“We’re in this together”: Family Factors Contributing to the Academic Persistence of African American College Students attending an HBCU

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ABSTRACT

Academic persistence among African American college students has become an important issue due to the consistent lack of increase in the retention rates of these students. Despite the importance of this issue in the field of education, little has been done to study how family factors may influence college student's academic success from a family science perspective. Further, students attending HBCUs are rarely utilized in empirical research even though HBCUs have proven to be effective in graduating African American students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the ways in which African American college students' perceive family relationships and support as impacting their academic persistence**.**

Fourteen African American college students attending an HBCU were interviewed about their perceptions of the impact of family relationships and support on their academic persistence. Participants included nine females and five males all identifying as juniors or seniors. Findings for the study included four major themes: (a) family structure and family relationships, (b) challenges/overcoming obstacles, (c) coping strategies, and (d) success and perseverance. Family structure and relationships were defined in a variety of ways by participants, which included immediate family, non-kin, and extended family. Participants faced several challenges and obstacles including transitioning to college, family issues at home, and being a burden, particularly financially, on other family members. Several coping strategies were utilized by participants. Family support, religiosity, peer relationships, and music were cited most often by participants in this study. The study concluded that family relationships and support are indeed important in academic persistence of African American college students.

Dedication

This dissertation was completed in memory of Antoine Cornell Gordon, my brother, my best friend, my angel. You are my inspiration. I thank you for your guiding hand during this process. I felt your love surrounding me every single day. Everything I do is in your honor. I love and miss you.

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Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. – Galatians 6:9

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Significance

Academic persistence among African American college students has become an important issue due to the consistent lack of increase in the retention rates of these students. Extensive research has documented various factors that contribute to poor academic performance for African American children; however there is little research that reports the factors that contribute to positive academic outcomes (Taylor, Hinton, & Wilson, 1995). Because of these trends, "educational researchers are interested in studying the academic success and adjustment of college students" (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, p. 223).

Over the past several decades, the percentage of African American children who have graduated from high school has increased significantly (Luster & McAdoo, 1996). Enrollment of African Americans at institutions of higher education has also changed over the past few decades (Allen et al., 1991; Robertson & Mason, 2008), with 40% of African American students who are eligible to attend college enrolling in a baccalaureate program (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). However, of that 40%, only 46% graduate within six years of enrolling in a 4-year program (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Although there has been an increase in African American student enrollment, African Americans continue to have a low college completion rate with only 8.7% of these students graduating from a 4-year institution (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003).

There is a concern that the numbers of African American young adults who earn bachelor's degrees have not increased for several years. Despite the importance of this issue in the field of education, little has been done to study how family factors may influence college student's academic success from a family science perspective. Studies have documented that as students face new academic demands and challenges they may experience stressful events

(Bailey & Moore, 2005; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), however few have documented how family relationships are related to helping students cope during these challenges. The vast majority of studies on academic success and persistence in African American college students are centered on social adjustment and related variables for students attending Predominantly White Institutions, as these issues are viewed as important aspects in the college transition. Further, theories of retention provide the predominant framework used for studying college students' academic persistence however retention theory does not account for cultural and family variables such as parental relationships and community obligations (Moore & Upcraft, 1990).

Retention theorists contend that "students are more likely to persist in college when they successfully separate from their home context and become academically and socially integrated into the college setting" (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007, p. 406). Although focused on Latino students, a supportive relationship with family was shown to be important in serving as a "protective role" (p. 247) for ethnic minority college students particularly in dealing with non-college stresses (Rodriquez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003). This support is important as students are in a new collegiate environment that may affect family relationships.

The importance of family relationships to African American college students' academic success is still under debate (Guiffrida, 2005). As discussed further in Chapter Two, there is some research that indicates that parental support is specifically related to adjustment in college for ethnic minority students though few studies have incorporated the family as part of the framework for studying college students. The connection between family and academic performance for school-age children and adolescents has been thoroughly examined; however there are few studies on college age students (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Taylor et al. (1995)

assert that "to truly benefit African American children and society as a whole, the factors that contribute to positive academic experiences must be isolated and studied" (p. 294).

While there are several influences that may contribute to academic performance, Taylor and colleagues (1995) point to the major importance of strong parental relationships. African Americans tend to report closer relationships with their parents than do their peers of other cultural backgrounds (Love, 2008). Hines and Boyd-Franklin (1982) indicated that typically African American parents hope that their children will outperform them when it comes to income (as cited by Kane, 2000). Because of this hope African American parents have great influence in their children's academic persistence. Further, Nicholas et al. (2010) found that parental involvement in education positively relates to students' educational aspirations. In addition, Nora and Cabrera (1996) suggest that higher levels of parental encouragement are related to higher levels of goal commitment, social integration, and academic development in African American college students.

Strong family relationships and the collectivistic nature of African American families may influence parents and "make them less willing to grant independence to their children" (Heard, 2007, p. 324) causing African American students to make a choice between pursuing a higher education and showing loyalty to their family. Parental assistance in navigating transitions has a great influence on children's success in adapting to a collegiate environment (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Successful transitions then are critical and should incorporate the student's family relationships with the collegiate environment (Inkelas et al., 2007). Thus, this study focused on the student and his or her family relationships in order to uncover new and relevant details on academic persistence in African American students and contribute to the development of programs aimed at retaining African American college students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the ways in which African American college students attending a historically Black university perceived family relationships and support as impacting their academic persistence. There are numerous family factors that may influence college students' transition experience possibly impacting academic persistence. Thus, a variety of family factors and their contribution to the academic success and commitment towards graduation are examined in this study. These factors include understanding family relationships, the collegiate and family transition, the conditions under which families were perceived as supporting and hindering students' academic persistence, as well as investigating family background characteristics that were viewed as important from the students' perspective.

This study was designed to identify the family factors that led to persistence in African American college students. Because much of the literature on African American families is conducted from a deficit perspective (Cain & Combs-Orne, 2005; Hill, 1999), the participants for this study were asked to tell their own stories of family support systems in their collegiate endeavors. The study contributes to the research on African American families from a strengths perspective, as well as, to a limited body of research examining the nature of family relationships on academic persistence among college students.

Research Questions

This study examined how family factors (i.e., background characteristics, support) relate to academic success in African American college students. Together family life course and family systems provided a theoretical framework to examine the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do family relationships and background characteristics relate to the commitment of African American students' persistence towards graduation?
2. How do African American college students perceive their transition from the family system to a collegiate environment as having impacted their family relationships?
3. In what ways, if any, do African American college students perceive their family as providing instrumental and emotional support during their transition to college?
4. How do African American college students perceive their successes and/or failures as impacting other members of their family?
5. What methods of coping are helpful for African American college students transitioning to college?

Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been used by scholars to conceptualize family composition, how it changes over time, and how those changes affect family members (Demo, Aquilino, & Fine, 2005). When studying family factors that influence academic persistence in African American college students, family based theories and concepts assist in conceptualizing the process. In considering various theoretical perspectives, family systems and family life course theories and their concepts explain the processes and dynamics for this study (See Figure 1). From a family systems perspective, family is defined as a household in which the behavior of any one person is at all times a function of behavior of all other members (Ackerman, 1984). A systemic view of family means that change in the behavior of any one person affects all the other family members in a meaningful way (Ackerman, 1984).

Understanding how college students are embedded within the family system while transitioning into a collegiate environment can lend insight on how these individuals and their

families adapt to new environments and family structures. Family systems theory and family life course theory are valuable frameworks to explain the variance in family adaptation to family members transitioning out of the home environment and into a new environment. For this study, family life course theory was used to focus on the concept of transitions. From a family systems perspective the focus was on family subsystems, relationships, and scripts. Both family systems theory and family life course theory address linked lives and interdependence among family members.

Family Life Course Theory

Family life course theory provides a broad framework through which to consider college students family experiences as it seeks to explain changes in families; that is, the specific social group, the family, is the focus of analysis (Chibucos, Leite, & Weis, 2005). The life course perspective is a valuable tool for conceptualizing changes in individual family relationships over time (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Demo et al., 2005) and for identifying the consequences of those changes for individual family members (Demo et al., 2005). Further, life course explains patterns of family formation and dissolution (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Elder, King, and Conger (1996) maintain that family life course refers to "age-related life patterns embedded in social structures and cultures that are subject to historical change" (p. 31).

The life course perspective emphasizes the importance of time, context, process, and meaning on family life (Bengston & Allen, 1993). In family life course theory, "the family is not simply a sum of its parts, rather the family is seen as various systems influencing each other, as their ongoing interactions produce outcomes that are not reducible to a mere summation of the separate individual functioning" (Chibucos et al., 2005, p. 12). With college students this could be particularly difficult as they transition out of the family system and into a level of

independence. Life course dynamics take place over an extended span of time; and they also may form within a short time span marked by the transition of specific life events (Elder, 1985) such as entering or leaving college.

Transitions. Transitions are a central concept in family life course theory (Heard, 2007). According to Elder (1985), based on the time that they occur and the significance of the event, transitions shape pathways and life course trajectories of individuals and families. In addition, transitions are always embedded in trajectories giving them specific form and meaning (Elder, 1985). Although in many instances college students live away from their parents, many parents continue to support their children as they make the transition to college (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006).

Transitioning into collegiate living occurs at a time for college students in which they are also entering young adulthood and establishing new peer relationships (Mounts et al., 2006). This transition period is also a time when college students should typically be granted independence from their families and become self-sufficient. Young adults transitioning from a family environment to collegiate living may face obstacles in adjusting to living independently from family members. For example, Love (2008) reports that "ethnic minority students tend to ascribe to a collectivistic extended family structure that emphasizes cohesion and support" (p. 32), possibly making the transition from the family environment difficult. Further, young adults may find their ability to conform to a lifestyle that differs from their traditional familial experiences as being challenging. This discrepancy could influence their persistence, or lack thereof, towards graduation. Thus, researchers must consider if diversity in family structure and culture may result in racial and ethnic differences in the impact of family transitions across a variety of academic outcomes (Heard, 2007).

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory uses systems thinking to view the family as an emotional unit with complex interactions (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Family systems theory suggests that like any group, a family is greater than the sum of parts meaning individuals cannot be understood independent from one another (Broderick, 1993). Families are considered systems for several reasons. Families are made up of interrelated elements, exhibit coherent behaviors, interact regularly, and may be interdependent and rely on one another (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). In addition, within a family system, patterns of interdependence result in all members of the family system being impacted by a change in one member (Ackerman, 1984; Chibucos et al., 2005). For example, when the child/college student transitions into a university setting the rest of the family is affected as the student may have been preparing meals, providing care for younger siblings, among other responsibilities. Thus, researchers have moved towards viewing individuals within their larger family systems (Cox & Paley, 2003).

In most instances the family system is the "central place in which African American children receive messages about who they are becoming and can (or cannot) become, in terms of education" (Kerpelman, Shoffner, & Ross-Griffen, 2002, p.289). A systems approach to studying ethnic minority college students and their families suggests that students are often significantly connected to their families of origin. Further, the family is one of the most influential social systems that influence young adults as they experience the transition to collegiate life. Families typically provide support, love, and encouragement during a transition period that may be difficult.

A family systems perspective for this study focuses on the similarities and differences in the experiences of different family members (i.e., the student and family members). Systems

within the family are altered (sibling system, parent child-system) as the student has been removed and is now expected to live independently. Relevant to this study is the systems theory tenet that the family and its members are at different logical levels as indicated by the fact that what is "good" for the family is not necessarily "good" for members as individuals (Ackerman, 1984; Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). In addition, students find themselves in a situation where they are living independently while still relying on emotional and financial support from their families. Guiffrida (2005) suggests that students are caught in a "double bind" (p. 57) and may experience "break-away guilt" (p. 57). As they attempt to improve the family name by attending college, they may also feel a responsibility to maintain their roles within the family system (Guiffrida, 2005).

Family scripts, subsystems, and family relationships. A systems approach to studying ethnic minority college students and their families focuses on the concepts of family scripts, subsystems, and relationships. During a lifetime individual family members may serve in various roles (White, 2005). Some of these roles are assigned within the family such as the relationships of brother and sister, child and parent, and among others (White, 2005). Members of the family and the roles they perform are viewed as the components of a family system (Chibucos et al., 2005) and may vary within different levels and subsystems creating a variety of family scripts, defined for the purpose of this study as the roles individuals fill within the family system.

A layering of subsystems is found within the family system. Subsystems reflect patterns of relationships among family members (Ackerman, 1984; Chibucos et al., 2005). These may consist of sibling subsystems and parent-child subsystems (White & Klein, 2008). Changes can occur at any level of the family system and a change at one level can cause a domino effect

further changing individuals, relationships, and the entire family system (Cox & Paley, 2003). Each level of the subsystem is affected differently by the removal of the family member transitioning into college and therefore could influence the support given to the student by family members and the academic persistence of the student.

Results from previous studies support the idea that family role assignments and family relationships impact transitions to college for African American students (Guiffrida, 2005; Love 2008). When the student is removed from the family system, roles within the family may become uncertain and all members within the system could be impacted. In this instance a "student's decision whether to separate or strengthen relationships with family members involves a complex balance between fulfilling their own needs without neglecting the needs of their families" (Guiffrida, 2005, p. 57). Because of the close bonds and the sense of collectivism in African American families this decision can be very difficult and impact the academic standing of the student as well as the relationships with individual family members (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988).

Interdependence and linked lives. Interdependence and linked lives are cited in both family systems theory and family life course theory. While family systems focuses on interdependence from a structural perspective, family life course theory focuses on linked lives from a relational perspective. Family life course theory suggests interdependence of family members through the concept of linked lives (Crosnoe & Elder, 2002), that is, that people in relationships with each other, such as parents and children, have interconnected developmental paths that last over the course of a lifetime (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). As Elder (1985) states, "the principle of linked lives extends beyond the notion of interdependent lives to the interlocking trajectories of individuals and their sequence of transitions, both social and

developmental" (p. 39). The concept of linked lives implies that the activities and actions of individual family members move together and are interconnected. Such theorizing suggests that situations in adult children's lives (the college student) would impact the lives of their parents and vice versa (Crosnoe & Elder, 2002). For example, if there are issues such as illness of a relative or problems with a professor taking place in the lives of those within the system, that issue could influence other family members.

Similarly, family systems theory identifies the concept of interdependence as having interrelated elements and structure within the family system (Constantine, 1986). Each element has characteristics; there are relationships between the elements; and the relationships function in an interdependent manner (Constantine, 1986). All of these elements and relationships create a structure, or the sum total of the interrelationships among the elements, including membership in a system and the boundary between the system and its environment (Ackerman, 1984). This concept of interdependence and linked lives includes the direct impact on other family members of any one member's personal events and achievements (i.e., the student attending college). The members of the family are held together by degrees of interdependence (on both emotional and instrumental levels) (Chibucos et al., 2005). Thus, college students are connected to their family of origin and family members may experience the achievements as well as difficulties that college students face. For example, when a student is named to the Dean's list or scores the winning touchdown during the big game, parents may share that news with friends as an accomplishment of the entire family.

Applying the Theoretical Framework to the Study

The integration of family systems and family life course theories provide a theoretical framework to consider when studying African American college students and the family

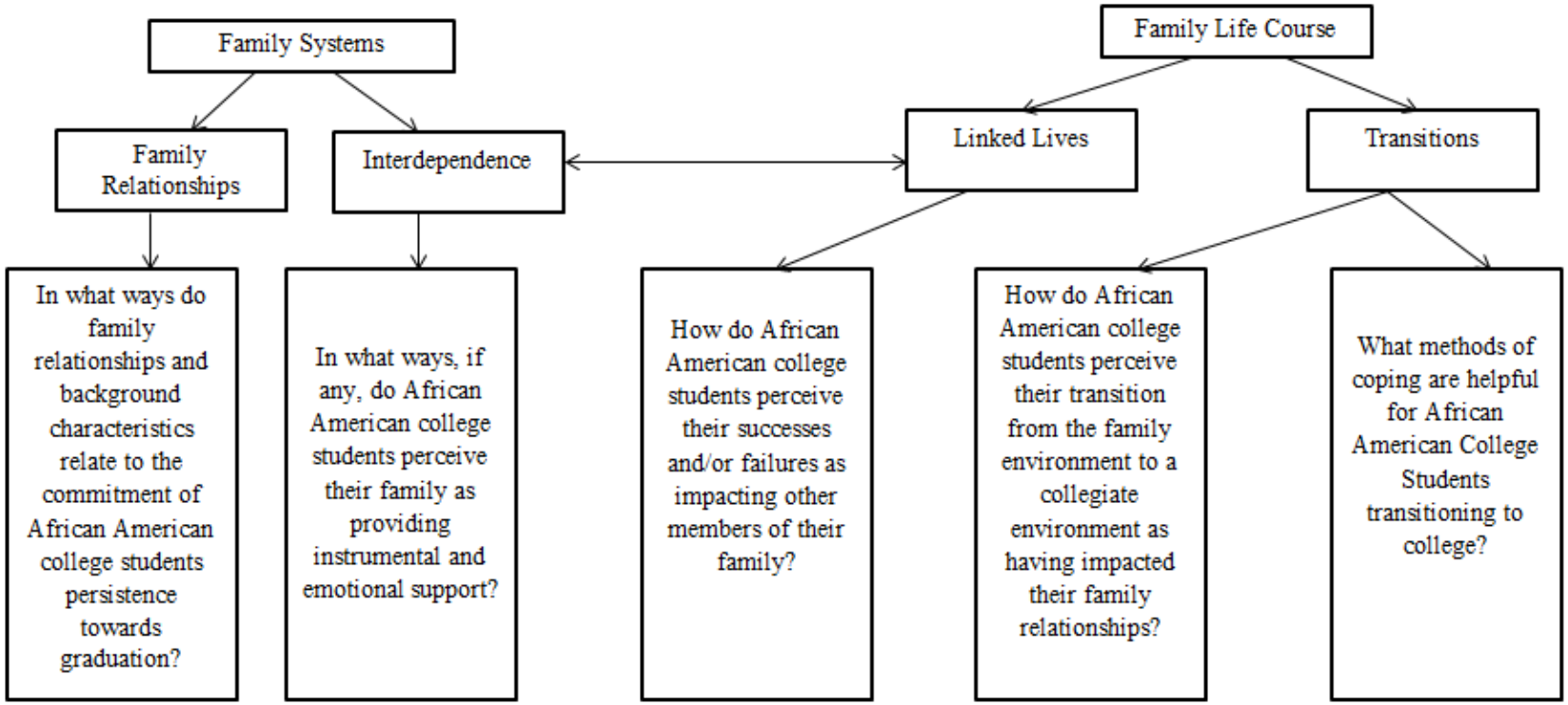
strengths that influence academic persistence. Incorporating these two theories allows the focus to be on the strength of family support systems for African American college students by examining family background characteristics and relationships as perceived by the student. Further, previous studies on college students have focused on retention theory, thus incorporating family theories allows for emphasis on the family as a unit.

Family life course theory provides a framework through which to consider college student's family experiences as it "seeks to explain changes in families; that is, the specific social group, the family, is the focus of analysis" (Chibucos et al., p. 11). A key concept in family life course theory is the emphasis on transitions. According to Elder (1985), transitions shape pathways and life course trajectories of individuals and families. For students transitioning into collegiate living, the transition comes at a critical time in which they are also entering adulthood. Further, the interactional nature of life course theory gives a unique vantage point in which to examine college students' transition from their family of origin as well as their perception of how their collegiate experiences influence family members.

A systems approach to studying African American college students and their families suggests that students are often significantly connected to their families of origin and directs attention to similarities and differences in the experiences of each family member (i.e., the student, parents, siblings). Family systems theory views the family as an emotional unit (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993) where families organize and restructure themselves to carry out the daily challenges and tasks of life. Further, both family systems and family life course theories highlight the interactions between individual family members through linked lives (Elder, 1985) and interdependence (Constantine, 1986).

