Perceptions of African-American Males on Retention: Two Focus Groups

Terrance Christopher George

Western Kentucky University, chris.george@wku.edu
PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES ON RETENTION:

TWO FOCUS GROUPS

A Specialist Project
Present to
The Faculty of the Department of Educational Administration, Leadership and Research
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Specialist in Education

By
Terrance Christopher George

August 2011
PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES ON RETENTION:
TWO FOCUS GROUPS

Date Recommended July 18, 2011

Dr. Sharon Spall, Director of Thesis

Dr. Gayle Ecton

Dr. David Coffey

Kercheal C. Doerner 8-Aug-2011
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date
Acknowledgements

My educational journey has been a long one, a journey where I have encountered so many people, too many to thank each one. I hesitate to write this because so many people have been influential in my life. The late Robert F. Kennedy said, “Some see things and say why? I dream things that never were and say why not? This is dedicated to all those that helped me along my journey of saying why not. However, I would be remise if I did not thank some very special people.

First to my colleagues at WKU Student Support Services, your unwavering support means so much: Carolyn, Kim, Mike, Ken and Mary Ann, you pick up my slack when I am gone, you call me out when I need it, and you lift me up when I am down. Most of all thanks for supporting my continued growth professionally and educationally.

In the closing frames of the movie Finding Forrester it is said, “We run away from our hopes and dreams afraid that we may fail or worst afraid that we might succeed.” To my committee, thank you for not allowing me to run away. Dr. Sharon Spall, thank you for never giving up on me, more than once you should have kicked me to the curb, but you never did, I will always appreciate that. You often believe in me more than I believe in myself. Dr. Gayle Ecton, you will always be my Obi Wan Kenobi. You told me from the very beginning, “I can only take you so far,” but you have been there every step of the way. Also, thank you for lifting me when I was down, and chastising me when necessary. When I need you, you are always there to listen. Dr. David (Doc) Coffey, thank you for being one of my biggest cheerleaders in all that I do. You always support me in all that I do, when I am right and when I am wrong.
To my lifelong friend Dr. James McCaslin, you have been awesome as I worked on my EDS project. Thank you for helping with the formatting and the advice. I never would not have finished if you were not there to help. We have come a long way from Caldwell County High School.

To a few important people that have influenced my education: Dr. Richard Stone, Dr. M.B. Lucas, Dr. Carlton Jackson for some reason you saw something in me and decided to take an active interest in education. I would not be where I am today educationally or professionally without you. Thank you for taking a chance on me.

To Mrs. Nancy Baker, you made a decision when I was in third grade that changed my life. Thank you for knowing what I needed, your decision has afforded me many wonderful opportunities, and allowed me to go places I never would have gone.

To Diana Yonts, thanks for always typing my papers during the days I did not know how to type. I am sure it was a task to transposing my hand written scratch. I never would have gotten my first degree without you.

To Mike and Martha Kenney, thank you for being there personally and professionally, I cannot express how important the two of you are to me.

Most importantly, to my mother Pat George, my aunt Flossie Blakely and my late grandma Ophelia Grooms thank you for being my number one fans. You are the wind beneath my wings. Each of you has always sacrificed, so that I can fly. You put me before you put yourselves, and I can never tell you how much I really appreciate your love and support.

Finally, this is to all those that went through the back door, so I might have the opportunity to go through the front. Your sacrifice still has meaning.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................x

Introduction ..................................................................................................1

Problem .......................................................................................................2

Question .......................................................................................................2

Purpose ........................................................................................................2

Significance .................................................................................................2

Limitations ...................................................................................................4

Literature Review ........................................................................................5

Issues impacting the retention of Black male students .......................7

Issues of first-generation college students .........................................9

Perceptions of first-generation college students ..............................10

Induction ....................................................................................................12

Experiences as a college student .............................................................15

Student expectations ................................................................................15

Institutional commitment to retention of Black males ..................16

Mentoring ....................................................................................................17

Mentoring and retention ..........................................................................18

Same race mentoring: Yes or no? .......................................................19

Institutional programs for mentoring ..................................................23

Conclusion ..................................................................................................25

Method ........................................................................................................26

Introduction .................................................................................................26
Role of the researcher .................................................................26
Setting ......................................................................................28
Data sources ..............................................................................29
Data gathering ...........................................................................30
Focus group interviews ..............................................................30
   Documents ..............................................................................32
   Questionnaire ..........................................................................32
Data analysis ..............................................................................33
Trustworthiness .........................................................................34
   Peer debriefing .......................................................................35
   Reflexive journal ....................................................................35
   Maintaining the audit trail ....................................................36
Findings .......................................................................................38
Focus Group Question I .............................................................39
   Away from home .................................................................39
   Meeting new people .............................................................39
   Campus experiences .........................................................40
Focus Group Question II ...........................................................40
   Family ..................................................................................41
   Mentors .................................................................................42
   Organizations ........................................................................42
   Other information ..............................................................42
Focus Group Question III .......................................................... 43
  First view ............................................................. 43
  Class seating ...................................................... 44
  Majors .............................................................. 44
  South campus ...................................................... 45
Focus Group Question IV ..................................................... 46
  Parents ............................................................. 46
  Mother/father ..................................................... 47
  Siblings ............................................................. 47
  Growing up ......................................................... 48
  Friends ............................................................. 48
  Black people ....................................................... 48
  Professors .......................................................... 49
Focus Group Question V ........................................................ 50
  Blacks on campus .................................................. 50
  South campus ...................................................... 50
  Time management .................................................. 51
  Socialization ........................................................ 51
Focus Group Question VI ........................................................ 52
  Desire for success ................................................... 52
  “Chasing a dream” .................................................. 52
  Circumstance ........................................................ 53
  “College isn’t for everyone” ...................................... 53
Fitting in ............................................................................................... 53

Focus Group Question VII ................................................................. 54

“Not an option” .................................................................................. 54

“Never but times get tough” ............................................................... 55

“Yes, have considered leaving” ......................................................... 55

Focus Group Question VIII ............................................................... 55

Diversity ............................................................................................. 56

Stigma ................................................................................................. 56

Role models ....................................................................................... 56

Summary ............................................................................................ 57

Discussion and Conclusions ............................................................. 58

Findings and the research question ................................................... 58

Findings and the literature review .................................................... 61

The Research Process: Building Knowledge ..................................... 67

Development of research skills ......................................................... 67

My personal research experience .................................................... 76

Contributions to professional practice .......................................... 78

Benefits of the research ................................................................. 79

Limitations ....................................................................................... 79

Recommendations for future research ............................................. 80

Summary .......................................................................................... 81

Reference List .................................................................................. 83
The intent of this study was to identify the issues that impact the retention of African-American, Black males in college. The study was of two small focus groups comprised of African-American students of various grade classifications from a regional comprehensive university in the southeast. These focus groups were comprised of up to but no more than six students. The decision on the group size was made to allow all of the students’ ample opportunity to respond to the eight questions used in the focus groups. The student groups attended the university main campus as well as the university South Campus where developmental courses are taught. The students were from both rural and urban backgrounds, as well as single parent and traditional family backgrounds.

Various themes emerged as a result of this study which includes: importance of family support prior to college and during the student’s college career. Additionally, the role of mentors was identified as affecting the student’s retention in college. There was also discussion of how Black males are viewed on campus by other Black students, as well as other students and the faculty and staff.
It can be concluded that several factors have affected the retention of this small group of African-American males in higher education. The information gathered shows that family support is a key cog in the retention of this group; in addition, the role of mentors in their education was very important to this group of students.
Introduction

Student retention has been an aspect of higher education that has been studied dating back to the 1960’s (Lang, 1992). As the years pass, many have studied the different aspects of retention (Lang, 1992). Almost fifty years later, studies on retention are still viable since many states have started to tie higher education funding to retention. In the recent past, public higher education funding has shifted from allocations based on admission to allocations based on retention and graduation (Lang, 1992).

Even more important, and more pressing, is the retention of minorities, especially African-American, Black males. This demographic remains one of the most at-risk populations in the higher education (Lang, 1992). This study is intended to determine factors which help African-American males stay in college. Using a focus group approach, twelve African-American male students will be interviewed and observed.

This study focused on student perceptions of the aspects that aid in their continued persistence toward a baccalaureate degree. The focus group participants were given prompts for them to discuss the things that might impact their education. Another prompt concerned the role peers have played in the higher education career of the focus group participants. Other prompts included the roles of institutional commitment, and roles of family and friends.

This study provides information from an African-American student prospective regarding things that impact retention. This student provided information gives insight into the things this group find important. The information also provides details about the factors this group feels may aid in increasing retention of African-American males.
Problem

African-American males are one of the most at risk population in higher education in regards to retention (Lang, 1992). After years of research, and vast amounts of university resources dedicated to the retention of Black males, this population continues to lag behind all other demographic groups (Lang, 1992). Black males are retained at a lower rate from the first year to the second year. Black males also graduate at a far lower rate than all other demographics of students in higher education (Lang, 1992).

Question

What type of experiences do African-American males view as having an impact of their retention in college?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine how some African-American male student’s view the experiences that help them remain in college. This study had African-American male students answer questions in focus groups setting. The focus group participants discussed questions about the people who influenced their college life. Other questions allowed the focus group participants to discuss obstacles they have had to overcome, as well as reasons that cause African-American males to leave college.

Significance

This project is significant for several reasons. First, it has the possibility to help university retention efforts. The information from the focus groups could assist university administrators to develop programming to assist in the retention of all students, including African-American males. Also, the findings can better inform the university
faculty, staff and administrators who work with African-American male students on a daily basis. This information could enlighten university personnel about academic and social experiences. In addition to helping those that work with African-American male students, the study findings could provide insight for administrators from the perspective of the student because these students discussed factors that helped them persist in higher education.

Additional significance comes from the impact it has made on the researcher. Professionally, I can now employ focus group research to gain information of topics that needs investigation within my department. Also, it provided a new insight into looking at students and the problems they face. Now, I will not make assumptions about students and their issues.

This project was a means for gaining limited insight into the problems that hinder African-American males as they attempt to obtain advanced education. It is also important from the perspective of hearing from students about the factors that help African-American males overcome educational barriers and boundaries. This project was also significant to the students taking part in the sessions. They were given the opportunity to hear other students discuss their problems, issues and ways to overcome barriers.

Finally, this study could be very important research to people working directly with retention and African-American students. For example, people working in academic advising and retention programs encounter African-American students with various problems that can result in non-retention. As detailed in the literature review that follows, many talented African-American males leave college for reasons that go
individually unexamined. To support the education of African-American males, this situation appears to require study for a deeper insight into factors that produce academic and social success and investigate the reasons students tend to disappear. I have long felt that it is my calling to help other Black males succeed and obtain a better education. The only way I can complete my task is to study the issues that serve as the stumbling blocks for Black males and to gain a deeper insight into the factors that help produce success. This study provided a deeper look into the some of the problems that exist on a public regional, southeastern, predominately White campus.

**Limitations**

The main limitation of this study was the number of students in the focus groups. Because this study was restricted to two focus groups of less than twelve students were included in the sample. Additionally, only six questions comprised each focus group session in order to allow ample opportunity for each participant to express his opinion. In the focus group format, the number of students must be kept small in order to allow each participant an ample opportunity to express his opinion. Also, the group size must remain small to control the length of time for each session.

The following sections include the background and procedures of this study. The literature review, methods findings and discussion/conclusion are followed by the references and appendences.
Literature Review

Introduction

Currently, student retention represents an important movement in higher education (Tierney, 1999). With an emphasis on producing more students with degrees, college administrators have allocated record amounts of resources to retain students (Tierney, 1999). In addition, significant and far-reaching strategies have been devised to increase educational attainment and opportunity (Tierney, 1999). The focus on retention has caused states to shift from the practice of funding based on admission, toward a policy of funding allocation tied to retention of students after enrollment (Tierney, 1999). Of the many retention movements, a considerable amount of attention has been directed toward the retention of minorities, especially African-American, Black males (Ryu, 2009).

Specific research related to the success of Black students in higher education did not begin until the late 1980’s (Robinson, 1990). The research trend of studying the factors that contributed to the success and failures of Black students culminated in the late 1990’s (Rowser, 1997). Retention has been a significant problem dating back to the days of integration in the late 1960’s. From the earliest days, researchers accepted that poor and working classes are less likely to attend college (Tierney, 1999). To counteract the lack of attendance, colleges and universities placed a special emphasis on recruitment of ethnic minorities. Then, the attendance problem was corrected allowing colleges and universities to focus on the problem of attraction within minority populations. There is a perception that Black as well as Hispanics and Native American students were less likely to attain a degree than their White and Asian counterparts (Tierney, 1999). This
perception presents a cause and effect scenario. The high attraction percentages lead to a shift away from recruitment and admission and a movement towards retention and persistence.

When the focus shifted toward retention and persistence, researchers began to use the theory of Vincent Tinto (Tinto, 1993). Tinto’s theory of student departure became the model to build retention programming at all levels of higher education. During this period Tinto’s persistence/attrition framework, which is based on per-entry attributes, institutional experiences, goals, and commitment guided research and programming (Tinto, 1993). Those researching retention of Black males such as Rowser (1997) have studied pre-college or post admission factors using Tinto’s framework.

Research, such as that of Rice and Alford (1989) support the belief that the retention of Black college students remains a major issue of concern and said students remain highly at risk. Even in the wake of modest enrollment gains, people of color still remain the most underrepresented demographic group at every degree level (Collison, 2000). An even more troubling piece of information reveals that Black males comprise the most at-risk demographic group on college campuses (Cuyjet, 1997). A review of the retention rates shows that all Black students are retained at 32% as compared to 50% for White students (Robinson, 1990). The enrollment numbers are even lower for Black males (Robinson, 1990). Black students’ retention rates fluctuate according to whether the institution is a predominately White institution (PWI) or a historically Black college or university (HBCU) (Rice & Alford, 1989).

Rice and Alford (1989) determined that the shift in enrollment numbers has skewed the retention figures to indicate Black students are being retained at a lower level.
As part of their study Rice and Alford (1989) tried to identify the factors that contributed to Black student attrition. The object of the study was to determine the factors that affect retention of Black students, specifically undergraduate Black students (Rice & Alford, 1989).

To gather the data, students were asked to complete a retention survey during the registration process. The twenty-four question survey ranged from demographic information to asking students to rank university services. To enhance the credibility and validity of the study, 176 Black undergraduate students who did not return to school were mailed a similar survey. Of the 176 students that were mailed a survey, 75 completed it. The non-returning students were asked the same questions; however, they were also asked to indicate the reason they did not return to school. The findings of the survey revealed that most Black students did not return due to personal or financial reasons rather than academic reasons (Rice & Alford, 1989).

