program] with some kids. I really enjoyed that . . .. Once I worked with the kids, I decided to change my major [to education], and I didn't need to go to Xavier anymore; I stayed there.

Ebraham found a vastly different educational atmosphere at SJC from what he had in high school. He particularly enjoyed the culture of the West campus:

> Yeah, it was something new to me to see Black people excelling in education, doing well, and coming to school. It was a good experience; it was not overbearing, but it was good to see. I feel comfortable here; I can let my hair down. Not only were people relating to me on an academic level, but on a cultural level.

He became thoroughly engaged in collegiate life. He participated in student government, took honors courses, and went to Europe as part of the study abroad program. Ebraham graduated from SJC after two years and immediately transferred to Regional State University.

Ebraham had visited Regional State University (RSU) as a member of the SJC student government, and had heard that it "was one of the best schools in the state for teachers." Again, he was able to have his tuition and books completely covered by the state scholarship, which was an added benefit. Even more important he stated, "When I got to Regional State, I got there with my associate's degree. I talked to my advisor and he said, you went to [SJC], you don't have to take this class, this class, or this class." Ebraham, nonetheless, found the transition to the four-year college taxing:

> I was away from home. I was in this small part of State, and when walking off campus, [other Black] people would say, be careful because we are not a wanted presence. At SJC, in class, I knew that stuff, so it was a lot easier. But at Regional State, going to that biology class at 8:00 in the morning, I had no clue what that guy just said and I was afraid of failing. I was like, how can I change this, what can I do to adapt?

After a semester, he realized that the academic disparity between SJC and RSU was mostly attributable to the difference between core requirements and major-level courses. He remarked:

> The main difference was the size; academically they were comparable. I was still challenged, but it was bigger. I had to walk farther; the classes were bigger, at SJC the class sizes were 30, and there they were like 60.

Ebraham described the racial makeup and graduation rates of the student body at Regional State as "around 25 percent African American and a very small percentage of other [racial or ethnic minorities], and the rest White." Regretfully, he also observed:

> There were a lot of Black males, but they were not as focused. They were stuck in college prep courses. . . .There were a lot of us, but many were more focused on the social aspects. They missed classes, and I didn't like to miss.

In terms of graduation, the outcome for many of the Black males was obvious. Ebraham reported, "about 350 of us graduated and about 70 were Black. I want to say

that 15-25 were Black males, but closer to 15 were Black males." He also noted that in contrast, there were two Black males, he knew of personally that "were very focused in my science classes. One was a star football player, and he understood biology like no one's business. I know those two guys finished, but I don't think the others did."

Ebraham graduated from Regional State in 2001 with a degree in Teacher Education and a concentration in science. In view of the relatively low numbers of Black male graduates, he reflected on this achievement:

> I felt like king of the hill. I felt so accomplished, that my time, my money, and effort were not wasted. I had a job; I knew I would be doing something. I knew I could make it, but I doubted sometimes. Stereotypes were saying that I wouldn't, but I did accomplish what I set out to accomplish. I knew I had to push the stereotype to the side and move on.

He also recalls his graduation as an extremely significant event for his family:

> I remember my brothers talking and saying, you know, I want to go back to school now. I just need to get the time; I <u>am</u> going to go back. One of my brothers wanted to study theology. He wanted to do it just for the knowledge. I did it for the knowledge, but I want stuff too. I remember one of my brothers missing a promotion because he didn't have a degree.

Ebraham went on to receive a Master's degree in Educational Administration from Regional State in 2003. He is currently teaching in another state where he lives with his wife, who is also a Regional State graduate with an MBA.

Gary

Gary currently works on the SJC West campus as a part time tutor. He held this position while a student at SJC and at his transfer institution. It has been almost two years since he received his four-year degree and began working, yet he continues to tutor SJC students. He assured me, however, that "it was certainly not for the money." I did not remember meeting him personally until the interview, but he mentioned that I was

present when he received an SJC award some years before. When we first spoke about the study, I found out he was originally from Jamaica and had only come to the United States immediately before he enrolled at SJC. In view of his West Indian background, I realized his high school experience would significantly contrast with the experience of those who were educated in the United States. Initially, I hesitated to include him in the study, but later I decided that this contrast might offer another dimension to the analysis.

We met at the tutoring lab on the West campus, and as I tried to spot him in the crowd, I was unable to differentiate him from the students. Gary wore a baseball cap, baggie pants, and a State Tech sweatshirt. He sported a beard and mustache and wore glasses. He is a strapping fellow, about six feet tall and sturdily built. If not for his broad and engaging smile when he approached, I may have even considered him somewhat intimidating. I could only hear the faint remnant of a Jamaican accent as we spoke, but his formal use of language and certain idioms were telltale signs of his origin.

Gary is 24 years old and a graduate of State Technical University (STU). In addition to tutoring college math at SJC, he works as an electrical systems engineer for an electronics firm on a contractual basis. He is one of several engineers in his family, having two uncles and an aunt who also graduated from State Tech. He was raised by his grandparents in Jamaica, where he lived with two of his sisters. His grandparents had both held professional jobs and attended college, and they would be considered financially well off by both Jamaican and American standards.

Gary makes a point to emphasize that his grandmother was quite a taskmaster. He confided, “I’ve always thought they were hardest on me, and I am not sure entirely why.” He went on to illustrate the family’s stance on the importance of school:

> I wasn't allowed to watch television during the week. As far as going out, I didn't really want to do that much anyway, so that really wasn't a problem. They were real strict in making sure I was doing enough while I was there to move on to the next step.

Gary's grandparents set high academic standards for him and structured his activities accordingly. Gary described the academic atmosphere generally found in Jamaican schools:

> Under a British [educational] system, academics pretty much started at an early age. Throughout your grade school and high school, it is a rigorous process. It is actually so rigorous that you don't actually have to go through the 12th grade. You can graduate from the 11th grade, which is pretty much what I did. I think that helped me a lot.

Like many young men of means in Jamaica, Gary attended a private church-affiliated high school, which he describes as strict, demanding, and competitive. It was an all male academy, which was also the standard in Jamaica. Although Gary can now scarcely believe that he endured single-sex environment, he admitted:

> It keeps you more focused. You don't have the distraction from females as many males would. It definitely kept me more focused, and I think it really helped a lot with how well I did.

Despite what Gary described as a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, his high school took little responsibility in terms of college awareness. He said, "We really didn't have any counselors. My high school was run pretty much by priests." Moreover, like most of the other participants, Gary expressed that during most of high school "college didn't cross my mind." He did recall an informal program for SAT preparation:

> There was one guy who went around the campus. He was the lab guy. He put forth an offer to assist students if they wanted to prepare for the SAT on Saturdays. I signed up with him; my grandmother gave him like two thousand dollars, which she still reminds me of today. We met on Saturdays in a very dirty classroom, and he would show us a couple of problems that he said were based on the SAT. I didn't really know about the SAT, so I had to take his word for it.

Gary reported that out of forty of his classmates, at least twenty-five went on to college; however, very few came to the United States. In the mid 90's, he stated, "I was always one of the few who said I am going to leave," but now since conditions in Jamaica have worsened, many more are electing to go to college in America or Britain.

When Gary graduated from high school, he was unsure of what field of study he would pursue. He remembered, "I was pretty much torn between two fields, whether to go into piloting, in Jamaica that is the big thing, or electrical engineering." He recalled, "The only thing I had to go on then was that I liked to open up electrical equipment." Gary came to the [Metropolitan] area, where his mother resided, the fall after his high school graduation without a predetermined educational plan.

Following a similar path as other family members, Gary decided to pursue engineering instead of aviation. His two uncles and an aunt, who were successful engineers, had all graduated from State Tech, known for its engineering program. However, soon after his arrival, he enrolled at SJC at the urging of one of his uncles who had also attended the college. In fact, Gary found that attending SJC before going to State Tech was an integral part of the engineering tradition in his family. Gary explained why he was encouraged to take this route:

> Money. It was a lot cheaper to come to school [at SJC]. At the time, my residency status wasn't known. I was under the age of eighteen, so we found out because my Mom was here for over a year that I was a resident automatically. State Tech was still a lot more money than SJC.

Not only did Gary have to make the transition between Jamaican and American cultures, he simultaneously had to make a transition from high school to college. He was able to make the cultural and collegiate adjustments easily, mostly because he welcomed the changes to his Jamaican lifestyle. He was released from his grandparents' firm grip

and was living with his mother who was more relaxed and lenient. He was able to easily obtain sports drinks and certain candies and snacks that were rare commodities in Jamaica. Gary was able to experience the bustling urban environment he had seen on television. He also found that collegiate life at SJC offered a few unexpected freedoms and privileges as well:

> SJC was different in a few areas. I remember I was sitting in class while the teacher was teaching the class and a student stood up and walked out. I couldn't believe it, I was like, can she do that? Also, I think that day I only had one course and the course was from nine to nine-forty. I remember asking the teacher, where do I go from here. She asked, do you have any more courses for the day? I said this is my schedule, and she said you can go home. I couldn't believe that either.

He also appreciated the "availability of recreational things like the gym and the swimming pool. Those things existed in Jamaica, but they were in like a top-secret area; nobody ever went there except maybe a few guys." Surprisingly, as a traditional aged student, another aspect of SJC that Gary valued was the wide diversity in the ages of the students:

> What I liked also was there were a lot of older students. Older twenties, younger twenties, even thirties, so that was attractive to me too. I didn't want to be surrounded by my peers because with the older student, I feel there is a better focus also. I'd just be able to go after my degree.

Concerning the curriculum at the two-year college, Gary remarked:

> It seemed easier, coming from Jamaica, such a rigorous environment. It seemed, I wouldn't say a step down; it seemed lighter. I wasn't studying as much; I didn't need to study as much as I needed to back in Jamaica and I was still doing well. [But] as time went on and things started to get harder, I realized that I was studying more and more.

He found, however, that in some ways the pace and the chance to receive fundamental instruction at SJC, worked to his benefit:

> SJC starts you off a little bit slower; State Tech starts you off with Calculus I and you go from there. [At SJC] you can't do that unless you decide to test out of those courses. I think I needed that because there were many things I picked up from College Algebra and Pre-Calculus that I wasn't getting back in Jamaica because of how they did things. So, certain things that I picked up [at SJC], I wouldn't have gotten [if I had] started at State Tech.

Aside from the tutoring lab where he worked, Gary did not utilize many of the student services offered by the college. For example, he said he visited the advising office during his first two semesters, but did not feel comfortable with the courses that the advisors recommended. Instead, like many college students, Gary relied on the informal network that exists among students with similar interests. He explained, "I had a friend. He wanted to be an electrical engineer as well. So, he was the one who went out and spoke to the advisors. We pretty much were taking many of the same courses, so I would just go with what he said."

Reflecting back on his time at SJC, Gary said, "It was the best years ever. I mean me and a couple of people who came [to SJC] still talk about how wonderful it was at SJC. SJC was where it all happened." SJC introduced Gary to postsecondary education and to the concept that academics can coexist with non-competitive relationships and unstructured activities. He found the overall atmosphere of the college more supportive, congenial, and casual than the academic institutions in Jamaica. Although Gary did not mention participating in many of the social or cultural activities available at SJC, he indicated that he formed relationships with a small circle of friends, most of whom were also foreign born. Through the friends who had lived in the United States for several years, he was able to learn about U.S. cultural norms, practices, and traditions from the perspective of other outsiders.

When it came time to transfer, he again, did not seek guidance from college personnel. Gary and his friend found much of the information they needed by visiting State Tech's website, including the fact that they could transfer to the university a semester earlier than they thought. So, without plans to graduate from SJC, they began the process to be admitted as transfer students. As Gary remembered "we got accepted for the fall of 1998, but we actually delayed [starting classes] a semester."

Before his first semester at State Tech, Gary was sent a letter from the university's minority services office, inviting him to a special orientation for transfer students. During the orientation, Gary expressed that the minority office staff assisted tremendously:

> We had a meeting the same day we were going to register for courses. They took us through what we needed to do. [Staff members] told us what supplies we needed to buy for special courses and so forth. I do remember that same day they actually reserved a ballroom upstairs in the student center and they had professors there, talking to students.

Gary was able to meet several other Black transfer students in engineering, many of whom came from HBCUs. Although he admits that the minority office "didn't see much of me after that," he was both impressed with and appreciative of the assistance he received at the orientation and noted how important it was to his transition to State Tech.

When he first enrolled at STU, Gary described his intentionally cautious strategy:

> I started slow. I didn't take as many classes as when I came [to SJC], so I could get a feel of what it would be like at a four-year institution. I started with only two courses. I could feel already that it was a lot more rigorous, but I was still able to manage. Over the first year, I started taking more classes until I thought I was trained enough to take classes at a four year school.

The upper-level curriculum at State Tech required an enormous amount of study and review and left little time for socializing. Though he became friendly with both

Black and White students in the Engineering school, he conveyed that social opportunities were rare "unless you were on the campus, which a lot of [of his classmates] were. I didn't really get socially involved." He also explained how the campus was spatially segmented, not only by majors, but also by different engineering concentrations. He mentioned that he lost touch with his friend from SJC because he changed his concentration and no longer had classes on Gary's "side of the campus."

Gary attended STU for approximately two and a half years. Since he did not live on campus, Gary had the additional complication of living in an environment that was not always conducive to a demanding study schedule. He said:

> When my sister got divorced, I was a couple of semesters into State Tech. She came to live with us, and that was a little stressful because we were all crowded into this one apartment. She had just had a child, and he was crying all the time. I remember one night I totally lost it; I blew up and went outside. I was fairly good friends with our neighbor across the hall, he gave me his key and said I could just go over there and study when I needed to.

Despite a demanding and unrelenting course of study and less than optimal living arrangements, Gary graduated from State Technical University with a degree in Electrical Engineering.

Julian

A colleague from another campus of SJC referred Julian as a candidate for my study. She had worked with Julian when he was a student leader several years before and remained in touch with him. He was one of the first men to confirm participation, and he seemed very interested in the study. Julian lives in a nearby state about 100 miles from the Metropolitan area. Since he visits Metropolitan regularly, we were able to schedule

the first interview at a conveniently located Metropolitan public library. For the second interview, we agreed to meet at a restaurant halfway between Metropolitan and his home.

We arranged to meet at a coffee café across the street from the public library before the first interview. Julian was immaculately dressed in a conservative, tailored navy blue "power suit" similar to the other young businessmen and women who sat with their coffee and newspapers in the café. He appeared ready for either an important business meeting or a formal interview that I assumed he attended either before or after our interview. He is attractive, clean-shaven, with smooth dark brown skin, a "razor-sharp goatee" and a short hair cut. He stands about 5'10" and has a medium build. Julian had two other distinguishing features: a sparkling and engaging smile and a smaller and partially disabled right hand.

Julian was raised as an only child in the Metropolitan area by his mother and stepfather, who are both mid-level professionals with degrees from HBCUs. He also maintained a relationship with his birth father, who also resided in Metropolitan. Growing up, his neighborhood and the schools he attended until 10th grade were "predominately Black, middle class; I wouldn't say urban, but not suburban-suburban." That changed during his sophomore year in high school, when his family relocated to New Jersey due to a job transfer. Julian began attending a predominately White high school in small town in New Jersey. He conveyed that for a while, he was sad about leaving his friends in Metropolitan, but soon he learned to adapt and make the best of his new situation:

> I think the biggest adjustment for me was that I got to play basketball. Whereas in Metropolitan, there was a lot of competition, I was pretty sure I could take some of those White boys. I just met the Black people that were there at the school and became friends with them, and I became

> friends with the other people. I think that helped me out a lot in life; I got to deal with a diverse group of people.

Julian's comment reveals his assumption that his athletic prowess, at least in basketball, was superior to Whites. This assumption is commonly made by many young Black males, and actually feeds the societal stereotype of Blacks having "natural" ability in sports. As will be discussed further in Chapter 4, this common racial stereotype goes far beyond a mere assessment of athletic ability, and it has social and political implications as well.

Julian enjoyed the attention he received as the "new kid." As a Black southerner from a big city, he was a unique addition to the school. He described the affect of his new celebrity:

> I was loved at [New Jersey high school]. It makes you kind of rebellious; you walk with a different swagger. No one knows you, and you can kind of just reinvent yourself if you want to.

Academically, however, Julian found the curriculum at the new high school was more advanced than what he was exposed to in Metropolitan. "When I went to New Jersey I was behind, so there had to be some difference." This surfaced particularly in mathematics. "I was deficient in math, so I started in a lower level math class when I went to New Jersey. I went to a [private] tutoring center to help me build on those deficiencies." Julian admitted that he was not happy when his parents insisted he attend the tutoring center "on his own time." He realized some time later that the extra instruction was rather costly and confirmed that his parents were actually investing in his academic future.

At the New Jersey high school, each senior student was expected to see an academic counselor for college planning purposes. Julian was not pleased, however, with the advice he was given:

> They tried to push me into going to a junior college. Initially, I thought they were just trying to send me off. They didn't want me to be as successful as everybody else. I resented the guidance counselor for that.

He contended that he objected to attending a junior college because this was a common path for many of his peers who for one reason or another refused to consider other options:

> So when people would say they were gong to the [local community college], it was kind of like a cop-out. Just so you would be doing something. So that is what caused my opinion of junior college. It wasn't a fair assessment; it is just that at that point in time that is what everybody was saying. I didn't want to be like everybody else, I wanted to go to Legacy College.

The preceding comment and his attitude about being tutored suggested that Julian was reluctant to accept an accurate picture of his academic abilities.

Upon graduation, Julian proudly disregarded his high school counselor's recommendation and planned to attend a four-year institution. He wanted to attend a historically Black college or university (HBCU) because "I had gone through a culture shock in going [to New Jersey high school] and I needed to get back. I needed to get back to my roots, so to speak. I think that is what put me on that course." He found, however, that because his grades were only average, he had limited college choices. He was admitted provisionally to Historic University, a HBCU located in Virginia, only after he met certain academic conditions. "Historic University said if you come for our summer program and you have a B or 3.0 average, we will accept you for the fall."

As is the case with many college freshmen, Julian found Historic University an exciting and dramatic departure from his high school academic and social life. He explained:

> My roommate was from the Virginia area, and so I got to see on campus life and off campus life. I got involved with everything, auditioning for the disc jockey position for radio. … Just wild things like women, alcohol, and parties.

His first semester grades suffered from his fast paced social life, and his parents, who had now moved back to a southern state, decided to withdraw him from the school. Julian was both stunned and disheartened by this decision:

> I think that my parents, this is still a touchy subject, but I think they were hearing, when they called [that] I wanted to talk about all the other stuff. Yeah, classes were fine, but I was at the radio station this morning, and I got this rap group…but what do you expect from a freshman student, a seventeen-year-old student where the ratio of women to men is like fourteen to one?

He felt his parents' decision was based not only on his academic performance, but also on not wanting to pay the high cost of a private institution. Julian said he felt:

> Like I had gone straight horizontal. I felt like a statistic. Here I am eighteen, a Black male, not in college, no job. I am a statistic now. I am one step away from jail.

Julian was faced again with the suggestion that he attend a two-year college and finish up at a four-year school, this time from his parents. He said, "they gave me the speech, you are going to go to college, or you are going to get a job." He decided to work and moved back to [Metropolitan], this time living with his father. After working for about a year or so at a variety of jobs, and experiencing "what it was like to work all week, get paid on Friday, and be broke again on Monday," Julian reassessed his options. He remembered:

> I said, 'you need to go back to school'. Plus my parents and I had mended some of those scars, so if I went back to school, I would get a little help

> from them. I think I am ready to go down that path again. So I said, suck it up, put your pride aside, and let's get this done.

Julian continued to wrestle with the idea of enrolling at a two-year college. Though he started taking evening classes at SJC while he worked full time, he admits

> My GPA wasn't strong because I didn't want to go to SJC to start. I wanted to go to USU. I am *Historic University* alum! I didn't want to go to junior college. I said I'm going to Urban State but Urban State said, not yet.

When his current job ended, he enrolled at SJC fulltime. Despite Julian's initial impression that SJC was just a "pit stop in the road," he began to appreciate the character and amenities of the college. He recalled:

> When I got there and I went to classes and looked around, I thought, this in nice, the library. I started to get a little bit of that school spirit. This could be a good springboard to go onto other things. And the way it is structured, you got day classes, you got evening classes, a wide variety of things that you could study. As far a technology, they had technology; there were probably some parts of SJC that were more advanced than Legacy.

He became involved in student government and began to enjoy collegiate life again. He said, "I am a person who gets to know people, especially if it is someone you need to know." This was a catalyst for opportunities and recognition.

> Well, working in student life, the Dean [of Students] would walk by all the time. She might need someone to go over to her secretary or over to the financial aid office. I would wear suits from time to time. So when I got into student life, and we were doing something specific, I would wear a suit, a shirt, and a tie.

When it was nearing the time that Julian would transfer to a senior institution, he admits to having second thoughts about completing a four-year program.

> I was doing a little bit of everything while I was in [Metropolitan]. I was doing school; I was doing the entertainment committee [as part of SGA]. I was doing my small business, and when I started thinking about schools to transfer, I started thinking maybe I didn't want to transfer. Maybe I just

> wanted to run my business. I had decided that was what I wanted to do and school was okay; it wasn't great. I was really at a crossroads.

A combination of factors, including gentle nudges from parents and family, the realization that the job market was not as promising for those with only associate degrees, and "the faith that my peers and instructors and administrators had in me to go on and do things… gave me confidence, to think maybe I should go on." His original plan to transfer to Urban State was also reevaluated. He realized:

> My personality, if I went to a big school, I would find a lot to get involved in. That might cause me to withdraw from some classes, and I really just wanted to be able to get in and get out and finish up school.

Julian, with only three more courses needed to graduate from SJC, happened on a small Christian college while going back and forth from [Metropolitan] to his home state to see his ailing grandmother. Church-Affiliated College was located in his home state and was about two hours from [Metropolitan]. The college offered a business degree program and accepted Julian as a transfer student. He was also able to take the three classes required at SJC, transfer them back, and pick up his associates' degree.

At Church-Affiliated College (CAC), he lived off campus, took daytime classes, worked in the evening, and made it his priority "to finish, … not to get involved, not to make a statement or change the school." Although his math skills were still weak, he chose the Finance Economics concentration offered within the Business major because, he rationalized, "people who are successful have that background. Like I said in our first interview, power and security are very high on my list of priorities, so I had to do what was going to lead me down that path. If I am a Finance major, it should be pretty hard for me to go broke." Julian attended the college for close to three years and graduated in the spring of 2004.

Of all the participants, Julian's progression from high school to the baccalaureate took the longest time (10 years). Although he is extremely proud of his degree, ("now I can consider myself a success story of a Black male"), he was aware of the toll that the pursuit of this goal had taken. Reflecting on his college encounter, Julian is candid and insightful:

> I was unsuccessful at times; I failed a class or two. I got tutors, a lot of help from teachers and spending extra time with them. [I had] friends in class; I was doing anything I had to do. A lot of my entrepreneurial spirit, a lot of my confidence got beat up in school. Going through those classes and barely making it out was like going through a 12 round fight. I made it through, but now I am tired. I don't want to go, being a businessman is hard too, and there is a lot of rejection in that.

Nephron

Nephron is a 27-year-old mid-level manager at a telemarketing firm in Metropolitan. He grew up in Queens, New York, and came to the Metropolitan area two years after graduating from high school. He still maintains a hint of the northeastern accent and aloofness common to native New Yorkers. Nephron is 6 feet tall and has a medium build. He has a manicured mustache, beard, and short, neatly cut hair. We initially met at a bookstore in his neighborhood, but found the noise level unusually high and not conducive to a taped interview. As a result, Nephron offered his nearby home as our interview site. I felt this gesture was very accommodating. His home was a recently purchased and newly constructed townhome and was spacious, airy, and nicely appointed. Visiting his home broadened my concept of Nephron as a person. I could tell he was fastidious, urbane, and very proud of being a relatively young homeowner.

From our first telephone conversation, I sensed a certain urgency in what Nephron wanted to reveal as a participant in the study. Like Julian, he was not only

willing but seemed anxious to contribute to the study. I believe this stemmed from wanting to disprove what he perceived as common assumptions about his generation of Black males. He also wanted to differentiate his life experiences in terms of class. Early in our first interview, as we began to discuss his family and educational background, he quickly established that he did not have a disadvantaged upbringing. He responded to my query about the characteristics of his neighborhood in this manner:

> I don't have a ghetto story. I didn't grow up in a ghetto. It was a residential area, but it was segmented. That is the type of school that I went through.

Like Gary and Carlos, a foreign-born grandmother raised Nephron. Although he spent his entire life in the United States, his immediate family maintained close ties to Jamaica. He also revealed that in his household "it is very good to be a grandchild, especially the first on both sides." Nephron made special note of his middle-class Jamaican heritage and what he knew of their educational system which he described as "far and above that of here in the States." He went on to describe his family's posture on college attendance:

> College was not looked upon as a great achievement. I wasn't the first one in college. My parents all went through it. My aunts and so on, and so forth. College was a rite of passage, which is the way it should be. After you go to high school, you go to college and graduate, and then go on from there. Even now, my family is encouraging me to get my master's degree.

Nephron reported that his early school experiences were generally positive in terms of academics. "I was put into all of the challenge and gifted programs; if there was a play, Martin Luther King Day, Presidents Day, I was always up to make a speech in front of the assembly." However, he began to notice some of the inequities associated

with being in what he called "advance classes." He recalled the activities of the students who were not in those classes:

> They would get to go to the movies. They would play for recess longer than we had. [The teachers] let them go outside because they really didn't want to give them the time of learning. When we were in the so-called smarter classes, we had to stay inside most of the time. We were working. We were doing class work, homework, things of that nature. And as a kid you were saying, I wish I could go outside sometime. But as an adult I see that it is very sad because [the teachers felt] if [the students] are not up to speed, just let them go play.