The following theoretical model was created to assist in guiding the study. The theoretical model includes family systems and family life course theories, the concepts identified from each theory, and the research questions that guide the study.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model.



Rationale of the Study

Examining persistence in African American college students is important for several reasons. According to Taylor and colleagues (1995), in the United States the traditional way to attain independence is through education. Higher education, beyond high school, is typically needed to obtain the types of employment that will provide sufficient financial support and to meet personal accomplishments (Kerpelman et al., 2002) and provide new advanced opportunities. There are also negative outcomes associated with low educational attainment, especially among the African American young adult population, which include "sustained poverty and crime involvement" (Nicholas et al., 2010, p. 28).

Operational Definitions of Frequently Used Terms and Concepts

- Academic persistence – continued enrollment in a baccalaureate degree program beyond two years of coursework.
- Family factors – characteristics unique to the traditions and histories of African American families.
- Family relationships – the interactions between members of the family.
- Family structure – consists of the people with whom participants lived.
- Family system – those who participants considered as included in the family, whether they were a part of the immediate household or not.
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) – any institution founded prior to 1964, with the expressed purpose of educating African Americans at the post-secondary level (Satterfield, 2008), (See Appendix A).
- Linked lives – people in salient relationships with each other who occupy mutually influential interlocking developmental trajectories to extend over a lifetime (Elder, 1985).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the research topic by providing the background and significance of the study, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, rationale, operational definition of terms, and organization of the study. Chapter Two provides a detailed overview of the existing literature relevant to the study. Chapter Three describes the methodology used in the study including an overview of qualitative methodology, sampling procedures and procedures employed to collect and analyze the data. Chapter Four reports the results of the study, and chapter Five discusses and interprets those results and their implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine family factors that contribute to the persistence of African American college students. Several topics are relevant to the study. Strengths of African American families are reviewed to include parenting styles, fictive kin and extended family relationships, and religiosity. The "deficit" perspective in African American family studies literature is also reviewed briefly. The second section focuses on educational issues in retaining African American college students with the focus being on college transition programs and parental and family involvement. Finally, the history, current conditions, and importance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to the African American community are reviewed.

African American Families: Challenging the Deficit Perspective in Family Studies

For African Americans, family is one of the most important institutions in the community (Franklin, 2007). The African American community has survived several problematic issues such as reconstruction, slavery, segregation, discrimination, and enforced poverty (Franklin, 2007). Many African American families have faced issues with unemployment, poverty, homelessness, crime, and violence, among other problems over several generations (Hill, 1999). Despite having to overcome these obstacles, a good percentage of African American families are positive contributors to American society (Franklin, 2007; Hill, 1999).

Understanding race, ethnicity, and culture in family processes is challenging for scholars in the field of family studies (Few, 2007). Generally, analysis of African American families focuses on identifying problematic issues, but rarely provide any solutions (Hill, 1999). Much of the family studies literature focusing on African American families is presented from a "deficit" perspective (Cain & Combs-Orne, 2000; Hill, 1999). Hill (1999) asserts that the predominant

illustration of African American families in social sciences literature is unbalanced. An overwhelming amount of family studies literature centered on African American families and culture is structured around low income families, single parents, health problems, substance abuse, violence, and welfare dependence (Hill, 1999). Further, it is common for African American family structure to be altered, often having the presence of an extended kin member in the home (Tamis-LeMonda, Briggs, McClowry, & Snow, 2008) yet this is rarely addressed empirically.

In his classic critique, "The Search for Applicable Theories of Black Family Life", Walter Allen (1976) characterized the state of African American family research as having problematic conceptualization and research design as well as conflicting findings. Over 30 years later, many of the same issues are still contributing factors to African American family research. Understanding African American families in terms of their strengths, the challenges they often face, and the ways in which they have been affected by governmental policies is impacted by several issues, most notably racism (Nobles, 2007).

Race theorists argue that while racism has taken different forms from previous decades, it continues to be the key factor in hindering African American progress (Hill, 2005) and influences studies on African American families. However, researchers are beginning to approach previous deficiencies in studying African American families in the areas of sampling and measurement that should assist in developing new understanding of these families (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). Many social scientists are moving beyond the "comparative approach of much of the research and are studying African American families from a perspective that recognizes the cultural variations, functionality, and validity of African American lifestyles" (Peters, 2007, p. 203). Research on African American families indicates that the behaviors and

styles of African American people are significantly different than those of other racial backgrounds (Peters, 2007). The majority of African Americans descended from African slaves (Dodson, 1981) and traditional African values have been passed on from generation to generation (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 1985). Individuals tend to identify with their families and their behaviors are a reflection of those family traditions (Stewart, 2007). Thus, "African American families need to be understood in the context of their unique history in the United States that is different than that of any other racial group in America" (Borum, 2007, p. 119). For the purpose of this study several strengths, that is, characteristics that historically have been considered as that which are important to the survival of African American families, will be reviewed to include parenting practices in African American families, fictive and extended family relationships, and religiosity as a coping mechanism.

Parenting Practices in African American Families

The value of children in African American families is consistently reported in African American family literature (Hill, 2001). Parenting has been described as "the process of nurturing, protecting, and guiding a child through the course of development, while preparing the next generation for life and success" (Greder & Allen, 2007, p. 119). Family research indicates that culture plays a major role in shaping parenting values, beliefs, goals, and practices (Greder & Allen, 2007).

The growing body of literature on diverse families suggests that although all parents may share key characteristics, African American and parents of other ethnic minority backgrounds experience issues that may influence parenting styles (Greder & Allen, 2007). African American parents play an important role in instructing their children on how to be successful citizens in a society in which they are minorities. Generally, analysis of parent-child relationships attempt to

understand how parents communicate certain behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs to their children (Nobles, 2007). Strengths within parent-child relationships in African American families are rarely addressed (Nobles, 2007). The predominant approach to African American parenting research focuses on "disadvantages associated with single parenthood to the exclusion of other issues" (Cain & Combs-Orme, 200, p. 19). Sampling practices often resulted in an understanding of low income at risk African American families most often compared to middle-income low risk White American families (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). However, there has been growth in both the quantity and quality of studies on African American parenting to include working- and middle-class participants from various backgrounds and communities over the last several years (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008).

Much of the current literature on African American parenting practices is focused on racial socialization. Taking a qualitative approach, Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, and Brotman (2004) interviewed 15 low-income African American women who were primary caregivers of children ages 5 and 6. They found that 73% of the parents included messages that focused on racism preparation, 93% teach racial/ethnic pride to their children, 86% used messages that related to similarities and equality of members of all races/ethnicities, and 67% included messages that emphasized individual and academic achievement, such as the need to achieve and work hard (Coard et al., 2004). In addition, parents emphasized to their African American children the need to work twice as hard as White children to be as successful (Coard et al., 2004).

Similar, the main purpose of a quantitative study by Smalls (2010) was to investigate the patterns of 94 self–identified African American adolescents' (ages 11-14) evaluation of their mothers' racial socialization and parenting styles and the association of those patterns with youth

engagement. Adolescent engagement outcomes including persistence, academic engagement, and background information (gender and status in reduced lunch program) were examined (Smalls, 2010). Results indicated that racial pride messages were positively related to task persistence and academic engagement. Further, engagement outcomes were positively associated with child-centered parenting and a positive climate in most cases (Smalls, 2010).

As illustrated in the previous studies by Coard and colleagues (2004) and Smalls (2010), researchers have begun exploring African American parents child-rearing practices and forms of racial socialization from the perspective of "effective, supportive, or practical strategies appropriate to those social realities that Black people face" (Peters, 2007, p. 212). Thus, parent-child relationships are an important factor to consider when studying African American college students, as these relationships shift and change when students make the transition into collegiate living. Further, parenting practices, such as racial socialization, within the African American community may influence academic expectations, academic persistence, family and university based relationships.

Fictive Kin and Extended Family Relationships

Without a doubt, strong kinship relationships is an important cultural strength in African American families (Hill, 1999), as well as, their collectivistic nature and strong community ties. Historically, family and kinship has been seen as extended rather than immediate or biological relationships for African American people (Stewart, 2007). These relationships are centered on "extended family, the community, the African American churches, and the adoption of fictive kin—individuals who are not related to the family but play a role in the raising of children" (Brown, 2008, p. 34). This kinship system, with a strong helping tradition, is based in West African culture and has enabled African Americans to survive the era of slavery and the

continued oppression after the slavery era (Gray & Nybell, 1990; Stewart, 2007). Networks and kinship relationships are not only considered as helpful but are often cited as necessary for survival, especially for African American families (Dodson, 1981).

Fictive kin relationships can be defined as relationships involving individuals who are not biologically related but who describe each other as relatives (Stewart, 2007). Members of extended families often include "relatives beyond the immediate family who provide social, emotional, and instrumental support" (Pallock & Lamborn, 2006, p. 815), often organized around a dominant family figure, such as a grandmother (Lamborn & Nguyen, 2004). Members are interdependent and may share financial responsibilities and child care across or among family units (Stewart, 2007). For many African Americans, extended kinship support and fictive kin relationships are an "adaptive strategy that allows for the sharing of resources" (Lamborn & Nguyen, 2004, p. 547).

Research on fictive kin and extended family relationships has found positive results for African American families. Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody (1994) conducted a study on fictive kin relationships in African American families based on the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) dataset. Data were collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans Institute for Social Research and consisted of 2,107 completed surveys of individuals over the age of 18. Results indicated that two out of three respondents included fictive kin relatives in their family. Differences in socioeconomic status, gender, region, and age were not found (Chatters et al., 1994) indicating that fictive kin relationships in African American families were not exclusive to a particular demographic group.

Pallock and Lamborn (2006) investigated the perceptions of parenting practices and extended kinship support in relation to academic adjustment in adolescents. The sample for the

study included 104 African American and 60 European American 9th and 10th graders (Pallock & Lamborn, 2006). Higher levels of extended kinship support were found to be related to school values, teacher bonding, and work orientation for African American participants (Pallock & Lamborn, 2006). In addition, having positive relations with extended family members related to stronger beliefs in the importance of school and stronger bonds with teachers (Pallock & Lamborn, 2006).

Further, in a qualitative study by Stewart (2007), participants voluntarily included fictive kin into their family system. Various pathways in which non–kin could gain entry into the family structure were described by participants (Stewart, 2007). These pathways included childhood relationships, church family, and relationships by marriage (Stewart, 2007). Each played a supportive role within the family structure of the participants. A participant in Stewart's (2007) study described those in his family as "Everybody. It's a bond. You don't even need to be blood to belong. You can go to church and find family. A church family." (p. 172).

Considering the historical significance of extended and fictive kin relationships in African American families, "it is important to explore the ways in which African American extended families adapt to changes" (Stewart, 2007, p. 178). In this study of African American college students, considering fictive kin and extended family relationships is relevant as these individuals may play a significant role in the support system of students.

Religiosity: A Coping Mechanism

Historically, one of the most defining cultural strengths of African Americans is their strong religious and spirituality commitment (Hill, 1999; Mattis & Jaggers, 2001) as it plays a vital role in sustaining African American families. The African American church focuses on

messages of hope for a better future (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The church is not only seen as a religious institution or place of worship but as an extension of the family (Kane, 2000).

Studies indicate that African American families consistently demonstrate high levels of religiosity as compared to other families (Chatters, Taylor, Jackson & Lincoln, 2008; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). When compared to American churches as a whole, African American churches tend to focus more on social services, providing family-oriented resources (Hill, Burdette, Regnerus, & Angel, 2008). The church provides strength during challenging times, a support system, leadership opportunities, and religious traditions that have been passed down over many generations.

The potential benefits of African Americans' religious participation are evident by research indicating that religious belief and activity form an important coping mechanism for handling problems (Chatters, Taylor, Jackson & Lincoln, 2008; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). Large numbers of African Americans indicate that they look to God for strength, support, and guidance (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, & Schroepfer, 2002) with nearly 9 out of 10 African Americans reporting that prayer is an important source of coping when dealing with stress (Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 2008). Further, an analysis of data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) by Taylor and Chatters (1991) found that the majority of African Americans participated in various religious activities frequently (several times a month or more) including: praying (93%), watching or listening to religious programs (82%), and reading religious material (74%). Eighty-three percent of participants believed that the African American community saw improvement because of African American churches (Taylor & Chatters, 1991).

Moreover, religion is often cited as a protective factor for African Americans. Several studies indicate "that students undergo spiritual and religious changes as they transition into college and the early years of adult life" (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010, p. 82). For example, using a nonclinical sample of 100 African American and 121 White young adults attending a large public Midwestern university, Chapman and Steger (2010) examined the relationship between religious coping and anxiety symptoms. Measures included the Beck Anxiety Inventory, a measure of cognitive and somatic symptoms of anxiety experienced over the past week, and Brief Religious Coping, a 10 item measure of religious coping (Chapman & Steger, 2010). Differences among the two groups were found. More positive religious coping was reported by African American participants (Chapman & Steger, 2010). In addition, White participants reported more anxiety symptoms than African Americans (Chapman & Steger, 2010).

Further, a qualitative study by Donahoo and Caffey (2010) examined how church participation influences academic performance, retention, and engagement in 25 African American college students. The sample included three freshmen, eight sophomores, three juniors, seven seniors, and two graduate students. For the majority of participants in the study who maintained their church involvement while attending college, this proved to be a wise choice (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). The authors concluded that "to varying degrees students attributed their successful transitions into college, academic performance, career selection, ability to cope with stress, and desire to accept and improve the lives of others to their church involvement, religious practice, and spirituality" (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010, p. 100).

As indicated by the previous studies, religiosity can be described as a coping mechanism within the African American community. Further, many African Americans "maintain a conviction of the existence of spiritual power and an unwavering belief in God providing for

their needs and this may permeate all facets of one's existence" (Chapman & Steger, 2010, p. 320). Including religion as a variable in studies on African Americans has proven to be an important factor in explaining positive outcomes amongst this group (Hill, 1999). Thus, exploring religion in the study of African American college students is important as it may be used as a coping mechanism and method of resilience during challenging times.

The "Deficit" Perspective in African American Family Research

As stated, much of the literature surrounding African American families is presented from a deficit perspective (Cain & Combs-Orne, 2005; Hill, 1999). Studies typically focus on problems within the African American community. Although this study focuses on strengths in African American families, it would be irresponsible to ignore the issues that have been addressed in previous family studies literature.

Several themes pertaining to issues with African American families emerge from the literature. Extensive research has documented economic pressures, lack of parental involvement in education, welfare dependence, parent-child conflict, and other problematic issues within the African American community. Further, studies on African American college students tend to focus on alcohol and drug use (Hall, 2010), lack of persistence (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008), academic and social challenges, and hip-hop culture and identity (Henry, West, & Jackson, 2010), among other issues. Thus this study utilized a strengths perspective in order to contribute to the literature on African American families as well as African American college students' academic persistence.

Retaining African American College Students

The numbers of African American young adults who earn bachelor's degrees has not had a significant increase for several years (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, &

Haskins, 2010). Increasing access to higher education was considered as a solution to previous issues with racial inequality, and the 1960s witnessed what was the beginning of a dramatic increase in the enrollment of African American students at colleges and universities (Allen et al., 1991). African American enrollment at institutions of higher education has varied significantly over recent decades with enrollment decreasing in the 1980s (Allen et al., 1991) and increasing in the 1990s and 2000s (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Although African Americans have seen an increase college enrollment, only 46%o of those enrolled will graduate with a baccalaureate degree within six years of entering college (Astin & Oseguera, 2005) as compared to 63% of White college students as reported by the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (cited by Robertson & Mason, 2008).

Current literature suggests that African American students' chance of persisting through graduation depends how involved they become in the collegiate setting both, socially and academically; however family relationships are rarely cited as being a contributing factor. Providing a social support system for African American college students is essential (Grier-Reed et al., 2008) to assist in collegiate transitions and increase academic success among this population. The research on African American college students persistence and retention is abundant, however much of the literature investigates differences in the persistence of African American students versus White students (Bailey & Moore, 2005) and focuses on students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

For example, Thompson, Gorin, Obeidat, and Chen (2006) examined how "student-level indicators - such as expectations for postsecondary education, academic achievement, participation in college preparatory tests, and student-parent communications - are related to postsecondary educational attainment for Black and White populations" (p. 549). In Thompson

and colleagues study (2006), multiple sources of data were utilized including data that is publicly available from The College Board and National Center of Education Statistics. Findings indicated that parental expectations of their 12th grader's postsecondary attainment were significantly higher for African American students than for their White peers (Thompson et al., 2006). However, African American students still have lower graduation rates than White and Asian students (Thompson et al., 2006).

Further, studies have documented retention rates of African American students as being lower than that of students of other racial backgrounds (Bailey & Moore, 2005). More specifically, attrition rates for African American students are much higher than that of their White student peers (Bailey & Moore, 2005). In a qualitative study, Robertson and Mason (2008) examined factors related to academic success and retention in 15 Black males attending a PWI in southern region of the country. In-depth interviewing was utilized for the study (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Their findings confirmed those of other studies. These findings included collegial faculty/student relations, understanding and dealing with racism, and extra-curricular activities all contribute to retention and academic success in African American males (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Family relationships were not cited.

College Transitions

Although access to higher education has increased, African American college students continue to face a number of educational issues that can be problematic while transitioning into a collegiate environment. These issues include lack of knowledge about the college process, social isolation, and family and economic problems (Arnold, 1993; D'Augelli & Hersberger, 1993), among others. The college years also represent a time in which young adults may be questioning identity, a time when "coping with transitions is influenced by internal (e.g., individual

personality characteristics), as well as external resources (e.g., family support)" (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003, p. 92). The transition of moving from a familiar environment (i.e., local school and community) to an unfamiliar environment (i.e., new school outside of local community) often creates an increased level of anxiety for African Americans (Bailey & Moore, 2005).

College students usually face several demands as they transition from high school and home environment to a collegiate environment (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). These demands include "(a) academic adjustment, (b) institutional adjustment, (c) social adjustment to peers, faculty and other individuals, and (d) personal-emotional adjustment, or the need to manage one's own emotional and physical well-being" (Schwitzer et al., 1999, p.189). Personal-emotional adjustment is where the family connection is evident. Given that the family is often central in African American culture, parents and extended family tend to have influence in the academic choices that are made by their children in addition to providing emotional support during this time of adjustment and transition.

During the first year of college students are creating the foundation for their later college years with numerous factors impacting the first-year college transition ultimately leading to academic success and persistence (Woosley & Miller, 2009). In a quantitative study with a sample of 2744 participants (77% of an incoming freshmen cohort) at a large Midwestern university, Woosley and Miller (2009) found that the early transition experiences of academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment were related to academic success and persistence. Results were consistent even when ethnicity was included in the analysis (Woosley & Miller, 2009).

Walpole and colleagues (2008) studied a summer bridge program, focused on academic growth and achievement, designed specifically for underrepresented college students. This

longitudinal study had 120 students complete the first survey (summer 2003), 86 complete the second survey (fall 2003), and 33 completed the third survey (fall 2005). Results indicated that students who participated in the summer bridge program "had high educational expectations, concerned, involved parents, school counselors, and teachers, and had attended a program designed to ease their transition to college" (Walpole et al., 2008, p. 24). Further, students who attended the summer bridge program persisted academically and by the fall of their junior year their retention rates were higher than the retention rate of the control group (Walpole et al., 2008).

In addition to summer programs, institutions have implemented programs for the first year of study. In order to determine if academic themed or transition themed first-year seminar programs were more effective, Friedman and Marsh (2009) examined which approach was most effective as it relates to first year retention rates, first year grade point averages (GPAs), and student perceptions of the course experience and outcomes. The sample for the study included 177 first-semester students enrolled in the seminar. The results indicated no difference between thematic versions and transition-style seminars on one-year retention rates or first-year grade point averages (Friedman & Marsh, 2009). Both formats of the seminar were effective in helping students transition to college (Friedman & Marsh, 2009) indicating that regardless of the format of a transition program, these programs are usually helpful for first-year students.