Rice and Alford (1989) also noted a current trend of more Black students choosing to attend HBCU’s, which hurts the retention percentages for PWI’s. With more Black students attending HBCU’s, those institutions will have higher retention percentages and cause the perception that PWI’s have lower retention percentages. It must be noted that the findings of the Rice and Alford study were obtained by survey with no follow up.

**Issues Impacting the Retention of Black Male Students**

The following review of literature will identify the issues that affect retention of Black male students. Black male students, as compared to other demographic groups, have a higher attrition rate in higher education (Lang, 1992). In the following review
various studies will be cited to provide supporting evidence regarding higher education retention initiatives involving Black males. The three major topics will be the issues of first-generation college students, induction experience, and experiences as a college student. Included in types of experiences as a college student topic will be sub-topics that discuss student expectations, institutional commitment to retention, and mentoring. As support for the topics, there will be sub-topics to further break down the issues that impact retention. Within each topic and sub-topic, there will be information from studies that discuss the different methods used by HBCU’s as compared to those used by PWI’s. Also, studies that explore different mentoring models will be reviewed. Finally, there will be information to explore the ideas of survival guilt and cultural suicide as factors related to Black male student retention.

Recent trends in achievement have led to questions about the pre-college preparation of Black students (Lang, 1992). Are Black males as prepared for higher education as their counterparts? According to a study by Rowser (1997) who surveyed 1,107 entering Black freshman students at a Midwestern university, of the males surveyed 90% reported that they were adequately prepared for higher education course work (Rowser, 1997, pp. 719-720). Of the same cohort group only 1% believed their first semester grade-point average would be lower than a 2.0. The survey asked questions pertaining to academic preparation, expected grade point average (gpa), expected graduation year, as well as personal and social preparation questions. The survey found that most of the surveyed students felt they would not have any problems making friends or adjusting to being away from home, yet 95% (Rowser, 1997, p. 720) of the group surveyed indicated that their social and personal preparation was the least adequate of
their skills. These findings suggest that Black males should be provided with accurate information about the college experience, which could help the students develop realistic expectations, and possibly eliminate unnecessary frustrations (Rowser, 1997). In addition to the lack of understanding expectations, the statistics in the findings do not support the unrealistic expectations of the students surveyed. There was no method of observation, and the study did not include any follow up data to compare the survey results with the actual outcomes.

**Issues of First-Generation College Students**

First-generation college students are a marginalized group that goes relatively unnoticed in the world of higher education (Hand & Payne, 2008). Hand and Payne (2008), suggest that this may happen because some may not look different like as other marginalized groups, such as Hispanics or African-Americans. Also, as mentioned by Hand and Payne, first-generation student are viewed as not needing help, which is a big problem.

For the first-generation student the various initial experiences on the college campus are typically their first encounters with higher education. First-generation students by definition are students that come from a family where neither parent has obtained a four-year college degree prior to the student’s entry into higher education Hand and Payne (2008). This section of the literature review will contain studies that discuss the perceptions of first-generation college students, as well as special programs that exist to assist first-generation college students.
Perceptions of First-Generation College Students

According to the study by Collier and Morgan (2008), the first-generation student population poses a unique type of retention concern. As outlined in the background information of the above study, the first-generation college student tends to suffer with social problems, which in turn lead to academic problems. Additionally, Collier and Morgan (2008) note that first-generation students tend to suffer when it comes to understanding expectations of faculty and expectations of coursework quality (pp. 432-433).

In their study, Collier and Morgan (2008) used a two-tiered study to interview both faculty and students in focus groups. The two faculty focus groups were broken down into a group that taught business and a group that taught liberal arts. The second tier of the study was two focus groups of students. One focus group was made up of first-generation college students of various ethnicities; the other group was made up of students from a traditional college background. The common themes that emerged from all focus groups in the study were expectations on assignments, and issues related to student and faculty communications. Additionally, the first-generation student group expressed concerns about not always having a detailed syllabus and needing clear expectations outlined by faculty. The first-generation group also discussed concerns about appropriate ways to contact the professor before or after class regarding course requirements.

A study by Hand and Payne (2008) used a phenomenological approach to gain the perspectives of individual student experiences. This approach allowed the researchers to gain in depth data on first-generation students, one of which was a student from
Appalachia. The nine students were enrolled in special program designed for first-generation students. These students were participants in the Student Support Services (SSS) program. According to the study, this program is charged with assisting first-generation and low-income students with retention issues. The SSS program worked to increase retention and graduation rates, as well as facilitate a successful transition from one level of education to another (Hand & Payne, 2008). The findings in this study indicate that students had concerns about finances, relationships and support, as well as how information is communicated. The Hand and Payne (2008) study also found that the students interviewed saw themselves at not academic disadvantage as compared to other students.

Special programs exist in most colleges and universities to support first-generation college students (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Pitre and Pitre’s, article reviewed the programs of Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound, which are designed to work with first-generation students. According to the report, these programs provided successful early intervention strategies and used counseling services which identified barriers to academic achievement. To support the impact of the Upward Bound program Pitre and Pitre (2009) cited the Mathematica Policy research study. The nationwide Mathematica study was conducted to gage the effectiveness of the Upward Bound program. The study compared students served by the program to students not served by the program. The study revealed an increase in credits earned by students enrolled in the Upward Bound program as compared to those not enrolled in Upward Bound. The Mathematica study used a random sample of 2800 Upward Bound students and 2800 non-Upward Bound students. The research found that 30% of the Upward Bound
students attained their degree within a 10 year period as compared to 13% of the non-Upward Bound students.

**Induction**

Induction into the university environment may be one the most important initiatives to assist in retention of Black male students (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure states that students must be immersed into their new environment fully to make a successful transition. Tinto states that while the social integration process happens for most White students informally, the same is not true for Black students. Guiffrida (2003) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 88 African-American students about their involvement with campus organizations. Guiffrida (2003) used small focus groups to collect data. The focus groups started with open-ended questions, and transitioned to questions that asked students describing their college experiences. Later in the study, questions were asked about stumbling blocks and liabilities. The research sample included students ranging from freshman to seniors; also, students that were active with campus organizations and those not active in organizations were included in the sample. The author found that campus organizations were prevalent as agents of social integration. One potential limitation of the study results from the fact that 67 of the 88 participants were enrolled in an academic enrichment program for students on academic probation.

A qualitative study by Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) explored both the academic and social experiences of high achieving male and female Black students in a northeastern university. Students involved in this study reported they felt they were judged and unfairly stereotyped based on racial stereotypes of African-Americans. The
authors used a case study method to support data on the subjects studied. Each student completed a demographic questionnaire, and then took part in semi-formal interviews with one of the researchers. According to the findings most students expressed that they felt the need to monitor their behaviors and not reinforce prevailing stereotypes on campus. Also, many expressed concern stemming from the fact that at many events or in organizations they felt they were the “token” (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 518). There are a few limitations in the Fries-Britt and Griffin study; first, like many studies it surveys high-achieving students, ones that will be more concerned with the impression they make, and second, it was conducted only with students enrolled in the honors college.

A study by Harper and Nichols (2008) chronicles the similarities and difference of Black men in higher education. The study proves that Black men for the most part do not share the same common experiences and backgrounds. Their sample was comprised of students from three private liberal arts institutions. At the three institutions, Black students made up anywhere from 6.5% to 7.2% of the student body (Harper & Nichols, 2008, pp. 201-202). The 39 students selected participated in focus groups. The focus groups discussed the differences in dress, language and cultural interest. The conceptual framework of this study stresses the importance of studying the differences in Black men, instead of the similarities. The findings highlighted the complex nature of the Black male sub-group. It was noted that Black men from affluent neighborhoods were less likely to identify with other Black men, largely because they had not done so growing up (Harper & Nichols). The most important finding was the stereotypes Black males had of other Black males. The most prevailing intergroup stereotype stemmed from notions about their peer’s background (Harper & Nichols, 2008, pp. 210-211).
Other studies detail the effects of stereotyping on Black students. Due to the stereotyping that exists, Black male students began to experience a feeling that they do not fit into their new environment, but now they are also beginning to become alienated from the home and familiar environment as well (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). A new phenomenon has emerged once the Black male begins to experience alienation. It has been observed that many Black males began the process of self-sabotage in order to regain acceptance in a familiar comfortable environment (Lang & Ford, 1992). This idea of self-sabotage or self-destruction is intertwined in a larger concept, that of survival conflict and survival guilt. Survival guilt involves “guilt of having survived when others, who seemed to be equally, if not more deserving, did not survive” (Christie & Dinham, 1991, p.431-432.). The broader concept is one of survival and conflict. The student questions why did he make it and his peers did not. These beliefs suggest that Black males have an adverse reaction to surpassing the accomplishments of family members and friends.

In a study by Christie and Dinham (1991) that details social integration during the freshman year, some factors that help trim the effects of survival guilt and survival conflict are offered. The study is based on the model of Tinto (1993) and suggests that some type of suicide (academic or cultural), will occur when students are insufficiently integrated into the campus culture. The study was conducted using a three stage interview process; it was not limited to African-American students. At each stage of the interview process students were asked questions about their friends and how their friendship aided in integration into higher education. The most telling findings are how high-school friends affected the integration process. Most of the twenty-five students in
the study expressed some conflict as it related to trying to hold onto high school friendship while developing new ones at college. While the Christie and Dinham (1991) study was not limited to Black students, it validates the notion that many first-year students are coping and trying to live in two varying environments. As for Black males, they may be trying to live and cope in three environments: home, community, and the college environment. Three groups emerged from the Christie and Dinham (1991) study. The first group was defined as isolated; this group is living in their new environment but not fully integrated, yet they had separated from the secondary school environment. The isolated group had the highest risk of withdrawal. Next, there was the more integrated group, they were living in their new environment and had begun the successful separation from their secondary environment. Finally, the third group was attempting to live dual lives. This dual membership group wanted to immerse themselves into their old environment, while integrating into their new one (Christie & Dinham, 1991, p. 432).

Experiences as a College Student

The experiences of the students refer to those events that shape and affect their retention. In regards to underrepresented minorities such as African-American males, colleges and universities intensified efforts to implement programs that attract and retain students in this demographic (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). In this section, literature will be discussed that delves into commitment by the university, as well as student related issues. Primarily, this section will include the role of mentoring and the institutional commitment to retain minority students.

Student expectations. First-generation status, i.e., neither parent having obtained a four-year college degree, impacts the retention of Black male students (Somer,
Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004). Somer et al., indicates that most Black males come from a first-generation background. In fact first-generation status may be the biggest preparation and expectation issue facing Black males (Somer et al., 2004). Somer et al also said that most Black males matriculate into higher education without any idea of the challenges and changes they will be facing. The investigators of this study further found that most first-generation students going to college suffer a major feeling of separation anxiety from the sub-culture of their family, which causes personal and psychological issues that could factor in student persistence (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000). The idea of cultural alienation will be discussed further later in the literature review.

**Institutional commitment to retention of Black males.** According to Campbell and Campbell (1997) the institutional commitment to raising the retention percentage of Black males is where any initiative begins. Additionally, the authors point out that the institution first has to be committed to allocating the necessary resources to enhance retention by funding specialized programming targeted at solving the attrition problem. Resources must be allocated to faculty mentoring programs, commitment to making sure financial aid is available, as well as cultural activity support. These things must be present to create the necessary environment. According to an article by Holmes et al. (2000), the first commitment from the university comes when the university attempts to validate the students’ entrance into higher education. The validation process starts immediately and can occur both in and out the classroom according to the authors. According to the Holmes et al. (2000), article validation can take place during one of three stages, either during the recruitment process, during the first-year of study, or via student outcomes.
Stage one validation happens during the recruitment stage and involves creating a supportive environment; one that makes the minority student feel valued, wanted and appreciated. The second stage validation happens during the first year of study. According to Holmes et al. (2000), the universities first opportunity to validate a student’s transition into higher education comes during the orientation process. Orientation plays a vital role in the transition of a student and leaves a lasting impression (Holmes et al., 2000). As stated in the Holmes et al. article, in many cases orientation is the first official program a student takes part in at the university. Stage two of the validation model also consists of in-class and out-of-class validations. In-class validation can come from course work success or faculty/student interaction. Out-of-class validation comes from positive experiences in the residential hall, peer interaction, academic advising or university recognition. The third stage of validation comes from student outcomes. Student outcomes allow students to talk about their experiences in focus groups or via open-ended questionnaires (Holmes et al., 2000, p. 55). The Holmes et al. article explores factors that contribute to low retention of minorities. It does not claim to have the answer to solve the retention puzzle, but offers a model which could assist in increasing retention.

**Mentoring.** Mentoring programs have a proven track record of success in higher education as a valuable tool of promoting interaction between students and faculty (LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). The African-American male population specifically has benefited from the popularity and effectiveness of mentoring programs (LaVant et al., 1997). According to Haring (1999), many colleges have implemented such programs as a means of support and encouragement for their minority populations. As stated by
LaVant et al. (1997), mentoring is just one of many intervention strategies that can be used to increase retention and promote success. The following sub-topics include information related to mentoring models.

**Mentoring and Retention.** Included in the Holmes et al. (2000) article, which outlines a three-stage model that could help increase retention percentages, are specific programs and initiatives that can be designed for mentoring. Creating a faculty/staff mentoring program, allows Black male students to create a bond with a person established at the university. This type of programming is an example of the out-of-class validation cited in the Holmes et al. (2000) article.

According to the study by Lee (2000), mentoring is a loosely defined relationship between a senior person and a junior person who wishes to participate in the relationship. This relationship can be formal or informal. The informal relationship, typically occurs by happenstance, and can be initiated by either the mentor or the mentee. The more formal mentoring relationship is an example of institutional commitment. According to Lee (2000), most formal mentoring programs target a specific student population with the goal of enhancing persistence and graduation rates.

The Lee (2000) study focused on the University College at North Carolina State University. This particular study used a qualitative method to gain insight into student perspectives on their adjustment to the university and their perspectives on the value of a faculty mentor. The study used focus groups as method of data collection. The groups met three times during the academic year. The findings that emerged from the study indicated that students liked the idea of having a mentor, but were concerned that a cost
could be associated with the mentoring program. Once they were assured there would be no cost, many were cited as being suspicious of “getting something for nothing.”

According to the focus group findings of Lee (2000), with the exception of two male students, the others felt that having a faculty mentor would be a tremendous help academically and would be someone they could work with after they had completed the University College program. The surprise discovery of the Lee study was the notion that these particular groups of African-American underprepared freshman students found it less important to have a same race mentor but were more concerned about having a mentor in the career field.