In middle school, he explained that other social consequences for being considered smart began to surface. Peer acceptance and academic achievement were both very important to Nephron. He seemed to conceptualize his ability to fit in with all his classmates as a unique accomplishment. He explained how he was able to socially navigate among his peers:

> Because I was able to do everything, I was able to interact with the kids who weren't in the smarter class through the extracurricular activities. [I connected] with the other students through the sports, through my personality and being a class clown. I got in trouble so they were like, hey he gets in trouble too.

Here sports participation is used to offset his identification as an academic achiever. Although this was a useful strategy for Nephron, the literature suggests that it can also begin to position sports as the antithesis of school performance (Harrison, 2000).

During high school, Nephron reported that his elevated academic status began to erode. He attended a predominately Black high school that was located in one of the more flourishing communities in Queens. It was known for its high academic standards. He confessed that after being very studious when he began high school, he "started slacking off in my last two years." He explained:

> I had so many credits [from my first two years]. I felt I didn't need to grind out the last two years. Maybe I got too full of myself at that point. I definitely let outside influences get to me at that point. I wanted to hang out, I wanted to be cool, things of that nature.

Aside from just being socially accepted, Nephron found he had to downplay his academic achievement. Like many young men, he was influenced by the traditional high school pecking order:

> You had the jocks, the smart kids, and the so-called bad boys. And that is what happened, so you started segmenting into groups, and, really, nobody wanted to be in that middle one, the smart kids. Either they want to be a jock or they want to be a bad boy. That is what really affects your grades.

He described other anti-intellectual pressures he experienced during his high school years. He surmised, "I think what happens is the outside influences start to tear into your grades. After awhile you're noticing girls, and you don't want to be too smart, or you're not going to get the cutest females in the class and so on." This points to Nephron's perception of the lack of social capital gleaned from academic performance and confirms for him the dichotomous nature of social acceptance and academic achievement.

Nephron discovered that those last two years of high school would totally alter his original college plans. Nephron had always envisioned attending a major university. He concedes that he was generally exposed to the pertinent information about preparing for college at his high school, but felt it was not sufficiently presented to all students. He admits, however, that he did not take action on the information he received. He remembered hearing basic college information, such as:

> Keep your eleventh grade scores high. That will influence you getting into a good college when you graduate. By the time you are in the tenth grade, you have to start looking for the colleges where you want to go. Take your PSAT's in the eleventh grade, you know, the practice SAT's before you take your SAT's in the twelfth grade.

The college selection and preparation process has lock-step stages that must be accomplished within specific timeframes. Like many families of underrepresented populations in higher education, Nephron's family may not have been familiar with the timelines and specifics of these processes. He therefore was reliant on the high school or his own initiative to prompt him to complete necessary tasks in a timely manner. Consequently, despite the information provided by the high school, and his family's support of higher education, Nephron stated that he didn't begin to think about going to college until his senior year.

Nephron pointed out that his graduating class was somewhat an anomaly in that the majority of the graduates that year were Black males. He was not sure why this occurred, or if it ever occurred again, but he speculated:

> Sports helped keep some of the males intact, and the others just did well. And they just did what they had to do to graduate. And not everyone graduated in four years, but it was good to see that some stayed maybe that extra year or semester to finish school. So I would have to say those factors were there. It was strange, but it was good.

In the above passage, Nephron indicates his perception that sports participation promotes academic retention, which has also been argued in the literature (Braddock II, Royster, Winfield et al., 1991; Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Harrison, 2000). The knotty relationship between sports participation and academics will be addressed further in Chapter 4.

After graduation, Nephron attended a local community college for the first year and a half. He conveyed that he was not pleased with the time at the community college in New York, partly because "I had my heart set on going [to college] elsewhere." He also believed that the community college was only "about fashion and factions. Class work was not a premium; it was more of a hang out spot. I stayed there for three

semesters, then worked for a while and then came to [Metropolitan] to finish up school."

He also was ready to leave New York:

> I saw people at thirty years old doing the same thing they did at fifteen. New York for young Black males, especially during the Giuliani years, was horrible. And it still is to this day. I was just reading the statistics that over 50 percent of Black males in New York are unemployed. Growing up in New York is the best, you learn so much, but after awhile, to grow as a man, it's not a good place. So, I didn't want to stay there any more.

Approximately two and a half years after graduating from high school, Nephron moved to Metropolitan. He remarked, "I never thought that I would miss school, but I did. I really, really missed school." His goal was to enroll in college and begin again working towards a college degree. He enrolled at SJC and explained that he did not consider many of the residential colleges and universities in the area for this reason:

> I didn't want to be involved with dormitory life; I have never been into fraternities and things of that nature. I was very focused. And because SJC is a commuter school, I was able to live in an apartment by myself. I thought that would be best for me because when I came, I was serious.

In addition, he added "it was definitely more economically feasible than going to a larger university at that time."

Surprisingly, Nephron also found that this two-year, commuter college located in a southern state offered a chance for cultural enrichment that he was not exposed to in New York. One of the most impressive features of SJC was the diversity:

> That was a big point for me because growing up in New York in my area. I was not exposed to other students except other African Americans until I got to [the New York Community College], and I didn't stay there long. So I was looking for that diversity again. I didn't want to go to [a HBCU]; I wasn't interested in that kind of dorm life, or a mainly African American school.

Nephron believed that attending a diverse college was important because:

> You gain a lot of tolerance, and I am not talking about racial tolerance. You learn different things, you learn different people have different focuses; different ethnic groups have different focuses.

Similar to most of the other participants, Nephron took advantage of the student leadership opportunities available on the campus. He recognized that SJC allowed him easier access to meaningful involvement with the college than would be afforded at larger universities.

> If I had gone to one of those big colleges, it would be harder to find someone that looks like me there. So, it would have been harder to find those opportunities without sacrificing my beliefs, which I would not do. The experience I had was the best; I did not have to play the game like you have to do in some colleges. I was able to be me and be successful.

Aside from honing his organizational and management skills by working with student government, campus programming, and budget allocations, these leadership positions came with generous stipends. This amounted to part-time employment on campus, which along with substantial family support allowed Nephron to attend SJC on a fulltime basis.

Originally, Nephron planned to transfer to Urban State University, which he says was pretty much the "status quo" at SJC. Because USU was the closest, public senior institution to SJC, he thought the majority of the students focused on transfer gravitated towards that institution. As he finished his courses at SJC, he began to consider other options. Nephron indicated that he decided against USU because of the number people from SJC that were also attending. He explained:

> I am always a person who likes to go a little bit against the grain. I definitely wanted to go to school where the focus was on the curriculum. I didn't want any extra activities anymore: no student life, no dormitory life of course, nothing of that sort. I wanted to get to a school that would allow me to have a good part time job and go to school at the same time.

(Later in the interview, Nephron revealed that his SJC grade point average was slightly below 2.75, which is required to transfer to USU. This was probably also a prominent factor in his transfer choice.)

After viewing advertisements, making a campus visit, and speaking to staff members, Nephron decided to attend International Business University (IBU), a local proprietary school that catered to working adults. He was primarily impressed by the school's:

> business type atmosphere for the business degree. There seemed to be students like myself, a little older, not nineteen. I liked the hours, 5-10. You take classes at a faster rate because you will take two courses at a time, and as I said, the curriculum was a little different.

Nephron found some of the other amenities and features of the program attractive.

> And of course, you get a laptop, which you pay for but you get it through the school, an IBM ThinkPad. . . .A lot of the professors are people who were in business currently and teachers who have been teaching business for a long time. So it gave you a view of business, not just from the textbooks of yesteryear; it gave you a focus on what is actually going on now, the newer trends in business, the teamwork aspect, the knowledge work and things of that nature.

Although he was tempted to take a few months off between finishing SJC and beginning IBU, he was encouraged by his grandmother to start as soon as he could. He began in the spring of 2000.

IBU, as a proprietary institution, came with hefty tuition costs, requiring that Nephron take on a substantial loan package. He indicated that he is still making payments toward that debt. Considering that he most likely could have attended a public institution for a fraction of the cost of IBU, I inquired if he believed the education he received was a good return on his investment. He responded:

> Now I could have taken the easier road. I don't think [USU's] curriculum matched the curriculum that I graduated from at IBU. [Also] the fact that there were already so many people [at USU] that I knew, I just didn't want the distractions. I just wanted to go there and be finished and be done. So, in hindsight I do not have any regrets about that. Monetarily, yeah, but as I said . . . I did what I had to do to get where I need to be.

Ty

Ty is the son of a colleague, who recommended him for this study. Although he had attended and participated on the campus, where I worked, my interaction with him was quite limited. In fact, it was not until he was about to graduate from SJC that I realized his relationship to my co-worker. Ty is of medium height, with a stocky yet athletic build. He has medium-brown skin and wears a short haircut and a slight mustache. His gregarious and pleasant demeanor is exposed by his infectious smile that is both charming and playful. Ty is 27, married, and a sergeant in the US Army, making him a uniquely seasoned participant. This became even clearer as Ty spoke of his educational journey to the baccalaureate.

Ty grew up in a government housing project located in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. His mother, a single parent, was recognized as having collegiate potential by a member of the housing staff and was selected to participate in a program that assisted her in earning her college degree. She later went on to receive a Master's degree in education. This took place when Ty and his sister were still in elementary school. He remembers:

> There were times when I didn't see her a lot. I spent time with my grandmother and other family members. I finally understood the struggle when we moved to [Metropolitan]. We were able <u>not</u> to live in substandard housing, live in nice neighborhoods, go to nice schools, and have a little money to go to a basketball game, or have more than five outfits in the closet. . . . My mother invested in education,. I mean she

> invested in us, but she saw something greater in education for us and for her in general. I have to admit it was a great investment for her and for us.

Ty conveys that his mother's experience sent one of the most significant messages he absorbed about postsecondary education. He was able to see and directly benefit from his mother's college career. He recalled:

> I watched her work full time, go to school full time and raise a son and a daughter who weren't always the best kids growing up. And I watched her struggle with all of those. Basically, that's how my life turned from living in the projects to living a comfortable, middle class lifestyle. It was a great turn around to see, in my lifetime, just what a college degree does for a person.

Ty and his family remained in Missouri until he completed his first year of high school. His mother's new career in education led them to move quite often during his high school years, and he attended four different schools. While still in Missouri, he participated in a summer before high school that proved to have tremendous academic benefits. The program was called Minority Excellence, and it was designed to help with the transition from middle to high school for "excellent minority students, or [students] with promise. I wouldn't call myself excellent but they could see I had promise." This program focused primarily on preparing students in math and science, but it also featured broader components that encouraged general academic achievement and college attendance. Ty described the program.

> It did things like bring in people to talk about college. You got a full credit for it. [The program] brought in samples of the classes you were going to take the next year. Like, say I was going to take algebra and English I. They would give me a two or three week sample of what would be in that class so I would know what to expect. Then, I wouldn't just be bombarded with x+y=a+c or something like that.

Ty revealed that being ascribed with academic promise at his first high school was a great motivator for him. He goes on to convey, however, that he was not perceived

as academically capable at all the high schools he attended. He received a very rude awakening at the high school he attended when his family moved to a southern town located in the State, due to his mother's employment. Ty described how he was academically positioned by the school counselor:

> Instead of bumping me up to take junior level classes, they bumped me down to take eighth and ninth grade classes. So that year my grades weren't as good as they could have been. I was kind of down; I felt like I had been demoted. I felt like I had been put back in the eighth grade again.

Fortunately, by the end of the school year, the family moved to another county and a new high school. The counselors at this school recognized Ty's potential and placed him in courses that were more rigorous. This move, quite possibly, was key in determining Ty's scholastic future. Now, he again found school "refreshing. I was motivated again." It is easy to imagine the possible consequences of a student who was consistently thwarted in his academic pursuits. Right before his senior year, his family moved again to a suburb of Metropolitan and he attended what he considered a high school comparable to the one in Missouri.

Despite the constant moves, Ty continued to take the required college preparatory classes and maintained a solid grade point average. Again similar to most of the other men in the study, Ty did not begin to actively pursue college admission until the semester before his graduation. Fortunately, with the help of a extraordinary high school counselor, Ty applied and was accepted at several local and out of state schools, competed for several scholarships and grants, and was awarded an ample amount of financial aid.

He enrolled at County State University, a nearby state institution, primarily because "that was the only college that accepted all of the academic scholarships that I received." During his first year, his grades were less than stellar. He recalled:

> I thought I would be able to do all of the things I did in high school, like stay out till [late] at night, go to school in the morning, listen to what the teacher said, and fully comprehend it. What I didn't realize was that a class is only an hour and a half, two or three days a week, most of what I needed to learn was not taught in class. I ended that first year with a 1.6 GPA. My heart was broken.

Discouraged, but realizing some important lessons, he took a break from school and decided to join the military. His intent was to return to college after his first enlistment. Once in the military, Ty discovered he was a "good soldier and had leadership potential" and he briefly considered, much like Julian, a detour from his original plan to complete college. He recalled:

> Halfway through my enlistment, I found myself really enjoying the military. I remember me and my friend having this conversation, and I told him, you know, I am seriously thinking about re-enlisting because I don't think I will ever have it this easy, or this good at anything else.

Ty's perception that the military was his best option at the time points to one of the reasons many Black males do not complete college degrees—lack of exposure to the realm of possibilities available to them. The absence of diverse role models available to young Black men in their community often constrains their aspirations. Ty fortunately had seen his mother prepare herself for unimagined opportunities by attending college. That example and the reality of military life served to help him stay the course. He called to mind when he began to rethink his earlier plan of reenlistment:

> But that all changed when I got deployed to the Middle East, and I had a few bombs dropped over my head. I realized that a college degree might be better because it opens up more options. Without a degree, who knows if I'll survive the next time a few bombs fly over?

When Ty left the military, his plan was to enroll in a 4-year college or university. His mother, who was now employed at SJC, encouraged him to resume his education there. Ty found her rationale for attending SJC compelling:

> First of all, going in as a freshman at a four-year college you are looking at four years which is kind of daunting. Whereas two years is a shorter goal; it gives you something to work towards. When you get done with your first year, you are halfway done. So she always thought that was a much better path, the two-year as opposed to the four-year. It gives you a short-term goal to look forward to. And it is much easier to get into the college of your choice if you are a good student at a two-year college.

Ty was more than satisfied with his decision. The majority of his classes transferred from County State, and he found the West campus of SJC to be "very inviting, especially for African American males." He goes on to remark that:

> I found [the West campus of SJC] to be the [HBCU] of two-year schools. Everything they say a [HBCU] has a comforting nature, looking out for the students, making sure that you excel, the small community I felt all of that [at SJC]. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience here. I thought it was a great move. I got some things here that I never would have gotten had I gone straight to a four-year school.

Describing his classroom experience at SJC, Ty continued, "I got professors who expected more and who had the time to *inspect* what they *expected*. Although they may have had a class of thirty-five students, they still managed to take out that time. They wanted you to excel."

Ty was able to go fulltime his first year and said in order to make up for lost time, "I absolutely double loaded on all my classes." He also became involved with planning student programs as part of student government. He graduated from SJC after two years and then transferred back to County State to pursue a degree in Information Technology, which was also his specialty in the military.

After being away from County State for over six years, he found that both he and the college were not the same. He no longer found the school as student-centered as he did before. After an internship, he also discovered that he was no longer interested in a career in Information Technology. He came to realize that he enjoyed this field while in the military, not because of the work with the technology itself, but more because of "the interaction between people, the talking to soldiers, the bringing them up to speed, the sense of community and the community service I was providing." This left him searching for a new major and a new school. He explained:

> I kind of went through a lost period. I didn't do well at County State. In fact, I got the only D I ever got after the army at County State. I was down. My lovely wife said, 'you like to do volunteer work, you like to mentor people, …you love politics and how politics and non-profit organizations can work together and do things. Why don't you make that a career?' So, she had me look up the School of Policy Studies, at [Urban State University] on the web, and I absolutely fell in love with the program and the classes that they taught. And once I got there, I felt rejuvenated and reinvigorated because I didn't really know that programs like this existed. Honestly, I knew there were people who worked for like, the United Way, or HUD full time, but I never saw it like a viable career option until my wife and USU showed it to me.

After transferring to USU, he started classes immediately, and took at least two courses each semester while still meeting his military obligations and doing volunteer work in his community. In May of 2004, Ty graduated from USU with a degree in Urban Planning. He is currently in the process of applying to graduate school.

Summary

The six participants followed divergent paths, yet all ended at the desired destination of their college graduation. Figure 3 provides a timeline of the participants' academic progression. The lack of commonality among the paths speaks to the difficulty in making accurate assessments of graduation rates for specific populations. It also

reveals the meandering nature of some academic pipelines that is often not considered in the literature. There can be many intervening circumstances that surface during an academic career, particularly for under-represented and economically disadvantaged students. Although it took some men longer than others, they all eventually received a baccalaureate degree. The next chapter explores the personal, external, and institutional factors that influenced the men as they worked toward college degrees.

Year	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04
Carlos	HS Grad.	Various 2-year colleges	SJC		USU		BA						
Ebraham							HS Grad	SJC		RSU		BA	Master's
Gary					Grad. HS	SJC		STU				BS	
Julian			Grad. HS	Historic Univ.	Worked			SJC		CAC			BS
Nephron				Grad. HS	Other 2-year college	Worked		SJC		IBU		BA	
Ty				Grad. HS	CSU	Military				SJC		USU	BA

Figure 3. Comparative timeline of participants' academic progression

CHAPTER 4

PERSONAL, EXTERNAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC PROGRESSION

True to its qualitative nature, this study progressed in various directions, traveling down some unique and unexpected channels and converging around several shared themes and factors. In this chapter, various factors will be analyzed in terms of how they either encouraged or hindered the participants' academic progression or success. The chapter is organized into three sections that will review the data related to the participants' (a) own attributes and perspectives, (b) relationships and external influences, and (c) institutional factors. A separate discussion of the integration of race and gender within the framework of the study will follow in the next chapter.

Personal Perceptions and Attributes: A Sense of Personal Agency

The life stories told by each of the participants indicated several common personal characteristics, perspectives, and strategies that remained constant as they pursued the baccalaureate. These personal attributes have been instrumental in helping the participants overcome barriers, endure disappointments and setbacks, and take actions that have led to their goal. This section will explore these attributes within the central rubric of personal agency, which emerged as the overall foundation of their approach.

A sense of personal agency in this study refers to one's basic capacity to intercede on his or her own behalf in order to meet difficult challenges and achieve aspirations (Betz & Hackett, 1987). More specifically, Bandura (2001) contends:

> Agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence is exercised, rather than residing as a discrete entity in a particular place. The core features of agency enable people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times (p. 2).

The concept of agency provides a relevant context from which to analyze the participants' journey towards the degree. It denotes self-direction and critical consciousness, particularly related to oppressive institutional structures and ideology within a given social system (Nancy E Betz, 2004; Nancy E. Betz & Hackett, 1987; Pajares, 1996; Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991). This study examines the experiences of six Black males and their interaction with a historically oppressive educational enterprise. The men in this study acknowledged or directly experienced the inherent obstacles faced by Black males in the American education system--the inequity of educational resources, the low expectations, and the cloud of suspicion about their intellectual ability (Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Billson, 1992; Polite & Davis, 1999). Yet, by their individual actions, the participants purposely sought to overcome the obstacles imposed by the dominant society.

The exercise of agency is deliberate and intentional. Five of the men verbalized during their interviews that they were aware of "beating the odds" in achieving their college degrees. Cognizant of the negative image ascribed to Black males in the media, the men suggested that they were partly motivated to achieve because of the society's expectation of failure. The following comments illustrate this sentiment:

> Ebraham: I am not going to be a stereotype. I think that was one of the things that kept me going.
>
> Julian: When we are in school, it is easier not to do the work and be cool than it is to do the work and suffer rejection and hate…. That goes back to being a leader and having a wealthy mentality versus a rich mentality. If

> you are a leader, those things won't matter to you. You will try to convert those people to think how important it is for you to be smart.
>
> Nephron: I am definitely going to break down the perceptions. I am not going to compromise myself, but I am going to be successful.

All of the participants viewed themselves as agents for change and acknowledged their role in making a difference in the lives of future generations. Carlos, for example, provided financial and emotional support for several of his younger brothers and sisters. He remarked, "I kind of looked around and saw that I had my brothers and sisters and I had to step in and be that role model that they didn't have." Although he graduated from State Technical University two years ago with a degree in electrical engineering, Gary continues to tutor math at SJC for a minimum salary. This is his way of "giving back." Most of the students he tutors are unaware of his accomplishments. Those that discover his graduate status are awed by his commitment to help others succeed. Ty has a history of leadership roles at SJC, in the military, and in his church and community. He believes his greatest leadership skill is his ability to develop and encourage others. He contends that what is most important "is not what you do but the legacy that you leave." Ebraham has dedicated his career to the education of young people. He desires to be a superintendent of schools so he can "free students from the mental oppression that keeps them from learning." Both Julian and Nephron expressed that receiving their college degrees motivated them to encourage and assist other young Black men to do the same.

Critical resistance of the status quo was another way the men exercised agency. Several of the participants gave examples of instances when they found themselves at odds with generally accepted rules and ideologies. For example, Carlos, Nephron, and Gary, all of whom lived with foreign-born grandparents, expressed that critical thinking and questioning the "truths" of the dominant culture were instilled by their families

Carlos gave an example of the lessons he learned, along these lines, from his Panamanian grandfather:

> I became interested in history even to the point that I became aggressive in high school with the teachers in a sense. Because my grandfather would always tell me whatever he's telling you, there is something behind what he's telling you. So that's when I think I gained my interest in history, from my grandfather. [That encouraged my] going on to USU and earning a history degree.

The similarities in the messages heard by the three men with West Indian or central American cultural influences in the home may suggest a more critical viewpoint of the American social order than is held by native Black Americans. The cultural implications related to the men will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Throughout the study, it became evident that the participants drew on a variety of inner resources that supported their academic goals. These inner resources seemed to stem from the fundamental concept of taking responsibility for one's future, which is a concept closely related to agency. Thus, the common personal factors that seemed to influence their academic progression are (a) self-efficacy, (b) endurance/resilience, and (c) self-regulation. Each is discussed below.

Self-efficacy

The men of the study revealed that they always "knew" that either through their intellectual capabilities or sheer tenacity that they would eventually attend college and complete a postsecondary program. They further indicated that this idea evolved consciously or subconsciously because of family expectations or traditions, a need to escape a lifestyle or location, or a personal desire for success. The profiles revealed that most of the men either encountered substantial hurdles or traveled on rocky roads before actually enrolling in college. For instance, Carlos had to overcome a language barrier

that complicated his early education. Ty attended four different schools during his high school career, some of which had significantly low academic standards and little faith in his academic ability. Nephron was raised with the expectation of going to college, yet peer influences led to mediocre grades in high school and undermined his ability to attend a major university. Each man, however, was able to maintain enough academic confidence to keep the goal to achieve a college degree firmly rooted in his mind.

The expectation of competence related to completing a specific task is necessary to exercise personal agency. Fundamentally, people who have belief systems that support their competence and control over their lives tend to have high aspirations, can commit to meeting difficult challenges, and can effectively manage both threats and opportunities. Albert Bandura (2001) terms this quality *self-efficacy*. Whereas low self-efficacy can lead to depression and ineffectiveness, Bandura argues that a high level of self-efficacy is necessary to remain motivated towards a goal, effectively cope with stress and anxiety, and construct life paths that are conducive to success.

Self-efficacy has been useful in augmenting what is known about motivation, persistence, and achievement in academic settings. Efficacy beliefs have been linked to increased academic performance, school perseverance in the face of obstacles, choices of major and career, coping skills, and specific mathematics or writing skills. Evidence also supports the effect self-efficacy beliefs have on more generalized experiences such as health maintenance, addiction, and stressful life transitions (Bandura, 1995; Margolis & McCabe, 2003; Pajares, 1996).

Two aspects of self-efficacy make it particularly useful in academic settings. First, self-efficacy is task or context specific, which differentiates it from other

motivational constructs such as self-concept and expectancy. It is most useful in influencing the completion of specific tasks and the achievement of a predetermined goal. Secondly, a sense of self-efficacy can be developed over time by repeated successful experiences, witnessing the success of someone else of similar background or capability, being coached or persuaded of one's own capability, or altering one's perception of the task.

The participants' levels of self-efficacy can be ascertained by several indices: first, by their early recognition of a college degree as an attainable goal, second by their positive academic self-perceptions, and third, by how they negotiated challenges and obstacles related to their education. Regarding early intentions to attend college, three of the men remarked:

> Ty: I assumed I would go [to college]; I never questioned that.
>
> Ebraham: I knew what I wanted, and I realized that early.
>
> Nephron: [In my family] college was a right of passage, which is the way it should be. After you go to high school, you go to college and graduate and then go on from there.

All the participants made statements throughout their interviews that indicated positive self-perceptions. Related to these perceptions, the data also uncovered another consistent pattern. The men not only saw themselves as smart, capable or tenacious, but they also indicated the sense that they were particularly unique, rare, special, or different compared to their peers. These self-descriptions surfaced throughout their interviews, but were particularly apparent when I asked them to surmise what made them persist towards the degree when so many others did not. Ebraham and Julian responded to my question with these comments:

> Ebraham: I would get simple rewards intrinsically from people saying you can do this. I was like, I am good at test-taking strategies; I do better than those around me. So, I [thought], oh, I must be doing something special. There must be something about me. That boosts self-esteem.