Transition programs have shown to be successful in contributing to the retention of college students. However, many of these programs do not continue beyond the first semester or the first year of college. Further, many transition programs are created for all incoming students and may not address differences in racial or ethnic background when it comes to the importance of family values, family relationships, and cultural norms (Inkelas, et al., 2007). Thus, for these

reasons, the current study focused on how family relationships impacted college transitions in African American students.

Parental and Family Involvement

Parental involvement in education has been found to relate positively to students' educational aspiration and plans (Nichols, et al., 2010). However, there is only a small literature that explores parental relationships and the adjustment of college students (Guiffrida, 2006; Love, 2008; Mounts et al., 2006). Generally, African American parents want their children to surpass them as it pertains to educational attainment, therefore African American parents typically have great influence in their children's educational endeavors.

In a quantitative study conducted by Nora and Cabrera (1996) the influence of parental encouragement in ethnic minority students was examined. The sample consisted of 851 freshmen as decisions regarding persistence were considered most important for first-year students (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Results of the study indicated that higher levels of parental encouragement of college attendance were related to higher levels of academic experiences with faculty and staff, higher levels of social integration, and higher levels of academic achievement. Further, parental encouragement was the most important factor impacting minority students' academic experiences (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

A supportive relationship with parents is shown to be important for the well-being of ethnic minority college students (Love, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 1995). Guiffrida (2005) conducted a qualitative study seeking to understand students' perceptions of family on academic achievement. The study was conducted at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). A total of 99 African American participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Guiffrida (2005) concluded that high achieving students cited their family and parental support

as positive influences on their academic success. Although they described their parents as not being able to help with academic issues such as homework, high achieving participants felt that their parents did everything that they could to support them, including providing encouragement and praise. (Guiffrida, 2005). In addition, financial support, regardless of whether it was for tuition payments or small amounts of money for other expenses, gave students the impression that their education was important to their family members (Guiffrida, 2005). Further, low achieving students in the same study rarely discussed their families when describing emotional support, often describing family obligations as interfering with making social connections on campus (Guiffrida, 2005).

As demonstrated in the previous studies, strong family and parental support may contribute to African American college students' academic persistence and success. Thus, successful collegiate transitions are important and "should bridge the student's home environment with the collegiate environment" (Inkelas et al., 2007, p. 406).This in turn should contribute to higher levels of persistence and an increase in graduation rates among African American students enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Rich History

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are important in the nation's educational system (Nichols, 2004; Price, Spriggs, & Swinton, 2011). HBCUs, also known as predominately Black institutions, were established during the pre-civil war years (Jackson, 2002; LeMelle, 2002; Redd 1998) during the period of segregation in the United States to provide educational opportunities for African Americans who did not have access to White institutions of higher education (Mathews & Hawkins, 2006; Sissoko & Shiau, 2005). Historically Black colleges and universities are defined (as established by the Title III Higher Education Act of

1965), as "any institution founded prior to 1964, with the expressed purpose of educating Blacks shall be known as a historically Black college or university" (Satterfield, 2008, p.1).

The first HBCU, the Institute for Colored Youth (later renamed Cheyney University) was founded in Pennsylvania in 1837 (LeMell, 2002); followed by Ashmun Institute (now known as Lincoln University of Pennsylvania) in 1854 and Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1856 (Redd, 1998). These private non-profit institutions (Redd, 1998), were started by White northern missionaries and White and Black church groups, and in the early years were assisted by the Freedmen's Bureau and in the later years by White philanthropist (LeMell, 2002; Redd, 1998). During early years HBCUs provided training in basic skills and religion to African American youth (Redd, 1998) during a period when African Americans lacked opportunities to advance their education.

The Morrill Act of 1890, a federal law created to help publicly fund black colleges, established public land-grant institutions for African Americans in segregated states (Jackson & Nunn, 2003; Redd, 1998). Land grant institutions provided training primarily in teaching, specifically in agriculture, mechanical arts, and in vocational and industrial trades (Jackson & Nunn, 2003). For the most part HBCUs, whether private or public, were established in response to racism (Evans, Evans & Evans, 2002) and discrimination in the educational system of this country.

Current Conditions

From their modest beginnings, HBCUs have made important contributions to American society by providing educational opportunities for low-income and disadvantaged students who may have otherwise not have an opportunity to pursue higher education (Redd, 1998). The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) estimates the average enrollment at HBCUs at approximately

2,720 students. Recent figures indicate an increase of approximately 26% in enrollment at HBCUs of the past 18 years, with more than 360,000 students enrolled at HBCUs (Henderson, 2001).

Presently, there are 49 private and 50 public accredited HBCUs (Redd, 1998), most of which are located in the Southern and Eastern region of the country. The majority are four-year institutions granting baccalaureate degrees, though many offer advanced degrees (Schexnider, 2008). Despite financial challenges, as HBCUs typically have fewer resources and serve a high number of disadvantaged low-income students, these institutions have continued to be important in the United States higher education system (Mathews & Hawkins, 2006). By the early 1990s, HBCUs had educated about 40% of America's African American college graduates (Jackson, 2002).

HBCUs: Contribution to African Americans Higher Education

The main purpose of HBCUs is to provide access and opportunity to pursue higher educations as these universities have always welcomed all students regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. Although some scholars and politicians, among others, question their value in a society that is no longer segregated, HBCUs have played a huge role in producing African American graduates across diverse career opportunities (Schexnider, 2008; Sissoko & Shiau, 2005). In addition, HBCUs strengthen African Americans in their cultural values while providing a sense of belonging; both of which are viewed as essential to academic success in African American students (Jackson & Nunn, 2003).

Despite their small size in relation to other types of higher education institutions, HBCUs have been helpful to the African American and disadvantaged communities. These institutions account for only about 3% of the accredited institutions of higher education in the United States, but collectively enroll approximately 14% of the total number of African Americans in higher

education (Avery, 2009; Redd, 1998; Stewart, Wright, Perry, & Rankin, 2008) and graduate 24% of all African Americans who obtain college degrees annually (Nichols, 2004; Shafer 2004). Further, approximately 70% of Black doctors and dentists, 50% of Black engineers and public school teachers, and 35% of Black attorneys received their bachelor's degrees at an HBCU (Avery, 2009) indicating their importance in the development of African American professionals.

Studies of HBCUs indicate that African American students who attend HBCUs have lower dropout rates than those who attend predominately White institutions (Carson, 2009; Shafer, 2004). In addition, African-American students show significant gains cognitive and personal development when attending an HBCU (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996) and benefit from increased levels of engagement with peers and faculty, increased support, and faculty diversity (Stewart et al., 2008). Higher grade point-averages and significant academic growth are also reported by African American students attending HBCUs (Dwyer, 2006.).

HBCUs also offer increased academic opportunities to African-American students (Kim & Conrad, 2006). A quantitative analysis of a national longitudinal student data set from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program found a higher (almost 1.5 times) proportion of African-American freshmen (N=941) at HBCUs had worked with faculty on research projects (Kim & Conrad, 2006). Further, African American students who participate in research projects with faculty have higher degree completion rates (Kim & Conrad, 2006).

Attending an HBCU has also been directly related to potential earnings. A quantitative study by Price, Spriggs, and Swinton (2011) suggests that HBCUs graduates have better labor market outcomes than African Americans attending other institutions. Using data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Price and colleagues (2011) results indicated that "the

effect HBCUs have on the psychological outcomes of graduates support the idea that HBCUs have a comparative advantage in nurturing the self-image, self-esteem, and identity of its graduates, which theoretically matters for labor market outcomes" (p. 25).

In addition to academic opportunities, African American students attending HBCUs are able to escape the questioning of whether they are academically qualified and have social advantages (Satterfield, 2008) as compared to African Americans attending other institutions. HBCUs provide an alternative to predominantly White campuses wherein African American students may feel disconnected (Watson & Kuh, 1996) from students and faculty of other ethnic backgrounds. Studies also indicate that African American students attending HBCUs are more involved campus life, have closer relationships with faculty, and have higher levels of participation in campus organizations and activities (Redd, 1998; Stewart et al., 2008).

As stated by LeMell (2002) "the HBCU has come full circle in fulfilling its mission – the production of highly educated African American students who are confident about who they are and how they should use their skills to improve themselves as well as their communities" (p. 193). HBCUs do play a significant role in our nation's higher education system (Nichols, 2004; Price et al., 2011) as they have the ability to improve the lives of African American youth by providing the opportunity to pursue higher education in a comfortable learning environment.

Because so many factors combine to determine an individual student's achievement in college, determining the success of any program or institution takes time (Nettles, Wagener, Millett, & Killenbeck, 1999) as statistics are compiled and evaluated. Nevertheless, HBCUs claim only 3.3% of the nation's 6.8 million undergraduate students (Henderson, 2001), yet they continue to produce well-educated students who otherwise may not have an opportunity to attend a 4-year institution. HBCUs are continuing to thrive because these institutions are successfully

educating and graduating African-American students at a higher percentage rate than other institutions of higher education (Carson, 2009; Stewart et al., 2008) while incorporating the sense of community (Copeland, 2006) and culture.

Literature Synthesis

Though somewhat limited, the existing body of literature on African American college students suggests the importance of considering family relationships during the transition process into collegiate living. Current literature also supports the notion that family strengths, to include parenting practices, fictive and extended kin relationships, and religiosity as a coping mechanism, in African American culture impact academic expectations, academic achievement, and persistence towards graduation. The research, however, falters in understanding the way in which these families organize themselves to meet the needs of the family member that is attending college.

While there is a growing interest in the phenomenon of the role of family and retention among African American college students, little is known about how the transition is experienced by the student and his or her perception of how individuals within the family system experience the transition. Further, little is known about how family relationships contribute to persistence among African American students. Current retention research focuses on social and academic issues and rarely addresses the influence of positive family relationships on academic persistence. Moreover, studies rarely utilize samples from historically Black colleges and universities, though these universities have proven as essential in educating members of the African American community.

Understanding African American families and the influence on academic persistence in college students can inform policy and transition programs within the university setting, thus,

creating more positive transitions and improving academic persistence in African American college students. In addition, this study contributed to the strengths perspective of studying African American families in the field of family studies.

Chapter Three: Method

Methodological Approach

Creswell (2007) writes "metaphorically qualitative research is an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material" (p. 35). Qualitative research is unique in two ways: "(a) the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted, and (b) the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 5). The current study is based in qualitative research for several reasons. Qualitative research designs begin with questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and are concerned about process (Patton, 1990) with the ultimate purpose of learning about a phenomenon (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Understanding how African American college students perceive the transition from home life to collegiate life is important because little is known about their collegiate experiences and their perception of how family impacts their persistence, as described in their own words. The meaning these students make out of their experiences can inform critical areas of African American family research, as well as, research in academic persistence and retention of African American college students. A qualitative approach allows researchers to highlight areas of balance between family and collegiate living and can create an image of the process for further review and examination (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative researchers also have the advantage of adding new pieces to the research puzzle or creating new puzzle pieces while gathering data (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Charmaz, 2006). In addition, a qualitative approach allows for the researcher to extend and expand the view of the studied life and, thus, enhance what is known about it (Charmaz, 2006). From this qualitative study, family support and family relationships came from a strengths perspective,

which is rarely utilized in studies of African American family studies literature. Further, institutions of higher education will gain insight as to how to better understand African American students and their families with the ultimate goal of improving retention rates in African American college students.

Phenomenological Approach

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to investigate the lived experience of individuals in relation to a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007; Daly, 2007) and how the participants express these experiences (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The focus is on in-depth meaning of a particular aspect of an experience (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). A phenomenologist is concerned with understanding what people say and do from the participant's own perception (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975) and therefore must put aside biases and become "immersed in the respondent's sphere and use the self as an experiencing interpreter" (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 14). Further, phenomenological approaches are appropriate when the focus of the study is to "understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 23). Transcendental phenomenology is the approach taken in this study as I have "set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being studied and relied on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience" (Creswell, 2007, p. 237). In a phenomenological approach, interviewing is the data collection method as data are collected from participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

A phenomenological approach allows for the exploration of thought and meaning that African American college students have developed given their experience with family relationships and support during their collegiate years. This is critical to understanding how

participants interact as members of their family and how those interactions influence academic experiences. The student's perceptions informed the study on how family relationships contribute to academic persistence. In addition, taking a phenomenological approach in understanding how African American college students perceive their transition from the family system to collegiate living and the family support given is important, as few studies have presented their lived experiences in their own words.

Procedures

Recruitment

Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at both Virginia Tech and the participating institution approved this study. Upon receiving approval from both institutions, contact was made with "gatekeepers", defined as "individuals who implement or enforce regulations and policies at the study site" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 163) at the participating university. Information regarding the study to include IRB documents, demographic questionnaire (Appendix B), and recruitment information (Appendix C) was sent to gatekeepers. The gatekeepers then forwarded the information to faculty members instructing large lecture courses, particularly those with high enrollment of students beyond their second year of coursework. In addition, information was forwarded to advisors of campus student organizations.

University faculty and student organization advisors were asked to forward study recruitment materials and information to students via class announcements, email, and Blackboard. In addition, I attended class sessions in several academic departments on campus to include psychology and human ecology, among others, as well as musical rehearsals and student organization meetings to introduce the study to students as requested by faculty. It was also recommended by gatekeepers to actively recruit by attending campus events and conversing with

students at a variety of locations on campus including the university student union, university housing (dorms and university apartments), and recreation facilities. I took this advice and attended several events on campus over the course of three months.

During the recruiting process interested participants were asked to review the informed consent document and complete the demographic questionnaire that included family background information regarding religion, parental educational level, family income, and household composition. Gender, age, major, and year in school were also included in the questionnaire. I requested that the questionnaire be returned via email. All participants were screened based on the confidential demographic information provided. Criteria for participants to be included in the study were:

- Above 18 years of age
- Identified as African American
- Beyond the second year of coursework towards a Bachelor's degree

Harrell and Bradley (2009) recommend considering various types of participants, therefore participants from a variety of backgrounds (socioeconomic status, household composition, parental educational level) were included in this study. Upon reviewing background questionnaires, interview times were scheduled with participants. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, that is, until no new information was being learned from interviews (Charmaz, 2006).

To insure confidentiality participant information to include demographic questionnaire and informed consent were kept in individual folders and locked in a file cabinet. In addition, electronic files were kept on my password protected computer. Data collected for the study were

shared only with individuals on the research team consisting of myself, and Dr. Katherine Allen, my academic advisor.

Pilot Study

Prior to conducting interviews for the study, interview questions were piloted through practice interviews and small focus groups. Participants for the pilot study were recruited from two universities in the same region of the country as the participating university. I conducted all practice interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 75 minutes. Based on the feedback from practice interviews changes were made in wording and the ordering of interview protocol questions. In addition I changed the length of interviews from 60-90 minutes to 45-60 minutes as feedback from pilot interviewees indicated the interview was too lengthy and some questions were asking for similar responses.

Description of the Data Collection Site

Data for this study were collected at a midsize (based on enrollment at other HBCUs), historically Black university in the southeastern part of the United States. As of 2009 (the most recent statistics available), this university serves approximately 5,400 students with 91.1% being of African American decent, 3.3% identifying as White, and less than 1% each identifying as Asian, American Indian, or Hispanic (State Council for Higher Education for Virginia University Data and Statistics, 2010). Approximately 62.2% of students are female and 37.5% are male with 0.3% not reporting their gender (State Council for Higher Education for Virginia University Data and Statistics, 2010). Nearly 91% of the student body consists of undergraduate students with 86% of undergraduate students attending school full-time (State Council for Higher Education for Virginia University Data and Statistics, 2010). Retention for students beyond the second year averaged between 55-57% annually from 2004 and 2007, the last years the

information was available (State Council for Higher Education for Virginia University Data and Statistics, 2010).

This university has several academic programs and awards bachelors, Masters and doctoral degrees. In addition, several programs are available to assist students with the transition to college, including a one-week transitional program designed to assist students prior to beginning their freshman year and a one-hour semester course that is required for all freshmen and transfer students to complete during their first semester of enrollment. Both programs feature seminars on university policies, substance abuse, campus safety, transitions, academic success plans, and library resources, among other topics. In addition, several financial programs assist students of all socioeconomic backgrounds with academic funding including grants, scholarships, financial aid, and book stipends. Ultimately, the participating university is dedicated to the "promotion of knowledgeable, perceptive, and humane citizens—secure of their self-awareness, equipped for personal fulfillment, sensitive to the needs and aspirations of others, and committed to assuming productive roles in a challenging and ever-changing global society" (University 2020 Vision Plan, 2004, p. 5).

Sample

Selecting a sample is very important in the development of a qualitative study as the purpose of qualitative research is to collect and analyze rich data. In order to specifically focus on the family and its impact on academic persistence, students attending an HBCU were interviewed for the study. Previous findings indicate that, African American students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) entered college with higher high school grade point averages and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)/American College Test (ACT) scores than African American students attending HBCUs, however, these students reported lower academic

achievement in college and exhibit lower academic self-concept than students attending predominantly Black institutions (Carson, 2009; Flowers, 2002; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Many African Americans attending PWIs experience feelings of isolation from the majority culture and therefore are likely to experience academic difficulty (Love, 2008). In addition, participants in a study examining family-oriented stressors on acculturative stress in African American college students attending PWIs reported some interpersonal distancing from their families based on: "family pressure not to change, pressure to maintain ethnic group's language, the perception of acting White, and the belief that values were becoming different than the family's values" (Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo, & Hurst, 2010, p.150). Moreover, students attending HBCUs are rarely utilized in studies of African American college students. Therefore this study provides evidence-based student perceptions of their own experiences in a context in their own right rather than comparative to students attending PWIs.

Selecting a site and individuals because "they can inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study" (Creswell, 2007, p.125), also known as purposeful sampling, was the method used for the study. Recruitment for the study took place over several months. As noted above, university faculty and staff were utilized to connect with African American college students beyond their second year of college through large lecture courses, campus events, and university organizations. Selecting students beyond their second year of college is an important factor for this study as previous research indicates that the majority of African American students who drop out of college will do so within the first two years (Allen et al., 1991), many doing so in the first semester. In addition, students beyond their second year of coursework are more experienced in the academic community and have persisted beyond the transitions and difficulties of collegiate adjustments in the early years.

In order to assist in recruiting a financial incentive was offered. Participants were informed during the recruitment and consent process that they would be compensated $20 as a token of appreciation at the conclusion of the interview. Further, participants were made aware during informed consent that they could discontinue the interview at any time and be compensated for the time that they did participate. Compensation was prorated $5 for every 20 minutes of participation for those who started but did not complete the interview. The amount of compensation was determined by myself with assistance from site gatekeepers, committee members, and my academic advisor.

Because a phenomenological study focuses on lived experiences of several individuals, Creswell (2007) recommends studying at least 10 participants when using this approach. A total of 14 participants were interviewed for this study. Participants included five males (about 36% of the sample) and nine females (about 64% of the sample). This ratio is in line with the statistics of males and females attending the university. Approximately 29% of the sample (four participants) were juniors or in their third year of coursework. The other 71% of the sample (10 participants) were seniors. Eight of the seniors were on track to graduate at the conclusion of the semester in which the study took place, while the other two were scheduled to graduate in the following academic semester. Participants were between the ages of 20 and 23 (M= 21.4).

All 14 of the participants for this study were full-time students with 7 participants also working part-time jobs. Nine participants were raised in two-parent households, four participants were raised in single parent households, and the remaining participant was raised primarily by her grandparents. Parental educational background ranged from having less than an eighth grade education to holding an advanced degree. Ten of the 14 participants had considered leaving school at some point during their college years. Eight of the 14 participants specifically

wanted to attend an HBCU with the remaining 6 not having a preference in the type of university they chose to attend.