**Same race mentoring: Yes or no?** As the report from the Lee (2000) study indicated, some students do not find same race mentoring important. The students in this study felt that the quality of the mentor-mentee interaction was more important than race. The findings in the Lee (2000) study raise a few questions. First, are the students in the Lee study the exception to the rule? Do minority students not care about the race of their mentors? Does the gender of the mentor and mentee matter? Also, does there need to be a match with mentor and mentee in regards to career interest? The Lee study cited the need for additional research of similar students at other like institutions to gain a greater insight into those questions. However, a study by Campbell and Campbell (1997) contradicts the findings by Lee (2000), stating that gender matters, but race does not.

In the Campbell and Campbell (1997) study the findings clearly indicate that ethnicity was not a significant factor in effectiveness of the program. Furthermore, a study by Guiffrida (2005) suggests that Black students, especially those at PWI’s might not benefit from faculty mentoring. According to the Guiffrida (2005) study Black
students have far less contact with faculty outside of the classroom. The findings suggest that Black students may have a difficult time connecting with White faculty. Guiffrida (2005) also suggests that primarily because they do not see them as realistic role models, and Black students tend to have view of white faculty as culturally insensitive.

Guiffrida (2005) chose to use a qualitative method. It is suggested in the article that quantitative measures alone fail to capture the unique experience of the minority college student. The author’s specific method choice was grounded theory; this selection was made to allow the research to broaden the understanding of the relationship between African-American students and faculty at a PWI. “The phenomenological nature of the grounded theory approach allowed the examination of important constructs regarding students’ needs and expectations of faculty to emerge from the students’ perspective” (Guiffrida, 2005, pp. 703-704). This particular study focused on students that self-identified themselves as high-achieving. The researcher used small focus groups as it was determined that minority students were more comfortable in sharing experiences in small groups as compared to private interviews. In addition, this model allows the students to share similar experiences and reflect as they listen to others.

The findings of the Guiffrida (2005) study suggest that Black male students feel that Black faculty tend to be more in tune with their needs. These findings in the Guiffrida study directly conflict with the findings of the Lee study. Another important finding from the Guiffrida study suggests that African-American students appreciate challenges to do better from their African-American mentors. It is stated in the article that Black students have the perception that Black faculty push them to succeed and believe in them more so than White faculty. The students in the study described
instances where they felt White faculty have demeaned them by offering inordinate praise. In addition, several students in the study suggested that they found the accountability from their mentor empowering, because it served as a source of motivation and belief in their ability.

Yet another study regarding mentoring of minority students studied what the mentee felt made a good mentor. This study by Freeman (2000) researched the needs of high-achieving Black males, as opposed to a cross-section or underprepared students. This qualitative longitudinal study followed 21 high achieving students from admission and in some cases to graduation. Each participant in the group graduated from high school in 1994, and each had been designated by *Ebony* magazine as being a “Top High School Senior in 1994” (Freeman, 2000, pp. 16-18). Finally, each of the 21 self-identified that they felt a good mentor helped in their post-secondary success. There were 60 students eligible to participate in the study and of those 60, 21 chose to do so. Interestingly enough, only 5% of the students in this particular survey were first-generation students. Based on the information presented in the earlier cited study by Lee (2000) as compared to the Freeman study, it is clear that first-generation status affects the need for a mentor, as well as affecting the perception of needs of a Black college student. In this study Lee (2000) stated that many of the students were underprepared for the transition to college. Their stated perceptions of needs and expectation of first-year outcomes serve as proof (As compared to the non-first generation students in the Freeman study that have a better grasp of the transition).

In the Freeman (2000) study, the 5% of the students that were first-generation each cited a feeling of carrying the weight of the entire family. The Freeman study has
two possible flaws. The limited sample group does not accurately represent the typical Black student nor does it not offer information as to the race or gender of the mentor that works with the student. Also, the findings do not differentiate between formal and informal mentoring relationships.

The practice of using mentoring is not limited to faculty and staff. Other mentoring studies research how peer mentoring can be an effective retention strategy. According to a study by Harper (2006), one of the biggest problems faced by African-American males is the perception that academic success will result in the view by their peers as assuming characteristics associated with White people. Harper (2006) used a qualitative, phenomenological study that interviewed Black males on six college campuses. The students were interviewed to see how leadership and mentoring within their peer group affected academic success. In research prior to the study, the article states that many Black males have a deeply ingrained idea that “academic success makes them weak, less masculine” (Harper, 2006, pp. 342-343).

According to Harper (2006), many of the factors that affect Black males in college result from earlier school experiences. This study sought to uncover the reason some males succeed when others do not. Interview questions were designed to glean information regarding relationships and support groups. During the data collection process a semi-structured interview technique was used. The article does not provide information about specific questions asked during the face-to-face interviews. According to the article, Harper intended for the interviews to become conversational, which would allow the participants to reflect and expound on the events they deemed significant.
Another reason the researcher chose to use a phenomenological design was that it allowed for a comparison of common experiences.

The Harper (2006) study was conducted at six, large public research universities; each of the universities are doctoral/research universities. This is a limitation to the study because it does not account for underprepared students at comprehensive non-research universities or community colleges. The academic ability of the student at the larger universities tends to be better prepared than students at other schools. In the Harper (2006) study, it was found that many Black male students at some point face a critical decision time when challenge by their peers to choose being popular and remaining true to their culture or being smart. In this particular study most students indicated they had successfully been able to negotiate being educated, while keeping it real.

**Institutional programs for mentoring.** There is a growing trend by universities to create programming to connect successful upper-class, African-American, Black students with underclass students (Holsendolph, 2005). Such programs tend to be very popular to HBCUs. However, this type of programming exists at other universities as well. The Minority Achievers Program at Indiana University connects Black male leaders with others in their peer group (Harper, 2006). The idea behind this programming is that the underclass student will strive to succeed in order to fit in with others in a successful peer group. Harper points out that the reversal of what typically happens, when students mask or camouflage their academic talent from their Black peers.

In contrast to the programming such as the Indiana University program, there is programming like the Each One, Teach One at the University of West Georgia. The goal of the Each One, Teach One is to create a bond that will go beyond mentoring
It should be noted that Indian is a Traditional White Institution (TWI). According to the article, once Black males arrive on a college campus they need adjustment help, but are not likely to seek out help. This program is designed to have the mentors take on the role of messenger and less of the role as mentor. In this program all students serving as peer advisors have been in the program prior to becoming advisors. Their function is to help incoming students adjust just as others had helped them.

Professional staff associated with the West Georgia program suggests that being part of an ethnic specific group, helps African-American men develop new friendships with peers and professionals. According to the article this program is an example of institutional commitment, as well as an example of induction (Holsendolph, 2005).

Mentoring programs are part of the induction experience of minority students. In a study by Ugbah and Williams (1989), a four-question survey was distributed to undergraduate, graduates, and faculty staff at a small Midwestern school concerning the school’s mentoring program. The participants in the study were asked about the function of the mentor and the impact that mentoring had on their successful matriculation and career development. Participants were also asked questions about the relationship between mentor and protégée and the qualities that protégés would like to emulate.

The survey sought to undercover perceptions of the schools mentoring program. In addition to the questionnaire, structured interviews were conducted with a random sample of participants. The findings suggest that female Black students found that their mentor relationship increased their confidence, while the suggestion emerged from males that they preferred male mentors, and both groups in this study preferred Black mentors. Participants in the Ugbah and Williams (1989) study commented that they felt socially
estranged at PWI’s. The findings suggest that the mentoring relationship cannot be forced; it must be developed, especially at PWI’s. The authors also ascertained that Black faculty and staff at PWI’s are too busy surviving to assist in mentoring of minority students.

**Conclusion**

The review of literature included studies focusing on faculty/staff mentoring, peer mentoring and sense of belonging by minority students, as related to retention of minority students. Articles also focused on the impact that stereotyping has on Black male students in higher education. This review of literature also chronicled programming that has been designed as institutional commitments geared toward increasing retention percentages of Black male students. The various articles cited range from information about mentoring of highly successful students as well as students studied at HBUC’s and PWI’s.
METHOD

Introduction

This study was a field-based project that focused on understanding why African-American, Black males continue to lag behind other demographic groups in terms of persistence and graduation at the post-secondary level. The purpose of this project investigated some of the social and academic areas that affect the retention of African-American males. This qualitative research project used a focus group method to obtain the data. The focus group method was selected because the guided group discussion can provide a rich understanding of the participants’ experiences and beliefs (Morgan, 1997a). According to Morgan, focus groups are typically used as a qualitative method to explore groups that are poorly understood. The African-American male college student is the ideal demographic since this group’s struggles in higher education are well chronicled and the failure as a whole is widely questioned and not understood.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I facilitated two focus groups. I recruited the participants for both sessions. To properly recruit the participants, I followed the recruiting model outlined by Morgan (1997b). This process included defining the target population, in this case African-American male students at the university. After defining the target population, a specific segment of the African-American male population was identified. The recruitment process also required that I identify the appropriate composition of each of the groups and determine the eligibility and exclusion criteria.

In addition to planning and recruiting for the focus group, I also served as instrument for the project (Eisner, 1998). As instrument I gathered and analyzed the data
for this study. My role as instrument required that I writing the focus group questions, facilitate the asking of the questions to the participants, and moderate the focus group process. As instrument it was necessary that my specific biases be well chronicled and monitored in order not to damage the data collected as part of the study. Such biases included my passion for helping African-American males succeed in higher education, while making sure that my belief systems did not taint the analysis of the data. Also, as researcher I ensured that my specific experiences in higher education did not influence the questions I ask nor how I view the data collected.

While my passion for the success of African-American males could be perceived as a bias, and my experiences could possibly influence the evaluation of the data, on the other hand Eisner’s (1998) concept of connoisseurship is applied to my study. Being an African-American male made me the ideal person to conduct the study. According to Eisner’s idea, the ideal person to conduct a study is someone that has an appreciation of the problem. In this case, being an African-American male, I have an appreciation of the problems that other African-American males face in higher education. Additional support for this idea of appreciation comes from Smith (2005) which offers the theory that the best people to write and reflect on a topic come from the community that is being studied. That theory supports my role in this particular study. To provide checks and balances and to monitor my views for this study, I maintained a journal and participated in peer debriefing and member checks (Creswell, 1998). Each of these items will be discussed further in the trustworthiness section.
Setting

The setting for this study was a public regional university with a student body in excess of 18,000 students (Western Kentucky University (WKU), 2009). The university, in its recent review by the states Council for Postsecondary Education (CPE) and the states Council for Equal Opportunities (CEO) achieved its retention mandates for African-American students. At the university where the study took taking place, a majority of the African-American student body is enrolled at the university’s South Campus, which is where the Community School is located. A review of 2009 enrollment data confirmed that most African-American students at the university enrolled in the community college. Of the total students enrolled in the university, the largest number of African-American students had majors in the College of Arts, and Letters. Within the College of Arts and Letters, the journalism program had the highest number of African-American students. African-American students comprised 18.2 percent of the total students majoring in sociology, which represents the largest percentage of African-American students in any major at the university. In contrast, of the total number of students enrolled at the university, the fewest number of African-American students are enrolled in College of Science and Engineering (WKU, 2009).

In an effort to increase retention, the university has recently invested significant resources in the Academic Advising and Retention Center (AARC), the unit primarily responsible for university retention initiatives. The AARC is located in a state-of-the-art Student Success Center. This center houses all of the academic programs that are responsible for the general retention of university students. The center has a dedicated quiet computer lab, a number of study rooms, in addition to a large general study area.
Recently, AARC opened satellite study centers in two of the campus resident halls, which happen to be the two halls that house a large number of African-American students. The Best Expectations Programs (BEP) is the university’s primary retention program. This program encompasses all of the retention programs that have been governed independently. The goal of the BEP is to provide academic assistance to students that maybe at risk, and provide them with resources that will help them persist toward graduation. BEP is partially guided by the Kentucky Plan. Many of the goals for these programs have been set by the Kentucky Council for Post-Secondary Education and the Kentucky Council for Equal Opportunity to meet the Kentucky Plan mandates. The Kentucky Plan outlines retention goals for African-American students that Kentucky public universities must meet to prevent funding penalties (WKU, 2009).

Another academic assistance program provided at WKU is the Student Support Services (SSS) program. SSS, a Department of Education funded TRIO program, works with first-generation, low-income and disabled students. The mission of SSS is to assist students in their transition from secondary education to post-secondary education. Additionally, the program provides academic assistance to students with the goal helping students persist and continue toward graduation.

Data Sources

Data sources consisted of two focus groups each comprised of a minimum of six African-American male students enrolled at the university. The students were from varying academic levels within the university and involved with the Student Support Services project. The students that participated were randomly selected from an interest questionnaire. To ease the concerns regarding the risk to the participants selected, each
participant was assured that the information on the questionnaire was kept confidential and destroyed after each focus group.

The main data sources for this project were students in the focus group interviews. The focus group process started with a set of questions designed to identify students that are interested in taking part in the research study. The questionnaire asked very basic questions, since its intent is to identify students that are interested. On this questionnaire students responded to questions about their age, their current academic standing, their involvement on campus and their hometown.

From the completed questionnaire, six students were identified for each focus group. The ideal group would have consisted of one student that is a first year student, two students classified as upper classmen, one student from the community college or student that started at the community college, and the remaining two slots were to be filled by students that returned the interest questionnaire, but there was no specific selection criterion.

Data Gathering

The data gathering component of this project consisted of the insights and information collected from the focus group participants. The following paragraphs details how data was gathered for this project. The description outlines the manner in which the participants for the focus group were selected. In addition, there information about each phase of the focus group process is included.

Focus group interviews. Once the focus group participants were selected the project proceeded to the moderation stage. After obtaining consent from each student the focus group participants were asked a series of open-ended questions developed with the
intention to get the perspectives on the issues that affect the retention of African-American males in college. There are three types of questions in a focus group: engagement, exploration, and exit. As described by Kruger (1997a), each type of question has a function or a purpose in the development and implementation of the focus group.

The first category is the engagement questions (Kruger, 1997a). This study utilized two engagement questions. The intent of these questions was to make the student comfortable and familiar with one another. Such questions serve as an opening and introduction to the focus group. Each question has a level of importance, which dedicates how much time should be spent on the particular question. The opening and introductory questions was not be given the same amount of discussion time as other questions. In some studies the opening question is not analyzed. However, as part of this study the opening question was used in the analysis and reported in the findings section.

Next, the exploratory questions investigated the primary research topic. Using Kruger’s (1997a) design, the exploratory questions are broken up into two parts, the first question transitions the conversation from the engagement question toward the research question. The key questions, the second part of the exploratory category, involved the participants in a discussion of the research question. According the Kruger method, these questions drive the study. In this study, there were three key questions, which were given the most time during the group discussion.