> Julian: I don't want this to come out the wrong way, but I have always felt rare. I know that Black males are not going to school at an alarming rate. Yes, it was rare [that I completed college]. But at the same time, my focus was on if I succeed, I can be a benchmark for other [Black] males. That became part of the drive to finish as well.

Similarly, Gary always considered himself as more academically advanced than his peers. He described the Jamaican system of high school selection as very competitive, with only a select few able to attend the rigorous private academies, while others had to attend the public secondary schools. Selection, of course, was also based on social class and ability to pay the tuition, but Gary perceived his academic talent as the main reason he was admitted to the more prestigious high schools.

> I knew a few students who went to [public] secondary schools. At the time, I think I was more academically inclined than they were. I am not sure whether it was just based on the school, but I could tell I was more serious about [academics] than they were.

Nephron's status as an academically advanced student, and its effect on his interactions with peers and teachers, was a subtle theme of his early educational experiences. His challenges related more to peer acceptance than academic struggle or discrimination. This was apparent in the following comments:

> I was able to interact with the kids who weren't in the smarter class through the extracurricular activities, through the sports, through my personality, and being a class clown. I got in trouble. So they were like hey, he gets in trouble too.

> I wasn't a nerd; I wasn't always picked on. I have an unusual name, so people think I must have been picked on. But no, I had a sharp tongue. I was always one of the taller kids in my class too.

Nephron's view of himself as unique in comparison to other smarter-than-average students stemmed from his attainment of a certain amount of social capital during middle school. The fact that the majority of the men considered themselves somehow extraordinary suggests a relationship between a generally favorable self-evaluation and self-efficacy. Their feelings of being special or chosen likely fed the sense of capability required to complete their academic mission.

Also embedded in self-efficacy are the basic concepts of approach and avoidance (Nancy E Betz, 2004). In other words, the perception of one's self-efficacy as either low or high, leads to evading or taking on the challenges and obstacles that inevitably occur when pursuing a long-term goal. A fear of failure is common for most college students and the occurrence of failure can be crippling. Betz (2004) contends that high self-efficacy propels ones forward even in the face of failure. This is confirmed by the participants in that five of the men spoke of experiencing some form of academic failure or disappointment (for example, failing a course, performing poorly on a critical task, or placement in a remedial course) at some point in their college career. Nevertheless, they continued towards their goal. Furthermore, during our interactions, the men consistently framed instances of failure more as a lesson than a significant obstacle.

Ebraham, Gary, Nephron, and Ty seemed to thrive on academic challenges and even feeling their educational experience was diminished without them. Ty shared a situation when an instructor's underestimation of his ability motivated him to excel:

> I had a bet with my Spanish teacher. Going into my first six weeks, I had a D in her class. She said to anyone who had a C, or below that the class was just going to get harder and she would advise that you drop out of the class. I said, 'I am not dropping out. I'm going to finish with an A'. She said, 'you are not going to get an A, not the way you started.' We made a

> bet in front of the class that if I got an A, I wanted an apology in front of the whole class. And I made an A. It was a challenge.

Carlos perceived that most of his K-12 teachers and counselors held low expectations of his academic capabilities and future options. He described the messages he heard:

> The teachers would [imply], you are not going to amount to anything. You don't know how to do this. You are going to be stupid. So, in that sense I was trying to prove, not them wrong, just trying to prove myself and my God-given ability.

These challenges served to strengthen the resolve of the men and perhaps even caused them to take additional steps to ensure their desired accomplishment. Nephron and Ebraham also contended that a rigorous and challenging environment supported their optimal performance:

> Nephron: What happens with me, if I am not given high standards, I will only do well up to [a point]. If I am given a challenge, I will rise above. That goes back to not settling. I want so much more; I need the challenge to be there, or I get lazy. I must be successful, I don't have to win at everything, but I have to be up there.
>
> Ebraham: I like stress. I do well under stress. Semesters where I didn't have as hard classes, I didn't do as well.

Feelings of being capable, competent and in control of one's life are predictive of academic success (Margolis & McCabe, 2003; Monk, 1998; Pajares, 1996). Moreover, a developed sense of self-efficacy is often transferred to concurrent and upcoming goals, thus having an enduring effect on future accomplishments (Bandura, 1995; Margolis & McCabe, 2003; Pajares, 1996). Illustrative of this point is that since their college graduation, the study participants have continued to build on their self-perceptions as lifelong learners and educated professionals. Each of the men is now considering further education beyond the bachelor's degree.

Endurance and Resilience

Within the framework of personal agency, persistence towards an established goal is an obvious requirement for acting on one's behalf. In that context, an examination of the circumstances, strategies and attitudes of those who persevere becomes critical in understanding educational attainment (Cuyjet, 1997). The men did not just simply finish the course, but they also in many ways created new paths and sometimes took detours that caused delays in their progress yet worked to their advantage. The resolve and endurance required by two men are reflected in their comments:

> Nephron: I had to learn to persevere. This did not come easy like everything before college did. It took time that I did not expect it to take.
>
> Carlos: It is so funny to think that I couldn't write and read in English. I have come a long way. My disadvantage was my advantage. If not for that I would not be who I am now. It made me work harder.

As with many populations that were not originally invited to the academy, the history of Blacks in America is rife with stories of incredible perseverance in the pursuit of education (Hunter-Gault, 1992; Washington, 1903; Willie & Edmonds, 1978). Some of the most compelling examples speak not necessarily of genius, but of the ability to endure setbacks, trials, and sacrifice in order to achieve academic goals. Likewise, through several false starts, hiatuses, detours, hardships, and recalibrations, the participants continued until they received their degrees. Gary and Ebraham were the only two men who seemed to have a relatively direct route from high school to college graduation. Yet even they endured and overcame factors that have led other students to withdraw from school: transportation problems, non-conducive study environments, discouraging transfer policies, and multiple personal demands.

Academic resilience and personal endurance are identified in the literature as essential to Black student persistence and graduation (Braddock II, Royster, Winfield, & Hawkins, 1991; Horn & Chen, 1998; Lang et al., 1988; Swanson et al., 2003). Lacking the skills to recover from academic hardships or failures, often leads to what Mason (1998) refers to as the "hopelessness and helplessness factor" (p.751) that causes so many Black males to feel trapped by their current or past circumstances. Varying viewpoints exist, however, for how and where endurance and resilience are developed. Swanson (2003), for example, examined how the contrasting mindsets of vulnerability and resilience can be shaped by the positive and negative academic experiences of young Black males. The author asserts that disparaging interactions with academic settings such as stereotyping and tracking, as early as preschool and elementary grades can contribute to impaired academic coping skills in adolescence and beyond. Positive demonstrations of support and encouragement in school settings, regardless of academic outcomes, encourage continued effort. Ross's(1998) examination of the success factors of Black males at a historically Black institution, found that coping and academic survival skills were primarily learned from those people with whom the men had a close and nurturing relationship. In Ross's study, the mothers and grandmothers of the men provided this nurturing.

Carlos spoke of being intellectually stereotyped throughout his school experience. Yet, in agreement with Ross (1998), he asserted that watching his grandmother persevere in spite of discrimination, lack of resources, and minimal rewards mediated the internalization of those stereotypes. The other men provided indication that they too

were academically resilient and resolute about seeing their college education through to the end. They described some of their experiences and perspectives:

> Ebraham: I walked to SJC the first semester. [At first] my dad worked on a shift where he could drop me off. They switched his shift and I walked. I got a bike and rode. My brothers got a car, but then they had to pay for it. I didn't have those expenses. I could use that time to do other activities like student government.
>
> Julian: I have more perseverance about me. I know that anything you set your mind to you can accomplish. I still have my visions, long-term visions, and I probably had more short-term visions [than] when I started. I have more of a sense of what is important now.
>
> Gary: [My mother] said she admired my perseverance. Before I had a license, I'd wake her up at three in the morning. 'Hey Mom, it is time to go to school now.' She [would say] 'what are you going there for?' I'm telling her that I have to study. I bugged her a lot.

Academic endurance is also positioned within the literature on college persistence and retention. Many conceptions related to college retention, however, hinge on the work of higher educational theorists of the 1970's and 1980's and are largely based on White, traditional age, residential college students (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987). Their work, which has been the theoretical standard for the last three decades, approaches college as a social construct, one requiring adaptation or assimilation. The common argument found in the "college impact models" of retention research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987) is that students who are not properly integrated or socialized within the institution are likely to leave college prematurely. Studies along these lines, though, fail to consider the influence of class, race, and gender on college persistence (Rendon et al., 2000).

Current research indicates that the separation-transition-incorporation model (Tinto, 1987) may not be as relevant for minority students. Rendon (2000) posits that college retention is culturally bound and influenced by systemic, historical, and

socioeconomic factors. The author argues that the assumption that one must separate from his or her culture in order to embrace the dominant culture of higher education has, at its center, a fundamentally hegemonic argument. Instead of institutional involvement that may require integrating into an unwelcoming culture, Rendon asserts that other persistence factors may be more salient for minority students.

The prevailing research on Black student retention indicates that persistence is enhanced by many factors. Dixon's (1999) qualitative study of twelve Black male students at a predominately White state college revealed an institutional milieu that was supportive, accepting and reflective of different cultures had the most significant positive effects on persistence. Mason (1998), Harris (1999), and Wallace (1999) found that outside encouragement from family or other advocates and the ability to manage self-doubt while maintaining realistic expectations are among the best indicators of the persistence of Black males.

Consistent with this literature, the men conveyed that many factors encouraged them to progress through the difficult passages in their academic journeys. Family support, religious values, mentors, and advocates played significant roles in the men's educational advancement. Each man also provided evidence that his intrinsic determination, born of specific goals, values, or life circumstances was principal driver to complete the degree. After reviewing the men's comments about motivation and perseverance, I noticed certain concepts repeatedly surfaced as reasons they persisted. Many of the concepts related to how the individual assigned meaning to the college degree.

For instance, Ebraham indicated that coming from such a large family and living in cramped conditions, encouraged his need for power and control over his lifestyle, income, and social capital. Witnessing other family members who did not complete college and their struggle to manage in those areas, he saw the college degree as the principal accomplishment standing between him and his desired outcomes. Ebraham also had lofty goals that required that he direct his academic and professional career down a particular path. He said:

> Once I decided I wanted to be a superintendent of schools, I learned that you have to be a teacher. You have to take time to go through administration. That gave me the drive that I needed, and I want to do it before I am 35. I want to be one of the youngest.

Ty came close to conceptualizing postsecondary education as a savior of sorts. He seemed largely motivated by witnessing the dramatic effect education produced for his family. His family moved from a low to middle socioeconomic level as a direct result of his mother's educational pursuits. In addition, after his stint in the military, which he considered a beneficial experience, he came to realize that a college degree would allow him to enjoy military benefits from a safer and less-likely-to-be-deployed position. Ty contends, "I finished college because I had the will. I knew that at 23 a college degree would improve my chances exponentially."

Many of Carlos' comments pointed to his need to for security and self-sufficiency, ideals instilled by the grandmother that raised him. Given that soon after he came to this country, neither of his parents was in the home and his grandmother worked very hard for long hours, he was required to be responsible for himself at a young age. His grandmother also exposed him to "perseverance and work hard, and that sometimes you will not get results even when you work hard." Carlos said, "I saw how hard [my

grandmother] worked. I always said that I don't ever want to work that hard for so little. I want to make sure I put myself in the position to hopefully sustain my livelihood in the way I want to live." For Carlos, going to college appeared to be simply the next step in taking full responsibility for his life. His statements during the interviews suggested that his perseverance throughout school was driven by his desire to emulate his grandmother's values and honor her for the sacrifices she made to raise him.

It was not just the desire for the degree that propelled the men forward. Sometimes the experiences that threatened their academic progress were powerful motivators. During the time the men were in route to graduation, they confronted difficult experiences that could have easily changed their direction. For some men, these experiences required careful negotiation, for others, effective coping strategies. For all the men, the experiences bore important lessons that informed their future actions.

Setbacks and turning points. Temporary setbacks, failures, obstacles, and how the men responded to them, surfaced from their stories as additional indicators of endurance and resilience. Each participant called to mind an experience that served, what Nephron referred to as a "wake up call" which forced them to renew or redouble their efforts to achieve academically. Financial limitations, stark reality checks, adjustment problems, and academic difficulty have been often cited as reasons why other Black males did not complete their college degrees (Majors & Billson, 1992; Mason, 1998; Richardson, 1992; Swanson et al., 2003). The men in this study, however, seemed able to recover from setbacks, take heed of providential messages, and glean necessary lessons from similar experiences. The ability to respond in this manner is requisite to the exercise of agency (Bandura, 1997; Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991).

The participants gave examples of the defining moments during their academic progression and the subsequent edification they received. For Julian it was his short-lived college experience at Historic University. He described how his parents' decision to withdraw him from the institution set off a course of events that included a period of depression, several unfulfilling jobs, and a failed stab at his own business. Eventually he realized, "[I] need to go back to school. So I said, suck it up, put your pride aside, and let's get this done. So, I started evening classes a SJC."

Ty experienced several defining moments when his educational career was unexpectedly detoured. But it was perhaps his military deployment to the Middle East and the experience of "sitting in a fox hole, getting rained on, wondering if this bomb is going to land close enough to kill" that were the "extreme motivators" for his returning to college after his tour of duty.

Carlos recalled an academic challenge that was both discouraging and eye opening:

> When I initially came [to SJC], I had to take [remedial] math. I studied for the class, went to class, took the exam, and didn't pass the class with a B. I didn't pass the exit [exam] and had to take the class all over again. It did discourage me in that it really opened my eyes to defeat. Wow! I really, really tried hard and I didn't make it, I didn't pass. It gave me the first true glimpse of failure when you really do try. That fear kind of prevents you from moving on and doing the things you need to do. I took all of my notes all over again. I went into the tutoring lab and got extra tutorials, and passed the exit exam.

Similarly, Nephron's disappointing performance during his last two years of high school, which severely limited his college choices, also caused him to re-evaluate his direction.

> I was knocked off a pedestal. I had to work myself back up and that was important. [If that had not happened] would I have been that mature of a person? No. I would still have been on my pedestal, and I would have been knocked off later. I think it is better to have that happen when you are younger. It is easier to deal with.

Gary said that he once took attending college for granted. He confessed that it wasn't until he faced the possibility of not completing his education at State Tech because of a financial issue related to residency that he fully appreciated the significance of the endeavor. He said, "I realized that this is something that I have to do; I couldn't start college and not finish it." Gary consequently had to persuade his family members, who were fed up with higher education bureaucracy, to redo and resubmit complicated paper work to resolve the matter.

Religion. When asked about the coping mechanisms employed to rebound and push forward from difficulties, several of the men referred to religious beliefs in that regard. Ebraham, Ty, Nephron, Gary stated that their personal faith and religious upbringing was somehow related to their academic endeavors. Ty and Nephron mentioned how their faith generally sustained them during their college years. Gary and Ebraham, however expressed their spiritual beliefs as integral to their self-concept and directly applicable to their academic pursuits. This becomes evident in these comments:

> Ebraham: I am one . . . who would go and read things and internalize the scriptures. I think that was important, having the scriptures to stand on. I think [my religious beliefs] are the main reason I am who I am. I internalize the fear of God; I didn't want to displease God. I am going to be a superintendent so He can work through me.
>
> Gary: One thing I will say was in my corner was that I tried to maintain a healthy spiritual life. It happened almost every semester. There would be a point where I would say, man, how am I going to get out of this? I have two tests three days from now, and two projects due. I'd get to a point where I would say this is where it ends. This is the [semester] where they finally get me, and I would find myself turning to prayer. So I guess [my spiritual beliefs] helped me maintain focus and keep my optimism up.

These men's acknowledgement and practice of religious principles while in route to the degree are consistent with the literature. The integration of spirituality in the academic lives of Black college students is featured in several research studies on

variables related to college success (Daugelli & Hershberger, 1993; Harris, 1999; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Ross, 1998; Walker & Dixon, 2002). These studies suggest that religious beliefs have a beneficial effect on academic success and persistence. Walker and Dixon's (2002) study specifically looked at the effect religious beliefs had on the academic performance of college students. The findings indicated that religiosity has a significant positive influence on the GPAs of both Black and White students. The authors found, however, that Black students are more likely to engage in religious activities for social and emotional support than White students. This concurs with the research on the religious practices of Blacks in general (Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody et al., 1996). Thornton (2004) further posits that the recent attacks on affirmative action and diversity initiatives may have encouraged even more Black students to adopt value systems that honor church and family as safeguards against oppression.

Self-regulation

The men's practice of self-regulation was another beneficial quality practice that emerged from the data. The term characterized how the men purposely made decisions or took actions based on their own standards of what was appropriate and necessary for their ultimate good. These decisions and actions required a forthright assessment of their character, habits, and limitations, and the discipline to address them. Thus, self-regulation is central to agency because examining "one's pattern of behavior and the cognitive and environmental conditions under which it occurs is the first step toward doing something to affect it" (Bandura, 2001 p. 8).

Carlos introduced the term self-regulation during our first interview. He contended that because of the unavailability of parental figures while he was growing up, he had to self-regulate himself. He explained:

> I'm one that probably like others had to self-regulate themselves without a lot of guidance. I was the kid that, although I didn't go straight home, I spent time at the library. I got to school without anyone waking me up. I went to class because I didn't want anyone to call and have my grandmother dragged out of one day of work, as hard as she worked.

Julian, similarly, learned from his experiences at Historic University that the campus environment could significantly influence his academic standing:

> [With] my personality, if I went to a big school, I would find a lot to get involved in. And if I stayed in [Metropolitan] and went to one of the [local] schools, I would still probably find a lot to get into. I would be driving all over, trying to do a whole lot of things. That might cause me to withdraw from some classes; I really just wanted to be able to get in and get out and finish school.

Julian therefore chose a college where he would complete his degree based on what he knew about his social habits, which represented a pragmatic approach to college life.

Likewise, Nephron had concerns that life on a residential campus may distract him from his primary aim. He therefore made the following decision:

> I didn't want to be involved with dormitory life; I have never been into fraternities and things of that nature. I was very focused. And because SJC is a commuter school, I was able to live in an apartment by myself. I thought that would be best for me because when I came in; I was serious.

Self-regulation is a pragmatic process. On the most basic level, it involves independent monitoring of the attitudes and actions taken in support of goal attainment (Bagozzi, 1992). Ty, having experienced relative academic success in high school, knew that his marginal performance in his first year of college indicated a need to reassess his priorities and lifestyle decisions. He said, "After the 1.6 [GPA] episode, I realized I needed to recalibrate my life, and I joined the Army." Ebraham had to resist the pressure to work in

order for him realize his goals. He explained, "When I went to school, I was there for that, not to work or do other things. Everyone [in my family] picked at me. You need to have a job. I was like, no, I need to have my degree."

In academic settings, self-regulated learning refers to the "capability to mobilize, direct, and sustain one's instructional efforts" (Zimmerman, 1995 p. 217), which essentially amounts to developing and maintaining effective study habits and strategies (Pajares, 1996). The research on the study habits and time management of college students has presented unfavorable results related to Black males. Key findings indicate that Black males, in particular, are not likely to come to college with appropriate habits or assumptions for college success (Cuyjet, 1997; Fuhrmann & Others, 1991; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986). The findings suggested that Black male students generally take fewer notes, put less time into writing papers, are less likely to report needing academic support, and spend more time developing athletic and recreational skills than their White counterparts (M. L. Clark, 1991; Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Ogbu, 2003).

The men's comments indicating self-regulation within the academic context seemed incongruent with the research findings described above. Some men expressed how they substantially adjusted their lifestyles to meet academic demands. Carlos and Gary recalled their study schedules. Carlos said, "I would study at work or stay in the library. On Friday nights, I would go to the library; I would go on the weekends. I would study at work until I got it done." Gary explained his strategy. "I would generally try to study first alone. [Then I would] try to get into a group later on to see what I was missing and provide what they might be missing." Ebraham shared actions he took to ensure he was taken seriously as a student:

> I learned to take advantage of my disadvantage. It is important where you place yourself in the classroom. Teachers look to see who is sitting at the back of the classroom. I would not sit there, especially not on the first day of class. I would sit, not in the front row, but just behind the front row. I have found that is the seat where you get the most information. You can see everything. I wanted to make sure that whatever odds someone had against me, I was going to turn it the other way.

Similarly, Carlos delineated the self-regulating behaviors he believed were required to manage the demands of college:

> Success in college is not always wired to how intellectually smart you are. It has to do with can you follow directions? Can you connect this point to that point? Can you get yourself to class on time and be responsible? And then, can you also handle all the other stresses that are out there pulling at you?

Extensive participation in extra-curricular activities has sometimes been used by Black males to mask academic difficulty (M. L. Clark, 1991; Horn & Chen, 1998). This also did not seem problematic for the participants. To the contrary, as evidenced in earlier comments, some of the men regulated their lifestyles to avoid becoming distracted by outside activities. In addition, because they were commuting students, extensive social and recreational activities were either not available or sufficiently enticing. Gary remembered his days at State Technical University:

> Socially none of [my friends] really got involved. We'd bowl a few games, maybe one Friday out of a three-month period. When [my classmates] would ask what I did on the weekend, and I said 'study', they would say 'Are you crazy?' They would say I don't know what I am missing. I guess I didn't, I didn't really know what it was about, and so it was okay.

Gary was particularly single-minded when he transferred to the university. Although he maintained a network of acquaintances, largely developed when he first enrolled, he did not associate closely with anyone other than the immediate family with whom he lived. Gary's experience is contrary to the literature that supports need for

productive peer relationships for college retention and achievement for underrepresented populations (M. L. Clark, 1991; Horn & Chen, 1998). On the other hand, Ty expressed the importance of being affiliated with like-minded people when pursuing important goals. He indicated with the following comment, however, that he also felt it important to regulate the people he allowed in his personal life:

> I generally only keep positive Black males around me. If you are not positive and you are a negative energy, I cut you off, point blank. I don't care if I have known you for ten years. If in the eighth or ninth year you have turned totally negative and are not pushing forward, then I simply have to distance myself from you. I try not to let a lot of negative energy into my circle.

The self-regulating activities employed by the majority of the men were used simply to survive academia. Because they were aware of the negative stereotyping and the unfavorable odds of degree attainment, the men, in their exercise of personal agency, did what was necessary to stay on track.

Relationships and External Influences

In addition to the personal attributes, several external factors and key relationships were common to each man that may have bearing on their academic progression. For the purpose of this study, external factors refer to the people, relationships, and experiences that influenced the participant in ways beyond his control. This section will feature the four prominent external influences that surfaced from the participant interviews: (a) their families, (b) role models, advocates, and mentors, (c) opportunities for early exposure to college or careers, and (d) participation in sports.

The Family

Each man credited his family in general, or a particular family member specifically, as the most important influence on his attending and completing college.

Although college attendance per se, may not have been specifically encouraged in all households, the men expressed that the concept of "knowledge is power" was a consistent theme. The men also acknowledged the enduring effect and significance of their parental figure's assertions about education. What they heard focused on survival, self-sufficiency, and maintaining high standards, both personally and academically, which they have now integrated into their own belief systems. Five of the men spoke specifically about a primary parental figure(s)'s wisdom and credibility and how much they respected their advice.

The family configurations of the men during their pre-college years were varied and complex. Few similarities existed related to family size, socioeconomic level, or parental education level. Table 4 outlines selected characteristics of each man's family.

Table 6
Selected family characteristics of study participants

Participant	Number in Household	Parental Figure(s) in Household	SES	Parental Education level
Carlos	6	Grandmother Grandfather (until Carlos was 14)	Lower Income	Neither Grandparent had more than high school education
Ebraham	14	Mother and Father	Lower-middle income	Mother: some college Father: 10th grade
Gary	5	Grandmother and Grandfather	Upper-middle income	Grandparents: some college
Julian	3	Mother and Stepfather	Upper middle income	Parents: College graduates
Nephron	3	Grandmother and Grandfather (until Nephron was 12), Aunt	Middle income	Grandmother: Trade school Aunt: Master's degree
Ty	3	Mother	Progression from lower to middle income	Mother: Master's degree

Research confirms the importance of the family in the college decisions of students. Parental aspirations, income, and education level, particularly of the father, are

identified as highly influential in determining whether a student will attend college (Freeman, 1999; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs et al., 1997; Kelpe Kern, 2000). The majority of this research, however, is based on a White, middle-class, two-parent family paradigm, which may not be pertinent for significant numbers of Black students. Although the majority of the men in the study had both a male and female parental figure in the home, except for the homes of Julian and Ebraham, the male figures were either peripheral or deceased during the time the participants would have been making college decisions. Consequently, four of the six families functioned with single parents for at least a portion of the participants' pre-college years

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in 2003, 23 percent of all children resided in single-parent homes. Although this percentage has increased only slightly since 2000, a more startling picture emerges when it is considered that 53 percent of Black children are living with one parent. The following studies address the structural configuration of families related to college planning and academic achievement. Bateman and Kennedy's (1997) research was designed to investigate the influences on the educational planning processes in both single and two-parent families. Their findings revealed that for Black males from two-parent families, consistent with previous research, postsecondary educational plans are influenced primarily by the parents. For single-parent families headed by a female, which are also normally economically disadvantaged, educational aspirations are influenced by both parental encouragement and school factors such as grades, with school factors ranking as most important.

Battle (1998) studied the effect of socioeconomic factors on educational achievement in the two types of families. In this study, the findings indicated that for

families in the middle socioeconomic range, little correlation was found between family composition and scores on a standardized achievement assessment. A significant relationship was found, however, for families in both the lower and higher ends of the socioeconomic scale. Within the higher socioeconomic level, students in single parent families scored lower, however, in the lower socioeconomic level, students from single-parent families actually scored higher than those from two-parent households.