In addition to the 14 participants interviewed for the study, 2 additional potential participants were excluded from participating in the study because they did not meet the criteria of being beyond the second year of coursework. Further all participants included in this study consented to participation and completed the interview process. No participants requested to be removed from the study or withdrew from the study prior to completing the interview. Demographic information for all 14 participants, using pseudonyms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Participant	Gender	Age	Mother Education	Father Education	Family Income	Household
Jacob	M	21	Associates Degree	High School Diploma	30,000-59,999	Single Parent
Jason	M	21	Attended College	High School Diploma	Under 30,000	Single Parent
John	M	21	Attended College	High School Diploma	Under 30,000	Two Parent
Joseph	M	21	Attended College	Bachelor's Degree	30,000-59,999	Two Parent
Mike	M	22	Attended College	High School Diploma	30,000-59,999	Two Parent
Alexis	F	22	Advanced Degree	Associate's Degree	60,000-89,999	Two Parent
Alicia	F	22	Associate's Degree	High School Diploma	60,000-89,999	Two Parent
Charlotte	F	20	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Under 30,000	Two Parent
Harmony	F	21	Associate's Degree	High School Diploma	30,000-59,999	Single Parent
Jody	F	21	Attended College	Attended High School	60,000-89,999	Grandparent
Jordan	F	22	Less than 8th grade	High School Diploma	30,000-59,999	Two Parent
Keisha	F	23	Attended College	Advanced Degree	Above 90,000	Two Parent
Mary	F	23	High School Diploma	Advanced Degree	Above 90,000	Two Parent
Savannah	F	20	Advanced Degree	Bachelor's Degree	30,000-59,999	Single Parent

In addition to the demographics, majors and career aspirations are presented below. To protect the anonymity of participants in this study, Table 2 is presented without participants' names, gender, or age.

Table 2. Majors and Career Aspirations

	Major	**Career Aspirations**
1	Accounting	Work for the government; Pursue advanced degree
2	Accounting	Teach math in a middle school or high school serving inner city youth
3	Animal Science	Pursue degree in veterinarian medicine
4	Hospitality Management	Career structured around travel and shopping
5	Mass Communications	Pursue career in radio
6	Music	Pursue career in instrumental music; teach music; own a jazz club
7	Psychology	Pursue advanced degree in psychology
8	Psychology	Pursue advanced degree; join the Navy
9	Psychology	Pursue Ph.D. in public health; open nonprofit clinics serving African American low-income families
10	Psychology	Pursue advanced degree; join the Air Force
11	Psychology	Pursue Master's degree in social work; work in a hospital/clinical setting
12	Psychology	Pursue Master's degree; work for the FBI
13	Psychology	Pursue dual degree in theology/counseling; open clinical practice and group home serving African American males
14	Sociology	Pursue Master's degree in journalism; create magazine

In-depth Interviews

Based on the qualitative nature of this study, interviewing was utilized to collect information from participants, as it is the hallmark of qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The goal of interviewing is to understand the lived experience of other people and the

meaning that they make of that experience (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 2006). The purpose is not to get answers to questions, or to test hypotheses (Seidman, 2006) but to explore and describe experiences (Creswell, 2007). The use of qualitative interviews allows for a thorough examination of the topic and exploration of the meanings of students' responses.

In this study of African American college students, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore how students perceived their experience of transitioning from their family life to collegiate life. This approach allowed for family life, as perceived by the participant, to be examined using their own words. An interview protocol (Appendix D), developed by the researcher was followed during interviews. Family support, religious influence, family background, collegiate living, and other topics, were included in the protocol.

I (an African American doctoral candidate who is studying human development and an HBCU graduate) conducted interviews with each participant. Interviews ranged from 47 to 82 minutes in length averaging about 60 minutes. Creswell (2007) suggests that "interviews take place in a natural setting or the site in which participants experience the issue or problems under the study" (p. 37). Therefore all interviews took place in the library on the campus of the participating university, although participants were given the option to meet in another location on campus if it was more convenient. Interviews began with a review of the study and informed consent. Participants were then asked to select a pseudonym. Further any names of relatives, friends, and university faculty/staff given were also replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of those individuals. Prior to beginning the official interview, I engaged participants in conversation or "small talk" in an effort to build rapport and to increase their comfort level. Upon the conclusion of small talk the interview began.

The interview protocol was presented in four sections to include family background, collegiate transitions, family support, and academic accomplishments and difficulties. With permission from participants each interview was audio recorded to ensure accurate descriptions for analysis. In addition, field notes were recorded by hand before, during, and immediately following each interview to capture participant descriptions, impressions about participants, sounds such as background noises/conversations, and/or facial expressions that were thought to be important to the interview environment.

Analysis

According to Rossman and Rallis (2006) "analyzing and interpreting qualitative data is the process of deep immersion in the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that have been collected" (p. 270). Utilizing in-depth interviewing generated an enormous amount of data. Interviewers may be reviewing transcripts for months therefore a detailed and careful transcript that recreates the details, both verbal and nonverbal, of the interview can be beneficial to a researcher (Seidman, 2006). Further, interviewers who transcribe their own audio recordings get to know their participants better (Seidman, 2006) therefore all interviews were transcribed word for word by the researcher within two weeks of conducting the interview. Transcribing interviews in a timely fashion also allowed for the opportunity to reevaluate the type of information received from the interviews, reword questions for future interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Seidman, 2006), and allowed for ongoing analysis (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

Upon transcribing the 14 interviews, open coding began. Open coding involves thinking and thoroughly examining the data, providing evidence for the development of categories (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Developing coding categories is a crucial step in data analysis

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Codes, or "a word or short phrase that captures what's going on in the data" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 286), were developed for each emerging category. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) recommend beginning with a preliminary coding scheme. Thus, I began coding by reading and reviewing transcripts multiple times. During the coding process I wrote my ideas and thoughts about the data in the margins of the document and kept a running written list of categories separately. In addition, the frequency of participant responses were calculated.

Emerging themes were identified and organized based on the frequency of response by participants, the research questions, and the theoretical model that guide the study. For this study, broad categories were identified followed by the identification of subthemes to elaborate the typography of meaning expressed by participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Interrelationships between subthemes were then analyzed. After completing this step development of the coding categories began. A list was compiled with each category being assigned an abbreviation. Upon developing a coding scheme, I met with my advisor and during that meeting adjustments were made to the coding categories to better capture themes from the data.

Transcripts were reviewed in three iterations. After reading and reviewing the initial coding schemes, themes were adjusted with several themes expanding or collapsing to capture the sensitizing concepts or the ideas that guided the research. For example, defining family and family relationships were initially two separate themes. Upon reviewing the transcripts in several iterations and reviewing definitions and codes, the two themes collapsed into the overall category of "family." After several reviews a final coding scheme was developed. Transcripts were again reviewed and coded using the final coding scheme. The final coding scheme for this study is provided in Appendix E.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers search for multiple truths about a phenomenon (Rossman & Rallis, 2006). Trustworthiness in qualitative methods is based on if the study is conducted both competently and ethically (Rossman & Rallis, 2006). For this study, trustworthiness was enhanced through the following qualitative strategies: credibility, audit trails, data triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. Credibility was established using participant validation following initial transcription of the interviews. Final interview transcripts, as requested, were emailed to participants for their review. Participants then had the opportunity to make any necessary clarifications and speak with me directly if they desired. Two participants spoke with me directly via telephone to elaborate and clarify statements made during the interview. No other participants requested any changes in their interview transcript.

A description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to completing the findings was kept in the form of an audit trail. The audit trail gave a clear description of the steps taken during the study to include details of the research design and procedures, data collection decisions, and the steps taken to analyze the data. Data triangulation, which includes the use of multiple data sources to help understand a phenomenon (Rossman & Rallis, 2006), was also utilized for the study. Data sources include literature review, interview transcripts, demographic questionnaires and field notes, and general characteristics and statistics from the participating university.

Peer debriefing was utilized for this study and included discussions with colleagues regarding the study. In addition a "disinterested peer", meaning another researcher who was not directly involved in the study, was also consulted. Discussions with colleagues and the disinterested peer took place during data collection, data analysis, and the development of the

coding scheme. These discussions included my interpretations of the data. Colleagues reviewed my interpretations and feedback was given directly to me. Finally, reflexivity involved analysis of my own role as the researcher in this process, as I now discuss further.

Role of the Researcher

At the age of 62 my grandfather, the Reverend John E. Gordon, Sr., earned his general equivalency diploma (GED). After losing his father while in his teens, my grandfather dropped out of school and took on the responsibility of a job in order to contribute financially to a household that included 11 siblings. He sacrificed his opportunity of pursuing further education to become a provider for the family.

Several years after marrying the love of his life my grandmother, Violet P. Gordon, my grandparents had 10 children, one of whom passed away shortly after birth. They instilled the importance of pursuing a higher education in each of their nine surviving children and supported each one as they continued on to pursue higher education. All of their children, including my mother, went on to pursue some form of higher education, many attending historically Black colleges and universities. My mother, aunts, and uncles have gone on to serve our community in various roles**.** After many years of sacrifice and a lot of hard work, my grandfather went on to earn a Bachelor's of Religion degree in 1994, making our family very proud.

Through my grandfather's dedication and hard work I realized the importance of pursing a higher education at an early age. In the fall of 1998 I began my own experience in higher education as I walked onto the campus of an HBCU, also my mother's alma mater. The transition from family living to independence quickly became mentally exhausting. Throughout my first semester, I had a hard time adjusting to the pressure to excel academically while enjoying the freedom of living on my own. Academically, I struggled to keep up with

assignments and maintain sufficient grades. As I continued through the semester, I often contemplated returning home temporarily until I was able to make a smoother adjustment. By the grace of God I was able to complete my first semester of college that December.

At the conclusion of the semester I, along with my parents, had to make a decision on my future in higher education. My grade point average was not very good. I was having a hard time managing my coursework and my newfound freedom. At 18 years of age, there was the possibility that I was not ready for the responsibility of living independently in a collegiate environment.

Before arriving home for winter break, the "news" of my first semester had made its way to my extended family. Upon arrival my grandfather requested my presence. During that encounter he recalled his graduation day and the hard work that went into earning his degree. He made me promise to continue to persist and not give up on my dreams of earning a bachelor's degree, becoming a teacher, and serving the African American community. That cold winter day, my grandfather's words convinced me to work harder, stay committed, persist, and not give up on earning a college degree. My academic endeavors would live to see another day.

When I returned to school for my second semester many of my peers, with whom I had learned invaluable lessons and shared great social experiences during the previous semester, had not returned to school. There were various reasons for their absence, but many had family obligations such as working to contribute to their households financially or assisting with taking care of family members. Several others felt that they didn't have the support of family as they tried to cope during our first semester, while others were accused of "selling out" or "acting White" by family and friends and felt that they were not "college material." Their dreams of pursuing a higher education had ended within months of enrollment.

As I entered my sophomore year the trend continued. Each semester friends would not return to school. I often wondered what made my situation different. Why was I able to turn my academic struggles around and continue to persist toward graduation? As I thought about this, one thing came to mind. I had a very supportive and loving extended family system in place.

Not only did my parents support me emotionally, spiritually, and financially, but my extended family and non-kin were also very involved in supporting my efforts to earn a baccalaureate degree. My sisters, who had attended the same university just years earlier, gave me advice on how to excel academically while still having time for involvement in university activities. My brother, who was only 9-years-old, called me regularly to remind me that I was his role model and "I should do well." Both of my grandmothers often sent me "a little change" to keep my pockets full and my spirits high and always had encouraging words to share on my visits home. My grandfather, a man who had sacrificed so many of his own opportunities, became a spiritual advisor and my biggest supporter.

Many aunts, uncles, and cousins had a word of encouragement and were often right there to lend a helping hand in my academic and financial struggles. I recall during my second semester of school, my aunt Gloria calling and inviting me over to her home to give me groceries, including homemade pound cake to share with my roommate and residents of the dorm. Rev. Warren J. Lewis and the Abner Baptist Church family supported me with an annual scholarship for books and supplies. In addition, my church family often told me how proud they were of my accomplishments when I would visit. Dr. Gina Kindred, my academic advisor, and the human ecology department faculty and staff treated me as a family member, never allowing me to give up. So many individuals supported my dream of earning a college degree allowing

me to persist towards graduation. They were able to see the best in me, even when I didn't see it in myself.

As graduation approached in the spring of 2002, I thought of all of those individuals who contributed to my academic persistence and success. All were invited to attend the graduation ceremony. On May 12, 2002, as I entered the commencement ceremony, a small voice from behind called my name. There my brother, now nearly 13-years-old, stood proudly videotaping every second. My eyes filled with tears as I recalled all those who supported my academic goals and dreams. My parents, siblings, and extended family looked on as I graduated with honors, something that only a few years earlier I thought was impossible. Later that day at our annual Mother's Day dinner, I shared a speech with my extended family giving thanks for the helping hands that lifted me when I couldn't lift myself. The degree I earned was not my doing, but a collective effort of many who loved, supported, and prayed for me.

In approaching this study, I recognize the benefits as well as the limitations of my previous academic and family experiences. Despite benefits and limitations, our experiences influence who we are as researchers and help us to better understand the lives of our participants (Allen, 2000). I acknowledge my experience as an HBCU graduate, my age, and my racial background, as well as my ability to relate to "HBCU culture," as benefits to relating to participants while conducting this study. For example, having attended an HBCU, I recognize the benefits of being in an environment of higher education where other students not only look like you, but come from similar cultural backgrounds. Further, I understand HBCU vernacular such as "the yard" (a term commonly used at HBCUs referring to the entire outside area of the institution or the main gathering area on campus) and other language affiliated with HBCU culture.

In addition, having had amazing support from my extended family I acknowledge that my perception of African American families may be skewed in a positive direction and not all individuals in my study are from similar backgrounds. I also acknowledge that my standing as a doctoral candidate, university instructor, and my family background (I grew up in a middle-class two-parent household) may have been a limitation during the study as participants came from a variety of family backgrounds, some of which were not similar to that in which I was raised. My personal experiences have shaped my view of situations and may have differed from my target population and participants. Despite these limitations, I am dedicated to studying African American families and academic persistence with an open mind. In the next chapter, the findings of this study in the participants' own words are presented.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Chapter Four is presented in two sections. The participants for the study came from a variety of family backgrounds, therefore participant descriptions are provided in the first section of this chapter. Included in the descriptions are highlights and details about participants' families and the households in which they were reared.

Participants cited a number of important factors that impacted their college experiences. The findings in the second section represent the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Four major themes emerged as a result of data analysis: (a) family structure and family relationships, (b) challenges/overcoming obstacles, (c) coping strategies, and (d) success and perseverance. The theoretical model (presented in Chapter One), literature review (presented in Chapter Two), demographic background questionnaire (see Appendix B), field notes, and transcripts from interviews were all included in the coding and analysis of the data for this study. The final coding scheme used for the study can be found in Appendix E. Participants' experiences are illustrated through direct quotes from interviews.

Participant Family Background Descriptions

Joseph

Joseph is a 21-year-old who is in his fourth year of coursework towards a bachelor's degree. He anticipates needing one more full academic year to graduate. Joseph is from a small town approximately an hour from the university. He was adopted at 5-months-old and was raised by his adoptive parents. Joseph has an older sister who is also adopted and a younger brother who is the biological child of his adoptive parents. His father is a Baptist minister and pastors a church. Joseph is a member of the marching band and a fraternity on campus and describes participation in these organizations as essential in his college experiences. Due to

financial strains Joseph has lived with his friend Charles' family during the current academic year. Joseph described Charles as a brother and includes Charles' parents and brother as family.

Keisha

Keisha is a 22-year-old graduating senior from the mid-Atlantic region of the country. She was raised in a Christian home with her mother, father, and two older sisters. Her mother holds a bachelor's degree and her father has an advanced degree. Because education was viewed as extremely important by her parents, Keisha was placed in a college preparatory school for her high school years. Keisha describes her family as very "close knit." She has a very close relationship with her parents and sisters though she says she is not very close with her extended family. Keisha is actively involved in campus organizations and attends church regularly.

Savannah

Savannah is a 20-year-old junior on track to graduate after one more year of coursework. Savannah was primarily raised by her mother and grandmother and is from a small town about an hour from school. She describes her mother as her best friend and her grandmother as having contributed to giving her the skills to deal with people. Although she does have a relationship with her father and sees him regularly throughout the year she describes their relationship as rocky. Savannah has two half-brothers by her father. She was not raised in the same household with her brothers but they are in contact and have been throughout their lives. Savannah's mother became pregnant and dropped of college during her early twenties, however she returned to school to complete her bachelor's degree during Savannah's adolescent years. Savannah considers her mother's return to school to be a major reason behind her decision to pursue a higher education. She is active in social organizations and was raised in the Christian faith.

Jacob

Jacob is a 21-year-old graduating senior from a small town about 45 minutes from the university. He was raised primarily with his mother in a home he described as "struggling financially." His mother eventually pursued further education to increase income in the household. Jacob has two younger brothers that were raised in his home. He has a relationship with his father and has five additional siblings who were raised by his father and stepmother. Jacob considers himself a role model for all of his siblings. He grew up living next door to his maternal grandparents whom he describes as playing a significant role in his life, with his grandfather serving as a father figure. He also has established a very close relationship with an aunt who is employed at the university he attends. Jacob has taken a leadership role and is actively involved in many organizations on campus and is a resident assistant. He was raised in a Christian home.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a 21-year-old in her third year of coursework towards a bachelor's degree. She is expected to graduate at the conclusion of the next academic term and is considered an in-state student. She is actively involved with the band program and is a member of a sorority on campus. Charlotte grew up with her mother and father who both battled illnesses during her childhood. She describes her childhood as rough because typically at least one of her parents was hospitalized. Her father passed away when she was in high school and her mother is currently disabled. Charlotte has one brother and a large extended family. She describes her brother as a best friend that she can go to for anything. Her brother is currently pursuing his bachelor's degree at a local university about 25 minutes from Charlotte and she relies on him as a major part of her support system. She was raised in the Christian faith.

Harmony

Harmony is a 22-year-old graduating senior and is an in-state student. She was raised by her mother and father who are both in the military. Harmony spent a great amount of time with her grandmother as a child due to the deployments of her parents and considers her grandmother as a primary caregiver in her early childhood. Harmony has a younger sister and brother and a very large extended family. She describes her relationships with her entire family (immediate and extended) as very close. She is a resident advisor and participates in several organizations on campus. Harmony was raised Christian and is actively involved in church. She aspires to join the military and possibly pursue an advanced degree upon graduation.

Jason

Jason is a 20-year-old third year in-state student. He anticipates graduating within one year. Jason was primarily raised by his mother in a single-parent household. He describes his relationship with his mother as "strained" though they are still on "talking terms" and he considers his father not to be a "great contributor" to his life. Jason has two brothers both of whom are considerably older. He describes one of his brothers as his best friend and always supportive and his other brother as absent from his life for the most part. Due to financial "strain" in his household Jason worked a 40 hour a week job while attending high school. He attributes the "hard work" as the main reason for selecting a university away from home. Jason is very active in campus organizations and plays a major role in programs aimed at retaining freshman students. He was raised in a Christian home.

Jordan

Jordan is a 23-year-old graduating senior from the northeast region of the country. Jordan was raised in a two-parent household that she describes as "loving" but also as "just

getting by" financially. Her parents immigrated to this United States although Jordan and her siblings were born and raised in this country. Jordan has two brothers and a sister. One of her brothers is attending the participating university with Jordan. She is a member of a sorority and is very active in campus organizations. Jordan was raised in a home without a practicing religion and was encouraged to decide for herself what religion she will embrace. Currently she is exploring different religions. Upon graduation Jordan anticipates moving back to her home state to "help meet her parents' financial needs" and assist her younger brother and sister with getting into college.