The final category is the exit question. This ending question asked the student to discuss anything they wish to include or add to the discussion. According to Kruger (1997a), this type of questions serves as an insurance question. Kruger suggests this type
of questions because it allows students to include any additional information they feel this is important to the discussion.

The focus group sessions were tape recorded and then transcribed. When students signed the consent form at the beginning of the session, each gave permission for the use of the tape recorder. Students were reassured that their names would be kept separate from the transcription and the tape recording. Every effort was made to maintain confidentially (Morgan, 1997a).

**Documents.** Documents included the university fact book (WKU, 2009), which provides information for the setting. The fact book contains vital information about the university. Information obtained from the fact book includes statistics related to the number of African-Americans enrolled at the university, information about specific colleges within the university and their African-American enrollment. Other supporting documents were collected to provide a description of the university’s retention programs and the Student Support Services program. Those documents provided background information about the mission of the retention programs and the Student Support Services program. The documents were also used to outline the assistance those programs offer students (Creswell, 1998).

**Questionnaire.** At the beginning of the study all students completed a questionnaire which guided the selection of the participants for the focus groups. The questionnaire asked for the characteristics of the participants, but names are not used in the final report.
Data Analysis

Data from the interviews and documentation were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Open coding is the first part of this process (Creswell, 1998). During open coding, data from each interview and from the individual documents was broken down into individual pieces. Similar pieces of information were placed into groups together in the categories that emerge. Everything that is mentioned in the focus group became data has been placed into one of these categories. According to Kruger (1997c), there are two choices regarding the analysis of the focus group data. The researcher can make the choice to place more emphasis on the analysis of the key questions or the researcher can analyze all the data equally. For this study all data was analyzed equally by question. Each of the questions started out as a one category, then is broken into additional categories as common meanings begin to materialize. The process identified segments of common meaning within each question. Once open coding was complete, an entry was made into the reflexive journal detailing the reasons for the selected data arrangement.

The next part of the constant comparative method was axial coding (Creswell, 1998). In axial coding, the categories from the open coding were connected to one another in an attempt to identify relationships. The goal of the axial coding process is to use the emerging categories and themes from each question that facilitate answering the research question. Another entry in the reflexive journal recorded the progress to this point.

The final part of the process was selective coding (Creswell, 1998). In selective coding an exploratory story showed the categories and common themes that answered the
research question. Ultimately, the common themes were woven together into a cohesive story, the final report.

According to Kruger (1997c), it is important to understand that focus group analysis is unique. The focus group can be analyzed like other qualitative research, but it has to be analyzed in a unique manner as well. While analyzing the focus group the researcher must remember that data and information evolves throughout the process. Because of the evolution of data as the focus group session proceeds, each student’s influence on the other participants must be considered. During the coding process the researcher has to keep in mind, that even though a comment may come forth in as an answer to a particular question, it may ultimately fit better as part of the data for another question. This phenomenon makes it imperative that sections be woven together and proper notations are recorded as themes arise during the analysis.

The reflexive journal was an essential component of the data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Kruger (1997c) warns that the researcher has to guard against being locked into one-way thinking. In order to protect the study from the trap of one-way thinking, journal entries were made regarding each step in the research process. The journal contains entries that describe the choices made during the selection process, the moderating process, as well as during the analysis process. Entries recorded also explored alternative possibilities for analysis.

Trustworthiness

The intent of trustworthiness is to help establish truth and credibility of the study. Trustworthiness is necessary to give the reader confidence in the findings that are presented by the researcher (Creswell, 1998). According to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper,
and Allen (1993) and Creswell, there are various ways to establish the necessary trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Erlandson et al. (1993), and Lincoln and Guba (1985) say that credibility is established through this process. Trustworthiness for this study will be established through the use of reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail.

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing allowed parties outside of the research project an opportunity to review the data collected and scrutinize the primary researcher’s emerging analysis of the data. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), peer debriefing helps to enhance the creditability of the study. During the peer debriefing process, someone questioned developing ideas about the data, as well as listened to the researcher’s ideas in regards to the topic and data analysis. For this the study, the peer debriefing took place with classmates who are also working on similar projects. For the purpose of this study after each peer debriefing session, an entry was made into the reflexive journal.

**Reflexive journal.** The reflexive journal served as a record of the study to provide information about decisions made by the researcher during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the journal was used primarily to record information about the study, it chronicled the private, internal thoughts of the researcher, as suggested by Hendricks (2009). In addition, entries were made concerning the moderation of the focus groups, and the events that took place during the focus group sessions. As suggested by Hendricks (2009), the journal was kept from the start of the study to completion. The journal contains information about the successes, as well as the challenges of the study. Additionally, it includes information about the themes that emerged during data analysis. Also, as mentioned earlier, reflective entries were made after every peer debriefing.
sessions. The journal followed the suggestions presented by Erlandson et al. (1993) that suggest reflections by the researcher include an outline of the emerging themes, issues and concerns that arise during the peer debriefing sessions. According to the Erlandson et al., the reflexive journal supports the creditability of the study. The reflexive journal is part of the audit trail (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Maintaining the audit trail. The audit trail is the keeping and the noting of items collected during the study that would allow an outside auditor to determine the trustworthiness of the findings (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allows an auditor to begin with the final report and trace the findings to the original raw data. According to Erlandson et al., it is the audit trail that provides dependability and confirmability of the study. Dependability and confirmability in qualitative research are meant to support the soundness and quality of the research and show that the data that resulted from the research. Dependability accounts for the changes that occur in the setting and how those changes affect the study, and the researchers approach to the study. Conversely, confirmability refers to the results of the study and asks if the results are confirmed or corroborated in the raw data. As stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the reflexive journal can be used as a tool to confirm or verify the research process and the decisions within the process. The audit trail should include items from the beginning of the study through the end of the study. In addition, the audit trail confirms that the raw data found during the study is reported in the findings of the final report. Erlandson et al. advises that both filter and unfiltered data be kept as part of the audit trail. Unfiltered data for this study included the raw focus group tapes; whereas filtered data would be the reflexive journal and the transcribed focus group recordings. According to Erlandson et
al. (1993) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), such items from data reduction and analysis
products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, and process notes, are in the
reflexive journal.

The data such as tape recordings and transcriptions that emerge from this study
are protected in order to limit the risk of the participants in this study. To protect the
data, the tape recordings and transcriptions are locked in researcher’s bank strong box.
Once the study is complete and successfully defended, the researcher will destroy the
tapes as well as the transcriptions.
Findings

The overall research question for this study is: What experiences do African-American males view as having an impact on their retention in college? The data for this project was collected from two small focus groups of African-American male students. Each group responded to eight questions, and the following sections contain the information organized by question. This data from each question have been categorized and summarized.

The data was collected from the same eight questions asked of each of the participants in two groups. The eight questions are broken down into three categories. In the first category, the engagement questions, contained two questions. These questions are designed to allow the participants the opportunity to become familiar with one another as well as provide them with an opportunity to become familiar with the moderator. The engagement questions also afforded the participants a chance to become better acquainted with the research topic.

The second sets of questions, the exploration questions, are the main questions that directly target the research question. The exit question served as the final question and afforded the participants the opportunity to discuss any ending thoughts or express opinions related to the research question. This question provided closure to the focus group but gave the opportunity for the participants to provide details that may not have been appropriate when discussing the other questions.
Focus Group Question I

The first question posed to the students was the opening question: Take a minute to reflect on your time at college. Now can you tell me what you have enjoyed about your college life, thus far?

This question provided the students an opportunity to get acquainted with one another, as well as get a feel for how the focus group format works. This question was not as rich in data as the main questions, but it served as the ice breaker, as well set the tone for the session.

As they answered this question, the students discussed various topics that ranged from getting to know different people to being away from home. In particular, the students mentioned things that fell into the following categories: getting to know different people, experiences, social life, and campus in general.

Away from home. As related to this question, the students seemed most interested about talking about how it felt to be away from home. One student stated, “I have enjoyed being away from home. I’m from Louisville. I have met a diverse group of people, I don’t think I would have met in Louisville or met with the same circle that I hung out with in high school.”

Meeting new people. The students were also very interested in talking about the new people they met. In particular, one student stated that he likes being away from home, but it helped that home was just right down the road if needed. The student went ahead to add “You know a whole lot of the stuff that I see around here I’m use to it, it’s not like it’s all new to me.” This particular part of the discussion was very interesting.
Each of the students seemed to relish in the idea of being on their own, but they did not talk about the freedom they had gained; they discussed the new people they were meeting and how much they were enjoying experiencing diversity. Meeting new people also afforded them the opportunity to network with different individuals. One student mentioned, “Getting the opportunity to network with different individuals, I think that is important.”

**Campus experiences.** The responses seemed to indicate that the students really enjoy the experiences on campus. One particular student mentioned, “I just like the fact of being on campus. Campus life is a lot of fun. Everybody is different.” The students also mentioned enjoying some of the typical college extracurricular activities such as parties. One student stated, “I just like being on campus. All of the different stuff going on, campus stuff is lots of fun.” Yet another mentioned how he enjoyed his independence.

**Focus Group Question II**

The second question posed to the students was the introductory question: Thinking back to your life prior to college. What experiences helped prepare you for college life?

This question was designed to introduce the general research topic. Data obtained for this question were not as extensive as future questions; however, it served as a subtle transition toward the exploration questions.

The themes developed from this question are: family, parents, organizations and mentors/ people you know. All of the data from this question focused on varying aspects
of interpersonal relationships. Two of the emerging themes were family related, whereas the others themes were organizations and mentors/people you know.

**Family.** When talking about family, the participants often mentioned siblings that had attended college and helped them. They also mentioned the encouragement they would receive from family members as they sought to obtain a higher education. To further delve into the question, the moderator asks the participants to be specific about some of the things revolving around their family. One student offered, “Most people in my family didn’t even attend college let alone finish junior high or high school.” Many also mentioned that they wanted to be the first in the family to graduate. Yet, others said that they felt the pressure to finish because their siblings had done so. One particular participant responded by talking about his older siblings completing college and how that motivated him, “I’d say all my brothers and sisters, since they graduated from different colleges and seeing them, I want to do the same thing.” One of the participants proudly said, “I will be the first guy, the first man from my family to graduate from college. My sister was the first person, but I will be the first man.” The participant went ahead to say, (responding to another participant), “Yeah, that’s a big accomplishment; my mother tells me all the time that I’m breaking the curse and all that. And all my little cousins look up to me.” The same participant further detailing how his cousins look up to him said, “My next cousin will be the second male to graduate, and I think that carries me.” The moderator asked if this was a burden to him, he said, “It’s not a burden, I like it.”

An interesting comment came from one of the participants regarding the strength he draws from his family. He said, “A lot of my family used to be close, and we are not
as close anymore. It has been mainly my sister, my mom, and I for so long. This has made me mentally stronger. When finals week rolls around and people are wilding out and losing their minds, it is small to me.”

**Mentors.** When discussing what prepared them for college life several participants mentioned people they knew, be it acquaintances or persons they felt were mentors. One participant mentioned, “For me it was my mentors while I was in high school that just basically pulled me off to the side and let me know what I was doing wrong.” The participants also mentioned people in their local communities that had taken an active interest in their success. Another mentioned, “The interaction, learning to be around people, teachers my freshman year really helped me with that. I had to learn how to fit in, how to mingle. “

**Organizations.** Another emerging theme related to preparation for college was organizational involvement. Two of the students mentioned the Trio Upward Bound program by name. Others mentioned athletic teams because of the academic requirements to remain eligible to participate. There was also some discussion about the importance of on campus organizations to assist in the transition into college. One participant said, “I knew very few people who had attended a four- year university. Getting involved in organizations with people who had actually done it, knew how to be successful, helped me.”

**Other information.** Additionally, one student said that he thought his living situation prior to college prepared him for college life he said, “Being basically homeless
me my mother and my sister having nowhere to stay. Having to share a bedroom with
my friends or my cousin or my sister helped me to learn to live with a roommate.”

Focus Group Question III

The third question to the group was the transition question: Reflect on the campus
environment and the campus community that exist at your college. Can you tell me how
you feel that you fit in at the university?

The transition question is the first of a series of exploration questions. The
purpose of this question is to move the discussion toward the primary research focus.
With the transition question the goal is to shift thinking from participant engagement and
comfort with the others in the group and toward getting data that answers the primary
questions of the research.

The participants were asked how they felt they fit in at the university. Answers to
this question varied from classroom seating location to perceptions and even some
mention of relating back to their high school years.

First view. One participant said, “Going to this university, being a Black male is
very hard.” Many of the participants mentioned that it was a difficult adjustment to a
primarily White campus and felt they had to figure out how to fit in. According to one
participant, “Coming here knowing it was primarily White, I had to get myself adjusted.
I was used to working with other White students, but it was weird to me to have a
primarily White campus.” Another student commented, “As soon as you step out of the
car on campus you see more Caucasians than Blacks.”
**Class seating.** Discussion about the classroom atmosphere seemed to be very important to the group, especially seating in the classroom. The groups seem to value the importance of sitting near the front of the classroom. When talking about how he selected his seat in class his first year on campus, one participant said, “Over time I have realized that I’m there for the same purpose all of the other students are there. Why should I sit there and subject myself to not learning, sitting in a corner being quiet?” Another participant attributed his early college struggles with classroom seating. He said, “As a freshman, I was the one sitting in the back of the class trying to hide from the teacher.” From a different participant, “I guess I had to find myself at the age of 25. I find myself more sitting in the front of the classroom thinking I should’ve done this at first.” Yet another commented that, “What I found out is when you’re sitting in the front the teacher is trying to engage you. They want you to learn; they are caring they know that is a difficult environment at time.”

**Majors.** A large part of the discussion centered on majors. Two of the participants were majoring in art. According to their responses, a majority of the time they were the only person Black person in the class. Based on the responses, there were certainly times they felt alone and isolated because of this. While talking about the departmental lectures that students in his major were required to attend, one participant said, “It’s like every time we had to go downstairs to the little talks, there’s sometimes I don’t want to go, but if I leave, they are definitely going to know I’m not there. Another participant said being the only Black male in class can have it positives effects as well. When discussing class attendance and how the teacher knows if one of the few Black
students is missing he said, “It kinda makes me want to go because if you are sitting at home you are like man, ‘If I don’t go to class, the teacher is definitely going to know if I’m not there.’” There was also discussion about being a Black male majoring in a subject that is considered to be a female dominated subject area. This particular student has a major in merchandise, design and textiles. He expressed some feeling that he is viewed as having in a “White female major.” He said, “You must realize that it’s not a color or social background, and everybody is there for the exact same reason. This will allow for moving past the reservations.” The participants also mentioned in being in a major that has no Black faculty. According to one participant, “There’s no Black professors, so sometimes you are going along, and you don’t feel comfortable talking to the professors, but eventually you get past that and its pretty cool.”