The findings of both studies indicate that socioeconomic status is more salient than family structure in terms of the educational aspirations and achievement for Black males. In addition, the findings suggest that while single parent households may differ in terms of socioeconomic status and how they influence the college choice process, they do not inherently have a negative effect on the educational aspirations or educational achievements of Black males. The findings of this study is congruent with the last conclusion, inasmuch men of various family configurations enrolled and progressed in college.

The influence of the mother figure. The relationship between the female parent and the male offspring is commonly understood by popular culture as being a powerful and unrelenting force. The special bond between the Black mother (or grandmother) and son is also significant in Black culture and speaks of sacrifice, protection, and high aspiration. Because the current social landscape includes such large numbers of Black female-headed households, the mother relationship is particularly salient for Black males. Majors and Billson (1992) suggest that in homes where the father is absent or peripheral, young Black males have a heightened sense of empathy for the mother. Witnessing the

mother's sacrifice and struggle to survive as the primary caretaker of the family serves to galvanize the mother-son bond.

With the exception of Julian, five of the men in the study identified either the mother or grandmother as the central figure in their family and, consequently, the primary influence on their academic pursuits. Julian, in contrast, consistently referred to his parents as a unit (my mom and dad) and seldom spoke of them individually. Ty and Carlos spoke almost exclusively of their mother or grandmother as the central figure in their lives. The women were consistently portrayed as wise, determined, and strong. Their diligence appeared to provide the most enduring message for the men as they grew to manhood. They each reflected on the challenges their mother or grandmother endured:

> Ty: I had a mother who really stressed college, and I watched her work full time, go to school full time, and raise a son and a daughter who weren't always the best kids growing up. And I watched her struggle with all of those.
>
> Carlos: My grandmother used to clean houses and she used to work for the school district. She worked in the kitchen in one of the elementary schools. She was a cook and then we'd clean houses. She did everything. She collected cans, newspapers. I was smashing cans, taking newspapers to the recycling bin. She did a little bit of everything. If you needed her to come into your house to clean up or iron and pay her a few dollars--that is what she did. So, in a sense when I say hard work, I kinda know hard work.

The profound sense of admiration and respect for his mother is conveyed as Ty explained how his life differed from one of his friends who became involved with the criminal justice system and did not continue his education:

> Ty: I was in a single-parent household; he was in a dual-parent household. Everything that society says is right, he had everything. I had what they say is not the best. So as far as situations, he had what society says is best. But I tend to be a fan of [mother's name]. I think that one [mother's name] in the house makes up for not having a mother and father in the house.

The grandmother as parental figure and primary academic influence added another dimension to the study. This family characteristic spoke to a cultural distinction that existed for three families. Carlos, Gary, and Nephron were all raised by their grandmothers who either lived in or emigrated from the Caribbean or Central America. Because of the similar depiction of the grandmother by the participants, the foreign-born culture of these families emerged as an additional theme. As the men talked about their grandmothers, they regularly referenced the importance of discipline and respect. Discipline was both expected and modeled by the grandmother and academic endeavors were no exception. The grandmothers were also referred to as intractable, hard-working women with high standards for their grandsons. They were often feared, yet hugely admired by the men.

As revealed in the profiles, Carlos and Gary were born outside the U.S., while Nephron was born in the U.S. and raised by his Jamaican-born grandmother. Thus, aside from the care and love of strong-willed grandmothers, they were also influenced by their families' common cultural perspective of discipline, determination, and respect. As indicated by Hrabrowski's (1998) study of successful Black males, this perspective can strongly encourage academic achievement and persistence and most likely did so for Nephron, Gary, and Carlos. This is supported by Ross' (1998) study of successful Black male college students, which featured foreign-born men from Africa and the Caribbean. While her primary focus was on Black American students, she did uncover several contrasts between the students who were U.S. or foreign born. Compared to the U.S. born students, the foreign-born participants were more likely to be raised by grandparents and came from two-parent families. Similar to the men in this study, Ross' foreign- born

men conveyed that their upbringing reflected "a sense of 'strictness,' and rigidity embedded within the society itself" (p. 59).

Messages about education. Like many of Black families, the men's families generally championed education as a vehicle for social mobility. Those who promoted higher education specifically presented it to the participants as the primary means of maintaining a competitive edge in society. Parents or guardians also communicated the importance of exceeding normal expectations if they desired to progress in mainstream America. Nephron relayed how his family framed education as a means of security:

> [My family] has always preached to me that no one can take my education away from me. Whatever you want to do, you will always have something to fall back on. Apart from obtaining knowledge, obtaining the degree was seen both as leverage and as something to fall back on.

Some of the families' messages were predicated on their concern for the men's social reality by virtue of their race and gender. Ty's mother expressed her perception of the benefits that education offers Black men:

> Getting educated beyond high school was strongly instilled by my mother. She would say, 'Please get an associate degree or bachelor's degree; a degree will make you attractive.' She said, 'You are a Black male and in order to survive, being good is not good enough; being great will only get you in the door; being the best is the only thing you should always aim for.'

Considering the limitations of her own family's circumstances, Ebraham's mother encouraged him to pursue education as a way to increase his life options:

> I remember my mom saying that education is a key to success. We could have sent some more people to college if we had known the avenues to take. Find out what you can, one of the scriptures says, . . . 'in all you are getting, get an understanding.' I heard that from my mom, you have to have options and be able to make decisions.

Most participants also recounted stories of seeing their parent or guardian working extremely hard to either progress in their field or to simply maintain a meager

lifestyle. This appeared to be a powerful message for the men. Carlos and Ebraham recalled how witnessing the hard physical labor done by their parents led them to pursue earning a living with their brains:

> Carlos: My grandmother…I saw how hard she worked, and I always said that I don't ever want to work that hard for so little. I want to make sure I put myself in the position to hopefully sustain my livelihood in the way I want to live.
>
> Ebraham: I don't like to do manual labor. It is funny I say that because I own a cleaning business, and I do manual labor. But it was my choice. My father was a mechanic, and I was like, I am not about to go and lift someone's engine out of his or her car. He said you don't always have to work hard, work smarter.

I found it significant that despite generational differences, socioeconomic status, or education level, the parental figures communicated clear and consistent values and direction concerning education that continues to resonate with the men. According to Garibaldi (1992), these unequivocal messages can also promote sustained self-efficacy and resilience.

Lack of planning. Although each participant's family was credited with instilling the values, awareness, and support that led to degree attainment, the men did not report that their families encouraged the type of advanced and thorough planning needed to make informed decisions on college attendance. From the participants' stories, it seemed that taking action on investigating specific colleges, gathering admissions materials, taking appropriate tests, and researching available financial resources did not occur until well into the senior year, if at all. Julian's and Gary's families did give attention to some college preparation activities, such as gathering admission applications and SAT preparation, yet neither the men or their families participated in a comprehensive college planning process.

Many of the men expressed that they knew they would go to college but were not aware of how the college process worked or the steps they needed to take to enroll. This indicates that the necessary actions were not explained or encouraged at home. Two of the men were first-generation students, while others had college-educated parents or guardians. Yet, none seemed to have had deliberate guidance on how the college enterprise worked. Further, the realities and expectations of postsecondary culture did not seem to be addressed by the men's families or schools. This undoubtedly contributed to some of the early meandering to different colleges, lack of achievement in the last two years of high school, bureaucratic challenges during enrollment, or lack of collegiate options for the men. Ty recalled knowing little about the difference in rigor between high school and college. He explained:

> It was years later before I realized that for every hour of class in college, you are likely to spend two hours outside of the classroom working on that project or class. So, the [study] process was never explained to me, not even by my mother. I think my mother took it for granted that I was smart and I would go and do well. She didn't explain it to me because everything I'd done, I'd done well, so she just assumed, he'll do well getting into college.

Reasons for the lack of college planning activities in Black families have been offered in the literature. As Gates (2000) points out, Black families have historically always valued education and effective communication. Yet many parents today may not be aware of sophisticated resources that are available to help students access the widest possible sphere of information and opportunity. This situation is not bound by income levels. Ogbu (2003) found in his study of Black families in a relatively affluent suburb that although the Black parents had lofty aspirations for their offspring, they often allocated most of the responsibility for the college choice and preparation process to the school system. Ogbu (2003) posits that the Black parents believed that their ability to

live in an affluent neighborhood and send their children to a suburban school would automatically command a more rigorous education and quality student support services. Ogbu asserts, however, that assuming the school has the time, resources, or interest to properly guide students (particularly Black students) toward appropriate postsecondary options is erroneous. In addition, his research revealed that not only were students not receiving adequate college choice and admissions assistance, they were often not placed in or encouraged to take the higher level courses that would prepare them for college work. Ogbu (2003) goes on to assert that parents should educate themselves about educational processes, both in the high school and in postsecondary education in order to ensure that their students are effectively guided towards college.

Role models, Mentors and Advocates

The lack of effective role models and mentors for young Black men has been featured quite often in the literature (Bailey, 2003; Glenn, 2001; Gold & Others, 1990; Harris, 1999; Jones, 2000; Morgan, 1996; Roach, 2001b). While a role model is someone to be emulated, which can be done from afar, a mentor is "a wise and trusted counselor or teacher" (The American Heritage, 2000). Research supports the need for role models that represent a wide range of possibilities and options for the future. Concern stems from the role models of young Black males being heavily weighted in the areas of sports and entertainment. An appropriate mentor is beneficial for promoting social, academic, and career success for Black males. Mentors usually occupy a closer and more significant place in one's life and offer guidance through various life events. Regardless of the term, a connection with a significant, caring adult has enormous positive effects on self-esteem, future aspirations, and feelings of efficacy.

The absence of a father figure in the families of many young Black males makes this dynamic a particularly sought after commodity. Ross (1998) identified the relationship with a supportive mentor as one of the key factors that led to the success and persistence of the Black male college students in her study. Several successful programs in promoting academic success for Black males have also incorporated a mentoring component (Bailey, 2003; Hopkins, 1997; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998).

The need to have effective guidance in managing life transitions surfaced frequently in my discussions with the participants. Some of the men spoke of this guidance in general terms, not specifying that it needed to come from a particular person, like a mentor or role model. Although all of the men named key people who constructively intervened at important junctures in their life, none identified anyone outside of immediate family members, with whom they had an ongoing didactic relationship outside the family. In at least one case, there even appeared to be resistance to forming such a relationship. For example, Nephron took great pride in making his way in the world. He acknowledged the need for someone to act as a temporary advisor who could provide social or business connections, yet he denied the need for what he conceived as a "mentor."

> I don't need a mentor. I would like somebody to allow me to be in different circles. Maybe someone with success who could say, come to this function and so forth and so on, and let me just speak to people. You never know who would say, you would be good here or there. I would like to get that type of break. I am always making my breaks from scratch.

Nephron's comment could be interpreted as both a possible misunderstanding of the role and purpose of "a wise and trusted counselor or teacher," and a reluctance to rely

on anyone but himself. The following statement, however, expresses an intuitive longing for someone to help him on his journey.

> I am a trailblazer. I try to influence my younger cousins or brothers, and I always have to blaze that trail, fall, get back up, and go forward. I don't really have a mentor, an older male, someone who is here. Another male, older than myself, whatever the case may be, or female, who takes me under the wing and shows me the way. I am always finding my [own] way.

In contrast, Carlos' clearly saw ways he would have benefited from a relationship with a knowledgeable advisor. Speaking about when he was first planning to attend college, he said:

> If I would have found a mentor or somebody who could have found money for me,or if I had known a little more about financial aid, perhaps [the tuition at Legacy College] would not have cost that much and I could have attended.

Instead of describing a mentoring relationship, most of the men referred to role models or advocates that emerged at specific points in their academic career, and influenced either their actions or perceptions of themselves. For Ebraham, Carlos, and Ty these role models and advocates were a high school teacher, a man who volunteered at a community center, and an exceptional high school counselor. Each role model or advocate influenced the men as they made important, life-altering decisions that ultimately influenced their academic trajectories. The majority, however, did so unknowingly and without developing an enduring or highly personal relationship with the man. Julian, for example, described how his casual interactions with a college administrator boosted his confidence:

> Well, working in student life [at SJC], the Dean would walk by all the time. I am a person who gets to know people, especially if it is someone you need to know. After I met the Dean, she was always nice to me. She would always call and say, like if they shot a commercial, 'Julian would you come shoot this commercial for me.' That meant a lot to me. That

> said, she has some respect for me, and she doesn't have to. It gave me the confidence to go on to do other things. I felt that if Dean [X] likes me, some other people will too.

Ebraham and Ty were the only men who specifically mentioned having role models. Ebraham's membership in a high school group for young men allowed him to interact with the faculty coordinator of the group. He described his impressions of this man:

> I think one of the things [that influenced] me was building a relationship with Mr. [Y], who didn't know me from Adam. Having him in class, [I observed that] he gets upset, so I can get upset. He apologizes when he is wrong, so I can apologize. He had a wife and three kids at home, and he took care of them. I can do that. He was a strong influence in my life; he was an African American male. I don't think it would have been the same if it were a White man. [Mr. Y] saw it as it was, at his level. He knew I had to know how to play the game. I needed to know how to go to work dressed properly, so that when everyone else is wearing jeans I am wearing my tie.

Ty mentioned two Black men, who he said were responsible for teaching him "life lessons". One was a high school basketball coach, who used "tough love" to prepare young Black men for life. The other was an officer, who Ty knew briefly when he was in the military. Ty said that the officer "sat me down and told me this is what you do to be a man. He was the first person that told me what to do opposed to what not to do." It was his White high school guidance counselor, however, who seemed to have had the most direct influence on his college attendance:

> I had a great counselor. When I wasn't thinking about college, she was thinking about it for me. She herself applied for three or four different scholarships for me and brought a couple more for me to apply for. She called me that January after we got back from break. She said, 'okay Mr. [Ty] what colleges have you applied for' and I said none. She was White. She was good; she was older too. Out of all of the students she counseled, she had high expectations of all of them.

Carlos indicated how simply observing and interacting with someone he admired helped him realize that he did indeed have options. Like many school-aged boys, Carlos' primary social network consisted of people who lived within a few blocks of his home. When he left school each day, he often spent time either in the library or at a community center because his grandmother was working. He described John X, who worked at the community center and was also his neighbor.

> I remember that I looked up to him. Everyone did. His message was not necessarily, you have to go to school, but look around here; you have more talent than what is going on around here. I remember kids would say I want to be like [John X]. He worked at [the community center]; it's like a boy's club without the resources. He helped the gangs come together and work out their differences. So, in a sense, he was kind of like the mayor of the city, and he lived next door to me. If he said, 'Hey, don't mess with Carlos,' that was the way it was.

Although Carlos admits to having only a few one-on-one interactions with John X, his name surfaced several times during our interviews as a positive influence.

The men's comments pointed to their need for encouragement, modeling, and advocacy, at the most fundamental level. They were able to identify the missing pieces in their development that only certain people were able to fill and found direction and encouragement from diverse and unexpected sources. The limited and unplanned nature of their interactions with those who seemed to make such a substantial difference in their lives was an important but unanticipated finding. The fact that the men benefited from such casual interactions indicated the importance of providing as many avenues as possible for young Black men to personally interact with individuals, outside the family, who genuinely care about their futures.

Early Exposure to College and Careers

Early and meaningful exposure to the concept of postsecondary education or a particular career was another common experience for the men of the study. Although there is limited research on the specific nature or timing of successful elementary and middle school interventions that promote college attendance, the literature does support that early engagement in the college preparation process increases the odds of students going on to college after high school (Bateman, 1997; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). As part of a 9-year longitudinal study, Hossler and Schmit (1995) noted that academic plans made during ninth-grade, such as graduating from high school, enrolling in a college or university, or entering into the workforce were consistent with the eventual outcomes.

Early college exposure can play a particularly beneficial role for lower income and ethnic minority students, if higher education has not been effectively integrated within the family environment (Bailey, 2003; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998) . One study identified that participation in pre-college career programs, such as Future Teachers of America, was a variable that led to postsecondary persistence for ethnic minority students (Robinson, 1990). Bailey (2003), who developed a leadership program for young Black males, further asserts that Black males should be preparing for postsecondary education beginning in middle school.

Early exposure to college and careers has also been considered as relevant to the academic pipeline for Black students. Hopkins (1997), in his book on successful practices for educating Black males, indicates that school reform initiatives that promote postsecondary access have put the emphasis on the wrong end of education. Instead of focusing on outcomes, like graduation and dropout rates, more attention should be paid to

what happens to Black boys in elementary school. Other scholars researching Black students' participation and achievement in higher education have long come to the conclusion that steps must be taken to introduce Black males to the variety of options available to them much earlier in their academic career (Bailey, 2003; J. A. Hawkins, 1999; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998).

The types of exposure experienced by the men were varied in scope and intensity generating both direct and indirect messages. Their experiences seemed to fall into three broad areas: (a) witnessing others attend college, (b) visiting college campuses, and (c) participating in programs or activities that promoted postsecondary education. While they were young, Nephron, Ebraham, Gary, and Ty observed parents or other family members within their household attend college. Nephron remembers:

> I grew up in a household along with my aunt, who is one of my best friends and my main educational mentor. She actually took me to college, while she was attending, when I was three or four years old. So, college wasn't a new environment to me.

From the time Ebraham was in elementary school, he was able to observe members of his family pursuing postsecondary education. He stated that he was most influenced by his mother, who demonstrated by her own attendance late in life, that college was a worthy endeavor. He remembered, "My mother went to college, when she was about forty. She said she wanted to go to set an example for her kids. She didn't want her kids to say that since she didn't go to college, why should they go. That was one of her motivations." Another way Ebraham was exposed to college life was by participating in a college tour, while in high school, in which he traveled up the east coast and visited several historically Black colleges and universities.

Ty said that seeing his mother attend school when he was young left a strong impression. He said he realized early that attending college "was not optional." Ty also participated in a bridge program, from middle school to high school, designed to prepare minority students for mathematics and science courses in high school, and to encourage postsecondary education in those fields.

Gary recalled that he was exposed to engineering as a career before the idea of college attendance. Although he was unable to directly observe the of older family members who studied engineering in the United States, he knew that his family "had more engineers than anybody else." He also became aware that going away to college allowed these family members to be a part of an exclusive society, one with its own language. He remembered, "Every time my aunts and uncles would visit Jamaica, there was this [engineering] lingo that was going on between them that I didn't understand, so I was always excluded. I didn't like that." In high school, Gary also had the chance to receive instruction from a visiting college professor. He recalled that the professor was impressive and urged his interest in higher-level study:

> I wasn't doing very well [in calculus]. In Jamaica, we had this exchange program with Notre Dame. Teachers from there actually came to our high school and we sent teachers to Notre Dame. That's really when it changed with me in calculus; when I got the teacher from Notre Dame. I understood him better.

Carlos and Julian were introduced to the social aspects of collegiate life through attending campus events and activities. When Julian was in his early teens, he was able to experience some of the social opportunities available on the college campus. He explained:

> Growing up, I was fortunate enough to go to many [Legacy College] football games. I was fortunate enough to see how my stepfather interacted with his fraternity brothers and college alumni. I got caught up

> with the glamour; there are a lot of beautiful women that go to [Legacy] football games.

Carlos' participation in the basketball program in high school, allowed him to visit several colleges and universities. As a result, he was able to examine different campus environments and appreciate them as retreats for higher learning. He was particularly impressed with the University of Santa Barbara. He described the setting: "It's *so* beautiful, in Santa Barbara. We had a basketball tournament there and went to the campus. I said, 'W*ow*, I have to be here.' [The university] is right across the street from the bluff and the water."

With the exception of Carlos, all of the men spoke of a personal encounter with higher education long before high school. Therefore, they grew up with favorable impressions about postsecondary education. This, along with family encouragement, allowed the men to view college as viable, enjoyable and important. These positive early conceptions of postsecondary education most likely contributed to the men initially deciding to pursue a college degree. Still, a more comprehensive and reality based picture of the college experience, might have allowed the men to avoid some costly mistakes. Some of the men had a very rude awakening when they first actually enrolled in college. Like many students, the men had no way to anticipate the academic rigor, the social dynamics, and the expense of this endeavor. This suggests that while early exposure is advantageous, it would be more beneficial, coupled with a detailed explanation of the role and function of higher education.

Participation in Sports

Each of the six participants was involved in organized athletic sports in high school, college, or both. For some of the men, sports participation was viewed as simply

part of the total school experience and nothing more. For others, however, sports participation served important social purposes. For Julian, it was a way to cope with both his move to a new state during high school and the isolation he felt at his four-year transfer college. When Julian moved from a predominately Black urban high school to a predominately White suburban high school, his odds of making the team increased dramatically. This helped to make his abrupt relocation, due to his parents' job transfers, a bit more palatable. In addition, because Julian was older than most of his classmates at Church-Affiliated College, he limited his social interaction on the campus. His decision to play basketball during his last year granted him the opportunity to become more integrated with the college before he graduated.

Sports participation allowed Ty entry into the social environment of the various high schools he attended. At the last high school he attended before graduation, Ty developed positive relationships with other Black males on the basketball court. He explained:

> My core group [of friends] from the second half of my junior year, all went to college. Most of my friends went to college on athletic scholarships. One of them won an academic scholarship. I got connected to them because we were all in basketball together. I was in a class with a few of them. We had a lot in common. We played basketball together, we hung out together, and we just clicked.

Similarly, Nephron asserted the positive effects of sports participation in high school. Referring to the large number of males who graduated in his high school class, he remarked, "Sports helped keep some of the males intact."

Nephron referenced sports participation more than any of the other men. He not only expressed his general "love of the game," but also that sports played an important role during his early school years. His athletic abilities helped to mediate the "geek

factor" associated with being a high achieving student in middle school. One of his remarks along those lines was "I was in the honors class the first year [of middle school]. We were definitely known as the nerds. We didn't feel like nerds; I myself didn't act like one. Then again, I played sports."

Gary, Ebraham and Carlos also participated in team sports in high school. However, aside from the inherent benefits of participating in school athletic programs, such as team participation, self-discipline, physical fitness, and perhaps social prestige, they did not mention that it served any other particular purpose. Carlos, for example, was a member of his high school basketball team. The time he spent playing basketball after school at the community center, while his grandmother worked, forged him into a talented player. Basketball, however, was not the centerpiece of his school experience. He explained that his coach had a policy of monitoring the players' grades to ensure they could remain on the team. Carlos said, "I would tell him, you don't have to check on me because I am here to pass my classes. I am not here to pass so I can play. I am here to pass so I can leave and get out of here."

The fact that all the men identified sports participation as part of their academic experience prompted further analysis of the relationship between athletic participation and academics. The research suggests that this relationship can be a complex issue for young Black males. On the most fundamental level, it is an integral part of the social and identity development of most American men. However, for Black males it takes on historic, economic, and sociological dimensions as well.

Sports participation and academic progress receives mixed reviews in the literature. Braddock's (1991) study of Black males confirms the body of research that

finds participation in athletic programs is positively correlated with postsecondary attendance. The author posits that certain aspects of athletic involvement such as the prescribed academic standards for continued involvement, the requirement of consistent investment towards a goal, the encouragement to work with others, and the ability to analyze one's strengths related to competitive weaknesses are also supportive of the pursuit of higher education.

However, a recent study by Eitle and Eitle (2002), suggests that the academic returns of sports participation may not be universally beneficial. The authors' findings on the relationship of race, cultural capital, and participation in athletic sports indicated first, that different sports yielded different outcomes, all of which are not positive. For example, participation in football and basketball related negatively to standardized test scores but had a neutral effect on grades. Second, Black males, particularly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, participate in sports at a higher percentage level, and yet do not receive as strong an academic return as similar White students. Further, the study implicated that "cultural disadvantage may contribute to an increased interest in and dependence on particular sports that may have additional adverse consequences for its participants in terms of academic achievement" (Eitle & Eitle, 2002 p.141). In other words, extensive sports participation for Black males may supplant the need for educational attainment.

From another perspective, Hoberman (2000) asserts that an "involuntary athletic identity has been inflicted on [Black men] over the past one hundred years" (p. 49). He notes that constant assumptions are made by Whites in professional and academic settings about the "innate" athletic prowess of Black males. Hoberman contends that this

occurs because of the dominant position that Blacks (particularly males) occupy in sports. In recent decades, the athletic ability of Black males has been promoted in such magnitude that it almost obscures cognitive talent. Undergirded by the glamour, glory, and wealth associated with professional sports in recent years, athletic success is often framed as social progress by Blacks and Whites. However, unlike the time when Jackie Robinson first joined the Dodgers, Black participation in professional sports speaks much less to breaking down social barriers and more to the limitation and diversion of Black aspiration.

The athletic stereotype is so powerful because it helps to reinforce and justify other negative positions taken by the dominant culture. The "innate" athletic ability, supposedly possessed by Black males, has been used to explain everything from the defeat of White players in sports to the conception of Black people as wild animals (Harrison, 2000). The one-dimensional, athletic "superman" becomes an iconic image of Black males frequently featured in the media. Unfortunately, the major consumers of these images are often impressionable, young, Black males who narrow their self-perceptions in response.

Although the men of the study received various benefits or opportunities from sports participation, they each appeared to have a pragmatic view of its importance. The meaning they attached to athletics seemed to complement rather than conflict with educational values. Further, their athletic experience was not perceived as essential to their identity or relevant to their future goals. This is an important distinction compared to men who see their futures more closely aligned with a sports arena than an academic classroom. Therefore, perhaps, the ability to glean the intrinsic benefits from athletic

participation while maintaining a balanced and practical perspective of its significance, that has the most positive effect on academic progression.