Alicia

Alicia is a 22-year-old graduating senior from the Midwest. She was primarily raised by her mother and stepfather. Her biological father also was actively involved during her childhood. Alicia has two younger brothers that she grew up with and three sisters by her biological father with whom she has a relationship but was not raised in the same home. Alicia also has a large extended family including an uncle who is four years older than her and whom she considers to be an older brother. She grew up in a very religious home and expressed that friends at school call her "the prophet" because of her strong religious beliefs.

John

John is a 21-year-old graduating senior. John was raised in a two-parent household and had two older siblings. His sister is 19 years older than him and he describes her as a "second mother;" his brother is 9 years older. John's sister attended the participating university when he was a small child, and he considers her to have played a major role in his college selection. He was raised in a very religious home and has found a church home in the local town while attending college. His current pastor and first lady serve as parental models as he attends

college. John considers the pastor's children as brothers and sisters. John is active in campus organizations and is a resident advisor.

Mary

Mary is a 23-year-old graduating senior and was raised in a two-parent household with three brothers, one of whom is autistic. She does not have a close relationship with her mother although she describes her father as her best friend. Her father is also completely funding her college education so she feels the need at times to "please" him. At the time of the interview Mary's parents were going through a divorce that she described as being "distracting" during her last year of college. She describes her relationships with her brothers as good with her oldest brother serving as a childcare provider in her youth and therefore the two of them having a special bond. Mary is not active in organizations on campus and considers herself to be "kind of shy." She does have two close friends at school but considers most people to be "associates." She was raised Christian but described her religion as "not being into my Bible like I should be."

Jody

Jody is a 21-year-old fourth year student who had transferred to two other universities before returning to the participating university to complete her bachelor's degree. She is expected to graduate after one more semester of coursework. Jody was primarily raised by her grandparents although she does have a mother and stepfather who are active in her life. She describes her mother as a young single parent when she was born and therefore her maternal grandparents took over as primary guardians. She is an only child and does not have close relationships with extended relatives although she does have an aunt who is very active in her life. Jody was raised in a Christian home and currently works two part-time jobs to help fund her education.

Mike

Mike is a 22-year-old senior from the northeast region of the country. He has completed coursework towards a bachelor's degree in his major, but he anticipates graduating after one more semester of coursework towards a minor. Mike was raised with his mother and father as well as three older half-brothers and an older half-sister. Mike's mother has pursued educational opportunities through certificates and licensure and his father is a convicted felon who has struggled to maintain employment. He describes his childhood as challenging due to the poor conditions of the family home (e.g., the lack of heat and running water). Mike is the first person in his family to work towards a bachelor's degree. He was raised in a Christian home and does not participate in campus organizations.

Alexis

Alexis is a 22-year-old graduating senior and is classified as an in-state student. She is also a transfer student and earned an associate's degree prior to enrolling in the participating university. Alexis grew up in a two-parent household although both of her parents were enlisted in the military and were rarely at home at the same time. Her grandmother also contributed to raising her while her parents served the country. Alexis has two half-siblings by her father who on occasion spent summers with their family. Her half-siblings were, however, primarily raised in the Midwest by their mother. Alexis describes herself as a "daddy's girl" and describes her relationship with her mother as rocky at times because they often bump heads. She attributes their conflict to being very similar in personality. Alexis is not involved in organizations on campus but does have a network of friends that she considered as her support system among peers.

"Who is in the family" – Structure and Relationships in Family Systems

"Family is like a person that you should always be able to come to." – Jordan

One of the main areas investigated for this study was the type of family that participants were reared in and the relationships that developed within family structures. As participants described their family variations, several terms regarding family emerged from the data and are used throughout this chapter. *Family system* consists of those whom participants considered as included in the family, whether they were a part of the immediate household or not. *Family relationships* are the interactions between members of the family. *Family structure* consists of the people with whom participants lived.

Considering the different terms that emerged, each participant had his or her own unique way of defining "who is in the family." Taken together, participants defined their own family as consisting of the individuals with whom they lived, and individuals with whom they did not live but still considered to be a part of their family system. For example, several participants included parents and/or siblings who were not in the immediate household as part of their family structure. Thus family relationships were not always congruent or equivalent to family structures or household compositions. For this reason, it is conceptually useful to describe participants' perceptions of their family in systemic terms.

Family Structures

Participants grew up in a variety of household compositions. In response to the question asking participants to describe their family of origin several definitions of family and descriptions of family structure were given. As family research has documented in numerous studies (Allen, Blieszner, & Roberto, 2011; Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Stewart, 2007), the meaning of family often goes beyond biology or blood relations, thus it is relevant to first

address who the participants considered a part of "the family" in which they lived and to whom they were related. The term "family" was used not only to describe those who were a part of the nuclear family or who were blood-related to the participants. Participants also included individuals who were not related by blood or legal ties, but who were considered important in their lives and collegiate support system.

In terms of family structure, the majority of participants (*n*=9) grew up in traditional two-parent homes with and without siblings. Others were primarily raised in single parent households (*n*=4). One participant was raised primarily by her grandparents. Further, there were some participants who described having extended family members as a part of their household at some point during their childhood.

Regardless of who actually was included in the family structure in which they grew up participants described in detail the relationships that developed during their childhood. Three different groups of individuals emerged as part of the family system of the participants: *Immediate family* refers to the participant's parent(s) and sibling(s), typically (but not always) those who were living in the same home as the participant. In one case, for example, immediate family involved a situation where a participant lived with her mother and grandmother. Some participants also included half or step siblings as immediate family (regardless if they lived with them or not), and others did not. *Extended family* includes aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. With few exceptions (e.g., on one occasion, a participant's immediate family shared a home for a short time with an aunt, and another participant shared a home with her grandparents and an uncle for a portion of her early childhood), participants did not live with extended family. *Non-kin* includes all of those who are not related to participants by blood or legal ties but who are referred to as family, such as peers and their family members, faculty and

staff of the university, as well as participants' church and community families. For some participants categories of family members overlap at different points of their lives; an aunt might be considered an immediate family member and an extended family member simultaneously.

Immediate Family Relationships

All of the participants defined their family system in terms of structure and relationships, however, there were several variations revealing the individuality and complexity of definitions. Although several participants grew up in two-parent or single-parent households and in some cases with extended family members, Jody was the only participant that was primarily raised by her grandparents. She described her immediate family in great detail.

> As I was growing up I was living with my grandparents, which was my nana and papa. My mom was a single mother at the time until she met her husband now and basically my grandparents raised me and they still are raising me now. I have a really close relationship with my grandparents and especially my nana. She is actually like a mother to me. She taught me everything that I should know. My nana is my guide, she is my everything. She's just the ultimate woman in my life per se…and her and my papa they take really good care of me and they don't ever let me down.

In another example of the uniqueness of family structures, Alexis characterized her immediate family composition as her, her mother and her father; however she also included half-siblings that only visited sometimes. Further, both of her parents were active in the military so it was rare that they were both home at the same time. Having military parents affected the relationships that developed with both her mother and father.

> It was basically me, my mother, and my father. I have a half sister and brother by my father and they came sometimes over the summer. It wasn't every summer. Sometimes I

> went years without seeing them. With my mother it was hard because we are so alike so we bumped heads in so many ways. We bumped heads a lot. I felt she was over protective in certain ways. Up until I was 16 I was a Daddy's girl. Both of my parents were in the military so it was a constant one parent is here and one parent is not here. But either way I still had my time with both of them.

Joseph had a different way of describing his family composition and who was included as a part of his family. Joseph, for most of his childhood, experienced a traditional two-parent household that included his adoptive parents, an older adoptive sister, and a younger brother who is the biological child of his parents. However, due to educational needs for a speech impediment he also had a point in time where he moved to another state to live with members of his extended family.

> Most of my life I lived with my mom, my dad, my little brother, and my older sister until maybe around third or fourth grade maybe 9 or 10 years old. We moved to another state and I stayed there for about a year and half with my mom's sister, my little brother, my grandma, my granddad, and my uncle and then we moved back and I've stayed here with my family for the rest of my life until I came to college. I got along with my Mom but me and my Dad didn't get along all that well.

Complexity in family structure was also described by Alicia. Similar to Joseph, Alicia spent part of her childhood living with extended family members in her household, but she also experienced living in a more traditional two-parent home. She described her family system in this way:

> Until I was 11, I stayed with my mom, my stepdad, my grandmother, my granddad, both of my uncles, my aunt, and my baby brother and then when I moved it was just me, my

> mom, my stepdad, and my brother. And then my other brother was born and around high school my stepbrother moved in so before we moved it was very crowded but my family we're really close so we managed like any other family. We had fights and things like that but I liked it because I love being around my family.

In yet another variation of immediate family composition and relationships, Savannah's childhood was spent with both her mother and grandmother as a part of her household. Although her father was not a part of her household she included him as well as her half-brothers when describing her immediate family.

> I was raised with my mom and my grandma. I'm an only child half way. I have two older brothers on my dad's side but we're not very close and they didn't grow up in my home. My mom and my grandmother and I were best friends. Like we were so close (said with emphasis). My grandma passed away when I was 18 of breast cancer and me and my mom still have that real tight relationship.

Another participant, Keisha, described her family as uncommon in today's society as her immediate family structure included both her parents and two older sisters. The comparison to peers family structures was evident as she felt that having both parents in the home gave her an academic and financial advantage over other peers.

> I grew up with both parents and I have two sisters. Like I said both parents I lived with all my life and I still do (when at home). I lived with both of my sisters. We're a pretty close knit family. All of my relationships are very close with each and every member of my family. A lot of people are like hey you know it's weird these days that you have both parents so like I'm really lucky to have both of them in my life….Because

financially it's a lot easier on the child and the whole family all together if you have both parents in the household.

Jason's family structure differed from those participants mentioned above. He was raised by his mother in a single parent household. Unlike the other participants for this study who expressed happiness when recalling family memories, Jason seemed more reserved and had neutral facial expressions when describing his childhood family structure. He later explained that his childhood was at times stressful because of the lack of a father figure in his home and "emotional restraints" while being raised by his mother. Attending college was explained as an "escape" in some ways.

> My mother was the primary guardian. My father, I can say he was around but he wasn't necessarily a great contributor. My siblings are all very much older than me. I'm 14 years younger than my next sibling. I have two brothers but they really were much older so it's not like we played together or they were a big part of my life while I was growing up. My mother…the older I got I can say the more strained our relationship got and in a way me coming to college was like me seeking my independence and getting away from home.

At times participants took on the adult roles within the family structure. Jacob was raised in a single parent home primarily by his mother. His household included younger brothers and a stepbrother. In addition he has a relationship with his father and has four half-brothers and a half-sister by his father. Jacob considered himself as the male figure in his home and assisted with raising his younger brothers.

> From the beginning I was raised by my mother only. I know who my father is but he has another wife so I'm the oldest of eight kids and I lived with two of my brothers and one

> of my stepbrothers he's in and out. I guess I was always considered the male figure in our household. I had that life where I was helping my mother raise my other brothers.

Family Hardships

Several participants expressed the hardships that their family experienced during their childhood. This experience was often described as a part of immediate family relationships. Difficult living conditions were described by Jordan, Mike, and Jacob. Here the participants described how socioeconomic status influenced different aspects of their childhood. Although living conditions were not always ideal, participants still felt that their families provided love and stability.

Jordan's parents immigrated to this country and experienced financial hardship due to a lack of higher education and employment opportunities. She grew up in a two-parent household, often considered to be ideal in today's society; however her family often faced financial challenges.

> I am the oldest of four. Growing up we didn't have much. We really didn't have anything really if you want to put it that way. We lived in a one bedroom apartment with six people but our love and our care and our parents' care and determination really brought us through. My parents are hardworking foreigners. They didn't have money so there wasn't like a Christmas or big birthdays it was more or less though having family and having that love to keep us stable.

Like Jordan, Mike grew up in a two-parent home with four children, that faced financial challenges as his mother was the only parent maintaining regular employment. He recalled his childhood in this way.

> I grew up with my mother and father and I have two brothers and a sister all from my mother's previous marriage. My mom and my dad are still together and I'm the youngest so my siblings are actually half-brothers and sisters but we all grew up together. My mom worked and she was the only one that worked. With my dad…he had a felony on his record. It was kind of hard for him to get a job. When I was in school I grew up in a deteriorating house. I think around 97 98 there was no heat. After 2000 the water was turned off so I lived with no heat and no water for like a good seven or eight years so that didn't go well for me. When I would come to school I was talked about a lot but I was still focused on my school work.

As stated previously Jacob considered himself to be the man of the house in his family. His family also faced economic hardships during his childhood. Here he described the conditions of the home in which he was raised.

> It was hard because we use to live in a house where we didn't have a bathroom and my mother was the only one providing income for the house so sometimes there were no lights. We would have no heat or anything like that so we progressed as the years went on. Now my mother is doing it up and living better.

Change in Relationships

Several participants expressed the change in relationships with parents and siblings after enrolling in college. Here participants focused on how their college experiences have contributed to the improvement of relationships with parents and siblings. Perhaps attending college contributed to an improved closeness for some participants with their parents. Relationships that were once considered challenging were described as being better quality because of the distance and having separate living spaces. Further, family members often

stepped in to assist participants with their collegiate needs, such as items needed for dorms or apartments, assistance with tuition payments, and traveling to the university to visit. In addition, for some participants' communication with relatives improved. Communication included phone calls, social networks, and texting. Participants often cited that attending college had "saved" relationships that once seemed hopeless. Jacob recalled a change with closeness in the relationship with his father. Here he described the change in relationship. "My father started calling me every day, coming up here, and bringing me money which was not how it was when I was at home before college." Jacob was pleased at the improvement in the relationship with his father. Further, the improved relationship made Jacob feel as if he could enjoy his college years and not feel the pressure of acting in the role of the man of the house for his household.

Alexis agreed that the relationship with her mother has improved since she started college. Here she described the change in their closeness and communication. She attributed this change to the fact that she was away and no longer able to see her parents daily.

> Since coming to college I can honestly say that I'm a lot closer to my mother. I became really close to her. If I don't talk to her for about a week she knows it has to be something. I have to be busy with school work or I can't fit it into my schedule to really talk to her but even then I try…but we've come really really far from what we were before and we're really close.

Mike experienced a similar change in the relationship with his father, noting an improvement in the relationship. In addition, when he returns home it serves as a time when the family comes together. He appeared proud that he could unite his family on visits home. When asked about his current familial relationships he responded in this way.

> Much better now with my dad. We communicate a lot more and talk about a lot of different things. I learned a lot of things about him that I didn't know before. I feel like when I come home I bring the family together and we all have fun and chill so it's fun and I think things are good.

Jason found himself growing close with one of his brothers who is also currently attending a four-year institution. Although they have a 14 year age difference, he described how pursuing a higher education was a way that they could relate to each other. Their relationship and bond has developed as he and his brother supported one another through the process. Here the change in closeness was perceived by Jason to have contributed to the academic persistence of both of the brothers.

> My brother was the one I was closest to….he started taking classes at the same time that I did so he is about at the same place that I am. We both should graduate next year. It makes me feel like we are accomplishing big things and even though we have that age difference we can relate to each other with this experience. Like he asks about what I'm doing and I always want to know how he's doing so it's like we support each other.

Extended Family Relationships

Relationships with extended family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents) also emerged as an important theme with the participants for this study. Participants experienced several relationships with extended family members that were cited as key in their upbringing and childhood experiences. Eleven of the 14 participants included extended family members as part of their family system. Here participants described how extended family members contributed to their family system. Further, extended kin were often included when participants referred to support. Moreover, at times these relatives acted in the

role of parent in the absence of the biological parent for various reasons including parental illness or active military service. Upon entering college the relationships with extended family members continued to be imperative in the family system for participants.

Harmony had a large extended family that was a major part of her upbringing as her father was in the military and often worked long hours. Further, he did several overseas missions during her childhood. Harmony's mother worked multiple jobs concurrently to bring in additional income to the household. For these reasons, her aunts took on the role of caregiver and played a significant part in raising her. Here she described how important her extended family was during her childhood.

> I have a big family. My grandma has 20 kids so whenever my mom had to go to work you know or whatever my aunts were there and then my Dad was in the Army but it's like my mom use to work three jobs so it's like I had my aunts there so it really didn't matter you know.

Similar to Harmony, Alexis had parents who were active in the military. Her parents' military service contributed to her developing a close relationship with two of her extended family members. She and her first cousin, were raised by her grandmother for a period of time as their parents served the country overseas. She considers her cousin to be like a brother.

> My grandmother – my mother's mother – me and her are really close and at one time when I was a baby before my parents actually got married she actually raised me for about four years. Then after that me and her just have been really close and my cousin…I have a first cousin. Me and him are really close to the point where we actually call each other brother and sister. My aunt was actually in the military as well so my grandmother took him in as well.

Due to the illnesses of her parents, Charlotte built a close relationship with an uncle that she described as a second father. He often served in a parental role particularly since the death of her father. For Charlotte, her relationship with her uncle has become an important aspect to her collegiate experiences as he has taken a lead role considering the illness of her mother.

> My uncle…he's like my second father and he really wants to see me do well so he brought me a computer, he brought me an IPod and he actually texts me every day with these words of encouragement. He was really involved with me as a child too with my parents being sick. He was the main one to encourage me and my brother to go to college because he had went to college.

The relationship that Jacob has with his aunt directly impacted his college experience. Jacob's aunt, an employee at the participating university, took the lead in his college application process. He credited her for having the opportunity to attend college.

> I wasn't even that involved in my college application process. Basically my aunt handled it all and I just gave them the information and signed the application. I know she wanted the best for me and really she did it all so I guess having her there really helped because otherwise I hadn't done any applications for other universities so I probably wouldn't be in college.

Non-kin Relationships

Several participants described close "family-like" relationships with non-kin such as, local community families, faculty and staff, and church members who were like family. Family studies literature often refers to these non-kin relationships as fictive kin (Allen et al., 2011; Chatters et al., 1994; Stack, 1973). Ten of the 14 participants had established non-kin relationships since arriving at school, primarily out of necessity. Non-kin were often called upon

to be there in the absence of immediate family members. As Savannah described it, non-kin relationships were like having "a family at home and then I have family here." Participants described how their relationships with non-kin enhanced their college experience. Often non-kin were important in the support systems of participants. Further, participants described concerns about being away from family and how incorporating non-kin made collegiate life "easier" and provided a "home away from home."

Joseph best described this form of relationship with his friend Charles and Charles' family. Charles and his brother both attend the university with Joseph and were part of an organization in which Joseph is a member. When Joseph was unable to afford campus housing Charles' family provided him with a place to stay so that he was able to remain in school. Here Joseph described what having a family at school meant to him.

> I use to live on campus until this year when I couldn't afford to live on campus so now I live with my friend and his family. They let me stay there for free. It's my friend Charles…and then it's his little brother…and then his mom and his dad. And it's all of us in the house. I sleep on the couch but I love it. It's comfortable. They treat me like a family member. They cook for me, they support me. If we go somewhere (referring to traveling with the university organization) and need money even if I don't ask for it she (referring to the mother) may slip me like $20 or something to make sure that I'll be ok. Whatever she gives Charles and his brother, she does the same for me.

Joseph's experience was not unique among participants. Similar to Joseph, John has established a close relationship with a local family, the pastor of his church and the pastors' family. He described their relationship as a significant part of his college experience considering he is an out-of-state student and lives several hours away from his immediate family.

> My pastor and his wife I call them mom and dad. Their kids I call them my brothers and sisters. As far as family is concerned I have everything from a key to their house to driving their cars and all that type of stuff. It makes life so much easier. They have that type of relationship with several students. There are a couple of us from here that go to the church and they are the type of leadership that loves young people. My parents…my mom is like I have to get them something. They've been taking care of my son and I'm like mom please, they do it because that's just what they do. It's not their first time taking in people.