**South Campus.** When the subject of the South Campus was brought into the discussion the participants had varying opinions. While discussing the South Campus, which is the part of university located a few miles south of the main campus where developmental courses and associate degree courses are taught one participant said, “I feel with the number of Blacks on South Campus, I feel I fit more there than on main campus.” All of the participants seemed to agree that the number of minority students at the south campus gave it a different feel. Yet they disagreed as to whether it’s a good thing or not. One participant questioned the motivation of students at the location. He said, “I came in on South Campus, and I was one of the few Blacks that aspired to get to the main campus.” Another participant also felt Black students are too comfortable on South Campus. He added, “I think everybody just gets so complacent over at South
Campus. They get comfortable; you know, the work kind of reminds you of stuff in high school.”

Focus Group Question IV

The fourth question is the first of the key questions: Take a minute to think about the people in your life, the people at work, school, etc. Who are the people that have had an influence on your college life?

These questions were designed to target the primary research question. The goal of this set of questions is to gain the data that will answer the primary research question.

When asked to discuss the people that had impacted their college life, as expected, the participants discussed their family, especially their mothers, the way they grew up, friends, Black people and professors. Additionally, this question provided some insight into the motivation of the students.

Parents. The participants mentioned that in some cases the parent’s education and success were driving forces in their pursuit of a college degree. One student said, “My parents were also pursuing higher education, my mother was getting her master [Master’s Degree].” Another mentioned that education with his parents was a big deal. He also said, “Because I know that one day my parents are not going to be able to support me, and if I want to maintain a comfortable life style, I have to pursue higher education.” When talking about the lack of support from his family while in college yet another participant mentioned, “Because my parents were never really there for me to provide support. They were like, ‘it is good that you are going,’ but they never offered financial support or reinforcement to do better when I was struggling.”
**Mother/father.** According the participants, one of the most influential people on their college life was their mother. Several in the group mentioned the impact of growing up in a single parent household and how their mother pushed them to move forward. One student said, “I had this dream when I was in third grade. I was going to be an architect all this different stuff and my mother was like ‘Go for it, Shoot for the stars, Go do whatever you want to go in college.’”

The students also mentioned the impact of their fathers on the college life. One participant had a very interesting comment regarding his father’s influence. He said, “My freshman year when my parents dropped me off, my dad said, ‘If you come back home, we will fight.’ He said, ‘if you don’t come back with a trade or degree, we will fight. If you don’t get it, don’t come back home. Fake it or Get it.’” While another said he was driven by his father’s success and wanting to do the same. Finally and most telling another offered, “My father had ran off and left my mother; they were separated. Seeing how my mom had worked so hard to take care of me and my other two brothers, she kinda made me want to do something.”

**Siblings.** Siblings were another topic of discussion. Several of the participants said they were influenced by the success of their siblings. Typically, they mentioned the manner in which their older brothers had served as role models. However, one participant mentioned that an older sister would often throw up to him that she was college educated, and that drove him to seek the same. It was also mentioned by one participant that he had a sister who in his words was “not big” into education. He said, “I have another sister who’s not really into education, she’s more of a ho. She has two
children, my nieces. I feel like if she can’t support them in the future my other sister or I would have to. So this is one thing that pushes me.”

**Growing Up.** The participants also talked about their background growing up how it had impacted their college life. Most all of the participants mentioned they wanted to change their life path in some way or another. One participant said, “For me it was seeing how my family grew up. It gave me a different insight for what I wanted to do with my life. Growing up, going to consignment shops, and going to buy cheap stuff. You know, you want better: a better car, better house, better stuff.” Another said, “Because we didn’t grow up like I would have liked, I want to do well, so I can help my mother later in life.” Most all mentioned they just wanted a better life than they had as a child.

**Friends.** The influence of friends seemed to be very important to the participants. The responses were both positive and negative about the role their friends have played in the life of the participants. One said, “All the rest of my boys are back home, and they keep telling me not to come back, they tell me not to look back.” While another referenced something his grandmother had passed along to him, the need to surround himself with good people. It was apparent by the statements that friends can have a positive and negative influence. Another of the participants said that once he focused on school some of his friends began to “shy away from him.”

**Black people.** Much the same as the influence of friends, there is also the influence of Black people which according the participant statements is both positive and negative. One participant said, “When you start, you see many Black faces, then they
start to fade in and out. I don’t want to be one of those faces that fade in and out, so that pushes me.’” Others discussed how negative attitudes from other Black campus professionals have impacted them. He said, “During Master Plan, me and a few of my boys decided we was not going to one of the meetings or whatever. I won’t say his name but one the Black people who works here said ‘Yall ain’t goanna amount to nothing. None of you will be here past the first year; you will be lucky to make it past the first semester.’”

**Professors.** The discussion about professors was also very engaging. Many of them seemed to embrace faculty that they felt took an active interest in them. Several of them made statements about particular faculty that engage them in discussion or encourage them to pursue their interests. When talking about professors, one student really appreciated that a particular professor in his major department encouraged him to explore his interest in the major and develop his portfolio. The student said that an older faculty member in his department that encouraged him to build his art portfolio and seek his interest. Yet another mentioned enjoying and feeling inspired by what he described as younger, forward-thinking faculty.

The participants also mentioned Black faculty. One student said it took a Black faculty member to make him realize the importance of education, “I think it really helped me get along here seeing other people that look like me trying to do something.” Another felt, “Black professors seem very willing to help minority students as much as they can.”
Focus Group Question V

Question five is the second in the series of key exploration questions: Thinking back to the different problems you have encountered during your college life. What are some of the biggest obstacles you have had to overcome in college?

This question is designed to get to the heart of the research question. The students discussed several obstacles they had encountered. They discussed issues with time management, South Campus, being Black on campus, as well as socialization.

Black on campus. A majority of the discussion of this question was about being Black on campus. The students really seemed to feel that being Black on campus is an obstacle. One student said, “I feel like most Black people here have reservations about their race.” Another commented, “Sometimes it’s just hard being a Black male on campus, being the only Black person in class.” The students commented they feel other students look at Black male students differently. Their feeling is as one commented, “They will look at this person and think I’m supposed to know everything that’s going on with the man. I don’t know every Black person.” The majority agreed they feel as one stated, “Like I carry the opinion of every Black person in the world.” The students also discussed the strange feeling they get when issues of race are discussed in their classes. One student said, “Sitting in class and sometimes issues of race are brought up. All the White people will look at you wanting to get your opinion.”

South Campus. Something that was discussed that goes along with being Black on campus is the impression of South Campus. Many of the students felt that general population thinks all Black males go to South Campus. One student said, “They [White
people] think all Black people go to south campus. While someone else added, “They automatically think all Black people go to south campus. Another added, “I know my freshman year every time I encountered a White person, they would say, what classes you are taking at South Campus?”

**Time management.** The group also discussed time management as an issue. Several mentioned how they had to make sure to properly manage their time, to ensure there was time to study, to work, and for leisure activity. One student said, “Getting off work and going straight to mass media, when I have work to do. Just working and school is a big obstacle.” Another said, “I’m trying to juggle the activities and balance my time to keep getting good grades.”

**Socialization.** The other major theme that emerged from this question was socialization as an obstacle. Several of the participants mentioned issues with female relationships. When discussing this question, most of the participants mentioned socializing with females on campus as an obstacle. An issue that usually leads to problems for both the male and the female student involved. One student said, “The drama you bring yourself when you talk to this woman, then that woman.” Another student added, “Everybody knows everybody just about, it can lead to problems.” Also they mentioned the issues of living on campus, problems that occur with resident assistants (RA) and hall directors. A student said, “What kind of RA do you have? Is the Hall Director petty? Stuff like that. It’s just a big problem.” They also mentioned the difficulties living with roommates and suitemates as issues. Related to this, one student also mentioned learning to talk to people and feeling he had no one to show him the ropes
as an obstacle. He said, “Learning to talk to people. It was hard for me when I first came here. I felt like I was on my own. I didn’t have anyone that was here before me to show me the ropes.”

**Focus Group Question VI**

This sixth question presented to the groups was the third in the line of key exploration questions: What do you think are the main reasons African-American males leave college?

This question sought to gain the insight of the students as to the reasons why these students think Black males students leave college. The discussion for this question resulted in comments on desire, circumstances; college isn’t for everyone, chasing a dream, and fitting in.

**Desire for success.** Several of the participants said they have remained in college because they have a desire to be something in life. One said, “There’s nothing to do for a young Black man if you don’t go to college. Another added, “I want to be something in life. Being a Black male you want to strive to be something in life, this White society.” Yet another talked about not wanting to be a burden. Several of the students also mentioned that they did not want to disappoint a parent, especially their mother, if they did not succeed in college. One student added, “Then being scared of going home to hear my momma say, ‘Why are you out of school?’ I just don’t want to hear that.”

**“Chasing a dream.”** They also talked how several of their peers leave to chase a dream of fame and fortune in the entertainment industry. One student added, “Not all of them can make money. According to this group of students lots of young Black men
think the only chance they have is in the entertainment industry.” Another added, “For every Jay-Z, there are 20 million Little Flips. And for every Little Flip there’s another 40 million Solider Boyz, Little Wayne’s and PST’s.” Another person added, “They don’t realize that Little Wayne went to the University of Houston and has a degree. Some kids don’t realize that. You have to have a backup plan.”

**Circumstances.** Circumstances were also identified as a reason some Black males students leave school. The students discussed how getting a girl pregnant factors into males leaving. One student mentioned that, “A lot of the girls stay in school when they get pregnant. They have the babies and stay in school. I don’t understand, if they can do it and have the baby, why Black men can’t stay in school too.” Also laziness was mentioned by the students. They felt that many Black males get caught in a cycle of entitlement. There is a feeling that they have a right to be here, and that someone owes them something. One of the participants added, “They come the first semester thinking it is going to be a party, a cake situation, like they can just slide by.”

**“College isn’t for everyone.”** They discussed how college” isn’t for everyone.” One student added, “Some people prefer a different lifestyle. I had a friend that was in college; he left for the Marines and loves it.” Another added, “Some people are misguided and don’t know what they really want to do.” The discussion also included how some students just have problems that are exclusive to them that factor into their decision to leave.

**Fitting in.** The participants also discussed how fitting in has an effect on retention. One student stated, “If you don’t have people that are like you around, then
you want to go back where the people are like you and that is usually home.” Another
student commented about lack of stability. Others commented on the intimidation of the
surrounds as a possible reason some leave.

Focus Group Question VII

This question is the fourth in the line of key exploration questions: Can you think
of a situation when you felt discouraged and it caused you to consider dropping out of
college?

Just like the other three, this question is meant to get at the heart of the primary
research question. This question asks the participants to think of times when they may
have considered dropping out or leaving school.

The responses were mixed on this question. Several indicated they had
considered dropping out, a few said the thought had never crossed their mind, and three
of them had stopped out at some point.

“Not an option.” The participants that said dropping out was not an option
seemed to have the strongest opinions on this issue. The sentiment was they had worked
too hard to throw it all away and had no other viable options if they were to drop out.
One student said, “It would take a lot for me to throw away all the work that led me here.
It would have to be a life altering something for me to throw away 18 years worth
preparation and hard work.” Another talked about how going back to his hometown
would not be an option. He said, “Going back home to my little small town, I would be
doing absolutely nothing.” Yet another referencing an earlier question said he couldn’t
go home, because his father told him not to come back without a degree. Another
mentioned that too much was riding on his success and that he had people looking up to him.

“Never, but times get tough.” Several of the students mentioned that they had never seriously considered leaving school. It was stated that when times get tough, thoughts of giving up enters their mind. One student said “I had to change my mind frame, and the stuff I was doing. Just do whatever I could to get a degree.”

“Yes, have considered leaving.” Several of the students mentioned they had considered leaving. One student said, “Heck yeah, my first semester man. My first semester I was right along with everybody else, I was going out and everything.” Another said, “I thought that I wanted to drop out a couple times, but later I realize it was a stupid idea.” There was also discussion of how failing a test or not doing well on an assignment leads to disappointment, and at the time, thoughts of giving up.

Three students had left school for a period of time. Two of them left due to financial problems and the other left because of family illness. All three openly said they realized while they were out of school that they must return. The consensus was that options are very limited for Black males without a degree. The students mentioned that their White counterparts often have options if they do not have a degree, but a Black man without a degree usually has no options.

**Focus Group Question VIII**

The final question of the focus group is the exit question: Is there anything else you would like to say about being a Black male at this university or the culture surrounding Black males at this university?
This question is meant to bring the focus group to a close, while also allowing the students to discuss any opinions they have not had an opportunity to mention earlier. The participants discussed how diversity affects the Black male experience at the university as well as the overall experience and the stigma that exists.

**Diversity.** The participants felt the necessity to embrace diversity. Several of them noted that their peers must let the Black stuff go. One participant said, “I can really fit in and be more of me, be myself. Being a Black man at Western I don’t feel like there’s any difference. I’m just another person.” Others said, “There are always people that are different than you. Just do what you like doing regardless of who’s around you.” Related to diversity one student noted, “There are a lot of people only doing things to satisfy their culture, and I don’t think you should do that.”

**Stigma.** Another topic that emerged was the stigma that exists about Black male students. One student offered, “I think a lot of programs are put in place for Black people only to reinforce those negative stereotypes of Black people. It’s like Black Student Alliance having cookout with Colt 45’s and Tupac.” Another said, “I’m letting go of the Black stuff, oh my God every time. I used to walk around with that stuff in my head; it’s like a war constantly going on in your head thinking about that kind of stuff.”

**Role Models.** The students also discussed the importance of finding role models and being role models. There was a discussion about giving back the surrounding community, so students, especially male students can see other males that are succeeding academically. Another student mentioned that there are times that he needed a shoulder
to lean on. He said, “Everybody needs an extra hand whether you notice or not, you need that extra person behind you.”

Summary

The above stated findings show that the students who took part in the focus groups sessions discussed several issues affecting the retention of Black males in college. There were several topics that surfaced continually across the eight questions. On numerous occasions the students discussed the role their family has played in their college preparation, success, and desire to remain in school.

Topics within the text of this section indicate this emphasis and stressed these points during the group’s discussion. The students reflected on campus and classroom experience, especially experiences related to interpersonal communications with faculty and other students as well as experiences related to classroom seating. They also mentioned major area of study selection, class attendance and influences from staff and professors. Their comments show that being a good student, using proper English and dressing respectfully is not acting white. They are color blind values to a successful life.