Institutional Factors

The purpose of this section is to address the perceptions of the six men on how institutional factors along the pipeline helped or hindered their progression. A great deal of the research done on Black males in educational institutions implies incongruence between Black male students and the established norms of the system and its traditional student population (Hall & Rowan, 2000). This suggests that the onus for change belongs to the Black male student. Thornton (2004) identifies this posture as a major fallacy in academic settings and proposes that educators look beyond a "blame the victim" perspective in order to assess causal factors. He asserts:

> Educators commonly blame socioeconomic status, family structure, and social conditions for low student achievement. Because these circumstances occur outside schools, they become unquestioned excuses for failure and justifications for the status quo. The end result is that educational systems are not examined. In contrast, systems thinking assumes that schools can improve student achievement regardless of external circumstances (p. 223).

As a Black college administrator, I am especially concerned about the attendance, retention, and graduation rates for all Black students. However, the dwindling numbers of Black males on campus and the attention this issue received in both the popular and scholarly literature prompted my examination of possible institutional causes. Admittedly, as I conceptualized this study, I assumed I would find unexplored, specific, and alterable institutional policies and practices in colleges and universities that supported or deterred degree attainment for Black males. The core factors that surfaced from the men's academic histories were much more pervasive. The findings conveyed how traditional public education models have treated Black males throughout their

academic career. Lowered expectations, lack of resources and information, and institutionalized racism throughout the pipeline came forward as negative effects on academic progression. While, as expected, high expectations, positive climates, recognition, and leadership opportunities had positive effects. By the time many Black males were ready to enroll in postsecondary programs, they already had faced institutional forces and factors that could set them up for failure.

The institutional factors discussed in this section reflect what the men perceived as the positive and negative institutional factors affecting their trajectories. They include: (a) college preparation in high school (b) the climate and culture of the two-year college and the transfer institutions, and (c) the two-year college as part of the academic pipeline.

College Preparation in High School

Although developing college readiness is a process that optimally should begin in elementary school, the early high school years still offer significant opportunities to direct undecided, unaware and underachieving students toward college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hopkins, 1997; Morgan, 1996). It also should be noted that these years could also be a primary leakage point in the academic pipeline. The number of Black males graduating with a college preparation endorsement is already limited due to high dropout rates and vocational tracking. Those that remain on the college preparation track are often not receiving sufficient information or encouragement about the college process from the high school. College choice information, application and admissions procedures, and financial aid opportunities are the basic areas that need to be addressed, particularly for first generation students (Bailey, 2003; Hurtado et al., 1997; Kim, 2004) . Many are also not counseled on the basic courses needed for college, or encouraged to

take higher level or advanced placement courses (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). This is not just an issue for poor or working class school districts. Recent studies have suggested that a void in appropriate college information exists for Black students at all socioeconomic levels (Hawkins, 1999; Ogbu, 2003).

The inconsistency and disparity of information available in high school emerged as an institutional theme. For Gary, Julian, Nephron, and Carlos, the college information provided by their high schools during the 11th or 12th grades was spotty, unfocused, or only directed at specific populations. Nephron offered his impression of his high school counselors: "I don't think they were very proactive counselors. That was their predominant role: to encourage students about school, and what trade you needed to go into. I don't think they did a good job with that." Julian felt that he was not given available information about different types of colleges. He described the reaction of his counselor to his desire to attend an HBCU. "[The counselor] tried to push me into going to a junior college. I wanted to attend an HBCU. I felt from [the counselor] that a HBCU and a junior college were one and the same."

According to Ebraham, his high school was proactive in providing college information. He described how going to college was generally promoted at his high school:

> It didn't start in the last year. I remember Geometry class, every Friday the teacher would bring in videos of different colleges. This was in freshmen year. I applied to each of those schools. Seeing those videos gave me an idea of what I wanted to be. That is where I got that college is out there. I don't know what I am going to do when I get there, but it is out there.

Although he benefited from the exposure to different colleges, he may not have received the full range of college preparation assistance that addressed his needs as a

traditionally underrepresented student. As an above average student, Ebraham would have benefited from advanced placement or dual enrollment courses, more guidance about college choices, and information about scholarship possibilities. Yet despite his early exposure, Ebraham did not receive the guidance and the practical information that could have broadened his collegiate options. The following comments reveal some of the gaps in his knowledge about college choice and preparation:

> High school to college, I had no idea what to expect. I had been to SJC before, but I didn't know what to expect when I got to class. I had good grades but I think my GPA was like a 3.1. I didn't know enough to write out this essay for a scholarship and things like that, and so I didn't have the scholarship money.

Ty was fortunate to have an extremely aggressive high school counselor who seemed to actually manage his entire college search process. It must be noted, however, that he did not received this assistance until the second semester of his senior year based on an assumption that he had begun the process much earlier. Ty's life may have been altered substantially, had he not happened upon such a diligent counselor. Venezia, Kirst & Antonio (2003?), address the widening gap in curriculum and student information between K-12 school systems and higher education in *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations.* They assert that the majority of high school students have college aspirations but are not adequately prepared for or appropriately educated about college and university requirements and standards. Again, the most severe disparities are found in schools with large minority populations.

Garibaldi (1992) also found that many Black males and their parents have high educational aspirations. But in the end, despite how many aspired to pursue higher education, the number of Black males that actually enroll in college after high school is

critically low. This has been a bit of a conundrum for social scientists in that the high aspiration-low attainment phenomenon occurs without regard to socioeconomic status, academic performance, or other college predictors. The literature offered several possible explanations for this apparent incongruence. These included: (a) parents and students having an uninformed conception of college preparation and admission requirements (Gibson, 2002; Hawkins, 1999; Kao & Thompson, 2003); (b) a cultural tendency in the Black community of not relating current realities with future possibilities (Ogbu, 2003); and (c) and the fact that students and parents often equate postsecondary vocational training to traditional collegiate study (Hurtado et al., 1997).

Although the majority of the men of this study did not have sufficient guidance on the mechanics of college choice and preparation, they at least understood, because of their This suggests that in cases of aspiration and achievement incongruence, further intervention may be required to inform Black students and their families' construction of intellectual ability, social mobility, and post-secondary education.

The Two-year College Climate and Culture

SJC was not necessarily the first college stop for the men of the study, it was, however a condition of this study that all six men attended SJC before transferring to their degree granting institution. The variety of different institutions attended by the men before and after SJC, led to some divergent perspectives about the overall character of their postsecondary experience. The common thread through their perspectives, however, had to do with the climate and culture they sensed on the various campuses.

The adjustment to college life can be a daunting task, no matter where students attend. The men in the study, however, indicated that they had a relatively easy time

adjusting to the college environment primarily because they began at a two-year college with a favorable climate. The men generally conveyed that they chose to come to SJC chiefly because of its affordability, convenience, and academic programs. They attended different campuses of SJC yet, each expressed positive feelings about the collegiate environment they found on each campus. Some of the comments referenced the homogeneous racial composition of one of the campuses, while others appreciated the multicultural population of another campus. Ty and Ebraham shared their appreciation for West, the predominately Black campus:

> Ty: I loved it, especially the West Campus. It was very inviting, especially for African American males. I found it to be the HBC of two-year schools. Everything they say a HBC has: like a comforting nature, looking out for the students, making sure that you excel, the small community. I felt all of that there. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience there. I thought it was a great move. I got some things at SJC that I never would have gotten had I gone straight to a four-year school.
>
> Ebraham: I had never been around so many people that looked like me and I enjoyed it. Yeah, it was something new to me to see Black people excelling in education and doing well, and coming to school. It was a good experience; it was not overbearing, but it was good to see, I felt comfortable there; I could let my hair down. Not only were people relating to me on an academic level but on a cultural level.

Comparing it with other schools they attended, Julian and Nephron were both fascinated with the different cultures and nationalities represented on the East campus. They related some of their initial impressions:

> Julian: [SJC] was much more diverse; I mean hundreds of percentages in terms of diversity. When I got there and I went to classes and looked around, I thought, this in nice, the library and everything. I started to get a little bit of that school spirit.
>
> Nephron: I needed to be exposed to everyone; I wanted to mix. That is what SJC offered, a mix, people from out of the country, Black, White, Asians, Africans, a good mixture of people. You could get different perspectives and work with other people, other backgrounds. I thought that was good; I wanted that to be the case.

SJC seemed to meet the needs of the men on a variety of levels. Carlos appreciated the small campus setting. He recalled:

> When I got [to SJC], I felt like I liked the environment. Initially, I could tell that people cared about me. The environment [at SJC] is smaller and you don't feel overwhelmed.

The men also consistently characterized SJC as offering sound academic preparation for the programs at the senior institution. Gary was emphatic when asked about his preparation. He said, "Absolutely, I believe [SJC] gave me a good base for when I went to State Tech." Along the same lines, Ebraham made this observation:

> When I got to Regional State, I got there with my associate's degree. I got there and talked to my advisor and he said, 'You went [to SJC]; you don't have to take this class, this class, or this class.' When I got there, I felt like I was well prepared to do well and be successful.

For the men in this study, the two-year college was an essential component in their path to the degree. Most also intimated that they believed their academic and social preparation for the four year institution and eventual degree attainment would have been negatively affected if not for their attendance at the two-year college.

> Ebraham: I am glad I went to SJC. I would not have done as well if I had not. I needed to get the nurturing, to get my GPA up, and get comfortable. If I had just gone out there [to Regional State], I would have been like, *whoohoo*, I am free, and I would have gone wild as opposed to knowing what I needed to study.

When I asked Ty how he thought his academic experience would have been different had he not gone to SJC, he responded:

> I don't think I would have had a 3.6 GPA. I don't think I would have enjoyed the four-year college, no matter where I went, as much as I enjoyed SJC. Like I said, it gave me a short-term goal. It gave me my associate's degree fairly quickly. I just got out of the army and a year later, I am sending out invitations to my graduation. It gave me a sense of accomplishment to get that associate's degree. It gives you more confidence going into that four-year school.

I asked Julian what did he think would have happened if he did not have the option of attending a two-year college. He answered with this comment:

> Looks a little bleak. I might have moved back to New Jersey. I wouldn't have gotten in at another school without SJC. I needed that ladder to go from my one semester at Historic University to another school. I would have needed another junior college.

Common to many of the participants' comments about climate and culture were expressions of a sense that they mattered and were integral parts of the SJC campuses. They seemed to hold a strong perception that the college's culture and climate as being welcoming and nurturing. Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) advances the concept of "mattering" as a critical component for non-traditional student retention. Contrasted with feelings of marginality, the authors argue that feeling that they mattered to the institution encouraged involvement and integration which ultimately leads to student success (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1987).

Conversely, in *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb,* Ogbu (2003) criticizes the affective demands of Black students related to higher education. He contends that evaluating an institution in terms of affective factors such as caring and support as opposed to its ability to impart expertise and useful knowledge is counterproductive. He recommends that the Black community reinforce a more pragmatic vision of education, framing it as simply a means to an end. My findings do not completely support Ogbu's assertions. Although the men had positive feelings related to the campus environment, those feelings did not preclude an appreciation for the cognitive purposes of higher education. Moreover, the history and effects of discrimination and marginalization in this country make it almost impossible to ignore the emotional and psychological needs of Black students.

Opportunities for leadership and recognition. The participants stated that one of the reasons they found the two-year college so beneficial was because they were able to participate in activities that might not have been as available to them at a large four-year institution. They particularly enjoyed the opportunities to be recognized for their academic achievements and leadership abilities. Garibaldi (1992) affirms the importance of recognition for Black male students. He contends that reversing the downward spiral of academic disengagement that plagues these students requires that one must begin with a value system that honors education "by verbally and materially rewarding academic achievement in the same way that society acknowledges and extols athletic performance" (p. 7). The participants' support of this position is evident in Gary's statement that is representative of four of the other men:

> When I came here, I was being noticed for a few things. That made me feel good because I saw myself [getting the recognition] that I thought was over after high school. I thought I missed my chance. Coming here, it made me think to myself, now maybe I am not the only one who sees me doing something very well; everybody else kind of does too. They are recognizing me for this stuff. That gave me the extra drive because [SJC] was giving me what I had been missing. I think it helped me tremendously in that sense.

Because of the relatively small campus environments at SJC, each of the men took advantage of the leadership opportunities that were available at the college. These experiences were highly valuable to the participants:

> Nephron: My experience in student government gave me a taste of things I will accomplish when I finish college. It helped me to stay focused because I learned that I can do it. I had something that I accomplished as a leader, and I was honored for it. I saw that people could see that I can do the things I can do. I want that [same experience] after college.

Contrary to the literature that suggests that two-year college students are often disengaged from campus activities (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1987), the men of the study

reported a high level of campus involvement. They received recognition for their leadership and academic skills and expressed feeling integrated and involved at SJC. This seems to support the traditional retention models that link involvement and integration within the collegiate culture to college persistence (L. Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Worthy of note, however, is the fact that the men perceived the SJC campus environment and population as culturally compatible. This provided, moreover, a conducive climate for involvement, leadership, and recognition. As pointed out by Rendon, Jalomo and Nora (2000; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996) the fallacy with the traditional theories of retention is the assumption that the culture and climate of predominately White institutions are as accommodating for Black and other underrepresented students as they are for the dominant population. Therefore, students with higher involvement levels may indeed support overall college persistence, if coupled with an encouraging and inclusive campus climate.

The Two-Year College as Part of the Academic Pipeline

Looking at the pipeline metaphorically as a conduit that transports an entity from one place to another presumes that there is some sort of agent or force that directs or propels the flow. In the case of the academic pipeline, people, programs, and policies are often the forces that serve to push students towards the next level. This force seemed to be missing for the participants at key points along the pipeline, forcing them to propel themselves through some narrow but necessary channels.

Despite the enthusiastic endorsements of the academic preparation the men received from SJC, they were critical of the college for not providing an accurate picture or preparation for the culture and climate at the senior institution. Additionally, they

could not discern a concerted effort by SJC to promote the transfer function of the college. This was especially troubling considering that SJC's primary mission and structure is aimed at providing the first two years of the undergraduate courses leading to the baccalaureate degree. Ty described what he heard about transfer at SJC:

> It was just like, please graduate. It would be nice if you went to a four-year school; we have the resources to help you. But please graduate and keep a good GPA. Get these first two-years out of the way, then we can work with you, once we see you are serious.

Nephron and Carlos made similar comments:

> Nephron: Mainly, I don't know if SJC made an effort to have you transfer to a four-year college. I think they were more self-serving. [I think they conveyed] that you are here, get a job. I don't know if there was a focus on getting your associate's, then go ahead and get the bachelor's [degree]. I don't know if there was a push for that. I don't want to say that there wasn't, but from what I observed, what I remember, I don't remember it being a thing.
>
> Carlos: I feel that although SJC is a different animal, they need to go towards that higher end. They need to challenge students. Not only academically, but how much is assigned in class so that when they get to the other school they will adjust better.

Ty contrasted SJC with his transfer institution, Urban State University, in terms of how the two schools prepared students for the next level of education:

> [USU] did a lot of career development. They said if you want to go into non-profit studies, here are some of the best schools. Every professor, even the student professors, talked about graduate school in the classes. It was expected that you were going to go to a graduate school or law school. So they took the mental step to help you understand things. As far as SJC, they didn't prep me for four-year college life, like Urban State prepped me for grad school. But SJC had a passion for making sure you got through. They thought if you got through SJC, you could get by out there.

Gary and Nephron also expressed that activities related to the transfer process were not sufficiently promoted or facilitated by the two-year college faculty and staff. To

that effect, Gary outlines how he and a fellow pre-engineering classmate gathered information about transfer requirements:

> We spoke to an advisor, from State Tech. An advisor came to the SJC campus once and we spoke to her. She pointed us to a website that actually had the course equivalents for certain courses. After that point we realized that we could actually transfer to State Tech a semester early, I think. There were a few engineering courses we could have taken [at SJC], but we didn't really need them. After she pointed us to that website we kind of saw that, so we did have that to aid us to decide what classes to take next before we transferred.

Lee (2001) and Zamani (2001) found similar issues with minority students negotiating transfer from two to four-year institutions. Their findings indicate that transfer policies and procedures were often confusing or inaccurate as explained by two-year college staff and institutions lacked an overall 'culture of transfer' promotion that featured dedicated programs and spaces related college transfer resources. Students often adopted a self-reliant posture as they approached the transfer stage, preferring to get information from senior institution personnel (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

It is an established fact that students do not transfer from two-year colleges to four-year institutions at a rate commensurate with their academic intention (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Lee, 2001; Rendon, 1993). While most students indicate that they wish to transfer in order complete a baccalaureate program, an average of only about 22 percent actually do so (Zamani, 2001). Regardless of the number of vocational programs offered, Rhoades and Valadez (1996) assert that the primary role of two-year colleges is the transfer function. As such, the expectation is that transfer preparation would be embedded into all core activities and programs of the college. This did not appear to be the perception of the men.

Rendon (1993) further asserts that though increasing transfer rates is a difficult task, it is not impossible. An exemplary program at a two-year college in a largely Latino area in Texas produced significantly higher transfer rates (60 percent for those in transfer programs) than other similar colleges. Their success was due to the purposeful and extensive reconciliation of the students' Hispanic culture with the culture of the institution. The college administration and faculty were able to present activities and programs that promoted the transfer function through the lens of a cultural perspective shared by the students. Validating cultural infusions throughout the college and its curriculum and consistent exposure of the students to the university world they would be entering helped the college yield the significant transfer results (Rendon, 1993; Trujillo & Diaz, 1999).

To effectively analyze transfer and articulation processes, the American Association of Community College and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2003) produced a recent research report entitled *Access to the Baccalaureate*. In this report, they attempted to establish the factors that prevented transfer students from experiencing a seamless transition between two-year and four-year institutions. The research findings identified a perception of lower academic standards at two-year colleges, weak articulation agreements, and the lack of appropriate processes and flow of information, as the primary barriers to increased transfer rates.

Since more than 36 percent of Black males begin their college career at two-year institutions, any barriers to academic progression at this level causes another significant leak in the academic pipeline (NCES, 2003). Advocates for the two-year college transfer function argue that these institutions must be held accountable for increasing their

retention and transfer rates (Laanan, 2001; Rendon, 1993; Susskind, 1997). This is critical because for historically underrepresented groups in higher education, two-year colleges may be one of the few places they have a chance to increase their social and economic capital.

The Climate and Culture of the Four-year Institution

The college or university experiences of the men after they transferred received mixed reviews. Although all of the men learned to effectively navigate the systems and adjust to the environment, some found particular aspects of the four-year institutions' climate and culture to be quite challenging. Lee (2001) points out that coming from a small two-year college and going to a large university, aside from being intimidating, can accentuate a more pronounced minority status. The following situations described by Carlos and Julian illustrated this point. Carlos described one of his first classes at Urban State University:

> There were about 500 of us, and it was a freshmen level biology course. We were of all different majors; it was unlike any experience that I had at SJC. I thought, *wow*, you can fit that many people in a classroom? I remember that teachers would walk up and down making sure no one was cheating. It is a lot of pressure with so many people in the classroom; it is not a conducive environment for many people. Students would not sit and get to know each other. [The large class] didn't give you the opportunity to build lasting friendships like you can at a junior college.

Julian's adjustment was of a different nature. Coming from a relatively progressive city like Metropolitan and going to a small college in a small southern town was a dramatic move. Julian perceived that the college campus reflected the culture of the town, which hinted at an oppressive environment for Blacks. He realized that the notable absence of middle and upper class Blacks in the town or on campus had a discouraging effect. He explained:

> It was tough because there were not many minorities there. I did not have one minority professor in my time there. And it wears on you; at least it wears on me. A lot of people I saw were not doing to well. They had jobs and that is good, but when you start looking up the ladder a little, I didn't see any managers at stores; I didn't see doctors. And so I would have to go [to Metropolitan] sometimes just so I could soak it up. So I could remember, yes you can still accomplish everything that you want to accomplish.

Nephron and Ty, on the other hand, seemed to appreciate the differences between the junior and senior institutions for reasons that fell along the same lines. Perhaps because they were slightly older than some of the other participants at the time they transferred, they were also more anxious about beginning their major courses and preparing for gainful employment. Nephron recalled that he welcomed the serious climate when he transferred to International Business University (IBU):

> IBU is strictly business. There is no social life, no student life, no intramural sports, nothing of that sort. You are there to learn with a lot of older students. A lot of the professors there are people who work in business currently and teachers who have been teaching business for a long time. So, it gave you a good view of business, not just from the textbooks of yesteryear. [IBU] gave you a focus on what is actually going on now, the newer trends in business, the teamwork aspect, the knowledge [industry], and things of that nature.

After a brief and disappointing experience at another transfer college, Ty felt he had found his niche at Urban State. He was particularly pleased with his new choice of a major and the delivery of the required courses:

> At Urban State, they focused not only on the subject they were teaching but also on how it will relate in your field. Also, how it will help you in graduate or law school. It was more of a career perspective at Urban State.

Ty and Nephron made similar comments about the nature of the education they received at two very different four-year institutions. They both appreciated the practical, real-world aspects of the curriculum and instruction. This points to the age-old debate,

perhaps best framed by DuBois and Washington, on the purpose of higher education and the life of the mind. Is the purpose of higher education to train and certify a skilled workforce, thus endorsing a practical and work-related curriculum? Or is the purpose to generally develop higher order thinking skills, an appreciation and understanding for the arts and sciences, and the responsibility of educated citizens? Of course, there are many nuances to this debate, but the fact that Nephron and Ty preferred instruction directly related to the world of work is at the core. The practical application of at least four additional years of schooling beyond high school is a valid consideration for many students. For Black males and other disenfranchised populations who are seeking to improve their economic and social position in this country, the utility of education takes on even more importance (Hall & Rowan, 2000). This seems to indicate the need to tie a college education to specific and meaningful career outcomes as early as possible during the pre-college years. The incorporation of such concepts in college preparation activities and the general curriculum may encourage more Black males towards college enrollment.

Another persistent issue that surfaced was the difference between how faculty related to student at the four-year institutions compared to SJC. Where the faculty at SJC had a more nurturing and supportive role, many found the professors less accessible and caring at their senior institution. Although Ebraham expressed noticing a sharp contrast in faculty demeanor at Regional State University (RSU), he felt that his positive experiences with the faculty at SJC gave him the academic confidence needed to adapt. He explained, "You were more intimidated to go and talk to some of the teachers [at RSU]. But by then that was okay. I had been nurtured enough [at SJC] to move on."

Carlos' perception of the professors at his senior institution were also not positive. He remembers "they did not really care about you, the little personal issues that you may be having. You can tell by how they taught the courses and in their mannerisms." As referenced earlier in this chapter, caring emerges again as an important factor for certain men in the study.

For the most part, the men did not indicate that they participated in many social, leadership, or academic programs or activities during their years at the senior institution. This was stridently in contrast to their time at SJC. Several men revealed the predominant reason for this change in participation was the increased rigor of the upper level courses and the men's focus on graduation. Ty and Gary did mention two helpful programs at the senior institutions that were instrumental in their college adjustment and socializing process. Ty became involved with a student organization in the urban policy studies college at USU that was an offshoot of the highly visible Black student support program. Ty described the organization as "a group for minorities students [that] looked at urban policy studies and urban issues." His involvement with the group allowed him to meet other Black students in the program and stay abreast of relevant activities, deadlines, and events.

At State Technical University, Gary was very complimentary about the transfer assistance received from the minority services office on the campus. At an orientation for minority transfer students, he was able to connect with other Black students who were transferring to State Tech and receive information targeted specifically towards upper-class students who were new to the institution. The literature reveals, however, that transfer orientations are relatively rare at four-year institutions, especially those designed

for minority students, even though the needs of this population are clearly different from those of first time freshmen (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

As with all formal education systems, postsecondary institutions can play a prominent role in shaping students' identity. Faculty expectations, cultural inclusion and sensitivity, and conceptions of "valuable" knowledge, can send clear signals of worth or denigration. Institutional environments can, therefore purposely or inadvertently, narrow or broaden a student's perception of their ability and options for their future, expand or limit their worldview and, reconstruct their value systems (Cuyjet, 1997).

Summary

This chapter presented the significant factors that emerged from the study as having influenced the academic progression of the six Black male participants. Three categories of factors were discussed: personal, external, and, institutional. The personal attributes of the participants included self-efficacy, endurance and resilience, and self-regulation. These attributes were framed within the central context of personal agency. Factors external to the participants consisted of family messages about higher education, role models, mentors and advocates, early exposure to college and participation in athletic sports. The institutional factors that surfaced were insufficient college preparation in high school, contrasts between the climate and culture of the two-year college and four-year institution, the lack of promotion of the transfer function at the two-year college. The next chapter will explore factors related to race and gender that have contributed to the participants' academic journeys.

CHAPTER 5

RACE, GENDER AND THE ACADEMIC PIPELINE

This chapter explores issues of race and gender as they relate to the academic progression of Black males. The perceptions and life experiences of the participants illuminated systemic, social, and economic realities that often exist for many Black males in the academic pipeline. From the subtle realization that their academic preparation for college was insufficient to the more overt situation of being personally identified as academically unqualified, the men confronted intentions, assumptions and practices that were clearly motivated by race and gender. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it seeks to provide a contextual outline of the social and educational atmosphere that existed for the men. Second, the chapter addresses the major themes that surfaced as the men shared their perspectives on how their race and gender effected the academic progression.

During the first interview, I asked each participant to describe his impression of how Black males are currently faring in higher education. I wanted to understand the participants' conceptions of postsecondary education, the salient issues surrounding those conceptions, and the status of Black men as a population subgroup. Each of the men recognized the critical shortage of Black male college graduates in general, and in comparison to Black women, and the social barriers that are often faced. They also gave their perspectives on why this condition developed and continues to occur. The majority

of their responses related to issues of race, class, and gender. The men's responses to this query and the subsequent discussion that ensued provided a logical and provocative place from which to examine the academic pipeline and their passage through it. The first section of the chapter describes the general social conditions that generally surround Black males. The other section addresses the intersections along the pipeline that were essential in shaping their journeys.