Not only were local families described as non-kin, but faculty members have also taken on the role for participants. Here participants described how faculty encouraged them and took on the "parental" role at times. Having this non-kin relationship was described as essential in the family system of participants. Further, when immediate family members were having challenges, participants relied on non-kin to be in the role of family. Mary, an out-of-state student living away from her immediate family, described such an individual who had taken on the role of family during her college career:

> I have one professor who actually taught my introduction course to my major so I feel close to her. I've had like a lot of stuff happen to me since I've been here (referring to family issues) and I know I can go to her and speak to her about anything. She's definitely kept me grounded and put some things into perspective when I am unable to so you know that always helps because you cannot figure out everything on your own and sometimes it takes someone who has gone further than where you're at to let you know that yeah you may have a hit a bump in the road or this has happened but you can recover and you can do certain things to fix your circumstances.

Like Mary, several participants had established close relationships with faculty or staff. Many participants relied on these individuals as a guide during their college years and credit them with being like a family member in a time where they were not available or did not understand problematic educational situations. For example, Jody had a two-hour commute to school during her first year of college. She found that the commute was overwhelming and considered leaving school. A faculty member reached out to her:

> When I came here in 2008, I had transportation issues and there was one professor that I really relied on. I was traveling back and forth every single day so it was it was kind of hectic trying to find a way to get to school and basically he was one of the main teachers that told me not to give up…just to go out and you know don't let nothing stop me. Don't let transportation stop me. I can find a way. And that made me feel good because it was like he actually cared.

Alicia experienced an academic situation that could have prevented her from graduating on time. She turned to a new faculty member that quickly had become "like family" to her.

> He's new here and I will say by far the best professor I've ever had. I didn't go to my advisor when it was time for me to get my new classes or anything like that. I went to him and he helped me because actually I was being told that I wouldn't graduate until December because of one class and he helped me. He made sure that I was getting out of here in May.

As described by participants, several forms of family were included in their family structure and family system. Participants described several forms of family to include immediate family, extended family, and non-kin. Each of the pieces of the family system puzzle were incorporated into the definition of family. Relationships with these individuals varied as did

closeness. Nevertheless, each of the 14 participants had someone that was considered to be family.

Overcoming Obstacles: "Trials do Come"

An important theme that emerged from the data was that being a college student can at times be challenging. Participants in the study expressed several difficulties and challenges that occurred during their college transition and the following years of schooling. The "story" of participants first semester of college, family issues at home, and being a "burden" emerged as subthemes. Participants talked in depth about these issues as they related to their college experiences.

"The Story of My First Semester"

For many participants the idea of leaving home was exciting as they were looking forward to a "new adventure" and experiencing "HBCU life." The process of preparing for college often took weeks. Participants attended orientation activities during the summer prior to beginning their first semester. In addition, one participant, Joseph, completed a summer transition program focused specifically on transitioning from high school to college.

The majority of participants discussed how they enjoyed packing and purchasing new items for the "big move." Some felt nervous and scared but still expressed excitement about beginning college. However upon arriving at school all but two of the participants experienced a rough collegiate transition. Participants described a variety of challenging experiences during their first semester of college including adapting to living in a dorm, attempting to make new friends, and adjusting to collegiate academics. Here participants described their expectations of how college would be and what actually occurred.

It was traumatic. In order to better himself and his family name, Jason was anxious to leave home and attend college. For him, enrolling in college was important. Jason worked hard to assist his family financially while still enrolled in high school. Prior to attending college Jason worked a 40-hour a week job while completing his high school diploma. He knew he wanted more for himself and applied to college for that reason. Unfortunately his first semester did not go as well as he had planned.

> My first semester of college was my worst semester of college. I finished with a 2.615 GPA. Yes! I know the exact number because it was a traumatic experience. I actually ended up dropping a class as well so it was just not good. The whole moving on campus and doing the dorm thing and getting acclimated to the environment and getting accustomed to the different people from where ever they were from and with different backgrounds. It was just an interesting experience.

Although Jason's GPA would be considered average or even good for some students, it did not meet his expectations. Similar to Jason, Jacob, an honor student who graduated near the top of his high school class, also faced challenges during his first semester of college. During his interview he revealed having a panic attack during his first semester of enrollment. After this experience he considered dropping out of school and returning to his hometown.

> My first semester of college….I was about to drop out. I hated college my first semester. I was an honor's student when I was in high school. I graduated number 14 in my class. When I first came here I already had 36 college credits that I had taken in high school that transferred here so they had assigned me classes I didn't need and I didn't feel the need to go to them because I had already taken those courses. I was failing the classes

> and I had a panic attack one day. I just felt like everything was going the wrong way and college just wasn't what I had expected so I just wanted to go back home.

Perhaps because participants had created their own idea of how they would experience college, instances that are often experienced by first year students seemed to be traumatic for them. For example, Alicia was initially excited about attending college in another state, however prior to heading home for Christmas break she decided that she would not return to school for a second semester. As an out-of-state student, she found herself missing her family and struggling because they were so far away. Although Alicia was aware of the distance from her hometown to the participating university prior to enrollment, the reality of a separation from her immediate family did not become evident until she arrived at school. She described her first semester this way:

> It was the worst! I cried all the time because I was so far away and I was always with my family so this was my first time going anywhere outside of the state by myself and I was like I can't do it. I'm coming home. I'm not doing this anymore. I didn't go home for Thanksgiving. At the time my aunt that was in the Army and her and her husband stayed about an hour from campus so I was able to go there but I still missed my parents so when I went home for Christmas break I was like I'm going to finish this semester off and I'm coming back home. I'm not staying.

Often during interviews, participants discussed several different aspects of the transition to college. Alexis described the challenges of being a transfer student. Upon arriving at school she found that close peer relationships had been formed as other students in the courses in which she was enrolled had been attending classes together for two years. She was also faced with having to share living space with new people for the first time in her life.

> My first semester I can honestly say was rough. I didn't know anybody and every class I went to pretty much people knew each other because they were juniors so they had already had two years prior of knowing each other. As far as the social life it was kind of crazy getting use to the fact that I had roommates because I had been the only child so I had to get use to people actually being in my space. It was kind of like an adjustment. You know its two different people living in one area so you have two different styles...maybe two different ways of cleaning. It was just a real big transition.

Another participant, Jody described how her first semester was "a mess" but it was "good" because she survived. In hindsight, she could see the positive aspect of her first semester and how those experiences contributed to her academic career. Although many participants contemplated returning home, with encouragement from family and friends, all of them returned to school to continue their studies towards earning a Bachelor's degree.

A cake walk. In contrast to the experiences of the participants mentioned above, Mike and Charlotte had an easier time adjusting to college. Both described the stability that they found through establishing relationships with peers. Charlotte became active in the marching band while Mike gravitated towards other peers in his dorm. Both Charlotte and Mike reported being comfortable in the university setting immediately because of relationships that were established.

Although nervous about beginning college Mike did not experience trouble with academics. His description of his first year focused on positive experiences.

> When I first got here I was nervous but I was excited at the same time. My roommate was from Germany and then the guy next to me and then another guy down the hall were both from my hometown…so we became friends and it made it more comfortable for me.

> Classes really were easy for me. I had like a 3.7 GPA my first semester. It was a cake walk.

Charlotte also had a relatively smooth transition and credited her participation in the university marching band as being helpful during her first semester. Therefore she did not have a difficult time adjusting to college. However, she considered her GPA to be somewhat disappointing.

> First semester….it went good. My GPA was like a 2.9 which was a little disappointing but I think looking back it really wasn't that bad since it was my first semester….I was in the band and I'm still in the band…and you know at HBCUs the band is always fun so I like that and I think that helped me actually.

The first semester transition was difficult for the majority of participants. All but two of the participants experienced trouble adapting to collegiate life. Experiences with on campus living, difficult academic courses, and professors, among others, were cited as problematic during the first semester of school. Charlotte and Mike, both of whom did not have trouble adapting, found that finding friends and participation in social organizations immediately assisted with adapting to being at school and away from family.

"What's Going on at Home?"

In addition to challenges adjusting to collegiate living, participants often had concerns about family issues taking place at home while they pursued higher education. Of the 14 participants 7 cited family issues that they found to be "distracting" throughout their college careers. These issues included parental job loss, parental divorce, and loss of the family home. In examining those who reported family issues at home, regardless of the issue that was being faced participants reported that they preferred not to be involved. They explained that their focus

needed to be on academics. This preference, at times, caused distance between participants and their immediate family members. Some participants chose not to communicate as often with members of their families. Others remained in touch with family but turned to extended family members and non-kin for advice and support. Mary's parents began divorce proceedings during her final year of college, leading, she believed, to academic issues. She found that her parents' divorce was causing her to distance herself from the family.

> My parents are in the middle of a divorce. There has been a lot of drama going on unfortunately and I've been feeling like I have to deal with them because they take turns calling me bad mouthing about each other. I'm kind of caught in the middle so what I've been doing to take myself out of the situation is when they call I just don't answer and I'll call them when I want to speak to them but I don't let them bombard me as much. Unfortunately the semester is coming to an end and grades are kind of what they are so it's only so much that I can do to try and recover at this point. I'm not in danger of not graduating or anything like that but my grades definitely aren't what I typically do and I'm not really happy about that.

Like Mary, Jason faced a family issue at home while attempting to complete his education. Shortly before the study took place Jason's mother lost their family home. Due to the circumstances surrounding their loss, Jason was unsure of when and if he would return to his hometown or when he would see his family again.

> Actually this last time that I was home I was at home for a reason…because my mother is actually being forced to leave our home so I was actually down there with her to help get that together and help her and she was just like…you know she started crying because

> she didn't know when would be the next time she actually would get to see me again so you know that's hard for her.

Participants often described how family issues greatly impacted their family relationships. Joseph's father lost his job shortly after Joseph enrolled in college. His father's lack of employment directly affected the amount of financial support his family could contribute to Joseph's college education. Communicating with his family became stressful as Joseph preferred not knowing what was going on at home. In addition he attributed the lack of relationship with his father directly to the job loss.

> After I got to college my dad had lost his job so I tried to keep in contact with my family a little bit but at the same time it got stressful knowing that he had lost his job and I'm in college, my mom is in college, and my sister just moved out. I tried to keep enough contact to know what was going on but stay out so I wouldn't be stressed about what was going on there while trying to do what I had to do for school….I was actually very happy to be away so I tried to space myself out from my family a little to get more used to being by myself.

Charlotte's mother had been battling illness since her childhood. Her father, who also faced illness during her childhood, passed away shortly before Charlotte enrolled in college. She explained her concern about her mother's illness:

> I was more concerned about her than my school work…but it kind of took my mind off of doing work versus is she ok and stuff like that. It affected me in a good way because it reminded me that I have to work hard. This is just like a present situation so I have to just keep moving forward and in the future I can help my mom out and things like that.

College can be extremely trying at times. Having family issues taking place at home while being away at school caused episodes of distraction for Mary, Jason, Joseph, and Charlotte, among others. Participants often attempted to remove themselves from those situations in order to continue to succeed academically. Although they were facing these issues participants continued to persist towards graduation.

"I Don't Want to be a Burden"

Like many college students, several of the participants for this study cited financial and academic concerns regarding their educational endeavors. Participants did not want their decision to pursue higher education to become a burden on their family members. The overall consensus among participants is that they often felt like "a burden" and would have preferred to be more "self-sufficient." Nine of the 14 participants felt as though they were a burden to other family members in some form, in most cases financially. At times the idea of being a burden was very stressful for participants as they had concern for the stress that finances may have been causing their parents and other family members. Further many expressed wanting to "give back" money that had been given to them for tuition and other college expenses.

While discussing the sacrifices her family has made for her education, Harmony became extremely emotional. She explained that her family has contributed financially and emotionally as she pursued higher education. She had mixed emotions about the financial support she received from her mother as she explained in this way:

> It makes me feel good but at the same time it makes me feel bad because I feel like when I was home I had a job. I paid my bills and I did all of that and I feel like I'm at the age where I can pay my bills and stuff and I don't like really depending on people. My mom

has always done that for me and I just feel like I should be able to pay my own bills and not stress her out.

Jason agreed that he was grateful for the financial support given to him but he would have preferred to be more "self-sufficient." Although Jason worked part-time, he expressed a desire to have a full-time job.

Occasionally my father will put money in my bank account to help me get by. It's like I'm grateful for the contribution that I'm receiving but sometimes I kind of wish that I could be all the way self-sufficient. Sometimes I wish that I would have my own job and everything but I do understand how that would take away from my education and I put that first before anything.

Jason went on to say that by not being at home he feels he is actually helping his mother, who is currently unemployed, financially:

Well my mother she actually had stated that by me not being there it sort of helped her financially. At the time she wasn't working and she actually is still not working so essentially that was one less bill that she had to pay. So it's kind of really taken a burden off of her and I can say that she wouldn't say it that bluntly but I know that it helps her by me not being there.

Participants frequently expressed concern regarding the financial impact that comes with being a college student. Alicia's family paid her tuition out of pocket for the past two years while also paying tuition for her brother to attend a private Catholic high school. When asked how she felt about receiving financial support she responded in this way:

Well my first year here I didn't know how I was going to pay for school but she (her grandmother) co-signed for a loan so my first two years were loans and my junior year I

> think we had a small loan but the rest was out of pocket and this year my entire year was out of pocket. My biological father paid for my first semester and then my parents paid for this semester and it was hard because it gets expensive because I'm out of state but they managed to do it. I don't know if I'll ever be able to repay them because my tuition is so expensive. I feel like even though those are my parents most people wouldn't feel a burden but I felt like a major burden.

John told a similar story. His parents are retired yet still pay a significant portion of his tuition. Due to financial need, John's mother has returned to working full-time and was considering picking up an additional part-time job to assist financially towards his education.

> I really don't want to ask them for anything only because I know the financial strain and she's talking about getting two jobs and I'm like two jobs….you're working an 8 to 5 now so it's like that's a sacrifice that she is making for me and I'm trying to find a good job so I can hurry up and give it back especially helping to pay off the student loans and things like that.

For Jordan the idea of being "a financial burden" on her parents became overwhelming leading her to find a job in an attempt to be self-sufficient. Further, she described herself as being a financial resource for her parents and siblings when needed.

> My father he took out my first loan under his name and then when I realized that burden that was putting on him. From then on I decided to take out all loans in my own name cause I feel like the thing about it is I have three younger brothers and sisters and I always say me asking my parents for money is like taking food out of their mouths. I always use to say that so that's the reason why now I don't ask at all. I'm completely

self-sufficient….And they know that say if they are going through hardship they know that they can ask me.

Like most college students, participants for this study faced several challenges including making the transition to college, family problems, and being a financial burden on family members; 10 of the 14 participants considered leaving school at some point, in most cases within the first year of attending college. However, as presented in the next section, participants found several methods of coping that have been helpful in sustaining their academic persistence.

Coping Strategies

Regardless of the challenges and issues faced during their college education, participants for this study had persisted to their junior or senior year of college. Family support, religiosity and faith, music, and peer relationships as well as other methods of coping were cited often by participants as contributing factors towards their persistence. All participants found some form of coping that was helpful during challenging times.

Family Support

Participants cited how important family support was in helping them maintain their persistence towards graduation. As noted earlier family included immediate, extended, and non kin. Even with some participants experiencing family problems at home, they often expressed that their immediate family was still there for them, helping them to achieve their goals. Further, if participants felt that they could not depend on immediate family members, they often turned to extended family or non-kin. Family support was described in various ways including financial support, emotional support and communication, and involvement in collegiate experiences. All 14 participants included family support as a major part of their college experiences. Each of the

participants felt as if they had someone, regardless of who that person was, that would support them when needed. Jacob described how he relied on his family:

> If I need something I have those people right there and I go to them (referring to his mother, aunt, and grandparents)…even with my aunt's boyfriend, he's not related to me, they aren't married but if I needed something from him I know I could go to him for anything.

For Savannah, communication was a key component in her description of support. This communication with her mother was not only for Savannah's benefit but to make her mother comfortable with the idea of her being away. She described how she speaks to her mother daily. She felt this was necessary not only to help her academically but to reassure her mother that things were going well at school. She also relied on cousins to help her when needed.

> I call my mom every day. Either to let her know what's going on or to just make her laugh. Nobody knows me like my mom. So day to day she's still there she's still a big fixture for me and I have cousins who will help me out…all I have to do is ask. Like if I can't count on anything else I can count on my family. Its little things like if I need food or if I need laundry quarters. They give me those things.

Jody told a story of how she relied on her grandparents when problems came up and if she was stressed about school. Her mother was also there to encourage her on a regular basis. She found the support to be helpful during her academic experiences.

> I rely on my Nana the most talking to her more and she always tell me don't give up. We're here for you no matter what and then my Papa will tell me the same thing and then when I tell my mom…she's like if you need anything…I know we don't have much like rich people like having money but she is like if I have all the money in the world I would

> give it to you for the bills and the loans so that you can be stress free and even though money is not really the issue she is like you know you can rely on God to be your backbone and your support and whenever times get rough just take time out and take a deep breath and just pray so she says just never give up and so that's why I'm still here.

Participant after participant described how their family members supported them while they attended college. Alicia often relied on her family for emotional support. She explained how her mother, stepfather, and brothers, would call her and pray with her as she attended school.

> They would just encourage me and remind me that I've been through worse. And my family is very strong on our religion and God and everything so it was like God is not going to bring you this far to not be there for you to let you down. You just have to have faith that it's going to work out so that's how I made it. They're always there. For a while we use to have prayer at night. My entire family would get on the phone and we would just pray. It really helped and it's crazy because that's how I was brought up so when I came here my friends started calling me "the prophet."

When it came to finances Mike was appreciative of his mother's support. Whenever he had a balance for his tuition his mother took care of it. He also found that getting help with the "little things" such as spending money was helpful. Assistance with paperwork was also noted by Mike as being supportive.

> Freshman year spring semester I had to pay $2500 out of pocket which came to about $600 a month or something like that. My mom paid for that. Last semester I had to pay $1,900 out of pocket and she paid for that… doing the FAFSA and stuff like that my

> mom and my dad have always been involved in that and they do the small things too like laundry money and you know just a little spending money here and there.

Because family members took on the responsibility of providing support, in many instances participants described how even the small things meant a great deal. When it came to support, Keisha's family would pick her up for visits home almost weekly in the beginning of her college career. They also visited campus frequently. This support made Keisha feel that not only was her family behind her 100%, but also that her education was as important to them as it was to her.

> They would be supportive by letting me come home whenever I wanted and if I needed anything they would come down here. It was nothing for them to drive down here if I needed something and just whatever they could assist in something possible they were here.

Participants relied on their families for support in a variety of ways. Whether for financial or emotional support participants found that they could depend on their family members to help them when it was needed. As Harmony described it, "If I need something she's (referring to her mother) going to work like 5 or 10 jobs…she's going to do what she has to do to make sure I have what I need for school." Overall, participants described the support that they received from their family as essential to their academic persistence.

Religiosity: "Having the Faith to Face It"

When facing problems the majority of participants cited faith as a major contributor to sustaining them throughout their college endeavors. Eight of the 14 participants considered themselves to be very active in church, with strong faith and religious values. Five participants considered themselves as spiritual but not as active in church as they "should be." At the time of

the study one participant, Jordan , was exploring different religions and believed that she "did the right thing" the majority of the time regardless of her lack of participation in organized religion.

I'm not a renegade. John, one of the eight participants with an active religious life, was typical of this group. Upon arriving at school he initially watched live streaming services from a church back home as he wanted to continue practicing his faith. During his sophomore year the resident graduate assistant invited him to a local service.

> The way I've been brought up as far as church is concerned, I'm not like one of those renegades…leave home and forget about church. When I came here I went with my G.A. to his church and when I got there I was like wow this feels like home and ever since then that's where I have been going. They are like literally walking distance right off campus and it has helped tremendously. Being on campus all the time and so much is going on and the stress of residence life and being an R.A. it's basically like an outlet for me when it comes to church and prayer and all that good stuff. You know it's a stress reliever.