The eight questions initiated and stimulated comments to answer the overall research question.
Discussion and Conclusions

Findings and the research question

This focus group study probed the question: What type of experiences do African-American males view as having an impact on their retention in college? The findings from these focus groups study show that certain experiences impacted on the retention of African-American males in higher education. Based on the information gathered, information emerged to show that family expectations, mentors, friends and acquaintances directly impacted retention of these Black male students. Other things mentioned that impact retention were desire for success and circumstances. The following section will include a discussion about the conclusions drawn from the data that answered the research question and other parts of this section will also delve into the implications that result from the data collected.

Based on the answers provided by the students, there were certain factors that aided in their retention and kept them in college. One conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is the burden of family. At one time or another most all of the students mentioned not wanting to let their family down as the one of the main things that has kept them in college.

The findings show that family support is extremely important for the retention of these Black male students in college. Of the things discussed, one student talked about the expectations placed on him by his father. Yet another said he wanted to show his father who was absent that he could be successful. Another said that he wanted to match
the accomplishment of his older siblings. Relating to family, one student mentioned that he might have to take care of his nieces at some point because his sister might not be in a position to do so, and to be able to do so, he would need an education. One student said this was his opportunity to break the curse on the males of his family by being the first to graduate from college. Also, they mentioned that options for Black males without an education are limited.

There is also evidence to conclude that this particular group valued the positive influences that resulted from encouragement given by the families, especially when the positive reinforcement came from their mother. One student stated that his mother encouraged him to shoot for the stars and had told him from an early age that he could do whatever he wanted. Another stated, when discussing dropping out, that he never considered doing so because he did not want to upset his mother.

Evidence to support the idea that a student’s background impacts their desire to remain in college and succeed exists as well. One student stated, “I just want better, growing up the way I did, going to consignment shops and buy cheap stuff, I want better.” Another mentioned how he never really knew of the world outside of his neighborhood in Louisville. A student also discussed how growing up homeless prepared him for living on campus, living with a roommate, and dealing with stress. These things exemplify the students desire to remain in college as well as succeed in college.

It can also be concluded that this group of students has a high value of education. Their value of education has helped them to remain in college and persist toward
Statements made by the students, such as, “There are no options for Black men without an education” exemplify the value of education to this group. Other statements reflect their desire to remain in school. One student said, when talking about the year he dropped out, “I knew I had to get back, I was going nowhere in Louisville.”

The findings for this study show that these students feel they need support. As part of question eight one student said, "Black men at this college need to support one another." This sums up the information found across the eight questions asked and answered. At the heart of everything the students always mention support and the need to support from family, friends, peers and university faculty and staff. One student said," It is easy to get into college, but it is hard to stay without help." Another added, "The older Black men need to support the younger guys." While another said, "Black men in college have to grow every year." According to the students, the need for support is born from fact that Black males in college have more to worry about than everyone else. The comments from the students indicate their feeling that a stigma exists around Black males. One student said, "There is a stigma to being a young Black man: it's about what you wear, how you act, how you talk, and what kind of car you drive." Another added, "Other Blacks will say you are acting White if you talk proper and dress nice." Statements such as those previously mentioned lead directly to the conclusion that Black male students have a stigma that surrounds them. The student statements often contains the words “us and “them.” When saying this, the “us” are Black male students and often times the “them” refers to White students, but it could be generalized to mean anyone that is not a Black male.

From my experiences and observations the university has programming in place to help minority students, but there is very little, if any programming that specifically targets Black male students (WKU, 2009). An implication of the lack of programming is the possible loss of some
Black male students. It stands to reason that programming should be designed to target this population. In the review of literature programming of this type is mentioned. There are programs such as the Each One, Teach One program at the West Georgia; this program is designed for upperclassman Black males to work with first year Black males during the transition into college life. The comments of the students in the study show they may want this type of programming and feel that they, along with their peers, need this type of programming.

It can all be summed up by the statement of one of the participants. When asked if there was anything that had not been discussed, related to the study, he stated, "There is nothing like the Black experience." This is referencing how it’s very difficult for others to understand the how it feels to be Black.

Findings and the literature review

The findings of the study support the information contained in the review of literature. The focus group participants discussed various topics that were cited in the review of literature. The information from the research project supports the use of the Rice and Alford (1989) study that retention is a major concern as associated with Black college students. According to statements made by the students, they too believe, as Rice and Alford, that Black male college students are at high risk of dropping out. The information from the study also verifies by the students’ experiences in the Collison (2000) article that explains how students of color are the most underrepresented demographic at every degree level. As mentioned by the focus group participants, the number of Black students that enter together decreases every year. They said you enter with a certain group of people and year after year the faces disappear. One student said, “You find yourself talking about the people that used to be here and have left for one
reason or another.” Additionally, the students’ comments support the Cuyjet (1997) finding that Black males comprise the most at-risk demographic. The focus group participants spoke directly to this idea on a number of occasions during the session. At one point they discussed how they did not understand why Black female students encountered some of the same problems, yet they remained in college. They also discussed how Black males are more apt to fall into the trap of drug dealing or chasing the dream to be an entertainer and leaving college.

Furthermore, the findings of this particular study support the Rice and Alford (1989) article that most Black students do not return to school due to personal or financial reasons. When asked about why Black males do not return, none of the students taking part in the focus group mentioned academics as a reason. Instead they cited family reasons and lack of available funds as the causes of their leaving school. Others mentioned that male friends had left school because their girlfriends were pregnant.

Another article used in the review of literature discussed lack of accurate information about college as impacting college retention. The students made comments that supported the information found in the Rowser (1997) article. According to these students, many minority students lack an understanding of how the college experience works. They stated that many of them have been aided by organizations and programs aimed at helping students transition to college, but felt that many times minority students who are on their own to figure out many things about the college experience. Continuing on this subject was the Somer et al. (2000) article that discussed students from a first-generation background. Several of the students on a number of occasions mentioned that having neither parent attend college hindered their understanding of the college
experience. Others noted they were the first in the family or extended family to attend college, and thus were carrying the load for everyone. Carrying the load was also mentioned in the Freeman (2000) article.

The literature review also mentioned institutional commitment to Black males. In the Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson and Mugenda (2000) article, there was mention of the validation process that students go through once they enter college. Part of this validation process comes at orientation. During the focus group sessions one of the participants made mention to an incident that took place during the university first-year student program that had made a lasting impact on him. The student mentioned a situation where a Black university employee had told him and several of his friends that they did not belong in college and would be lucky to make it past the first semester if they did not change their ways. The student said that stuck with him because he wanted to prove that person wrong. According to Holmes et al. (2000), orientation plays a vital role in the students’ transition, and leaves a lasting impression. Based on the comments by that particular student, orientation is an important part of first-year student programming.

Another section of the review of literature dealt with mentoring. The Lee (2000) article cited information that Black male students felt that having a faculty mentor would be a tremendous help. The students in this study mentioned help coming from faculty mentors, but help from people in the community, as well as help other students who mentored them. Their comments indicated they did not find the race of the mentor to be important, as the Lee study stated. While the students made mention of enjoying the help that Black faculty members offered to them, never once did they state race as a factor in
their mentoring relationships. However, they mentioned age of the mentor as being important, which was not a factor in the Lee study. According to the student statements made by several of the students, they enjoyed and sought the knowledge and wisdom of older faculty members, while one student said he liked to work with what he called “younger, free thinking” faculty. The students’ statements about mentoring also went against the findings in the Guiffrida (2005) study that stated Black students at predominately White institutions (PWI’s) might not benefit from mentoring. Guiffrida stated that Black students might have a hard time connecting with White faculty, which is contrary to what this particular group of students had to say. However, Guiffrida also said that Black male students feel Black faculty members tend to be more in tune with their needs. Statements from the students offer support to this, on a number of occasions the students mentioned that Black faculty had “raised the bar for them.”

The Holsendolph (2005) article also explores student-to-student mentoring. This article discusses successful peer mentoring programs. During the study the students mentioned on several occasions how upper-class students had helped them, especially during the first year on campus. This also goes directly to the Ugbah and Williams (1989) study that stated peer mentoring can help Black students at PWI’s that are feeling “socially estranged.”

Another article used in the review of literature discusses peer relationships. According to the Harper (2006) article, one of the biggest problems facing Black males students is their peers’ view of their success. Harper states that many Black male students fear if they are successful that their peers will view them as acting White. The students in this study discussed at length how they are viewed by other Black students as
well as White students. The consensus seemed to be that the Black male student is in a no-win situation. According to the statements of the students in this study, criticism comes from all sides. They made mention of comments made by other Black students about their dress, or having to field questions about why they go to class, and try to do well. In addition to dealing with other Black students they also have to deal with White students asking them question about why other Black students do some of the things they do. Additionally, the Harper (2006) article stated that many Black male students are at a cross-road they are trying to be popular and be smart, I often say they are trying to “keep it real and be educated” (p. 352). This statement is meant to speak to the idea that Black males are not supposed to value education; instead they should live to the stereotype that exists for Black males in society. A student in the study stated that he did not understand why some other Black people find it wrong to speak correctly.

Also, there is the role of organizations which help with induction. Most of all of the participants at one time or another mentioned campus involvement and organizations. The Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) article mentioned that most Black students feel like “tokens” (p. 515) in organizations. However, this particular group never mentioned having that feeling. They did mention how they felt being the only Black male and sometimes the only Black student in a class or a major. But never once, when talking about organizations was this mentioned. One student did mention that he felt some of the “Black organizations,“ were holding up the stereotypical view of the Black person.

Additionally, there was no discussion of the idea of “survival guilt” (pp.341-342), which was mentioned in the Christie and Dinham (1991) article. While the students talked often of friends they had left behind at home, or fellow classmates that had left
school, never once did the mention any feelings of guilt because they had succeeded.
There was mention of how some friends had “turned” on them, but these students did not
talk about feeling guilty because of their success.

Finally, the Harper and Nichols (2008) article concludes that for the most part
Black men do not share common experiences and backgrounds. The students in this
study and their comments support these conclusions of Harper and Nichols. There was a
student that had been homeless with his mother and sister, a student from an affluent,
well-educated background and on and on. It was best stated in answer the final question
by one participant when he said, “It ain’t nothing like the Black experience.” This
statement speaks to the unique experience of Black people within society. A Black person
has issues within their own race, but also personal issues outside of their race, a very
unique experience.

The findings of the study support the information in the literature review. The
data for the most part agreed with review of literature. However, there were a few
instances in which the students discussed things that were not apparent in the literature
reviewed. The students made mention of what they termed “chasing the dream.” This
refers to students that leave because they are chasing the dream of being an entertainer in
the music industry.

As in the literature review the focus group participants also discussed lack of
knowledge about college as an issue that affected their retention. Additionally, they
mentioned the roles that mentors have played in their success and induction into higher
education. The students often made mention of the role their family in their education.
Finally, they discussed their experiences as college students.
This study is beneficial because it is a 2010 firsthand account of the things that affect the retention of the most at-risk population in higher education. While the group taking part in the focus group was small, the factors mentioned were things that had been found in other studies, things that are real to the students.

**The Research Process: Building knowledge**

My learning experience was greatly aided by a series of books on conducting focus group research (Kruger, 1997a; Kruger, 1997b; Kruger, 1997c; Morgan, 1997a; Morgan, 1997b). Each book in the seven-series set taught a different aspect of conducting a focus group. Each book provided a complete, detailed breakdown of how to perform a specific task. The first book in the focus group kit, *The Focus Group Guidebook*, walked the reader through everything needed in order to understand how to use the remaining books in the series. The book starts off by detailing why focus group research should be used in educational research. This very first section talks about the importance of listening and learning as well as the strengths of qualitative data. This series of books serves as an introduction for all focus group research. This book provided details about what to expect from focus group research as well as some the myths that surround this type of research. Most importantly, I knew what to expect as I moved through the process. It helped me to understand the appropriate uses of focus groups, the ethical issues that were involved, and how to make sure the subjects were protected throughout the process (Morgan, 1997a).

**Development research skills.** Conducting this study taught me that there are four basic uses of focus groups; something that was important to as I tailored the methodology of my research project. A focus group convenes a group to solicit
information about a topic or a product. There are focus groups for formal research such as this project and focus groups for product information in the corporate world. Focus groups can also be used informally to gain information about any topic (Morgan, 1997a).

My project falls into the category of academic research. The other types are product marketing, evaluation research and quality improvement. Interestingly enough, after completing the study, my project could have easily been crafted to fall under evaluation research or quality improvement. However, my research question made my project academic research rather than some of the other possibilities.

In addition to learning about the different types of focus groups, I also learned how to plan focus groups. I used a general outline to guide the research principles for the study and the initial four basic steps: planning, implementation, conducting and analysis. For me, the most important aspect of the early stages of the project was thinking through the project from start to finish before proceeding. During the planning stages, the researcher must be fully aware of the purpose of the research. This led me to focus on the research questions. I learned that to have a quality study the research question must be properly focused in order to gain the desired information (Morgan, 1997a).

This planning stage of a focus group leads the researcher to the different levels of implementation. First, there is the structure of the project; the research must decide just how structured the project will be. This project was structured very informally to allow the participants the maximum opportunity to contribute and remain centrally focused on the participants (Kruger, 1997b). When the sessions took place, only the participants and the moderator were in the room. There were no video cameras; two tape recorders were used to record the participant statements.
The structure of the study is so very important. The moderator has to take either a very structured role or less structured role in the focus group. Both roles have advantages and disadvantages. A more structured role will keep the group on task, but it also could make the participants feel less comfortable. I made the decision to take a less structured role. By doing so the participants were allowed to fully dictate the pace of the group interaction (Kruger, 1997b). In addition to the moderation approach the book also offers suggestions on the approach methods for questions. I choose to use less structured questions. The idea behind using less structured questions goes along with using a less structured moderation approach. By using the less structured question method, the students were allowed to fully discuss the questions based on their interpretation of what each meant (Kruger, 1997b).

The planning stage also includes deciding on the size of the groups (Morgan, 1997b). For this study I choose to use what is considered a small group which is has six participants. A small group, allows each participant time to offer their answers to the questions, and allows for discussion between the participants. It is very difficult to arrange for six college students to be at the same place at the same size. One of my groups was smaller than originally planned, designed for five students, but one failed to show up for the session. After the decisions for group size was made, the make-up of the groups needed consideration: who and what characteristics. Individuals for this study were comprised of students from the main and South Campus. There were students from all economic backgrounds as well as from both rural and urban areas.