The State of Black Males in Higher Education

Cuyjet (1997) asserts that there are two major reasons for why Black males are missing from the campuses of postsecondary institutions; (a) many do not ever get to college because of incarceration, death, dropping out of high school, monetary deficits, and health issues; (b) many who do come do not stay because of monetary deficits, adjustment issues, or under-preparation in academics. Although the genesis and implications of these factors are extremely complex, they do adequately account for a large portion of the Black males absent from academia. Of all Black college students in 2002, only 37 percent were male (NCES, 2003). Currently, among Black males between 18-24 years old, only 25 percent are enrolled in college, as opposed to 34 percent of the White male population. Moreover, in 2004, only 11 percent of Black males over 25 years of age, compared to 19 percent of White males, had earned a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

The participation rates for Black males in higher education are dismal. The low numbers can be better understood when considered within a larger social context. Compared to the general population, Black men have higher unemployment rates, higher rates of substance abuse, and a higher likelihood of being killed by another Black man

(Gibbs, 1988; Harris, 1999; Jordan & Cooper, 2001; Polite & Davis, 1999; Washington & Newman, 1991). Black males also have the dubious distinction of being more numerous in jails and prisons than in colleges and universities. In 2000, the Justice Policy Institute (2003) reported that the prisons housed 20 percent more Black males than were enrolled in college. These conditions pointedly suggest that many societal factors are stacked against young Black males.

In *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species*, Gibbs (1988) uses the term "psychic stress" to describe the effect of subtle, yet constant assaults on the identity of young Black men. Gibbs illustrates in the following passage from the book, the daily reminders of societal denigration that have become so commonplace for many Black males that they are often unconsciously anticipated or dismissed.

> A teacher calls him stupid; a White stranger gets up and walks away when he sits next to him on a crowded bus or subway; a bank teller reacts suspiciously when he tries to cash a check; and employer refuses to interview him for a job; a clerk ignores [or follows] him in a department store; a police officer stops to question him in a White neighborhood (p. 242).

The effect of these experiences, over time, can be physically and psychologically debilitating, especially for those with already fragile egos.

Nephron's comment expresses a similar sentiment:

> I was born and raised in the USA. Anywhere you go you always have the sense that you are seen as a second-class citizen. It was like that wherever I went. They don't expect the best from you and it is a surprise when you do succeed. I want to earn respect by being me.

In the face of these conditions, Black men must also contend with the societal expectations that come with being male. For many Black males there is an undertone of frustration and resentment when society evaluates them based on traditional norms of masculine attainment: education, financial solvency and stable families. Many Black

males find that even a college education may not hold the same financial benefits as afforded to White males (Washington & Newman, 1991). Indeed, the average earnings of a Black male with a college degree is considerably lower than that of a White male, however the disparity between the earnings of Black and White men only a high school diploma or some college is even more significant.

Many Black males find that even a college education may not hold the same financial benefits as afforded to White males (Washington & Newman, 1991). Indeed, the average earnings of a Black male with a college degree is considerably lower than that of a White male, however the disparity between the earnings of Black and White men with only a high school diploma or some college is much greater. They question how can there be equity when the "outlets for achieving masculine pride and identity, especially in political, economic, and educational systems, are more fully available to White males than to Black males" (Majors & Billson, 1992p. 31)?

Higher education for Black males and females is affected by family stability as well as economic conditions. The profound and interdependent nature of these social and economic issues cannot be solved with straightforward intervention. Stable and economically resourceful families, able to support the soaring costs of higher education, develop as a result of one or both parents maintaining gainful employment. Steady and gainful employment in this technology-focused society now requires postsecondary education. Without postsecondary education, Black parents are less able to obtain the gainful employment that can help to create stable and financially resourceful families. Gibbs (1988) describes this as the "vicious cycle" that exists for Black families in trying to mediate their economic and educational conditions.

Stereotypes, Marginality, and Identity

Much of society, including that of many young Black males themselves, is tainted by an inaccurate or one-dimensional presentation of men of color. The media images of Black men are overwhelmingly skewed toward the criminal or the sensational (Gibbs, 1988; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Hilliard, 2002; Hoberman, 2000). Because this is the prominent image presented, it becomes subconsciously affixed as the common standard for all Black males (Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 1997; Wharton, 1988). This not only contributes to young Black males having a narrow perception of their options, it reinforces some commonly held beliefs of the general society (Hoberman, 2000).

Black males must often endure being assessed negatively on both ends of a continuum. On one hand, media images of Black men often project aggression, maladjustment and irresponsibility, or as Gibbs (1988) contends, "the five 'D's': dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant and disturbed" (p. 3). On the other hand, relatively successful or particularly well-spoken Black males can be characterized as arrogant, anti-social, and overly materialistic. Several authors have suggested that the latter misconceptions, are often ascribed to Black males who resist being disrespected, or accepting the status quo, or have achieved high levels of social, economic or political capital (Haralson, 1993; Hoberman, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Majors & Billson, 1992).

In reality, the complex nature of the Black males' social and economic position in this country can be the impetus for several conflicting outward personas. Julian provided his perception of some of the conflicting dynamics faced by Black men:

> I think [the lack of Black males in college] has to do with education, and some of it has to do with not having a lot. A lot of times as Black males, we are not given anything, not even opportunities or chances in some cases. So, the thing that we see, like a nice car, is something tangible. A

> diploma is not tangible. Once you get it, you can kind of see where it might get you, but you can't touch it; you can't feel it. You can touch it, but not like a car. Your peers don't smile when you accomplish those things like they would if you pulled up in a new Mercedes or the newest clothes.

The appearance of arrogance, hostility, and bravado can also serve as defense mechanisms to combat feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalization while materialism may emanate from a need for security, the lack of financial guidance, or early material deprivation, often found in f families coping with oppression and economic instability (Gibbs, 1988; Kunjufu, 1985; Majors & Billson, 1992; Suskind, 1998).

Educational research has also promulgated conceptions of an anti-intellectual culture of Black students and particularly Black males. The so-called achievement gap between Black and White students has caused several explanatory theories, such as the "acting White" assertion of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), and the "cool pose" theory of Majors and Billson to become popularized. Fordham and Ogbu suggest that Black students reject academic achievement as a White behavior because of years of being judged unfairly as academically deficient by the White educational power structure. The authors also posit that a collective identity or a "fictive kinship" exists among Black students that lead to identifying those who embrace academic achievement as "acting white" and thus, ostracized by their peers. Majors and Billson (1992) theorize that Black males take an oppositional stance towards education as a way to cope with the subjugation they have already experienced in school and society.

The oppositional culture assertion is commonly mentioned in discussion about Black student achievement, yet like many theories used to easily explain complex social problems, it is over-stated and broadly generalized. The research on which the "acting White" contention is based involved a small sample of adolescents attending an urban

high school. Yet the theory has been drawn into the discussions of educational achievement of Black students from elementary school to graduate school. ("Acting white", 1997; Wharton, 1988) Ferguson concludes that Black students, particularly males, do not reject academic achievement but rather those Black students that fail acknowledge and affirm a positive racial identity. Likewise, Price (2000) also found that the term “acting White” was used by the men in his study as a euphemism representing a lack of racial pride and identity, unauthentic behaviors and condescension rather than academic achievement.

More recent examinations of the academic culture of Black students suggest that the image of Black students hiding their academic prowess to fit in is not necessarily preclusive of having positive racial identities (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). Ferguson also confirms that peer pressure and the need for acceptance are particularly powerful forces for Black males and may contribute to them wanting to appear “cool” and “tough” rather than “brainy.” There is evidence that Black males learn at an early age that the norms associated with being a “good student” in school involve many non-cognitive descriptors including well-mannered, attentive, quiet, and controlled. These attributes are often in conflict with their social, cultural, or gender identities.

Consequently, for some young Black males, behaviors associated with academic achievement do not equate to social capital. For example, Nephron intentionally took steps to maintain his social standing while he continued to do well in school. Until the latter years in high school, he had exemplary grades, but he didn’t let his fellow students know about them. He provided this example of an instance when his peers were surprised at his academic performance.

> I got the high grades, but a lot of the kids didn't know that. I remember one time when we received out report cards, this was ninth grade, they snatched my report card and saw my grades. They were surprised. I was the class clown, they didn't know that I always did my work, and always got high grades. They expected my grades to be a lot lower because I didn't act nerdish or geekish.

Black males may downplay their individual achievement in favor of group solidarity. High achieving students are normally separated from the general student population that can lead to social isolation in classes where other Black males are not present.

While research on the superior achievement outcomes for Black males due to inspired teaching practices, cultural edification, and standards of excellence, go virtually unnoticed in the literature, the "acting white" and oppositional identity contentions continue to surface in the discussion of academic disparities. Although these theories reveal the complex dynamics of the relationship of Blacks to established social systems, taken out of context and generalized, they continue to reinforce the stereotype that Black males and educational achievement are dichotomous.

For several years, the media has been faulted for consistently highlighting the problems with and the problems caused by Black males in society. Even the media's "success" stories offer a limited view of achievement due to the sensationalized reports of highly profiled athletes and entertainers. The ability of these images to undermine aspirations of young Black men is overwhelming. For example, Ty made this observation on how the media presents skewed images:

> Rarely do you see a story on Johnny Cochran, or William Gary or how they went from dirt poor to millionaires and almost billionaire lawyers. You don't see sensational stories like that. But you'll see a story on Germaine O'Neal and how he went from the streets to dribbling a basketball and signing a 44 million dollar contract.

Majors and Billson (1992) posit that Black men are also lured to entertainment and sports because those are areas where they feel they have a clear competitive edge. By the same token, many young Black men are fascinated by the rap music industry (Hoberman, 2000) because it is "one of the few arenas where young Black men are the leaders and innovators. It is a field where they are admired, encouraged to be creative, expressive and unique" (Few, 2004 p. 6). With the possible exception of collegiate athletics, these industries tend not to support the idea of investing years of one's life to pursue a college degree.

American society, in general, already sends a strong message of its values with how athletes and entertainers are glorified and compensated. For young Black males these values are often considered within a context where other successful Black men are not featured the media and their social environment. It is, therefore, easy to understand why the pursuit of success in these areas is so compelling.

Culture and Class Issues

In addition to the social, educational, and economic issues that surround Black males in general, the men of this study also provided insight into the effect of culture and class on their academic journey. Social class is said to have the single most important effect on how the American public education system is operationalized (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1995). It bounds students to aspirations, activities, and outcomes by virtue of their exposure and access to available possibilities. Higher education, like wealth and power, is itself an indicator of social class, but as evidenced by the men of the study, it is also a vehicle of social movement. Although the men were located at different class

positions, other intervening variables such as personal agency, cultural influences, and compelling educational values drove them toward similar goals.

The cultural differences of the men also informed how they perceived and approached postsecondary education. The intersection between class and culture was most apparent in the narratives of Carlos, Nephron, and Gary. As discussed in Chapter 4, these men were directly influenced by their own or their families' Jamaican or Central American culture. The role and depiction of the grandmother suggested cultural similarities between the men; however, the cultural and class distinctions between them were also salient for this study. For example, Carlos and his family migrated from Panama, a Spanish speaking country and thus shared both a Latino and African heritage. Carlos described himself as "Latin-African," which embodies its own cultural system. He said, "I identify with being Panamanian. I cannot say I am African American. If you were to go to one of my family gatherings, it would be different than one with African American people, the music, the food." He acknowledges, however, that "although I say I am Latin, I am still a Black man in America."

Due to his dual heritage, he was also burdened with two targets of discrimination—language and race. Carlos did not speak English when he came to this country, which was another hurdle to overcome in order to succeed academically in American public education. His family also had significant financial and social mobility limitations stemming from both language and racial barriers. Carlos realized, however, that considering the lifestyle of many people in Panama, he was still fortunate to be living in the U.S. Because he left Panama at the age of five, he relied on the stories of older

family, friends, and neighbors who had recently immigrated to clearly understand the contrasts between the two lifestyles:

> I had friends from the West Indies, and they came from way lower than the people from the US. So, when they come here, they are hungry. It is as if they see opportunity all around them, whereas kids who have always had [opportunities] are not as hungry. When you come from a culture where you have to go outside to get your water, and live in a place with a dirt floor, it's very different.

This comment suggested an immigrant work ethic that is devoid of entitlement and focused on making the best of opportunity. Carlos perceived that his family's immigrant background and the values instilled by his grandmother were responsible for his determination to succeed.

Nephron, who was born in the U.S., was raised by his Jamaican grandmother and grandfather. Many of his relatives lived in Jamaica, and the cultural connection between them and his family in New York remained strong. Nephron spoke of growing up in a Jamaican household, which he represented as more disciplined from that of a Black American family. His comments also entailed a subtle sense of elitism related to his Jamaican heritage and his family's middle-class lifestyle.

The primary influences that Nephron attributed to Jamaican culture were similar to the foreign-born men. They respected those in authority, assertiveness when deemed appropriate, a strong work ethic and themselves. The following comments indicated these influences:

> I knew how to speak up for myself or speak up for others. I wasn't a boisterous man. I was never rude because respect is premium, especially in a Jamaican household.

> I always had to do chores. I guess this was the Jamaican background. I was always the kid in the neighborhood who was cutting the grass when everyone else was able to go out and play right away.

Gary's pre-college years represents another point on the socioeconomic spectrum. Gary's grandparents raised him in Jamaica and he enjoyed the trappings of a comparatively affluent lifestyle. He mentioned that in his high school class, only two or three students would have been considered "rich" and he was one of them. Providing perspective, he said that this designation was primarily based on his grandparents owning two Honda Accords.

Gary was aware that he was afforded several opportunities and privileges that encouraged his academic progression. He brings the issue of socioeconomic class to the discussion, as he described his perception of the reasons why many Black males are not in college. He explained:

> I think your social status helps with [graduating from college] as well. If you live in a middle class to a higher social class, you may not have to deal with so much exterior stress, and that might help, as you go through college.

Gary benefited from a family tradition of sending promising students to the U.S. to attend college. He was also educated at a private high school under the British system, which he described as considerably more rigorous and disciplined than what he had observed in the U.S. Aside from a more challenging curriculum, he described what he perceived as the stringent educational environment in Jamaica compared to the U.S.:

> Here [in the U.S.] if someone's cell phone rings in the class, some teachers won't say anything. They'll just ask you nicely to put it away. In Jamaica they'll bite your head off. If you do something out of code, they will grab you by the shirt and pull you out and discipline you. They would make you stay out of the class for the whole week. They were just real strict, and the consequences were real strict.

Nephron also described the Jamaican educational system as superior and credited his Jamaican heritage as the reason he was expected to attend and graduate from college. He remarked:

> My entire family is from Jamaica, West Indies, so their education system is unfortunately, far and above that of here in the States. In my family, my female and male cousins, all down the line, go through college and graduate. It was a standard put on me to achieve. I was just regular. I'm a [family surname], I am supposed to go to school, and I am supposed to finish school.

There is a general assumption among both Jamaican and Black American communities that students from West Indian nations are better educated than Black American students. This assumption, however, is currently raising questions about postsecondary attainment and achievement among Black scholars, affirmative action advocates, and several highly selective U.S. colleges. A recent article in *Black Issues in Higher Education* (Roach, 2005) reported that concerns were developing about the percentage of African and West Indian immigrants and biracial students represented in the number of Black students at highly selective colleges and universities in the U.S. The article reveals that close to 41 percent of Black freshmen in some of the most elite colleges identified themselves as one of the above groups. This statistic has called into question the recruitment initiatives of these institutions, indicating that they are circumventing the intention of affirmative action by intentionally targeting advantaged and better educated groups in college admissions.

Like Gary, many West Indians who come to the U.S. are from middle-class families, have attended private high schools, and " retain a national identity free of America's racial caste system" (Roach, 2005p. 38) These students have several advantages in terms of college attendance and graduation. Because they come from societies where Black people are in the majority, they are normally not exposed to racism or racist behaviors as part of their daily lives. They are, therefore, more likely to see themselves from a more empowered stance.

Although Gary's path to the college degree was not free from obstacles, his experiences reveal the benefits of his social class and academic preparation on his educational journey. This was a distinguishing feature between Gary and the other men of the study. The other men came from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings of the study indicate, however, that a social class advantage assists with the process of attending college but does not necessarily determine the outcome.

The Gender Gap

The growing disparity between the educational attainment of Black males and Black females renders its own set of social, political, and economic implications. There has been significant growth in postsecondary enrollment and graduation among Blacks. Black females represent the majority of that growth which masks the declining numbers of Black males participating in higher education. Although women of almost every race have outdistanced their male counterparts in undergraduate enrollment, the disparity between Black males and females is by far the largest.

The uneven distribution of educational attainment resonates loudly in the collective Black community. A growing deficit in the number of Black males with college degrees has serious implications related to employment opportunity, social mobility, and family stability. Black educators and social observers suggest that the trend of graduating substantially more women than men is contributing to a "feminization" of the academy and cause Black males to further alienate themselves from higher education (Hefener, 2004; Hopkins, 1997; Trent, 1991). Black scholars have also sounded the alarm that the deficits in Black male graduation, has serious implications for mate selection and family stability.

On the other hand, it is important to note that although Black women enroll and complete college at higher rates than Black men, they still earn less on average than Black males with less education (C. J. Cohen & Nee, 2000). The fact remains that Black women are the primary caretakers of Black children and as such, any gains in education and economic standing ultimately benefits the entire Black community. Washington and Newman (1991) also warn that "advancing a gender war that pits the steady state of 'progress' of Black women against the declines of Black males" is counterproductive. The authors further argue that "attention to gender disparities among Blacks—and to the ways in which these disparities are viewed—detract from the larger menace of racism as a factor that depresses educational opportunities for all Blacks."

The gravity of the gender imbalance in degree attainment was not lost on the men of this study. They each expressed in one way or another, a perception that Black men were not progressing at the same rate as Black women educationally, and in some areas, professionally. They also acknowledged that this condition would ultimately have dire consequences for the collective Black community. I could not detect, however, any hostility or resentment towards Black women for reaching high levels of educational attainment. They were simply stating an unfortunate fact. Nephron's comment below represents the predominate sentiment of the men.

> Well the status [of Black males] is not good. I have experienced it myself. I am very happy to see that Black women are doing very well, and it shows in the graduating classes and in the classrooms. Especially throughout my years at SJC and IBU, there are many Black females in college. But as for Black males finishing college, … that's marginal. It looks bleak right now. It's not good.

Nephron's comment and the prevailing sentiment of the men did not support the notion of a bitter competition between Black men and women for economic and professional

opportunities. While it has been argued that Black women are often preferred in the workplace because of their dual minority status, and on the campus because of their less threatening presence, they must still contend with a largely male dominated power structure in these environments (C. J. Cohen & Nee, 2000; Washington & Newman, 1991).

Research focused on gender and educational attainment of Blacks has yielded important findings about the way men and women experience postsecondary education. Fleming (1984) found that Black men generally develop better academically and socially than Black women in HBCUs; however, in PWIs Black women fare better. At PWIs, Black men tend to view negative race related encounters as more serious than do Black women. Black men are more likely stereotyped as athletes, low achievers, and social misfits than their female counterparts. This ultimately leads to a lower academic self-concept, yet Black men are also less likely to seek out academic support systems when necessary (Walter R. Allen, 1986; Chavous, Harris, Rivas et al., 2004; J. E. Davis, 1999).

The men were already grounded in the values of hard work, perseverance, and independence partly as a result of witnessing the hardships overcome and the sacrifices made by their mothers, grandmothers or other significant women. They, therefore, would not likely perceive Black women as having special advantages or easier paths to attain their goals. Indeed, having seen significant women in their lives confront racial and gender oppression may have served to foster a sympathetic and appreciative stance toward women who are able to enroll in and complete postsecondary programs.

Although there was no discernible resentment towards Black women for their educational achievements, the men raised other issues related to gender in their

narratives. How the men saw themselves in relation to women, and more specifically Black women, was suggested by their comments and provided an additional dimension to their academic life. The men's comments concerning females seemed to reflect two general themes: (a) females as distractions and social barometers, and (b) gender-related expectations and social codes.

As for most high school and college-age men, members of the opposite sex were meaningful considerations in the participant's educational experience. Each participant held certain assumptions related to females in general, female preferences, and the appropriate role they should play in their academic life. For Ebraham, females were clearly framed as distractions from academic pursuits and should be kept at arm's length. Ebraham subscribed to his mother's belief that "girls are vision blockers. Yeah, they may be pretty, friendly, but their goal is to block the vision. That may not be their mental decision, but that is why they are there." Gary, who attended an all male high school, contrasted the environment with co-educational schools. He said, "I think the difference is the [all male] high school keeps you more focused. You don't have the distraction from females as many males would have. It definitely kept me more focused, and I think it really helped a lot with how well I did."

In contrast, Julian and Carlos seemed to have some of their academic decisions driven by the potential for female interaction. Julian was attracted to the social opportunities available at certain HCBUs. He remarked, "I got caught up in the glamour, there are a lot of beautiful women that go to [HBCU] football games; I was like, I need to be here." He briefly attended an institution where the reported female to male ratio was 14:1. This figured prominently in why Julian wanted to attend the institution. Yet, as he

admitted, it was also a major reason why he did not continue at the college: "I got involved with everything, just wild things like women and alcohol and parties." Carlos recalled one of the reason he took courses at a community college while still in high school. "The counselor [at the college] told us we could come in the summers and take classes. I was like, there will be older girls, so in the summertime I went to a sociology class or psychology class."

Nephron suggested that young women are not always attracted to a male's academic achievement, which sometimes serves as an incentive for academic mediocrity. He explained why males lose focus in high school:

> I think what happens is the outside influences start to tear into your grades. After awhile you're noticing girls and you don't want to be too smart, or you're not going to get the cutest females in the class and so on. [The girls] wanted the bad boys, the ones who didn't go to class or spent all their time studying.

I asked the participants how they perceived their academic journey would have been different if they were Black females. I wanted to ascertain how they considered their academic experience was affected specifically by gender. Although their responses were congruent with the lack of resentment expressed towards the level of Black women's educational attainment, I was somewhat surprised that none of the men expressed that women had it easier than men. Much to the contrary, most of the men indicated that Black women might have a more difficult time progressing towards the degree. Realizing that some of their responses may likely have come from a general assumption of male academic superiority, I still maintain that the men did not assume that Black women were advantaged in regards to postsecondary attainment. What did seem apparent from some of the men's comments was how society has constructed race and gender puts Black males in a vulnerable position in terms of educational attainment. Ty's

response to the question of whether Black females have an easier time progressing through the academic pipeline than males supports this assertion:

> Black females don't have it easier. But I think there is less of a stigma on them than on Black males. I think if you are a smart Black female, it is not such an anomaly to people than if you are a smart male. I think it is because they are mothers. I was reading a report that a lot of Black women, by age 35, are a lot more successful than their White counterparts because a lot of them had children when they were young. They didn't have a husband and had to do things on their own when they were young. By the time they were 35, they were thoroughly advanced. For Black males you are looked at like you are not going to make it. You are good, *but* you are not going to make it. There is always a *but*. [emphasis added]

The report to which Ty referred in his comment was most likely based on the statistic that Black women, often earn more on average more than their White counterparts between the ages of 30-40; however, before and after that timeframe Black women continue to be last on the salary ladder for Black and White men and women (C. J. Cohen & Nee, 2000).

Pre-college Experiences and Concepts of Race

Revisiting the academic pipeline metaphor, college graduation comes as a result of advancement through a channel of sequential educational stages. Apparent from the participant stories and implicit in the literature, was how each stage compounds the inequities of the next. This section considers those stages and the inherent discrepancies that can impede the academic advancement of Black males.

The issue of the racial inequity found between and within urban and suburban school systems continues to create a significant barrier to postsecondary access (Few, 2004; Garibaldi, 1992; Gibbs, 1988; Gibson, 2002; J. A. Hawkins, 1999; Hopkins, 1997; Lang, Ford, & Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University., 1988). For Black males who have tended to fall within the lower percentiles in academic achievement and graduation rates and the higher percentiles in dropout rates and suspension and expulsion,

the situation is exacerbated (Garibaldi, 1992). Black males are more likely than any other subgroup to attend predominately Black urban school settings with a large concentration of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These schools typically have less qualified and motivated teachers, less access to educational technology, less influential parent organizations, and a less rigorous curriculum (Jordan & Cooper, 2001).

Academic Preparation for College

Wealthier suburban school districts are not exempt from applying lower standards for Black students. Hawkins (1999) observed that for Black students "their mere physical presence in the suburbs does not translate into anything automatic when it comes to schooling outcomes" (p. 110). Black males in these schools are still more likely to be overrepresented in special education courses, take less demanding courses, and take considerably fewer honors or advanced placement courses. White students are significantly more likely to take and pass advanced placement courses in a variety of subjects. These courses are favorably viewed for college admission purposes and can allow students to skip or receive credit for lower level courses (Burdman, 2000)

Ebraham's high school experience exemplifies the inequities often present even within the same school system. His family, realizing the difference between the schools located in the predominately Black and the predominately White parts of the county, chose to have all 12 children bused to the majority White schools. Though the academic environment was considered more rigorous and college attendance was significantly promoted at the school, Ebraham did not take any advanced placement courses, nor was he encouraged to do so by the high school counselor.

In the sixth grade, Nephron became aware of what he perceived as the "separate but unequal" public school system he attended. When he was selected to compete for admission to an exclusive preparatory school in New York, he felt that he was very prepared to do well.

> I wanted to take the test; I always excel in tests. My whole time in elementary school, my grades had always been in the 99th percentile, which is the highest you can be statewide. I remember the day clearly; I went to the campus to take the test. When I opened up the packet, at least forty percent of that test, I didn't know the material. I actually missed the test by one point. So everything I knew I aced it, completely. There were only two other Black students along with me out of say, about thirty-five students. The others were White students.