Without her faith Harmony felt as if she wouldn't have been able to sustain her academic career. She credits God for being able to persist academically. Her religious story centered on how God was there for her throughout her academic journey.

> Religion has really helped me keep my sanity. I feel like if I hadn't had that I wouldn't have had anything to just allow me to make it through what I've made it through. Just when you're going through stuff …my mother always says it's in the Bible. So it's helped me deal with a lot of situations and go through a lot of things. I feel like if I didn't have it I wouldn't be here. I had the support from my mom and my family but they aren't physically here. Just knowing who God is and my upbringing and where I came from God has brought me here. I can do anything and God has just shown me that if I trust in

> him he has it. And without that faith and having God there I don't know where I would be but I know I wouldn't be weeks away from being a college graduate.

Participants also made reference to leaders in their church community. A message given by her pastor was instrumental in Savannah's story of religion. Her church also supported her financially by providing her with an annual scholarship.

> I'm on a church scholarship. If I wasn't going to church I probably would have hurt somebody by now. That's the one thing that keeps you going and keeps you grounded. Especially where I'm from…the country church. You know like that's going to be the same. It's a state to keep you there and stop you from flying off the rails.
>
> I heard my pastor say one time "love the people that treat you right and pray for the ones that don't." That's what I've been doing. And it's just like the little things that you remember.

I'm not as religious as I should be. Mary was one of five participants who described themselves as spiritual but not as active in the church "as she should be." She explained that she had behavioral issues throughout her high school career and felt that without a divine power she could possibly be somewhere else instead of pursuing higher education.

> I feel like somebody is watching over me because it's been like a lot of stuff and it could have been like so much worse but I don't know. I'm not as religious as I should be but I know it's definitely been a factor because I could have been somewhere else doing something else and I don't feel like I'm here just for no reason.

Similarly, Joseph, Alexis, and Keisha all expressed how they did not actively participate in church services when they first arrived at school. Over the years, some of them had returned to church while others had not. Each explained how they had once been "forced" to go to church

but had stopped attending church services upon arriving at college, choosing to explore their religious freedom. However, each still felt that their faith was important to their college experience.

Joseph grew up in the church as his father was a pastor of a Baptist church. He described being "forced" into going to church every Sunday during his childhood but had a newfound "freedom" upon arriving at school. However, Joseph did credit his religious upbringing as contributing to the man that he currently is.

> My father is a preacher so I was brought up my whole life going church. Every Sunday we went to church but when I got here I started having more freedom. I was like well since my whole life I've been forced to go church I'm going to take some time for myself to realize do I really want to go to church or not. I still believe in God but I don't go to church as much as I feel I should. I don't feel like it changed my faith any. I know what I believe in. I know what I should do. I know what I do. Now sometimes what I should do and what I do don't work together but I know who I am on the inside. I know who I was brought up to be. So I feel like my faith is still the same even though I don't go to church as much but I'm still the same person.

Keisha agreed. Like Joseph, she was raised attending church services regularly. Upon arriving at school she initially stopped attending church services. In recent years she has returned to services.

> Before I came to college I've been in church my entire life and at first I was like I hate church. But when I got here it's like when you're so used to doing something you're like ok well why am I not going to church so I ended up finding a church and I go there all the time so it's really something that's a part of my life that I want to keep that way.

The serenity prayer was often recited during tough times by Alexis. However, she had not attended church regularly since her childhood.

> Well when I was growing up I went to church pretty much every Sunday. My mother was like you're going to church…but as far as my religious views now it really hasn't had a big impact but I do have to step back sometimes and say the serenity prayer to myself…like in some situations I have to just ask Him to please help me.

For the 13 of the 14 participants religion was a part of their childhood experiences. However, upon arriving at college some participants embraced their religiosity while others chose not to attend church services but still described themselves as religious or spiritual. Participants did speak about having faith to face academic problems. Faith, however, was described in various ways as demonstrated by the participant quotes above.

Friends and Music

Peer relationships. When asked what other factors contributed to academic persistence several participants cited various factors that were helpful. Although identified to an extent previously in the section regarding fictive kin, peer relationships were often referred to by participants when it came to support. Peer relationships were formed through participation in organizations, making friends in dorms and classes, as well as social events on campus. Eleven participants considered the participating university to be "very social."

Most participants (*n*=11) were active in university organizations. One participant expressed that there was "an organization for everybody." Of the 11 participants who were active in organizations, 9 reported that the organization experience allowed them to make friends with individuals with similar interest. Further, participants described how peer college experiences were similar to their college experiences, making these relationships different than

family relationships. Often participants explained that family members did not understand the nature of academic problems. Because of this lack of understanding by family members, peers were often relied upon for academic support.

Having peers who at times had similar collegiate experiences was helpful for Joseph. He often had a listening ear for others but was able to use their experiences for his own benefit. He described his peer relationships in this way:

> Sometimes people are going through the same things. Sometimes people are going through worse things. I like to pride myself in being someone that people can come talk to when they have problems. I help them. I don't try to help them find a solution but I try to help them think things through before they react. So by doing that it helps me think things through before I react so it's more like I help you but I'm helping myself at the same time.

After her grandmother passed away, Savannah described a time in which she wanted to leave school. Her best friend, who also attended the participating university, intervened and convinced her to stay. This peer relationship was described as one that "changed" Savannah's academic track.

> Right after my grandma passed away I was like you know what, I can't do this anymore and my best friend sat me down and made me stay. Like I was in the middle of packing she threw me on the bed and she sat on me and I was like ok I'll stay!

Other participants relied on several different groups of peers for various reasons. Harmony explained how she had "study friends" in addition to peers that she spent time with for social activities.

> I have my study friends…we're cool but we don't really hang together outside of class. Then you have your friends who are your true friends like I go to them. I talk to them. If I need help my psychology friends they will help me. I didn't utilize that the way I should have but it feels good to know that if you are struggling people will help you and they're not just about their own gain but you're both learning together.

Encouragement was a main factor that John cited when referring to peer relationships. He and several friends were approaching graduation and encouraging each other as the semester was ending. John explained his peer support in this way:

> We always encourage each other and we push each other. We're all trying to graduate and our thing is graduating on time which for some people it's not really an on time thing…it's like when I graduate I graduate but for me I wanted to do it in four years.

Jordan also used "friendly competition" with peers as a motivating factor. Further, upon learning of one of her sorority sister's intention to drop out of school she and several members of the sorority intervened with a group meeting.

> My mom always says show me your friends and I'll show you who you are and so when you surround yourself with people who are on the same track as you, you never want to fall off that track. It's a like a competition. I got an A in that class and you got a B so when you surround yourself with those types of people you don't necessarily have an issue of leaving and not coming back. I remember when one of my sorority sisters was going to drop out of school. Me and all my line sisters came and we all went around in the circle and spoke to her and told her why she shouldn't leave and she graduated so without that family oriented feeling especially in college there are a lot of "out of staters"

> and out of staters can feel very home sick. If they don't have that family that's within the school which is on campus they can fall astray easily.

Music. Surprisingly, in a study that centered on family factors, music was often described as a coping mechanism that allowed participants to block outside distractions that were taking place in their collegiate or family lives. Although not specifically asked about music, six participants noted that it was helpful when they experienced academic or personal problems. This factor included listening to music and/or playing a musical instrument. As noted most participants relied on family support, however the love of music was often also attributed to their family background. Participants described how music was a part of their household during their childhood. Further, the love of music was important in their daily living.

Mike experienced various types of music throughout his childhood. He described his father as having an extensive collection. Mike found that there is some form of music to handle any situation.

> I grew up on music. My dad use to buy records and tapes. I dreaded the day he found out about live wire but with him he has CDs everywhere. Mostly jazz, so I got the rap side from my brothers and sister and then R & B but mostly….I have my thinking music for when I need to think. I have music basically for every situation.

Joseph's love for instrumental music led him to follow his passion and declare music as his major. He credited his family for encouraging him to pursue his dream of being a musician. He often played the trumpet when he wanted to relax. "I'm always in band always playing my horn so when I get pissed off I just go to band practice and practice and play for a little bit and cool it down." Charlotte added, "I listen to music. I love music and that just works for me. When all else fails I can put in my ear buds and listen to music." For her, listening to music was

a way of rebounding when challenges occurred. Savannah agreed. When it comes to music she expressed that it made "worries" go away. She explained that her I-pod was like her "go to" when trials arrived.

> That's the thing that makes everything else go away and just for five minutes you don't have to really worry about it. Once you take the ear buds off you snap back to reality but that I-pod with the right song…you just (exhales) you just feel so much better.

As noted, several methods of coping were helpful for participants as they attended college. Family support, religiosity, peers, and music were all cited as helpful for participants when they faced collegiate challenges. Although participants found comfort in having support systems in place, as discussed in the next section, they also reflected on their own desire and self-motivation to persist academically.

Success and Perseverance -"I Can Do This"

"Great Expectations"

Expectations for participants were high at an early age. The importance of attending college was relayed to them by family members beginning in childhood. Family pride and great educational expectations were mentioned in some form by all of the participants for this study. Several participants experienced parental and household hardships and financial struggles and used that as encouragement to attend college. Others had parents who prepared them for college during their early childhood years. For nine of the participants, family members, in most cases parents, expected them to attend college. Although some of the participants felt pressure to attend college and excel, they also were grateful for the "push" from family members as this was viewed as encouraging. For Savannah, attending college was not optional. She witnessed

firsthand the hardships of not having a college education and the benefits that come with earning a college degree.

> I saw how important it was because my mom had me her third year of college and then she had to drop out. Until I was 12 she kept three people in a house going on 500 bucks a month. Then when I was in sixth grade she went back and finished her degree and I was thinking dang we can actually afford stuff. I don't have to like go to Wal-Mart and spend a dollar. It's just like if going to school can do all that then being broke is not even an option.

Jason did not consider his father to be a "great contributor" in his life; however his father did encourage him to be better than he was. Jason saw college as a way out from the negative environment that surrounded him during his childhood years.

> I said my father wasn't a great contributor and he wasn't really around much. One thing I do remember him always saying was don't be like me, be better than me. So with him saying that I felt like I knew what it took to be better than him. I knew with that I had to know what I needed to do in order to not be a negative product of my environment.

Participants often described how their parents encouraged them to pursue higher education beginning in their elementary years. Keisha's parents emphasized academic success, education, and the importance of attending college from an early age. Keisha was active in several church activities, attended a college preparatory high school, and was expected to have a part-time job while attending high school.

> They always reminded me and they did certain things like as far as examples making sure we were in certain programs that guided us towards success and when it came to academics it like something they say you have to but they would rather give you different

> opportunities to experience things that led you in that direction like I was in the upward bound program….They had us get jobs so they was like so if you are working here you don't want to work here for the rest of your life so you need to go to college so it was things like that.

Preparing for college early was important to Charlotte's parents. Charlotte and her brother spent many weekends during their childhood preparing book reports while other neighborhood children were outside playing.

> My dad actually he started us off at a young age. My mom and dad would make us do book reports and things like that and everybody else would be outside…but I understand why they did that and at the time I didn't like it. I was like ya'll are the worst parents ever…that's how I felt then but it really prepared me for the future so I understand and I'm more mature about it now.

Mary had a strong desire to attend college by the time she reached high school. Her father was instrumental in expressing the importance of pursuing a higher education.

> I knew in ninth grade that I wanted to go...my dad would sit down and have talks with me and give me statistics on certain things and how minority groups are not doing as well or what we can do to get better in certain fields and arenas so you know I think around then that's when it became a big deal but I always knew that I wanted to go…my father expressed to me if you want the best and the finer things in life then you're going to have to probably go to college and actually finish college.

Participants for this study received messages of the importance of attending college at an early age. Several also experienced financial hardships of their families during childhood.

Because of the importance of attending college, participants expressed that pursing a higher education would not only benefit them but other family and community members as well.

Serving as a Role Model

Becoming a role model for other family members and younger students on campus was cited by 9 of the 14 participants included in the study. Participants discussed feeling great family pride by accomplishing their goals. By becoming successful and persisting academically participants became role models for younger family members and students on campus. As Alexis put it "it's that pride in what I'm doing and being able to be that role model for my cousins." Participants often described how their parents and family members would "brag" about to them to other family members and friends. In addition, participants felt they were enhancing the family name by attending college. Working hard and staying strongly connected to family members made participants feel proud of working towards earning a college degree. Further, it was gratifying for participants that their family members were proud of them.

Having been one of the first members of her family to attend college, Harmony felt as though she was setting a good example. Here she described how she and her younger cousins could enhance the family name by pursuing higher education.

> It makes them proud and with my little cousins a lot of their moms didn't go to college and some of them didn't graduate from high school. This makes them see that you can do anything. I tell them get in a sport, get involved at school, you can do what you need to make the grades. So I try to tell them that you can do good in school and do a sport and those things will help get you scholarships. I made it. I'm graduating. We need to have families of psychologists, doctors, social workers. We could have a family where the next generation makes something of ourselves.

In their interviews participants often discussed relationships with their siblings. Jordan felt as if she was serving as a great role model for all of her siblings including her younger brother who was attending college with her at the participating university.

> I kind of feel like my twin brother and sister…I don't have that same connection as when I was living in the house I feel like they've grown up…they're just these grown kids but I honestly want to go back to my home state so I can spend their last year with them because they are going to be seniors in high school. That means filling out college applications and since my parents pushed me they didn't have that college education but they pushed me and I have it and I want to help them with it and so because of that I want to be with my brother and sister.

Like Jordan, Alicia, the oldest of her siblings, felt as if she was serving as a model for her brothers and sisters to follow. Her description was typical of how participants characterized their position as a role model to other members of their family.

> It pushes my brothers and sisters. My parents always use me as an example for them. Pay attention to what she's doing. She's doing good. I'm not saying do exactly what's she's doing but she's preparing herself. She's working hard now so she can play later. And when it comes to my step-brother he played a lot and now he's just now realizing it so he's kind of behind in everything and so they are like pay attention to what she's doing. She's doing something good…especially with my sister because she's a little rebellious…she wants to go to school but then again she doesn't. She wants to party and have fun. She just turned 18 so I'm like those things will come trust me they will come.

Mike was the first person in his family to attend a four-year college. His brother and sister both dropped out of high school prior to graduating. Because of his educational

achievements, several of his family members have been inspired to return to school to further their education.

> My mom actually started going back to school to become a registered nurse. She's been an LPN for like 20 years but she has always read about new things. I'm proud of that but they are excited about my schooling as well. Especially with the kids (referring to his nieces and nephews). They want to come to college. They've actually been here to visit and I remember having my niece here and taking her to a football game and she was up in the stands acting like the cheerleaders so she said she wants to come here and be a cheerleader. But my sister is now going to get her GED and my brother is now talking about going to get his GED.

Another participant, Mary, described how being a role model for her niece was important. She stated that doing the best that she could and the pride in her family name motivated her as she pursued higher education. The degree that she was scheduled to earn at the conclusion of the semester in which the study took place, was not only for her but for her entire family.

> I have a niece so she's always constantly telling me that I need to be an example for her so I guess with all of that in mind I just try to do the best that I can and if I see myself slacking I try to you know clean that up as fast as possible and get back on the ball. I guess I can be added to the roster of lawyers and doctors and psychologists well not yet because I still have to go back to school but just to get through it because a lot of times I really just wanted to walk away from it but that's a big deal and just the simple fact that you know my brother didn't go to school and there are just some people that didn't go so I feel like I do it more for them and to show them that it can be done.

Participants also described serving as a role model for other students on campus, typically freshmen and sophomores. Being in the position of a resident advisor Jacob found he served as a leader for the residents that lived in his building. Here he described the pride that he has in doing his part for the university community.

> Most of the guys in my building…they look up to me. I'm probably the most mature and the most experienced one in my building than my fellow staff members so anytime that they need something they can come to me. I feel like I'm a role model because I feel a role model is simply leading by a positive example and I feel like I am a positive example by the way I handle things by the way I do things and the way I say things. You know I show them respect but at the same time I lead by example.

Like Jacob, Jason served as a role model to other students on campus. Jason was active in several organizations geared at providing services for new students.

> I have to hold myself to a certain level of standards because I can't be the person that's walking around telling people this this and that but I'm not doing it myself so…so yet again that's a point where I'm a role model and aside from me also being a student leader during freshman week like I'm one of the first people that freshman see so it's important that I be a good example for them you know.

"I Want to Succeed"

Although family and support systems were important in the academic persistence of participants, many felt that family expectations and being a role model for others could only get them "part of the way." Nine participants stated that in order to be successful in college, you have to "want it for yourself." Self-motivating factors contributed to their academic persistence. "Wanting to be something" and "make something of myself" was an important factor in

academic persistence. Further, as discussed in the previous section entitled, "I don't want to be a burden," participants desired the ability to take care of themselves and considered a college degree as a way to do that. Here Keisha compared her personal drive with the state of African American families.

> I'm very driven. If I say I'm going to do something I'm going to do it. I stayed here this long so that's an accomplishment in itself because you know I personally feel that in Black families a lot of us aren't graduating and we're not doing the things we're supposed to do so for me to do this and I'm the last one out of the family [to earn a bachelor's degree].

Joseph agrees that the desire to be on his own is a motivating factor in his persistence "The desire to succeed. The desire to be out of college and on my own, to be able to just be me and do what I have to do. I want to be something so I push myself to succeed." Setting personal standards was also a motivating factor for Jason. He described his goals while attending school.

> I'm here to get an education which is going to get me at least, well really higher than a 3.0 GPA. I'm here to be a part of my campus community. I'm here to provide community service. I'm here to be a servant to my community and my campus. I think just me knowing my goals and the things that I want to achieve and the time that I want to achieve it in is what's really helping and that's really what's driving me.

Mike stated that one of his motivating factors was self-determination. He attributes his success to wanting the best for his future.

> Determination to succeed it's kind of scary because I get all the degrees in the world and still not have a job so I know people with advanced degrees that are working

> construction….So building relationships and stuff like that and networking hopefully will help me out one day.

Paying it Forward

When asked if there was anything else that participants wanted to tell me that would help me better understand their experiences, several participants offered advice to other college students about their collegiate experiences. In addition to encouraging future college students to rely on family and to develop a support system, participants also reflected on the need for good time management and getting to know people in the university community. Utilizing campus resources was also cited by participants.

Typically these stories of advice centered on the participants' own experiences and what they had learned over the past few years as a college student. Here participants demonstrated their willingness to share their experiences in the role of mentor. In addition to their own personal success, participants wanted others to be successful as well. By offering advice to future students, participants expressed the value of pursing education.

Keisha described the importance of time management and the responsibility that comes with being a college student.

> My experience of being a student is you always have to be on top of things. It's always about time management. It's not that college is hard because it's not that hard as people try to make it seem. You really have to learn time management and other little factors that go with it as far as finances as far as parties as far as friends as far as doing whatever. But you have to remember you're here for a reason. This isn't high school.

Getting to know your professors was an important piece of advice that Harmony offered to those who are entering college.

> When you get to college you just have to utilize your resources. Get to know your professors. Just take that extra step because if they see you trying they have no problem helping you…well most of them. You can be anything that you want to be as long as you put your head into it you can be anything, you can do anything. It's a lot of work and there is work behind it but know that college is about education and as long as you have that foundation you'll be good.

Similar to Keisha and Harmony, Jody referred to the accountability that comes with being a college student.

> It's really on yourself. What do you want to do and what your decisions are. And then really you only get one chance out of life to take this opportunity and do that so I was like I am young and I'm really not doing anything else and I have plenty of time to go into the military. I decided to do that after I get this college education but then how long will it take me if I had went to the military first and then tried to go to school.