I learned as researcher a sound understanding of the guiding principles and planning strategies for focus group research is a must (Morgan, 1997b). The importance
of setting up the groups and recruiting participants for the study cannot be understated. Most important is to develop a checklist to use through the various stages of the planning and carrying out the focus group. The checklist should include: the general planning steps such as timeline, group size, location, dates, and time. Next on the checklist should be the recruitment to include where to get the participants and characteristics of the participants. After recruitment comes moderation of the study to include a list of necessary materials. Finally, related to analysis of the findings, the checklist should include the materials necessary to analyze the data (Kruger, 1997c).

The next stage of the planning is developing the questions for the study. First, I had to learn about the different types of questions used in a focus group and the importance of each type of question toward accomplishment the overall goal. Developing appropriate categories, as well as proper phrasing and sequencing of the questions is a must. Also, understanding how to probe and ask follow-up questions is necessary (Kruger, 1997a). In one group, it was necessary to probe on a few occasions because the students were not talking; they were giving very short answers.

There are five types of focus group questions. The first question of the study is the opening question. The purpose of this question is to get the participants familiar with talking openly, as well as serving as an ice breaker of sorts. This question also offers an opportunity to test equipment, adjust the volume, etc. The opening question is more of a “getting to know you” type of question, designed to obtain useful data but data that will not be as rich as the data obtained later. The second question of the study is the introductory question. This question is designed introduce the research topic and begin a subtle transition toward the primary research question. Like the opening question it will
not be as rich in data as later questions. However, the goal of this question is to begin shifting the participants thinking toward the research question (Kruger, 1997a).

The next question provides the transition toward the main focus of the research. This question like the introductory question is designed to continue the shift toward the primary research question. This question is not as subtle as the introductory question but it is designed with similar intent in mind. When designed, this question includes phrasing that targets the primary research question (Kruger, 1997a).

The next set of questions includes the key questions of the session (Kruger, 1997a). The key questions are the grouping of questions that will answer the primary research question. Unlike the previous types of questions there will be more than one question in this category. It is suggested that a minimum of three open ended questions are used to explore different degrees of the primary research question.

In the next series of questions is the final question (Kruger, 1997a). The final question can come in one of three forms. The final question can be an all-thing considered question, a summary question or a final question. For this study I choose to use a final question. My rationale for using a final question was to allow the students to talk about anything they felt was important that had not been mentioned (Kruger, 1997a). When designing the questions, I felt it was important that the students have an opportunity to discuss anything that was on their mind and affecting their retention.

In addition to outlining the types of questions used in focus groups, the importance of proper phrasing and organization information about testing of questions must be considered. The questions must be tested prior to using them in the focus group session (Kruger, 1997a). Of the testing methods suggested, I chose to test the questions
first on other higher education professionals, and then I tested them on follow classmates. Finally I tested them on a few African-American male alumni. Testing the questions was beneficial; it uncovering a few flaws in the questions as well as helping to make sure they were properly phrased for the target group.

Writing and refining the questions was a very difficult process. First, the questions must fit the research question of the study. If the focus group questions do not connect with the research questions properly, the findings of the study will be compromised. Also, wording of the questions is very important. The focus group questions are meant to be open-ended format, in order to spark discussion among the participants (Kruger, 1997a).

If I had to write the questions again, I would use either an introductory or transition question but not both. Even though the questions were carefully tested various times it was apparent after analyzing the data, the two questions fetched similar data. Had one been eliminated there would have been room for another key question.

The next step of implementation is moderation of the sessions. This role was very foreign to me. Even after watching a mock focus group session and reading from the focus group series, the moderation was very difficult. It is very important when moderating the session to not get caught up trying to be a participant as well. Kruger (1997b) cautioned that the moderator could easily slip into the role of participant by imparting their opinions to the questions. As I moderated the sessions, I was very careful to stick to the script and not stray from asking the questions and probing when necessary. There were a number of occasions where I wanted to make a comments or probe for deeper answers. No matter how many mock sessions are viewed or books studied,
nothing can prepare the researcher to moderate the session. It is a unique experience. It is easy to think it is like a one-on-one interview, but it is not. In a person to person interview, there is an opportunity for interaction; doing focus group research the moderator is only there to facilitate discussion and nothing more (Kruger, 1997b).

Additionally, the mental state the moderator during the session is very important to the success of the project as well as managing the sessions. The focus group kit offered some very useful advice that I employed during this project. The moderator has to be prepared to handle participants that will not talk, as well as participants that try to talk too much. Having an understanding of how to do this was helpful as one of the groups had a student that did not want to talk. I used the suggested methods from my readings to get him involved (Kruger, 1997b). I had him to lead off the discussion of a few questions as a way for forcing his participation.

Setting the room up in the most effective manner is essential, ensuring the environment was appropriate for the session. The room needs to be an inviting area that has plenty of room, and is, for the most part, quiet. High traffic areas that will be distracting to the participants should be avoided. Also, using the proper equipment is a must. The moderator needs a good recorder, with a quality microphone. I choose to use a backup recorder as well just to have two tapes in the event something happened to the original (Kruger, 1997b).

In hindsight, I should have paid more attention to the suggestions from my readings about handling a participant that wanted to ramble and wander off subject. After a review of the tapes, the transcriptions and analyzed data, I realized one particular
participant continually strayed off subject. His rambling made it very difficult to analyze the data.

From my readings I also learned the importance of transcribing the data myself instead of hiring it out to a professional. Transcribing the data was very time consuming and difficult, but doing so allowed me to hear the discussion over and over again, which assisted in analyzing and writing the findings. Transcribing allowed an opportunity to gain a better feel for the pulse of the discussion and to pick up things that may have been missed during the actual session.

The final step to the process is analyzing and writing the findings. There are various ways to analyze the data (Kruger, 1997c). The first in the final sequence is analysis. There are four potential types of analysis: transcript-based, tape-based, note-based and memory-based analysis. For this project, the primary analysis method was taped based, but aspects of the other three were used as well. Using the transcript-based method makes it easier to combine analysis and reporting which work hand in hand and provides consistency. When reporting the findings using the transcript-based method, the writing comes directly from data that has been coded.

I tried several methods. First, I tried to use a method described in the book, which called for reviewing the transcript and making a list of the themes that emerged on different colors of paper. Ultimately, this method did not work for me. I had to go back to a more familiar method reviewing the transcripts, and cutting the different comments and placing them on note cards. After placing the comments on the cards, the cards were divided by questions with like comments being placed in the same categories.
The method worked better for this project: analyzing using 3x5 note cards, and dividing the data in emerging themes from the discussion. Additionally, it was the method that I was first taught to use and most comfortable using. While time consuming and tedious, it works.

Trying the various methods was a learning experience. I learned that the best way sometimes is the most time consuming. But I also learned that is necessary to step out of your comfort zone and try something new. By handling every aspect of the data it has really helped me to write the findings and the conclusions. I think it is very important for the author to transcribe the data. By doing so it allowed me to hear the sessions over and over, as well as catch something that I may have missed. If I had just read transcriptions done by someone else, I may have overlooked something.

The final part of analysis is reporting, the data can be reported by using an oral method or a written method. An oral method might be presented in a formal presentation, conversational report, or formal/informal debriefing. Written reports can come in the form of narrative reports, report memos, top-line reports, or bulleted reports. This project is being presented in a formal narrative report. Using the narrative report format requires that every aspect of the research project be reported on in detail. It includes, but is not limited to findings, conclusions, summary, and recommendations. This particular report also incorporates some aspects of category-based reporting in the findings section. In category-based reporting, the emerging themes are identified and then reported.

Overall the focus group book series proved to be extremely helpful. It removed much of the mystery of the focus group process. My readings were especially helpful in
designing the focus group questions. It offered a rationale of the importance of each question and the clear outline of the goals for questions in relation to the primary research question. The readings served as an easy to follow reference source during all phases of the research process. The entire process would have been more difficult to complete without an easy reference to follow.

My personal research experience. This project has been a very unique experience. To start, I was introduced to a new area of educational research. The focus group method is a very interesting research technique that is very valuable because in this method the researcher gains insights of several people at the same time participants interact with one another and offer ideas that might not emerge from an individual interview. Doing this study allowed me to take a focus group approach from the very beginning and see it to completion.

Before deciding to use focus groups as my method of research, I first had to complete my literature review. I now understand that the literature review is the tool that will set everything about the study into motion. The literature review provides the foundation for framing the research question. Additionally, in many ways, it serves the cornerstone of the entire research project. From the literature review, the researcher learns what has been studied and the results. In some cases the literature that is reviewed shows that no future research is needed on a particular topic.

Conducting this study was difficult. As the moderator I had to make sure not to take part in the session. I had a very difficult time refraining from adding my point of view to the discussion. Additionally, it was difficult to keep from asking too many follow-up questions. As the moderator I had to remain neutral and allow the participants
to answer the questions. Another difficult task was not asking too many additional questions when the students would provide certain answers to questions, and to engage in the dialogue. The moderator must stick to the script in order to protect the validity of the research question and the consistency across the two groups (Kruger, 1997b). Another issue was getting the session together. It was extremely difficult to get six students together at the same time in the same place.

Using the focus group approach allowed the participants to respond to open ended prompts and give responses to the question. I now realize that taking some time to talk to students about issues that affect them is very important. Based on the results it is apparent that this group of students wanted to be heard about the issues that affect them. Their candid responses showed that they had things they wanted to say, and opinions they wanted heard.

Additionally, I was able to learn a few very valuable personal lessons. First, when you make a mistake take ownership of the error and move on. I made a very critical error early in my research project. I had selected a topic that I wanted to do, but I did not know how to make it work. Instead of going to my committee members and owning my mistake, I decided the best course of action was to do nothing, and act as if I was making progress. Second, if you do not understand, do not be afraid to ask for help. The fact is I had no idea how do a literature review, yet I refused to ask for help, which cost me a lot of valuable time, thus making the process harder than it really should have been. Third, when I was struggling with coding, instead of asking for help which was available, I chose to do nothing. The theme here is I made many aspects of this study harder on myself than necessary. My refusal to ask for help really complicated this
research study and affected my research experience. From this I have learned that you must ask questions if you do not understand. Instead of asking questions, I initially choose to avoid the situation and make excuses.

On another level this project has helped me to realize that I am no longer as close to this generation of student as I once thought. Because I entered the higher education profession at such an early age, I have often tried to “brand” myself as knowing what the students are going through and having an understanding of their plight. I will always understand what it means to be a Black male student. However, at this point in my career I have no knowledge of some of the other issues that face today’s student. After hearing the comments of the participants, I now wonder if I ever really understood the plight of so many of Black male students. This project has helped me as I now have a better understanding of issues that are out there.

**Contributions to professional practice.** My research has taught me some very valuable lessons. I now understand that the things that motivated me as a student are not the same things that motivate today’s Black male student. The thin line that existed between these students and oneself when I started my professional career has widened. This study made me aware that all Black males encounter some of the same problems, but over time the younger student has to face new problems that arise. As I work with this demographic professionally, I need to realize that I cannot expect them to walk a mile in my shoes. Nor can I walk a mile in theirs to fully understand the problems they are facing. I now have a better understanding of the some of the socio-economic issues that face students. I am now unaware of the length of time some students carry the baggage of their economic background with them.
This study also made me aware of the benefits of focus group study. This is a tool that I will be able to use to make the program more effective. The focus group approach can be used to evaluate project services, as well as to uncover what students will like to have offered to them. I am a member of several professional associations and I believe that focus group research could be beneficial to these organizations in various ways.

**Benefits of the research.** This research project was beneficial because it provided a look into how these African-American male students view their place on the university campus. Additionally, it uncovered the how this group of students view the things that affect their retention in higher education. Furthermore, it allowed this group of students to detail some of the things they feel and how they see view themselves and the environment around them.

This research also serves as an indicator of the areas that need attention. Based on the comments from these students, there needs to be a commitment to mentoring of Black male students. Additionally, there needs to be an emphasis placed on providing support for first-generation college students. Also, there needs to be a forum that allows Black males to openly discuss the things that are weighing on their minds, such as the feelings that they are different from everyone else.

**Limitations**

This study was limited by a few factors. First, the study was limited by time. The goal was to complete the session by the end of the semester. In order to do so, the questionnaire was sent to a small number of students instead of a larger more ideal number. The demographic was also limited because the questionnaire was not broadly distributed. Secondly, the study was limited by the number of groups. For an
exploratory project of this size, two groups seemed large enough sample. Thirdly, because of time and how focus groups operate, the number of questions asked during the session was limited to eight. All of the above factors caused this study to have a narrow focus.

**Recommendations for future research**

It is necessary to continue to study the factors that affect the retention of Black male students. After conducting the two focus group sessions it became increasingly obvious that this small group of Black male students was carrying a lot of personal and family baggage with them. As stated by one of the participants “My mother told me my success would break a family curse of non-successful men.” How hard must it be for one student to carry the load of a family lineage on his shoulders? As a researcher I feel it is necessary for future research to be conducted to uncover specific problems that plague many Black male students, and what resources are needed to be successful and overcome the barriers.

This study consisted of two small groups. It would be beneficial for future research to include more focus groups that included different populations of Black male students. Additional groups could be comprised of students in specific majors, from urban or rural areas, based on hours completed, students from first generation backgrounds, students from backgrounds with parents who are college graduates, students from single parent homes, students from low income backgrounds and even alumni.

Based on the emerging themes from the data analysis, there are a few topics that warrant consideration for future research. First, the topic of the role of single mother as
related to African-American male students is important. As mentioned previously most of the participants mentioned time and time again across several topics the role their mothers had played in their education to this point.

Another area of future research could be a focus group, solely discussing the stigma that surrounding African-American males in higher education. The participating students in this focus group seemed to be carrying a lot of “personal baggage” as related to a perceived stigma of Black males. Their comments seem to indicate that they question their place in the campus community. The students commented about a perception that all Black male students attend the South Campus. There were also comments about how some Black students mock the Black students that attempt to do well and better themselves. It is important that Black male students understand that being a good student, using proper English and dressing respectfully is not acting white. These are the color blind values to a successful life. There were also comments about the perception that one Black person can answer questions about the entire race of Black people and why other Black people do some of the things they do.

Summary

In conclusion, this entire project has been a very rewarding experience for me personally, professionally, and as a graduate student. I have learned much about the research process from constructing the review of literature to creating the proposal. I now understand how to conduct a research study, code and analyze it. Personally, I now understand that I must ask for help and not run and hide from the things that I do not understand. I must place an emphasis on the things that are important, and prioritize: put first things, first.
This study provided me a brief glimpse into some of the issues that are facing Black male students of this generation as told by this group of students. I now better understand of some of the issues that exist, the things that haunt them, and things that are barriers for them. According to this group, this generation of students wants someone to invest in them and take an active interest in their success. Based on their comments Black male students seem to be carrying a lot baggage, baggage I never had to carry. The hopes and dreams of so many may be riding on the success or failure of one student. Because of this study I can now better assist these young brothers in achieving an education, and changing their destiny. My research has provided me with information I can use to help other students. It has increased my knowledge base about things that are out there, things that are foreign to me.