He soon realized, however, that the test was on subject matter he had not covered in his predominately Black school. Although Nephron could not prove his suspicions, he believed that the White students taking the test had been exposed to more of the material. He explained:

> I believe that they knew everything that was on the test, or at least had classes that explored the different levels of math, and the different levels of history that I didn't get at my school. Even though I was a top-performing student and was in the talented and gifted programs, I just did not know a good percentage of what was on the test.

Wallace and Bell (1999) noted a similar situation in their qualitative examination of three Black males' attending a predominately White university The men's perceptions also pointed to the handicapping effect of unequal curriculums and standards applied in school systems has on Black male achievement. The authors described the students' troubling realization that the White students at the institution seemed to have "had much better preparation for college" (p. 311) than they received from the predominately Black public school systems they attended. They each gave examples of how they were considered very capable and even outstanding in some subject areas at their high schools.

Yet, they all landed on academic probation during the first year of college due to some of those specific subjects. They expressed feelings of being cheated in that their high schools may have falsely "raised their expectations of success in college" (p. 311). The authors also identified that the three Black males were subject to racism on two levels:

> First, if the educational experiences offered to African American students in primary and secondary schools do not prepare them as well for the demands for higher education as do the educational experiences of other students (and the research we reviewed suggests that this is the case) then the school system itself might be seen as racist even though the individuals involved do not act with racist intent. Second, those of us involved in higher education may be guilty of unintentional racism if we fail to realize that many minority students do not start higher education on equal footing with their White counterparts (p. 313).

Tracking or leveling of Black students, particularly Black males is another race and gender driven practice that still continues in school (Gibson, 2002; Harry & Anderson, 1999; Kunjufu, 1985; Ogbu, 2003). The research speaks to the disproportionate number of Black male students who are either labeled as needing special education or are placed in vocational programs (Gibson, 2002; Harry & Anderson, 1999; Patton, 1998). In addition, Ogbu (2003) found that even in an affluent suburban school district, Black students were often placed in lower level courses than White students regardless of their demonstrated abilities. As Wharton (1988) aptly maintains, the systematic labeling of young Black men as discipline problems, academically disabled, or lacking college aptitude is much more likely to derail postsecondary aspirations than any socioeconomic condition.

As reflected in their profiles, both Carlos and Ty fell victim of being placed in courses based on an unfounded perception of their basic skills or future ambition. When Ty moved to a new high school, his counselor assumed he had only minimal academic preparation and placed him in courses well below his ability. Carlos was particularly

vulnerable to arbitrary tracking because of language and the fact that no parental figure was available to advocate on his behalf. He was placed in vocational courses while in middle school, and he would have continued on the vocational track in high school, had he not questioned some of the courses he found on his schedule. This very likely would have led Carlos down a different academic path than the one he chose:

> I started to notice that they gave me these little arts and crafts classes, like wood shop, electronics, and sewing. I was like why am I in these classes? I [told the counselor] I didn't come to school to cut wood; I came to learn. And from that point, I started to notice that my classes changed.

Black males' interaction with teachers and schools is troubling and problematic. Academic researchers and pundits (Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999; Gibson, 2002; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Wharton, 1988) provide support for the often conflicting relationship between the reality of Black male students and the social and academic expectations of public school systems. Theories as fundamental as the self-fulfilling prophecy establish that students will rise to the level expected. Even so, a common complaint about schools with large minority populations is that teacher expectations are markedly low in terms of academics and future prospects (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Garibaldi, 1992; Gibbs, 1988; Hopkins, 1997; Majors & Billson, 1992; Orfield et al., 2004; Patton, 1998; Polite & Davis, 1999). Black males are particularly vulnerable to these teacher attitudes.

Contrary to popular belief, the men of the study welcomed academic rigor and challenging academic settings. This paradox is supported by Garibaldi's (1992) study of a New Orleans school district with a large Black population. When he surveyed the teachers he found more than 60 percent of the teachers did not believe that the Black male students they taught had the ability or interest in a college education. He also found

these attitudes to be remarkably pervasive, held by teachers of all grades, experience levels, and races. Of the 318 teachers sampled 60 percent taught elementary school, 70 percent had 10 or more years of experience, and 65 percent were Black. As part of the same study, he found 60 percent of the Black male high school students felt they could have been challenged more, and 40 percent indicated that the teacher's expectations of them were too low.

Having experienced failure and limitation in the classroom, Black male students often drop out either physically or mentally from the school setting. Garibaldi (1992) contends "teachers have a pivotal role to play in reversing the negative academic and social behaviors of African American males; but they too are susceptible to internalizing and projecting the negative and myths that are unfairly used to describe African American males as a monolithic group with little hope of surviving and being successful" (p. 8). Consistently caustic teacher interactions can have dire consequences for Black males. Gibson (2002), in her examination of student/teacher interactions found the more negative a teacher's regard is for a Black male student, the more likely he is to be academically unsuccessful or engage in serious delinquent behavior.

Transition to College

Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) present the three essential tasks that must be completed before or during high school to properly prepare for college: (a) acquire at least the minimum course requirements for college entry; (b) graduate from high school and (c) apply to college. Although the tasks seem simplistic, many Black males do not accomplish any of them. Reflecting on his high school years, Ebraham made these observations:

> Looking back I see there are not as many Black males out there going for higher education. They are going for the trade schools, not going for their degree. I think one thing may have to do with having to see people around them working toward that goal of graduation. And not having the drive or support system to get there.

While the high school years can be the most critical time for solidifying plans, it can also be a time of escalating disengagement (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). A relatively recent report underscores the danger of failing to address issues of educational attainment for underrepresented populations. In *Losing our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Orfield et al. (2004) revealed "the racial disparities in graduation rates that exist at the federal, state, district and school levels are pervasive and deep" (p. 2). Particularly disturbing, the national average of high school graduation rates for Black males is less than 50 percent. The report, which also reported the racial gaps in graduation rates by state, recommended that states increase the scrutiny and reporting of school system outcomes and develop intervention measures targeting the rates of minority students. As suggested by the report, many Black males "disappear from the educational pipeline before graduating from high school" (p. 1).

Black males who are eligible to graduate with a college preparatory endorsement must often consider a variety of pragmatic and intuitive factors when making college choices. As previously noted in Chapter 4, the traditional decision factors (parental income and parental education) affecting college participation or choice do not provide the entire picture for Black students. For many Black students there is a sense of responsibility to achieve for their families, especially families without a history of college education (Freeman, 1999; Harris, 1999). This adds to the stress in making an appropriate college choice. Davis (1999) would agree, and notes that Black males often find themselves in the crossfire between high expectations from family and community

and lower expectations in academic settings. Ty, who spent his early years in government housing projects, saw his mother get the rare opportunity to attend college. In the following statement, Ty reveals how he felt that he was carrying the dreams of his whole family, when he went to college.

> I was always looked at as the person who would do something or be something in my family. I was always encouraged to go to college and do good and not get in more trouble than I was [already] getting into. That burden was placed on my shoulder from about six years old. It came from my father, from my mother, and especially from my grandparents and my aunts and uncles

When Ty started showing academic promise in elementary school, his family began to believe that his and his sister's lives could be different. However, as the male of the family, Ty believed he received the brunt of the encouragement.

As for many students, financial concerns also have a significant impact on both college attendance and college choice (Evelyn, 2003; Heller & Marin, 2002; Kelpe Kern, 2000; Kim, 2004, "Money and higher education", 1999). In 2000, the median annual family income of Black families was $29,404.00 compared to $49,023.00 for White families, a disparity that represents an economic gap that has existed for decades. Many Black college students are unable to attend college because they cannot afford college costs and because they cannot afford to take years off from the work force. For the last few years, Federal financial aid programs have altered their policies, reducing money for need-based aid and allowing for educational income tax reductions that tend to favor higher income families ("Money and higher education", 1999).

All of the men indicated that their college choices were heavily influenced by financial considerations. They were all reliant on financial aid of some sort and affordable tuition to continue their education. Ebraham had the high school GPA

necessary to receive a state merit-based scholarship. In addition to the scholarship, he also received aid based on his family's size and income level. As a result, he received enough aid to cover his entire tuition through all four years of college. Ty also had the GPA to qualify for several scholarships immediately after high school. He also had a portion of his college expenses defrayed after his stint in the army, as part of his military benefits. Like many students, the other participants, because of their grades, income, or state residency status, did not qualify for generous financial assistance and relied on family, loans, and part-time jobs to finance their education.

The move to more merit based scholarships in many states has inherent benefits for higher income families and perpetuates the gap between the educational haves and have-nots. Heller and Marin (2002) of Harvard University's Civil Rights Project provide the following tongue-in-cheek scenario to illustrate how this practice gives students from affluent families an unfair advantage:

> Imagine someone reacting to higher education's current situation by saying that what we needed were large scholarship programs to subsidize white and middle-to-upper-income students to attend college, and that it was not necessary to raise need-based aid even enough to cover new tuition increases. We should give some minority students the awards because of their relatively high grade point averages from inferior segregated schools. However, we should take their aid away when they cannot get a "B" average in a vastly more competitive college setting and blame them for not being up to the task. . . . We should get the money from . . . a state lottery that drew money disproportionately from poor and minority players. In other words, poor blacks and Latinos would end up paying a substantial part of the cost of educating more affluent white students, who would have gone to college even if they had not had the additional financial incentive (pp. 1-2).

In addition to the influence of merit-based aid programs, the Justice Policy Institute (2003) points out the irony in the fact that it is considerably easier to get state support for more correctional facilities than higher education facilities. State budget cuts

in education have made public institutions less accessible to minority students because of the limited ability to offer sufficient courses and by raising tuition costs.

Unwelcoming Institutional Climates

Chances are the majority of Black male college students will attend a predominately White institution (PWI) at some point in their career. Although it may not be until graduate school, they will likely confront an academic environment where they are not offered the support, cultural appreciation, or respect readily given to their White counterparts (Milem, 2001; B. Smith, 2004). Black students often find that they may be aggressively sought after by what first appears as an inclusive, diversity oriented PWI, only to find upon arrival an overwhelmingly narrow cultural climate (Watson, Terrell, Wright et al., 2002). Therefore, in order to proceed with their educational goals, Black males may be called upon to cope with, ignore, or accept times of racial marginalization.

Black males are likely to feel culturally alienated and socially stigmatized at many PWIs. This is manifested in social isolation, poor faculty relations (Walter R. Allen, 1986, 1988a; Dixon, 1999), and reticence to seek academic support (J. E. Davis, 1994). An assortment of institutional variables is suggested in the literature for why this condition exists. They include the absence of meaningful campus diversity initiatives and activities (Hall & Rowan, 2000; Hughes, 2002), institutions placing too much emphasis on recruitment and not enough on retention and campus climate (Milem, 2001; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; B. Smith, 2004), and an absence of Black faculty and staff role models (Dixon, 1999; Hughes, 2002).

Academic Stereotypes

Stereotypes and misconceptions often follow young Black males to the higher education setting. Haralson (1993) concluded after a review of college persistence literature that Black males who are viewed as assertive are not predicted to persist. He posits that this is because assertiveness displayed by Black males is viewed as hostile, threatening instead of positive and productive. Academically successful Black males, as described in the literature, have tended to be submissive and compliant. The assignment of negative traits is indicative of the deficiency model commonly used to reference Black males. Nephron described the impression he possibly created at his senior institution:

> I was a younger student. Many of the students were there to get degrees to move up in their career. I don't want to say that I felt resentment, but I felt alienated. I was one of the few Black males. I came off as a recluse or as arrogant. I didn't let people get to know me at IBU because it just was not the time for that. Everyone was too focused. I didn't try to be everyone's friend. I was respectful but not very personable

Ebraham surmised why the Black male students seemed to attract so much negative attention at the residential campus he attended for his last two years of undergraduate study:

> I think we were perceived as more aggressive because we were louder. We are perceived as more aggressive because we are visibly seen on campus doing loud activities, music, etc. Others have loud music, but the White guys and the fraternities would go back to the frat houses and party there. We did not have a frat house; we had to go back to the room and party.

The men's statements point out their perception that others misconstrued their actions and automatically attributed them as negative. The men further relayed how they believed they were stereotyped by some of their professors:

> Nephron: Just another black male, I am interested only in girls and basketball. [It is] the same perception that the country has about young

> Black males. I like my hip-hop clothes. They think I don't know much; I can feel that. It is not exclusive to school, it is everywhere.
>
> Ebraham: I think [the professors] may have thought here is another mediocre student. I was not big enough to play football but maybe they though I had some sort of sports scholarship or whatnot. Many of the guys were on some sort of scholarship from somewhere, not academic.

Gary described the subtle implication that Black students were somehow academically inferior to Whites at the PWI he attended. He also revealed, however, that he also internalized this assumption and sought to prove himself as a result:

> I did get the feeling from the other Black students that many of the White students [at State Tech] expected us to do bad, not do well. I was doing well, so that made me feel good. I felt I wouldn't say more valuable, but I might have been doing more because I was expected not [to do well] but I was.

Likewise, Davis (2004), in her qualitative examination of the complexity of persistence for Black students at a predominately White university, concluded that these students frequently sensed they were being stereotyped. They felt faculty and students made assumptions that the males had to be athletes and that all Black students were poor and academically deficient.

Claude Steele (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) advances the objective analysis of negative stereotypes and their effects with his theory of "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat is defined as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (p. 111). Steele argues that Black students, who are commonly assumed as intellectually inferior, experience stereotype threat when faced with competitive academic tasks. The apprehension that accompanies the perception of such a threat causes deleterious effects on academic performance. Steele further notes that it is not the under-prepared student that is most victimized by stereotype threat, but rather superior students who "led into the

domain by their strengths, . . . pay an extra tax on their investment—vigilant worry that their futures will be compromised by society's perception and treatment of their group" (p.121).

The concept of stereotype threat, as an addition to the usual explanations for Black underachievement such as a dis-identification with academics and lack of pre-college preparation reveals the complex web of factors that can influence Black college students. The extant literature seldom recognizes the affective dimensions, developmental tasks, and coping mechanisms necessary for Black college students to negotiate predominately white institutions. These students many times are not only managing the adjustment to collegiate life and academic rigor, but are also, perhaps for the first time, developing a conception of what it means to be Black within a predominately White context (Watson et al., 2002; Willie, 2003).

Despite the fact that many Black students do graduate from all types of postsecondary institutions and go on to graduate and professional schools, the characteristics of these students are seldom featured in the literature (Haralson, 1993; Willie, 2003). In order to appreciate the resilience and self-determination of Black college students, it is necessary to fully explore the oppressive and discouraging messages they receive during the course of completing a college degree. The men of this study experienced the various manifestations of negative or erroneous stereotypes; however, their individual sense of agency and resilience appeared to intercede and promote their persistence to graduation. Similarly, Cooke (2002) also found that frequent and bothersome racist comments or actions targeted at Black college students' academic competence had little effect on their self-concept and academic performance. In fact,

similar to the participants of the present study, Cooke found that racist comments correlated with more indicators of resilience rather than harm.

Regular confrontation with cultural subjugation and racial stereotyping has been shown to have tremendous effects on academic achievement, self-perception, and social interactions (Hughes, 2002; Monk, 1998; Phinney & Haas; Wallace & Bell, 1999; Wharton, 1988; Willie, 2003). Further, the literature indicates that Black males may react to racial strife on campus more strongly than Black females (Cooke, 2002; J. E. Davis, 1999; Harris, 1999) These factors are seldom considered or fully appreciated in institutional responses to retention and campus climate issues.

Davis (2004) presents the perceptions of Black students at a selective northeastern university as a myriad of complex emotions. While they felt special that they were accepted, they also felt that they carry the weight of the Black race on their shoulders, which causes considerable stress. Some described feeling "oppressed by Whiteness" because of being so dramatically outnumbered and so dominated by White culture.

Generally, students are expected to assimilate within the culture of an institution. As pointed out by Rendon (2000), this can present conflicts for Black students who view the traditional European value system as antithetical to their sense of identity. In addition, their racial, cultural, and collective identities of Black males are often devalued in postsecondary education. Coping with these conflicts is normally necessary for academic survival.

Hrabowski, et al. (1998), identified the development of a positive racial and gender identity as a crucial task for families. The successful students in Hrabowski's study displayed a balanced understanding of the barriers, obstacles, strength, and

resilience of being Black and male in America. This is particularly significant, because for most Black men, race and gender are the predominate features of their identity and are integral to how they function in the world (Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 1997). Price (2000) also concluded from his qualitative investigation of six successful Black male high school students, that a sound racial identity is necessary for Black males to cope with the inherent discrepancies of power and privilege found in society..

Nephron spoke directly to the concept of assimilation as he described his concept of academic respect:

> When you are out for respect, being loved is not the point. I want respect from everyone, no matter where you come from. You can tell I have an accent; I have my baggy jeans and boots. [The faculty] don't expect much out of me. I am not going to assimilate to get known. The intelligence that I do have will carry me; that is what I want to carry me.

Although they became aware of "how to play the game," for college survival, for the most part, the men of the study seemed unwilling to obscure or mediate their constructed identities. Instead, most of the men appeared determined to refute negative stereotypes and reject behaviors and perspectives that were not compatible with their core values.

Racially-Motivated Encounters

As mentioned in Chapter 4, all the participants transferred to predominately White institutions, yet their experiences in those institutions were notably different. As revealed throughout this study, all the men clearly acknowledged oppressive and ineffective educational systems, negative social and economic conditions, and enduring stereotypes that plague them and many Black males. They also gave examples of what they perceived as racially motivated incidents they experienced at a predominately White high school or college. The predominant impression I received from their comments,

however, was a matter-of-fact acceptance that racism is a given, and as unfair and debilitating as it may be, it did not hinder the achievement of their goals.

Carlos provided an example of what he perceived as the subtle but consistent themes of racial and possibly gender bias that occurred at his transfer institution:

> The whole class had bombed the test. … [The professor] said to all of us, come and talk to him. We all went. I went around to the office, and I heard the conversation of the lady in front of me. She was White and had gotten a 59 on the test. He was like don't worry about it. If you need to see me come in, we still have the finals. He was very encouraging. When I went in there; he said you don't have the right edition of the book. He asked me what the problem was, and I said I didn't have the money. I only had an old edition, but I still had gotten a higher grade than the girl in front of me (63). He said we are going into the midterm, and you don't have the right book I might advise you to drop the class. Take it next semester. That is why I became even more determined. Oh, you think I should drop out, I will show you.

Gary was often one of only two or three Black students in his engineering courses. Although he believed that the instructors in his department generally respected him as a capable student, he recounted a remark made by one of his instructors during class that he found very demeaning:

> [The instructor] had asked a question to the class and I had answered. It was incorrect. He said that is incorrect. You probably haven't understood anything I've done. I didn't really like that at all. So, for that course, that motivated me tremendously, and I wouldn't let up on that course. I did very well, very well.

Again, as discussed in Chapter 4, Carlos and Gary were able to respond to these experiences with renewed determination and resolve. The men were able to reframe potentially discouraging incidents as opportunities to prove themselves. This finding surfaced throughout the study. Four of the men further indicated that their confrontation with racially motivated obstacles and other related hardships ultimately yielded positive benefits. Carlos made a statement almost identical to Ebraham's about coping with

certain disadvantages. He also stated that he owed a lot of his success to his lack of privilege:

> My disadvantage was my advantage. I would say, if not for that, I would not be who I am now. It made me work harder, I always tell students that as long as you go in the direction of your goal, even if you will not meet it today, you will get there.

Moreover, I asked all participants to describe how they felt their academic experience would have been different if they had been a White male. I received this response from Gary:

> If I were a White male, my experience probably would have been a lot different. I am not sure if that would have made the result any different.
>
> One of the useful things I did notice about the minority students going to [State Tech] is that they have certain organizations that are there to help them along the way. There are certain clubs in certain majors, like for engineering there is a National Society for Black Engineers. You have the Office of Minority Education that is geared towards all majors for minority students. There are certain organizations or groups that predominately White people on the other hand, get into; those involve fraternities and so forth. I believe that is what I would have had available to me, and none of them promote college learning or finishing college

Ty expressed how he believed his academic experience would have been different if he were White:

> I wouldn't have been driven to be two or three times better. I would have been told, if you are good, you are going to make it. I wouldn't have been told that if you are good, you still won't make it. You have to be so much better. You just have to be outstanding and do things that are above average to be heard as a Black man or female. I welcome that challenge and I love it. Which is why if I was sent back from heaven today, what would I want to be? --a Black person.

The men's comments throughout this study revealed a strong sense of their personal identity and a firm belief in their own abilities. Additionally, in keeping with their strong sense of agency, the men were able to develop effective coping mechanisms and maintain belief systems that allowed them to progress. Although each of the men

emerged from their academic journey with a college degree, the additional yoke of negative stereotypes, academic difficulties, financial concerns, and institutional deficiencies that they carried did not leave them unscathed.

Black male coping strategies often result in a loner mentality that causes them " to distance themselves (psychologically and physically)…in order to escape the negative stereotyping associated with the group" (Roberts, 1994, p. 385). Other qualitative examinations of Black students have also indicated their need to disassociate themselves from certain racial realities in order to persist in the face of restrictive or hostile environments (J. E. Davis, 1999; R. D. Davis, 2004; Hughes, 2002; Mason, 1998; Wallace & Bell, 1999; Willie, 2003) Willie (2003) argues that how race is personally constructed has a powerful influence on resilience and self-efficacy. She suggests that race be viewed as something that is "performed and is malleable" and is not limited to a predefined set of characteristics.

For example, I noticed in reviewing the transcripts that Gary seemed to distance himself from the dilemmas of the other Black students at his senior institution. When referencing the other Black and minority students, he spoke of them as separate from himself. This became evident in his use of "them" and "they" to refer to these students. He also stated that he chose not to subscribe to the perception of many Black students that racial overtones permeated State Technical University. Gary described his personal experience with the university:

> I didn't really get that feeling. As far as instructors, many of them, they actually listened to what I had to say. They'd ask me what do you think the answer is and stuff like that, so I didn't really get that feeling. Sometimes I'd just call it paranoia for them; they are seeing things that are not there.

Yet, in a later interview Gary did acknowledge that he did believed that he was expected to fail at State Tech. When I asked what his college degree meant to him, he had this to say: "It means a tremendous amount of value to me, to be able to say I did what everyone said I couldn't. I know everybody says that, but really [the university's students and faculty] were telling me I wouldn't make it through State Tech." Gary evidently chose to avoid nonproductive perceptions in order to stay focused on his studies, which proved to be a useful strategy. Ty, Carlos, Ebraham, and Julian also conveyed in their comments that they had to find ways to neutralize thoughts of being stereotyped or marginalized in order to maintain their resolve.

Although considerable attention has been given to the shortage of Black males on college campuses, institutions must look beyond policies and programs framed from the cultural deficiency model and critically assess their role in maintaining preferential and unwelcoming campus environments (B. Smith, 2004 p. 2). Hall and Rowan (2000) speak of the educational Darwinism that exists in many universities that allows only the most talented, skilled, and personally resilient Black males to succeed. This conception does not support an effective academic pipeline. Ultimately, as Allen (1988a) concludes, the low participation and success rates of Black males and other specific populations will continue until the Academy is rid of the "smug attitude that 'higher education is not for everyone' and the accompanying behaviors that fulfill this prophesy" (p.79).

Lack of Black Faculty

For most of the men, there was a noticeable absence of Black professors at their senior institutions and in their programs. Ty, Carlos, Nephron, and Gary reported that they had no Black professors while attending the senior institution. This emerged as a

concern for a majority of the participants. Ty explained why he felt the need for Black professors in his program:

> Just to let me know that there are Black people in the field that were teaching. It would be nice to know there were Black experts and Black people who had taken time out to get a degree in that field

Ebraham had only one Black professor, and noted the void he felt as a result:

> I would have liked to see more teachers that look like me. I had Dr. [Y], [at RSU], and at SJC I had a great many. When I got to Regional State, I had Dr [Y] and that was it. . . . More Black teachers] would have made me try to work harder. I tried to do everything to make Dr. [Y] happy. I figured she looked like me she must think like me; I wish my students would do the same.

It stands to reason that due to the lack of Black males attending and graduating from college, there are only scarce numbers of Black males in the faculty ranks. The pipeline to the academy is one of the most critical concerns in higher education today. A 2002 American Association of State Colleges and Universities report states that Blacks make up only 4.8 percent of the faculty at four-year, public institutions. As discussed in Chapter 1, Jackson's (2003) study of the pipeline for Black males to upper-level administrative positions in higher education found the educational and professional attainment gaps between Black and White males widen significantly at certain points in pipeline. The largest gap is between the percentage of Black and White males holding doctoral degrees who are employed as fulltime faculty. This gap is 81 percent. This exposes additional "cracks in the human capital pipeline" (AASCU, 2002 p. 2).

Rowley (2000) and Akbar (2002) refer to the cultural and social conflict with the American academy experienced by many Black academicians. First, academic life has its own shared traditions and culture to which new faculty must be socialized. The socialization is often inadequate for Black faculty and graduate students because of the

lack of suitable mentors, the university's preoccupation with research as opposed to student development, and enduring conceptions of preferential treatment given to Black graduate students because of affirmative action. Secondly, ideological conflicts may occur between the faculty and the academy about the purposes and uses of scholarship. In that many Black faculty contend "from the standpoint of history, the transcendent aim of the African American scholar or administrator should be to further the collective advancement of Black people in American society" (Rowley, 2000 p. 92), this may or may not be compatible with the ideals of the institution.