On a very personal note, after this study when I talk to students, I will wonder about their story. I think about the student in this study that was homeless prior to coming to college. I think about the student that said he was trying to break the curse on the men of his family. I think about the student that said he was trying to show his father that had abandoned him, that could be successful without him. Because of this group of students, I now think about what each particular student needs, how I can help. I also now understand that I cannot make assumptions about students and their needs. I must ask questions to investigate and learn about their story.
References


[http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CAREE&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=34214](http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CAREE&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=34214)


Western Kentucky University. (2009). *2009 Western Kentucky University fact book,*

Appendix A

In future correspondence, please refer to HS10-270, April 23, 2010

Terrance Christopher George
C/o Dr. Spall
Educational Leadership
WKU

Terrance Christopher George:

Your research project, Perceptions of African-American Males on Retention: Two Focus Groups, was reviewed by the HSRR and it has been determined that risks to subjects are: (1) minimized and reasonable; and that (2) research procedures are consistent with a sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (1) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (2) selection of subjects is equitable; and (3) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects’ welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) signed informed consent is required; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data. (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects.

This project is therefore approved at the Expedited Review Level until September 1, 2010.

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Sponsored Programs at the above address. Please report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. A Continuing Review protocol will be sent to you in the future to determine the status of the project. Also, please use the stamped approval forms to assure participants of compliance with The Office of Human Research Protections regulations.

Sincerely,

Paul J. Mooney, M.S.T.M.
Compliance Coordinator
Office of Sponsored Programs
Western Kentucky University

cc: HS file number George HS10-270

HSCB APPLICATION # 110-270
APPROVED 4/14/10 9/11/10
EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULLBOARD
DATE APPROVED 4/12/10

The Spirit Makes the Master
Office of Sponsored Programs | Western Kentucky University | 1900 College Heights Blvd, #11026 | Bowling Green, KY 42101-1026
Project Title: Perceptions of African-American Males on Retention: Two Focus Groups

Investigator: Terrance (Chris) George, Educational Enhancement Programs, 745-3978

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Sharon Spall, Educational Leadership, 745-5190

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** This project is designed to gain the perceptions of African-American male students on the issues that affect their retention in college. The purpose of this study is to uncover the issues that may cause African-American males to leave college.

2. **Explanation of Procedures:** You are asked to participate in a focus group of six students that will discuss retention issues as related to African-American males. The session will be tape recorded. You will be asked six questions all related to retention; questions will include barriers you have encountered, the people that have influenced your education, and general questions about college life. The focus group will last between 45 minutes and one hour.

3. **Discomfort and Risks:** There are no known or anticipated risks associated with this study.

4. **Benefits:** The results will assist those who work with retention initiatives in higher education. Additionally, you as a participant will gain a better understanding of the issues that impact the retention of black male students. Also, you will gain a firsthand knowledge of the things that are affecting other black males.

5. **Confidentiality:** After transcription of the tape recorded sessions, the transcribed data will be kept in a lock file cabinet in the faculty sponsor’s cabinet. The tape recordings will be destroyed. Your name will never be associated with the transcriptions.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

---

**HSRB Application # 10-226**

**APPROVED 7/17/10 to 5/11/10**

**DATE APPROVED 7/17/10**
You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant                                      Date

I give permission for this focus group discussion to be tape recorded.

Signature of Participant                                      Date

Witness                                                       Date

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Compliance Coordinator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-4652

HSRB APPLICATION # 10-270
APPROVED 4/23/10 to 3/31/16
EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL BOARD
DATE APPROVED 7/10/10
Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

Project Research Question:
What experiences do African-American males view as having an impact on their retention in college?

Research Questions:

Engagement Questions:

Opening question-
- Take a minute to reflect on your time at college. Now can you tell me what you have enjoyed about your college life, thus far?

Introductory Question-
- Thinking back to your life prior to college. What experiences helped prepare you for college life?

Exploration Questions:

Transition Question-
- Reflect on the campus environment and the campus community that exist at your college. Can you tell me how you feel that you fit in at the university?

Key Questions-
- Take a minute to think about the people in your life, the people at work, school, etc. Who are the people that have had an influence on your college life? (Please be specific about how the person or persons have helped, and how it impacted your college experience.)
- Thinking back to the different problems you have encountered during your college life. What are some of the biggest obstacles you have had to overcome in college?
- When answering this question think about other African-American male friends and classmates those of you who have remained in college and those that have gone for various reasons. What do you
think are the main reasons African-American males leave college? (Follow-up, what has helped keep you in college?)

- Can you think of a situation when you felt discouraged and it caused you to consider dropping out of college?

Exit Question:

- Is there anything else you would like to say about being a Black male at WKU or the culture surrounding Black males at WKU?
Appendix C

Greetings,

My name is Chris George. I am a graduate student at Western Kentucky University in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research. Currently, I am working on the final requirements to complete my Educational Specialist degree. My final research project is a study that focuses on the retention of African-American males at Western Kentucky University. I want to talk to African-American males at all academic levels. I am inviting you to take part in a focus group for this project. Attached you will find a short questionnaire to gather some background information about you. The questionnaire will serve as an indication that you are willing to take part in the focus group. The questionnaire will be used solely as a way of finding participants for my project. Finally, I assure you that your survey responses, as well as all opinions expressed in the focus group will be kept confidential. Your name or identity will not appear in any information regarding the study. I hope you will take a few minutes to complete the questionnaire, and I also hope you are interested in taking part in my study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Interest Questionnaire

Name_____________________________

Best Contact number: ______________________ Email:_________________________

Age_______

What is your current class standing? FR. SOPH. JR. SR.

Have you attended any other school besides WKU? Yes or No

Are you currently taking classes at the community college? Yes or No

Have you taken any classes at the community college? Yes or No

Would you be willing to take part in my focus group study? Yes or No

As an indication of involvement, please lists the organizations you are affiliated with at WKU? (Please list in the blank space below)
Appendix D

Desired Characteristics for my focus group

Research Topic:
Retention of African-American males at a regional comprehensive university

Research Question:
What type of experiences do African-American males view as having an impact on their retention in college?

Focus group traits:
- African-American males student at WKU
- At least two upper class students
- At least one first year freshman student in each group
- At least one student from WKU community college
CURRICULUM VITAE

Terrance (Chris) George
333 Hanover St
Bowling Green, KY 42101
chris.george@wku.edu

Education
Western Kentucky University (WKU), Bowling Green, KY
Educational Specialist, Education Leadership
Thesis Project: Perceptions of African-American males on retention
Thesis Supervisors: Dr. Gayle Ecton, Dr. Sharon Spall, Dr. David Coffey

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY
M.A., History, August, 2002
Emphasis: United States History
Certificates: Kentucky History (August 2002), Unites State History (December 2002)

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY
B.A., History, August 1999

Employment
Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY
Director, Student Support Service (July 2011-present)
Assistant Director, Student Support Services (June 2010-June 2011)
Coordinator/Counselor, Student Support Services (March 2003- May 2010)

Western Kentucky University (WKU), Bowling Green, KY
Graduate Assistant, Department of History (January 2001- May 2002)

Murray State University, Murray, KY
Educational Advisor, Educational Talent Search (October 1999- December 2000)

The Princeton Times Leader, Princeton, KY
Special Correspondent, (August 1993- November 1995 and August 2001-present)
Teaching

Instructor, Navitas at WKU, 2010-present

- University Experience 175

Instructor, Enrollment Management/University College, Western Kentucky University, 2002-present

- University Experience 175 (general)
- University Experience 175 (Student Support Services)
- University Experience 175 (Kentucky Plan)

Instructor, Department of History, Western Kentucky University, 2003-2007

- Western Civilization 120 (main campus and Glasgow Regional campus)

Presentations


5-W’s, How of Motivation. Western Kentucky University Peer Mentor training, May 2003

How to use Critical Thinking Exercises in the Classroom (I Love You to Death). Western Kentucky University Peer Mentor training, May 2003

Celebrate Success. Western Kentucky University Minority Mentoring Project, June 2003

5-W’s, How of Motivation. Western Kentucky University Journalism Peer Mentor training, August 2003.

Peer Mentoring: Help for the Helper. The Benefits of a Peer-Mentoring Program for Trio Programs. TASP/KAEOPP Fall Conference, Bowling Green, KY, September 2003 (with Jim Fulkerson, Instructor WKU University Experience)

Making the Transition from High-School to College: Tips and strategies that work. Western Kentucky University Upward Bound Project, March 2004

Team Building and Leadership based on the Lead Exercise and the Principals of the Pyramid of Success. Western Kentucky University Journalism Peer Mentor training, May 2004

The Rules of the Game: How to Transition from High School to College. Western Kentucky University Upward Bound Project, March 2005

Tip-Off: How to make the most of your College Experience from day one. Western Kentucky University Project Early Start, August 2005

Putting a new spin on old things: Changing the face of our program. TASP/KAEOPP Fall Conference, Chattanooga, TN, October 2005
Changing the Face of our Program, Changes the Life of our Participants. SAEOPP Conference, Greensboro, NC, February 2006 (with Michael Johnson)

Leadership Development for Trio student. SAEOPP Conference, Myrtle Beach, SC, February 2007 (with Tamika Dobbins, Counselor WKU Upward Bound)

Filling the Preparedness Gap. WKU Engaging the Spirit Conference, Bowling Green, KY, August 2007 (with Sean McCray, Assistant Director of Supplemental Education, Academic Advising and Retention Center WKU and Bethany Smith College of Business Advisor WKU)

College Preparation and Success for First-Generation and Low-income Students. WKU Engaging the Spirit Conference, Bowling Green, KY, August 2007 (with Dr. David Coffey, Director of EEP, WKU and Michael Johnson Director of SSS WKU)

Retention Strategies of TRiO Programs. SAEOPP Center TRiO Training, Lexington, KY, November 2009 (with Dr. Dan Connell, Director of TRiO Programs Morehead State University)

Technology in TRiO. SAEOPP Conference Pre-Conference workshop, Mobile, AL, January 2010 (with Stephen Hendrix, Associate Director East Tennessee State University Upward Bound)


Finding your Yoda, the importance of mentors to student success. WKU Upward Bound Senior Seminar, June 2010

Using Technology to increase participation in your TRiO Program. TASP/KAEOPP Fall Conference Pre-Conference workshop, Gatlinburg, TN, October 2010 (with Stephen Hendrix)

Using changing technology to change your TRiO Program. SAEOPP Conference Pre-Conference workshop, Atlanta, GA, February 2011 (with Stephen Hendrix)

Student academic competitions and how they can increase participation in your program activities and student leadership events. SAEOPP Conference, Atlanta, GA, February 2001, (with Matt Hyden, Technology Coordinator Morehead State University Upward Bound Programs and Michael Maxwell, Program Manager Upward Bound Math and Science Morehouse College)
Professional Activities

Memberships

- Kentucky Oral History Commission
- Southeastern Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personal (SAEOPP)
- Kentucky Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personal (KAEOPP)
- Southcentral Kentucky Umpires Association
- Kentucky Association of Blacks in Higher Education
- Kentucky College Access Network (charter member)

Committees (non-university related)

- Ralph Hallowell Memorial Scholarship Committee (2000-2004)
- Charles Asher Continuing Education Fund Committee (2003-2004)
- KAEOPP Scholarship/Leadership Awards Committee (2004-2008)
- KAEOPP Trio Day (2004-present)
- KAEOPP Student Support Services Debate Chair (2004-present)
- KAEOPP Student Initiatives Chair (2005-present)
- KAEOPP Communications (2005-2007)
- KAEOPP Editorials and Publications (2005-2007)
- SAEOPP Exhibits and Vendors (2005/2010-2011)
- SAEOPP Conference Committee (2007)
- SAEOPP Resource Development Committee (2007-2011)
- Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) Resource Development Committee (2007-present)
- SAEOPP Ad Sales (2010-2011)
- SAEOPP Membership and Marketing Services (2011-present)
- SAEOPP Student Initiatives, Debate (2010-present)

Office Held

- KAEOPP Secretary 2005-2007
- KAEOPP Vice-President 2007-2008
- KAEOPP President 2008-2011
- KAEOPP Past-President 2011-present
- South Central Ky. Umpires Association Vice-President 2009
- South Central Ky. Umpires Association President 2010-present
- SAEOPP Board of Directors (Ky. Rep.) 2008-2011
University Service

- University Experience Steering Committee, 2002-present
- United Way Campus Fund Drive, 2002
- Campus Diversity, 2003
- Orientation, Advising and Registration (OAR) Advisor/ATP, 2002-present
- Master Plan Connector, 2002
- University Experience Peer Instructor, 2003-2004
- Master Plan Faculty/Staff Group Leader, 2003
- VIP Gateway Community Mentor, 2002
- Peer Mentor Trainer, 2002-2003
- WKU Minority Mentoring Project, 2003
- Delegate for the Kentucky Plan Committee on Equal Opportunities, 2004
- University Certified Academic Advisor
- Graduation Committee/Commencement Officer, 2003- present
- UE Peer Mentors (2002- 2008)
- UE Learning Communities (2002)
- UE Curriculum Development (2003-2008)
- UE Professional Development/Instructor Training (2003-2008)

Awards and Honors

- 2003 KAEOPP Emerging Leader
- 2004 SAEOPP Emerging Leader I
- 2005 SAEOPP Emerging Leader II
- WKU First-year Student Advocate Award 2007
- SAEOPP President’s Award for Outstanding Services 2009
- SAEOPP Outstanding Leadership Award 2009
- SAEOPP Outstanding Leadership Award 2011

Unpublished Works

- The History of Shepherd Street Baptist Church (2000)
- A Puzzle to Portrait: Mary Lou Hollowell, The woman who fought the Night Riders. (2001)
- The Robert (Mike) Bradley Collection (2002) Housed at the Kentucky Museum, Western Kentucky University.
- Interview with Judge William Cunningham on the Night Riders and the Black Patch Wars. (2001)
- Interview with Ann Kimmel on Mary Lou Hollowell and the Black Patch Wars. (2001)
- Interview with Gale Cherry on the Integration of Caldwell County High School. (2000) Transcript can be viewed at Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky Oral History Page http://162.114.3.83/civil%5Frights%5Fmvt/county.aspx?c=Caldwell