Summary

The specific nature of how societal influences contribute to both the perception and academic progression of Black males was the central focus of this chapter. The Black male participants in this study revealed how they coped with and negotiated the effects of their race and gender in their academic pursuits. The men's personal attributes, socioeconomic status, academic experiences, and cultural backgrounds all contributed to the unique ways they navigated their academic paths.

In order to gain additional perspective on the lack of postsecondary participation of Black males, the chapter considered the general state of Black males in terms of social, economic, and educational conditions. The media images and stereotypes of Black men were examined in terms of how they have defined those conditions or resulted from them. In addition, the academic pipeline connection points of pre-college education, transition to college, and predominately White postsecondary institutions were reviewed as they related to issues of race and gender. The next and final chapter will summarize the essential conclusions of this study and their implications for educational practice.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study and a discussion of the implications and recommendations that emerged from the findings. The study was designed to learn more about the academic progression of Black males from high school through college by examining the lived experiences of six Black men who successfully completed college and earned a baccalaureate degree. The study also reviews the system of educational institutions, transition points, and processes otherwise known as the academic pipeline through which the men progressed to graduation. For the six Black men, the two-year college was a component of their academic pipeline and was, therefore, evaluated based on its function as a conduit aiding degree attainment.

Overview of the Study

The number of Black males who are participating in postsecondary education is dwindling. Graduation rates of Black males from high school and college remain low as well. Black women, however, are realizing substantial growth in both of these areas and account for the majority of the increase in Black student college enrollment. The literature identifies several conditions, factors, and traits that contribute to low Black male enrollment and high attrition rates in college. Most of this research is quantitative in nature and frames Black men from a largely deficit perspective.

This research study is qualitative in nature and as such is not intended to be generalizable; it does provide, however, dimensions of the academic progression of Black

male college graduates that have not been explored previously in the literature. First, by capturing the lived experiences of six Black males that completed the journey towards the degree, personal perspectives of an entire academic pathway were considered. Second, by analyzing an entire academic path that can be taken towards graduation, this study identified features of several institutional transition points that could have an influential effect on academic persistence. The men's narratives are rich and reflective, and those reflections expand an understanding of factors that may encourage and discourage Black males in their pursuit of the baccalaureate degree. The study also informs the current recruitment, retention, and transfer practices of institutions that are part of the academic pipeline for this population.

The study was conceived to answer this central research question: How do the participants perceive that the characteristics of the current academic pipeline, between high school graduation and college graduation, intersect with their persistence strategies and personal characteristics? More specifically, the study asks what are the various personal attributes, relationships, external influences, and institutional factors that either helped or hindered their academic progression.

The exploration of perceptions, conceptualizations, and experiences pointed to a qualitative case study methodology that was employed to gather and analyze the men's individual narratives. The six participants in the study were selected from Black male students who attended a two-year college within the last 10 years, transferred, and subsequently graduated from a four-year institution. The men ranged in age from 22-29 and were educated in a variety of settings. Two of the men were born outside the U.S. Suburban Junior College, a large, public, multi-campus institution located in a large

metropolitan area, was the only postsecondary institution common to all the men and was, therefore, considered the primary site for the study. Other postsecondary institutions attended by the men were considered as secondary sites.

Seidman's (1998) model for conducting in-depth interviews was used to gather data for the study. Each man participated in at least three hours of semi-structured interviews, divided into two to three sessions. All interviews were taped, transcribed, stored, reduced, and coded as part of the analysis process. Specific passages from the interviews were coded first based on a predefined set of themes and then refined as other themes emerged. Database software was used for data retrieval and management. To establish trustworthiness of the data, I conducted member checks with the study participants and used peer reviews by two other qualitative researchers.

Chapter 3 introduced the reader to the men of the study through their personal narratives. The six men provided details about their individual academic journey and their perspectives on the significant influences on their academic progression. Their profiles revealed that the men came from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and family structures. The size, racial makeup, geographic location, and relative prestige of the high schools and postsecondary institutions the men attended before and after coming to SJC were diverse as well.

Summary of the Major Findings

Perhaps the most significant finding is that although the Black men went down paths that were not always easy, straightforward or preferred, they did graduate from high school, matriculated at college or colleges, received degrees, and moved on to live productive and satisfying lives. Chapter 4 explored the personal attributes, relationships,

external conditions, and institutional factors that shaped the academic progression of the study participants. The men's aspirations and achievement were influenced by stereotypes, socioeconomic distinctions, academic ability, or physical location; however, they were not completely bounded by them. The study uncovered that the men shared certain characteristics, experiences, and practices that seemed related to their ability to persist and achieve in academic settings.

Personal Attributes

Through their exercise of personal agency, the men were able to take the necessary actions to keep themselves moving forward toward their desired aim. The men first had to believe that college attendance was an achievable goal. Successful academic experiences, family messages in support of education, and a sense of their own competence, uniqueness, and self-worth, contributed to their sense of self-efficacy. The basic belief that they would be successful in academic endeavors drove them to make decisions and take actions that were congruent with that belief. Continuing their college education when faced with financial, academic, and socially demoralizing obstacles and challenges reflected both endurance and resilience. Spirituality was one mechanism used by the men to bolster their determination and persistence at different points in their academic career. Also essential to their progression through college was the ability to self-regulate. The men were in touch with their own strengths and shortcomings and could therefore discern appropriate actions and behaviors that worked to their benefit. Thus, a sense of personal agency that embodies self-efficacy, endurance, resilience, and self-regulation was found to be a potent contributing factor for progression to degree attainment.

Relationships and External Factors

Family support and unwavering endorsement of education was the factor the men most often attributed to their academic attainment. The men described their families as promoting education as a means of survival, a competitive edge, and a road to financial security. The families also promoted the value of hard work, determination, and self-discipline. The theme of discipline and respect for self and others was particularly prevalent in families with a foreign-born cultural influence. The men portrayed the mother or grandmother as the most influential family member. The men also revealed that despite the strong messages about the value of education, their families did little to prepare them for the processes related to college choice and admission or for the expectations of collegiate life.

Role models and advocates were helpful to the men as guideposts, motivators, and actors at different points during their college preparation and attendance. Although none of the men specifically spoke of participating in a formal mentoring relationship, some did indicate the need to do so. Several men expressed being profoundly affected by casual or short-term interactions with role models and advocates, which indicated the importance and need for positive guidance and encouragement throughout the academic career.

Another important finding was that most of the men were introduced to the value, benefits, and social opportunities of collegiate life long before high school. This served to contextualize college attendance as a meaningful goal. Their early exposure to postsecondary education came as a result of a variety of activities such as college visits,

attendance at collegiate functions, and academic bridge programs. The men revealed that they began to look forward to attending college because of these activities.

The last external factor addressed in the study was the participation in organized sports programs during high school. Unlike some young Black males, the participants did not construe sports participation as essential to their identity or as a viable career option. This balanced and realistic perspective is a major determining factor in whether active participation in sports is a contributing or inhibiting influence on academic progression and achievement. Although the men participated in sports at various levels of intensity, the major purpose sports served for the men related to socialization and forming a network of like-minded peers.

Institutional Factors

The institutional factors that surfaced spoke to places where the academic pipeline flowed smoothly and to places where it was clogged. Compounding the lack of college planning and information made available through the family was the insufficient college preparation efforts in high school. The men indicated that their high schools did not offer a systematic presentation of what was needed to prepare for college attendance. The information that led the men to college was either late or incomplete and in several cases restricted their college options and opportunities.

A contradictory finding related to the men's perception of the role and function of the two-year college as part of the academic pipeline. The men generally perceived that SJC, a two-year college, significantly contributed to their academic preparation for senior level studies, their academic self-concept, and their leadership capability. The climate and culture of the two-year college was encouraging and stood in sharp contrast to that of

the four-year institution the men attended in terms of opportunities for recognition and relationships with faculty members and fellow students. SJC, therefore, served as an effective induction institution into higher education and for several men was the only viable point of entry.

The men noted, however, that SJC did not seem to aggressively promote transfer and completion of a four-year degree. Although ample information was available about different transfer institutions, an intentional thrust to move students to the next level was not apparent. The men identified the lack of transfer emphasis in the two-year college classroom as a deterrence to academic progression and perhaps a cause of low transfer rates. In contrast, two of the men revealed that at the four-year institutions they attended, graduate school possibilities were regularly discussed in upper level courses, which further motivated and prepared them to continue their education after college. The men's comments suggested that transfer information and expectations were not integrated sufficiently into the curriculum at the two-year college.

Race, Culture, and Gender Influences

The participants confirmed the tremendous social and economic dysfunction faced by many Black males during the critical passage from adolescence to adulthood. As part of their academic journey, they confronted academic and social stereotypes that stemmed from persistent and narrow media representations of Black men. In addition to subtle and overt indications of racial typecasting, the men were also affected by fundamental issues of class, culture, and gender. As discussed in Chapter 5, the social construction of race, class, culture, and gender shaped both their pre-college and postsecondary experiences in profound ways.

The men's natural movement through the academic pipeline, therefore, can be construed as impeded by powerful societal forces beyond their control. This suggests that in turn, compelling forces are required to keep these men progressing towards the college degree. The participants' narratives brought to light some probable forces. They are: (a) personal attributes that engender academic success, (b) strong family and community support, (c) encouragement of and assistance with college preparation and transition in high school, (d) welcoming, culturally sensitive climates in postsecondary institutions and (e) deliberate actions taken by educators at all levels to expose Black men to, prepare them for, and motivate them toward, progressively higher levels of educational attainment.

Participant Perspectives of Major Influences

Toward the end of the last interview, I asked each participant to list in order of importance the five most significant people, events, programs, factors, etc. that influenced his educational success and eventual college graduation. The men's responses provided an even deeper understanding of how they viewed their academic progression. Their ranking of the factors further confirmed the findings of this study and revealed other additional themes. Table 5 details the participants' responses.

The ranking of the factors indicate that the major influences to their academic progression were primarily relational in nature. In other words, personal interaction at various life stages seemed to hold the most meaning for the men. This, of course, confirms the majority of studies on college persistence that indicate the importance of strong support systems and personal contact to student success. However, what it also

Table 5

Participant ranking of major influences

	Carlos	Ebraham	Gary	Julian	Nephron	Ty
1	Grandmother	Father "whooping my tail in 3rd grade"*	Grandmother	PARENTS	Family	Mother
2	Grandfather	Mother	Uncle	Focusing on successful people in business and entertainment	Wanting to break societal stereotypes	Positive family expectations
3	Other members of his extended family	Observing older brothers and sisters	Mother	SJC-Leadership Opportunities	Leadership accomplish-ments at SJC	Negative environment
4	His neighbor and role model that worked at the community center	Male role models in high school	SJC-Working in tutoring lab and receiving recognition	Senior year at Church-Affiliated College	Not being able to go to a four-year college after high school	High school guidance counselor
5	The disadvantages he was able to overcome	Racial stereotype incident in high school *	Spiritual Values	Fiancée'	"Being on my own" in another state	Male role models in high school and military.

* These incidents are described in Chapter 3.

implied is that encouragement, challenge, and high academic expectations must be sustained from early childhood throughout each level of educational attainment.

Another theme that became evident in how the participants assigned value to specific factors was the importance of their experience at the two-year college. Enrollment in Suburban Junior College seemed to meet a variety of important social and academic needs for the participants. The factors listed that related to SJC were described by the men as opportunities that they did not or would not have received in other academic environments. Both of these findings suggest that a constellation of human and

academic resources (advocates, extended family members, various types of institutions) have been used effectively to help the men of the study reach their academic goals and must, therefore, be developed and employed to encourage more men through the academic pipeline.

Implications

This study allowed for an examination of the academic and social systems that lead to the baccalaureate from the perspective of six Black men. As a result, places where potential connections were missed, practices were working, and programs and services were needed were exposed. Although qualitative research does not purport to generalize, the findings may offer implications that can be considered in a variety of academic settings. For educators at all levels, this overview suggests a new framework from which to evaluate what is currently being done to promote postsecondary attainment for Black males and other underrepresented populations. The research findings can also inform statewide education systems about where potential members of an educated and productive workforce may be falling through the cracks. Perhaps most importantly, the parents, teachers and advocates of young Black males can be informed of the critical points of intervention that may influence future possibilities.

The Importance of Personal Agency

Using the personal narratives of the men of this study as the primary basis for analysis provided vivid glimpses of their character, values, ideologies, and habits that would have been obscured in a quantitative research design. The analysis revealed that the men demonstrated self-efficacy, resiliency, and self-regulation in achieving their educational goals. These attributes, unified under the rubric of agency, manifested

themselves in different ways, in varying degrees, and for different reasons. Because it was not evident that the men were born with these attributes, the development of these qualities can be considered a viable point of intervention. Thus, the development of a clear sense of personal agency may likely encourage young Black males to expand and accomplish their postsecondary aspirations in the face of misleading and diversionary media images and discouraging social conditions.

Pollard (1989) emphasizes the value of teachers and parents identifying "factors in the student or [his or her] environment which can be manipulated in some way to enhance school performance" (p. 298). Factors that promote self-efficacy, critical thinking, and resilience in young Black males can be developed by informed parents and caring and competent teachers. For example, parental demonstrations and reinforcement of hard work, discipline and striving for excellence were identified as supporting self confidence, endurance and self regulation by the men of this study as well as the successful Black male students in a study by Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998).

Likewise school practices that help students set up successful experiences with subjects they fear or have not mastered have been indicated effective in developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989, 1995; Margolis & McCabe, 2003; Pajares, 1996). Critical problem solving activities, consistent feedback, and tributes to academic achievement that are supported by teachers with high expectations, have also been correlated with positive educational trajectories (Freire, 1970; Herideen, 1998; Pollard, 1989). Schools and parents, working together can help young Black males realize their own responsibility for and capability to create sustainable academic goals.

Pushing Through the Pipeline: Coordinated State K-16 Initiatives

The study revealed that the participants did not necessarily take a planned, sequential, or efficacious pathway towards attaining their college degrees. Instead of being directed and propelled through what should be a seamless public education system, the men primarily had to navigate independently through complicated and misaligned channels. This can be attributed to a lack of coordination between high schools and postsecondary institutions and between various levels within higher education. As outlined extensively by Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio in *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations* (2003?), the lack of coordination and collaboration between public high schools, two-year colleges, and universities actually thwarts college attendance and threatens the successful progression through the academic pipeline.

As the men spoke of their various college transitions, they conveyed that information and services were available at the high school and two-year college level. However, they also noted that the lack of consistent, systematic, and targeted direction to the next level of educational attainment was not present. Again, the pipeline metaphor is put forward to illustrate the need to go beyond simply making such information and services available. The development of an effective pipeline for underrepresented groups begins with the assumption that sufficient numbers are not progressing through the currently available channels. Thus, efforts must be made to push, drive, or otherwise compel movement toward the desired end.

With the help of statewide K-16 initiatives, school systems must gain a clear understanding of the minimum competencies necessary for collegiate success and build

their college preparatory curriculum around these competencies. Similarly, colleges and universities that do not responsibly collaborate with local school systems run the risk of creating or perpetuating formidable chasms between secondary and postsecondary education. In addition, all types of postsecondary institutions that are able to serve as part of an academic path to college graduation (two-year transfer colleges, accredited technical institutes, universities and colleges) need to examine the efficacy of their transfer connections.

The men in the study were eventually able to navigate through various transition points; however, some also indicated that they took some unnecessary detours that may have been avoided if the channels between different levels of education were more transparent. For example, Ty found that the middle school bridge program sponsored by the school system in Illinois (described in Chapter 3) aided his transition from middle school to high school. Had this same type of orientation to the next level of study been provided in high school, he may have been better prepared for his first collegiate experience. Likewise, similar efforts on the two-year college level may have helped Carlos avoid some of the "transfer shock" he experienced when transferring to his alma mater and expanded the transfer options of Nephron and Julian.

K-12 Programs and Practices that Enhance College Exploration and Preparation

This study revealed that the Black male participants were not fully aware of the requirements, processes, or expectations of college enrollment. Many school systems rely on college fairs or occasional recruitment visits from local colleges to provide college information for students. This assumes that the high school student (a) will receive thorough, unbiased information from which to make an informed college choice,

and (b) is already aware of the steps necessary for college admission and financing their education. The literature tells us, however, that college choice and transition is a complex, culturally bound process (Freeman, 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Kelpe Kern, 2000; Kim, 2004).

A more effective approach calls for local school systems to be more proactive in their efforts to promote college attendance. Every high school would benefit from a well-defined and managed system for encouraging college and career awareness and the dissemination of college testing information (including the core requirements for admission to likely college choices), and financial aid resources that begins in the 9th grade. Responsible school systems would then ensure these systems are in place and functioning at all high schools.

School systems must be held accountable for setting the tone for high expectations and progress of all students regardless of their race, address, or social position. Two tiered academic systems that direct students to either vocational or college preparatory curriculums in high schools should be closely monitored and critically assessed for racial balance. Likewise, the inequities associated with racially re-segregated school districts cannot be ignored. Simply citing the egregious socioeconomic conditions or ascribing a culture of academic resistance to Black males is not a sufficient explanation for consistently low high school graduation rates. As Thornton (2004) postulates, school systems that are able to identify the connection between school practices and the social and environmental realities of their students are more likely to effect change. In addition, successful programs and practices have been developed in various states that refute the notion that low graduation and achievement rates among

Black men is inevitable. There are numerous examples of educators who have had tremendous success with poor and under achieving students learning at the highest levels (Bailey, 2003; Dawson-Threat, 1997; Evans, 2001; Garibaldi, 1992; Hilliard, 2003).

Maximizing the Role of Two-year Colleges as Postsecondary Conduits

For some scholars and pundits, the role of the two-year college is merely a philosophical or political debate, but for Black and other minority students, this college sector is central to aspirations of, access to, and attainment of postsecondary education (Herideen, 1998; Laanan, 2001). The fact remains, however, that two-year colleges enroll over 47 percent of all undergraduates, many of whom are seeking transfer credit that will lead to a four-year degree (AACC, 2005). Given that fact, research that suggests that students are somehow hindered from attaining a baccalaureate degree by two-year college attendance seems almost irrelevant, as long as such large numbers of students continue to enroll with their degree aspirations in hand (K. Dougherty, 1987; Monk-Turner, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the men of the study indicated weaknesses in how the transfer process was operationalized at SJC. Their criticisms concurred with what Lee (2001) and Zamani (2001) found as issues with minority students negotiating transfer from two to four-year institutions. Their findings indicate that transfer policies and procedures were often confusing or inaccurate as explained by two-year college staff. Institutions also lacked an overall "culture of transfer" that featured dedicated programs and spaces related to college transfer resources. Students often adopted a self-reliant posture as they approached the transfer stage, preferring to get information from senior institution personnel (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

Two-year colleges that admit students into transfer programs must take the responsibility to ensure these students move to the next level. Two-year colleges should develop intrusive programs for making students aware of transfer requirements and procedures. These programs should also promote major selection and defining career interests by their second year of study. Too many students are too often allowed to take courses indefinitely, having no clear academic purpose or career goal in mind (Eaton, 1988; Laanan, 2001; W. Lee, 2001; Zamani, 2001). And this lack of academic focus is closely related to a student's failure to transfer (Blau, 1999; Trujillo & Diaz, 1999).

Monitoring of the Social and Academic Climate in Colleges and Universities

The academy must engage in rigorous self-study on how its academic climate promotes learning and socialization of all students (Walter R. Allen, 1988a; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Harris, 1999; Hughes, 2002; Wallace & Bell, 1999). Instead of just course monitoring and assessment, perhaps consistently monitoring the academic progress of student populations that reflect different races and genders is in order as well. The curriculum, designed for one homogeneous population, may no longer be valid considering a more multicultural student body (Modood, Acland, & Policy Studies Institute., 1998). The question of whether women and minorities are progressing as well as White males in certain disciplines is one that should be asked and answered by universities. This, of course, would require a radical paradigm shift in how higher education institutions perceive themselves in relation to the students they serve.

The Need for Conscious and Diverse Educators and Inclusive Curricula

The academic experiences shared by the men illustrated instances where schools and teachers failed these Black men. From making false assumptions about their ability

or character to failing to encourage postsecondary attainment actively and intentionally, some educators have not done enough to support the aspirations of Black males.

Educators, individually and collectively, need to analyze their assumptions and beliefs related to Black males, mainstream education, and academic practice. What principles and values are being communicated to students about their societal roles and future possibilities? There is also the need for teacher education programs to assess the amount of social justice and cultural understanding that is infused into the curriculum. This entails going beyond adding a perfunctory class on diversity. Does a clear intention and plan exist to develop both competent and socially conscious teachers to meet the critical teacher shortage? The stakes are much too high for beginning teachers to leave teacher education programs without the ability to critically analyze the social and political implications of their pedagogical preferences, world view, and concepts of race, class and gender for the students they teach.

The face of education must also reflect the inclusion of Black males. Two participants specifically identified Black male high school teachers as positive influences in their academic pursuits. The literature also supports the importance of young Black boys seeing strong and caring Black males in their classrooms (Garibaldi, 1992; Hopkins, 1997). Effective programs that have targeted the recruitment and training of Black male teachers should be studied and implemented in teacher education programs where this population is grossly underrepresented. The demand, however, for more culturally and ethnically diverse teachers is not enough. There must also be a demand for teachers that value education as an agent for social mobility and opportunity.

Recommendations for Further Research

The implications for additional research on Black males and the academic progression to college are vast and wide. Studies that compare Black males to other Black males of different cultural backgrounds, in different institutional settings, across different disciplines, and so forth are necessary to move the current body of research from a deficit perspective to one that reveals the complexities of their experiences. The difference, if any, between the educational messages and expectations shared in West Indian families compared to African American families is a line of inquiry that provides an additional dimension to the research on college success factors for Black males (Harris, 1999; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Ross, 1998).

Many of the critical studies on Black male educational achievement, attainment, and experiences in higher education were done in the 1980s and early 1990s (Walter R. Allen, 1986, 1988a; J. E. Davis, 1994; Dunn, 1988; Fleming, 1984; Fuhrmann & Others, 1991; Garibaldi, 1992; Lang, 1992; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Weis, 1985; Wharton, 1988). The higher education milieu has changed in significant ways since that time. Attacks on affirmative action and the advent of "race neutral" admission policies, the investigation of graduation rates of NCAA institutions, cuts in federal financial aid, and the continued decline in Black male enrollment compared to Black females are all legitimate lines of inquiry related to educational attainment issues for Black males.

Further qualitative explorations of Black males at various points in the academic pipeline are also warranted. It would be useful to compare the lived experiences of those who made a successful transition at specific points and those who did not. Additionally, ethnographic investigations of Black male students in two-year college and four-year

institutions, similar to that of Weis' *Between Two Worlds* (1985), should also provide additional perspectives of the degree that cultural dissonance remains between Black males and academic culture. Studies on how Black males experience instructional support programs, transfer initiatives, and mentoring programs in various postsecondary settings could lead to effective institutional interventions for this population. .

Additional inquiry is also needed on strategies that work to promote seamless transitions between high school and college graduation. Successful initiatives that have proven to increase the transfer rates at two-year college for specific populations should be carefully studied and replicated. Another comprehensive longitudinal study of Black students in higher education, based on the model of *The National Study of Black College Students* conducted by Allen et al. from 1981- 1986 is also warranted. It has been over 20 years since a data set existed that could be used to compare Black students to other Black students at both predominately White and historically Black institutions based on a variety of factors. In light of the dramatic increase of Black students on predominately White campuses, this data could inform policy and practice of higher education related to Black students for the next decade.

Conclusion

The growing trend of Black males vanishing from the academy is a revealing symptom of a much larger dilemma of educational access and equity in American higher education. Each Black man that is left out of the highly competitive global workforce because of the lack of postsecondary education contributes to the destabilization of the Black family, future generations of Black children, the collective Black community, the national economy, and the global influence of this nation. Deliberate investigation of this

dilemma and its symptoms is central to the very fabric of a progressive and democratic society and critical to the future opportunity of its citizens. As Black males continue to "swim upstream" in the academic pipeline, families, communities, educators, schools, and post secondary institutions all have a role in moving them through the channels or at least keeping the passageway clear of obstacles.

The voices of the Black male participants who so generously shared their lives for this project have allowed for an increased understanding of the transitions, setbacks, challenges, and opportunities on the path to reaching an educational goal. It is only fitting that this study concludes with those same voices. As a subscriber to the belief in the liberating and transformative function of higher education, I have not found any better indication of that ideal than in the participants' comments about the meaning and possibilities of their degree attainment for them and their communities.

> Gary: One of my goals is to actually build a school, for Black people, basically for kids, and it would provide them with what they are not getting in today's schools. It would be free of cost, which you'd have to be successful to make that possible.
>
> Nephron: I always said that I would open math and science centers in urban areas for young Black children to learn and to be exposed to those things.
>
> Carlos: College gives you an appreciation. Now you can go back and research things. It will always give you a reference point: let me check this out for myself and see what other ideas are out there.
>
> Ty: It's the old adage do what you would do, if you were not getting paid. You'll do well because it is what you love to do. I am a youth basketball coach, I am a youth mentor, I love to go into a park and clean up. I love to show people about managing their money. I love to do all of those things.
>
> Julian: I definitely think I am influencing people. I know that the lumps I took gave me more confidence because I did accomplish my degree. Any youth that I talk to, I can say if I finished college, you can too. I don't have that opportunity everyday, but I can say it too my cousins. They

know what I have been through so it gives more validity to what I'm saying.

Ebraham: In my classroom where I have speckles of Black students, they ask me where I went to college and …how many degrees do you have? Three. They are like why are you here with us? I say because I choose to be. Just because I am Black does not mean I need to stop [going to school]. I want to be a role model for them, I dress well, and I make sure I wear a tie everyday. I make sure they see an example of a successful Black man and a teacher doing well.

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