Participants continuously gave advice to encourage others through the college process. Alicia encouraged students to enjoy the experiences of college. She suggested that in the midst of newfound freedom, remember to get your coursework done and focus on your educational goals.

> College is basically what you make it. If you don't want to do anything like I did my freshman year then you're not going to enjoy it. But if you go and have fun….not saying not to do school work. You really have to get down to it and do your work. It's not like high school. You really have to look at what's going on, follow the syllabus, and work.

Financial problems should not hinder you from attending college was Jordan's contribution to paying it forward. She suggested future students look at all of their options before giving up on the idea to attend college.

> I always tell people…when people are like oh I'm not going to college because I don't have the money or this and that…take out a loan. It may hurt your credit but your experience of doing what you did and the money that you have to pay back is worth more.

Alexis described college as difficult at times. However, she encouraged those who are attending college to press on and not to give up.

> It was hard as first. It was a lot of things or at least a couple of things that I wanted to do when I got here that I wasn't able to do for one reason or another but at the same time I'm graduating knowing way more people now than I knew before so I did get something out of it. Get to know people in class and in organizations and even work related because I had an internship so I got to know them and my instructors as well so all in all it was a good experience. I would just encourage others to give it a chance and not give up.

Realistically, college "is not for everyone" according to John. He expressed that some of his cousins had already chosen another path but it is up to the individual to figure out what is best for them.

> People choose their own route in life and some of my cousins have already chosen the route they are going to take as far as if they are going to go to school or just try to find a job or something like that. I do my best to encourage them and let them know that really you're not going to get a real good paying job now without having a college education but really college is not for everybody.

Summary of the Findings

The findings from this qualitative study on African American college students academic persistence focused on four major areas: (a) family structure and family relationships, (b) challenges/overcoming obstacles, (c) coping strategies, and (d) success and perseverance. Based on the areas identified several themes emerged to describe how African American college students attending an HBCU perceived their experiences with family members both kin and non-kin, the challenges that they faced as students, how family supported them when they faced obstacles, and their perception of academic persistence and success.

The participants interviewed for this study described family in a variety of ways. Establishing who is included as family is important in this study as participants described several different types of family as part of their family structure and family system. Immediate family, extended family, and non-kin were all described as "family." Each of the types of family served in various supportive roles. Relationships with these individuals varied as did family closeness but regardless of the relationships, each of the 14 participants had someone that was considered to be family. These relationships ranged from parents to pastors to professors to peers.

In addition, many of the participants included family support, both financially and emotionally as key factors to persisting academically. Despite the amount of support received, participants gave accounts of challenges they often experienced during their collegiate years. Transitioning during the first semester, family issues at home, and being a financial burden on family members were all described as challenging by participants. During their challenges, participants described how several coping mechanisms became useful. Religiosity and support from family were incorporated as part of coping during tough times. Though not specifically asked, peer relationships and music were often brought up in interviews by participants as coping

mechanisms. Peers were described as supportive with academic and personal issues. Participants felt that in times when they did not want to worry family members with school issues they could rely on peers. Moreover, participants often assisted their peers with collegiate challenges. Music was also used as a coping mechanism when participants need an outlet to get away from academic problems.

Although participants relied on family, their success and perseverance was also attributed to self-motivation. Encouragement from family and friends would only get participants so far. Having a personal desire to want to pursue a higher education "to better myself" was often expressed. Though family pride and encouragement played a major role in the academic persistence of participants, determination to become something for themselves was just as important. Participants also demonstrated a willingness to "pay it forward" and share their collegiate experiences with other college students providing them with tools for collegiate success. In the final chapter, the findings of this study, implications for family studies and education, limitations, and directions for future research are presented.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which African American college students attending a historically Black university perceived their family relationships and support as impacting their academic persistence. This qualitative study was guided by a theoretical model that incorporated concepts from family systems theory and family life course theory. Family systems theory examined family relationships and interdependence of participants, while family life course theory examined linked lives and transitions.

The following research questions guided the study:

- In what ways, if any, do family relationships and background characteristics relate to the commitment of African American students' persistence towards graduation?
- How do African American college students perceive their transition from the family system to a collegiate environment as having impacted their family relationships?
- In what ways, if any, do African American college students perceive their family as providing instrumental and emotional support during their transition to college?
- How do African American college students perceive their successes and/or failures as impacting other members of their family?
- What methods of coping are helpful for African American college students transitioning to college?

Four major themes emerged from the data: (a) family structure and family relationships, (b) challenges/overcoming obstacles, (c) coping strategies, and (d) success and perseverance. This chapter presents an interpretation and analysis of the findings of the study as they relate to

the research questions, the existing literature, and the theoretical framework. In addition, implications for the fields of family studies research and educational practices are reviewed. Limitations for the study are identified followed by future directions for research in African American family studies literature and education.

Discussion of the Findings

Over the past several decades, patterns of college attendance for African American students have changed (Allen et al., 1991; Robertson & Mason, 2008); however retention rates have not improved significantly (Nichols et al., 2010). Positive academic outcomes are rarely addressed in current education literature (Taylor et al., 1995), particularly for African American college students. Further, family factors are often overlooked as a variable for studies on academic persistence in college age students. In addition, family studies research often is designed from a deficit perspective (Cain & Combs-Orne, 2005; Hill, 1999).

Because I wanted to examine the relationship of African American family strengths impact to academic persistence, this study focused solely on African American college students. Previous research indicates that African American students attending HBCUs are more likely to persist academically as compared to African American students attending PWIs (Carson, 2009; Flowers, 2002; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Further, when attending an HBCU African American students rarely feel that they are questioned about their academic qualifications (Love, 2008; Satterfield, 2008), which is often an issue when attending a PWI. Thus, focusing on students attending an HBCU allowed for a thorough examination of academic persistence in African American college students, while contributing to the literature in education regarding HBCUs. Previous studies have also documented the stress that comes with college experiences for many African American students as they face new academic demands and challenges (Bailey

& Moore, 2005; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), however only a limited number of studies focus on the impact of family support (Guiffrida, 2008; Heard, 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996) and family relationships. Therefore, this study was centered on family factors that were important to academic persistence in African American college students.

Family Relationships and African American Students' Persistence

Family background characteristics can have implications for academic persistence in college students. Implications can be both positive and negative depending on the family background, established family relationships, and the ability for the family system to continue to function in a way that is supportive of family members who are physically withdrawn from the family system, meaning they are away from home. The first research question examined in what ways, if any, do family relationships and background characteristics relate to the commitment of African American students' persistence towards graduation.

To examine this question, participants were asked about their relationships with family members. In addition, demographic questionnaires containing information regarding parental educational level, family income, and family household composition were administered to all participants. Findings indicated that participants came from a variety of family backgrounds. Several structures were identified to include two-parent households, extended family households, intergenerational families, single-parent households, and growing up in various systems at different points during participants' lifetime.

When asked about family of origin, participants included various individuals as a part of their family system. Immediate family, extended family, and non-kin were all incorporated into the family system of participants. Family structure was not consistent among participants, with various subsystems, or different patterns of relationships among family members (Ackerman,

1984; Chibucos et al., 2005), identified in response to the question. Family was defined as consisting of the individuals with whom participants lived, and individuals with whom they did not live but still considered to be a part of their family system. Further, different forms of family intersected at different points for some participants during childhood and collegiate years.

Immediate family relationships were discussed in the past and present tense. Immediate family relationships, referring to the participant's parent(s) and sibling(s), included only those who were living in the same home as the participant in some cases. In other cases parents and siblings not living in the home were also included. Participants reflected on their childhood relationships and current relationships with members of their household. Various immediate family structures were evident among participants. Immediate family structures included two-parent households with or without siblings, single-parent households with or without siblings, and extended family members being part of immediate family households.

In addition to immediate family members being identified in family structures, extended family members, meaning the networks of relatives beyond the nuclear family (Pallock & Lamborn, 2006), were included in family systems of participants. Extended family included grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Previous studies on fictive kin and extended family relationships examined samples of adults in middle and late adulthood (Chatters et al., 1994), large extended rural families (Stewart, 2007), and teens (Pallock & Lamborn, 2006). Positive results for African American families who incorporated extended and fictive kin were reported consistently. The current study supports the findings from existing literature. Perhaps, extended family members were incorporated into participants' family structure as an alternative to immediate family members when it came to communicating challenges and relating to collegiate experiences. For example, one participant noted that she was more willing to communicate

problems to her uncle rather than "worry" her mother. This finding contributes to the literature on African American family relationships, as few studies have documented the importance of extended family with young adults or college students.

Another piece of the family system puzzle included university faculty, friends and their families, and church family, referred to as non-kin. Findings for the current study suggested that out of state students and those living 90 minutes or more from biological family members were more reliant on fictive kin networks than in-state students or students that lived within 90 minutes of family. Thus, students who lived further away from family members were more apt to seek "family like" relationships with members of the university and local community. For these students, fictive kin became their family away from home. Participants often cited how "life was easier" because of the connection with their fictive kin network. Findings suggested that turning community members into fictive kin is a way that young African American adults utilize the strengths of their own kinship systems to help them get through college. This finding contributes to education literature regarding the importance of university and community members in retaining African American college students.

The overall theme that surrounded family background and relationships was the impact that the college experience had on family systems and structures. There was no distinct pattern amongst participants indicating that family background characteristics as far as income, household composition, and parental education level did not have a significant influence on academic persistence. Further, participants included various forms of family as a part of their family system indicating that the definition of family varies among this group. This finding regarding defining family system is critical in understanding the way that African American

families adapt to various circumstances and separations from members within family systems as well as who some African Americans include in their definition of family.

Perceptions of Transitions from Family System to Collegiate Environment

The first year of college is an important time for college students because they are creating the foundation for their later college experiences (Woosley & Miller, 2009). The transition of moving from a familial environment (i.e., local school and community) to an unfamiliar environment (i.e., new school outside of local community) often creates an increased level of anxiety for African Americans (Bailey & Moore, 2005). The second research question addressed how African American college students perceive their transition from the family system to a collegiate environment as having impacted their family relationships.

Previous research indicated that the college years represent a transition period for young adults when they should begin to develop into independent individuals and begin solidifying their identities (Love, 2008). However when it comes to African American college students typically they continue to rely on family relationships and family support (Guiffrida, 2006; Love, 2008; Walker & Satterwhite, 2002), and as the current study found, fictive kin in the college community. Participants for this study described in great detail their concerns about leaving family and the impact that it would have on family relationships. However, for the most part participants were excited about enrolling in college and beginning a new chapter in their lives.

Several participants described a positive change in some of their immediate family relationships upon enrolling in college. This included a change in parent-child relationships and sibling relationships. For example, one participant described tension with her mother prior to enrolling in college, however upon moving away their relationship improved. One reason for improvement in parent-child relationships was participants being away from home, meaning they

did not have daily contact with family members. This sense of independence put more responsibility for communication on participants. In addition, participants reported that family members often wanted to feel as though they were "helping" them through their collegiate experiences by "being there for them" and providing encouragement whether financially or emotionally.

Another reason family relationships had improved was because absentee family members, in most cases fathers, became more active in supporting participants as they attended college. Perhaps fathers became more involved because they were proud to say that their child was attending college. Further, one participant mentioned that although his father was not a "great contributor" in his childhood, his father always instilled in him that he should be "better" than what the father was. Moreover, these absentee fathers began daily or weekly communication through texting, phone calls, Skype, internet social networks, words of encouragement, and financial assistance. For example, absentee fathers who had little communication with participants in their childhood became more active in communicating regularly with participants as well as providing financially, something that was not a part of the participants' childhood experience. Other participants experienced increased communication with parents as parents wanted to be involved and aware of what was taking place in the university setting. Further, as found in previous studies on African American families and religiosity (Chatters et al., 2008; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), participants reported that family members also offered prayers and spiritual support when needed (religion is discussed further in the coping mechanism section later in the chapter) .

Though some participants experienced a positive change in family relationships upon enrolling in college, others participants experienced problems at home that affected their

academic life. Participants who reported having family issues at home often attempted to disconnect themselves from family members. Consequently, the transition to college negatively impacted family relationships as there were times of emotional separation from immediate family members. During the separation from family participants described a lack of assistance with the transition process. However, these same participants often relied on fictive and extended kin relationships to replace the lack of relationships with immediate family members during challenging family issues. Further, when family issues at home were resolved, participants often resumed their relationships within the immediate family.

Because African American parents typically hope that their children will surpass them as it relates to income and education level, many African American college students carry the responsibility of improving the family name (Guiffrida, 2006) by pursuing higher education. This responsibility was, at times, described by participants as a "burden" or as "too much pressure." Participants did not want to "let the family down" and therefore although this was seen as a burden, family pressure contributed to persistence towards graduation by being a motivating factor at times when participants considered leaving school. In essence, the collegiate environment was described as being different than that of a family environment. However, after the initial transition to college (in some cases a semester and in others longer time periods), participants of this study adapted to collegiate living and family systems adjusted based on the needs of participants.

Instrumental and Emotional Support

For college students, relying on family members during the challenges of collegiate experiences is important in their academic persistence. The ability for the family system to withstand stresses was described as "we may bend but we will not break" by participants. The

third research question was, in what ways, if any, do African American college students perceive their family as providing instrumental and emotional support during their transition to college? Previous studies indicated that family support is instrumental in academic success for African American college students. Guiffrida's (2005) qualitative study explored perceptions of family on academic achievement in African American students attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Findings indicated that high achieving students cited family support as beneficial during their college careers while low achieving students in the same study rarely discussed their families when describing emotional support (Guiffrida, 2005).

Although Guiffrida (2005) investigated African American college students attending a PWI, his findings are in line with participants in the current study of students attending an HBCU: Both confirmed that African American students need family support as they pursued higher education. The theme of family support provided further understanding of how relying on family contributes to academic persistence in African American college students. Several participants described wanting to leave school at some point, particularly early on in their collegiate experience. However, many times family intervened and encouraged them to continue to persist towards graduation.

Family support was offered in various forms. Financial and emotional support was described by the majority of participants as instrumental in their academic persistence. Financially, the majority of participants relied on family to assist with tuition, fees, books, and other bills such as housing. Although participants were appreciative of this financial support, they often described feeling as though they were "being a burden" on other family members. Participants acknowledged the desire to be more self-sufficient and take care of themselves without the help of family members, however due to their status as a student it was often difficult

to secure employment that would adequately provide financially. Jordan was the one exception to this finding as she became completely self-sufficient in her later years of college.

Despite the desire to be more self-sufficient, participants did express their appreciation for the support that was received. Moreover, many explained the desire to "pay back" money to family members upon becoming employed. While, participants reported that paying money back was not expected, they felt the need to "give back" as much as possible.

Emotional support included daily or weekly communication via internet social networks, phone calls, texts, and Skype. The participants talked about the efforts of family members to remain in touch and be involved in their daily collegiate lives. Emotional support was provided by immediate, extended, and non-kin family. Each played a role with encouragement, prayers, and words of inspiration. Further, even if they were unable to fully understand the nature of academic challenges, immediate family members often attempted to be supportive of their child/sibling. This finding confirms previous research on the collectivistic nature of African American families (Stewart, 2007) as participants reflected on various forms of family that were important in their childhood as well as their collegiate experiences.

Perceptions of Successes and Failures on Family Members

Family life course theory suggests that through the concept of linked lives that family members are interdependent and that people in relationships with each other have interconnected developmental paths that last over the course of a lifetime (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). The fourth research question investigated how African American college students perceived their successes and/or failures as impacting other members of their families. This was examined by asking participants about their perceptions of family members being impacted by their collegiate experiences, academic challenges, and successes.

Participants expressed that they felt high educational expectations from parents and family members from an early age. The importance of attending college was relayed to them by family members beginning in childhood. Family pride and great educational expectations were mentioned in some form by all of the participants for this study. Further, several participants experienced parental and financial hardships during their childhood and these hardships were used as motivation to attend college. For example, one participant noted prior to her mother completing her bachelor's degree, their family of three was making it off of limited income. After her mother graduated (during the participant's adolescent years) they no longer struggled financially. The participant, in turn made a decision at that time that she would attend college.

Consistent with literature on African American college students, this study found that participants' perceptions of family expectations carried a great amount of weight in their decision to attend college. Further, family pride by parents and siblings was often expressed by participants. Participants openly acknowledged that the college degree that they were pursuing was not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of the entire family. Although family expectations assisted with persistence, participants often felt pressure to do well in college to make family members proud. Guiffrida (2008) describes this as a "double bind" (p. 57). As participants for this study pursued higher education, they often felt pressure of "not letting the family down."

Another theme that emerged was the responsibility of being a role model for other family members. Participants described how they willingly served as a role model for their siblings, nieces, nephews, other students, and in some cases even parents. Working hard and staying strongly connected to other family members made participants feel proud of working towards earning a college degree. Further, participants felt that their success would be an influence on

other members of their family and community. Here the concept of linked lives was evident. Participants wanted to succeed not only for themselves, but to show other family members that completing college was possible.

Coping Mechanisms

The final research question explored what coping mechanisms were helpful during the transition process from a home environment to a collegiate environment. Participants were asked what methods of coping are helpful for African American college students during their transition to college and during challenging times. Beyond family support and family relationships, participants cited religion, music, and peers as methods of coping while attending college.

Previous research has indicated that religion is a key form of coping in the African American community. Donahoo and Caffey (2010) examined how church participation influenced academic performance, retention, and engagement in African American college students. Findings concluded that "to varying degrees students attributed their successful transitions into college, academic performance, career selection, ability to cope with stress, and desire to accept and improve the lives of others to their church involvement, religious practice, and spirituality" (Donahoo, & Caffey, 2010, p. 100). Further, Chapman and Steger (2010) found that African American college students reported less anxiety symptoms and higher levels of religiosity than White students (Chapman & Steger, 2010).

Similar to previous studies, the current study found that participants considered religion to be a main source of coping. Although religious participation in church services varied, most participants found that they relied on faith and spirituality in some capacity. Levels of religiosity ranged from regularly attending church services, to prayer with family members, to not actively

participating in organized religion but "still doing the right thing." Participants described how their trust and belief in God brought them through difficult times. Thus, participants expressed that God was there for them even when family members could not be. Based on childhood experiences and the freedom that came with attending college, levels of religiosity varied among the participants, however each felt that at some level they had a relationship with God.

In addition to religiosity, peers and music were often cited as coping mechanism that was helpful with the transition to college and challenges faced both personal and academic. Because this study focused on family, participants were not directly asked about peer relationships or music. Music was described as a private experience, connecting oneself with something sensory that provided a sense of peace. As such, the importance of music as a self-sustaining coping mechanism for student in the context of family strengths reveals a need for further research.

Implications

Implications for Family Studies Research

The findings of this study hold several implications for future research and practice in the field of family studies. First, studying African American college students and their families from a strengths perspective is contributing to family studies literature on African American families. Much of the literature in the field of family studies that focuses on African American families is from a deficit perspective (Cain & Combs-Orne, 2005; Hill, 1999). This study comes from a strengths perspective by revealing an array of positive factors in the African American community such as the strong sense of communalism, extensive extended and fictive kin networks, close knit communities, and religiosity.

Another implication for family studies is relating the family in the context of educational goals, support, and persistence of African Americans. Previous studies on academic outcomes

have typically focused on elementary age students (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Moreover, very few studies have examined the relationship between family systems, family relationships, family structures, and academic outcomes of college students. This study addressed family kin and fictive kin support for college students where most of the family kin network research on African American families was not on youth but on older families. Further, this study addressed the gap in literature regarding African American families and academic support of college students.

Implications for Education and Practice

In addition to the implication for family studies, the findings for the study also relate to the field of education. Several implications for higher education are evident. First, the study contributes an understanding of what is important in the success of African American college students. The findings from this study suggest that family relationships and support, whether biological or non-kin, is important in the success of African American college students. Many universities want to improve retention and graduation rates. By incorporating and acknowledging the importance of family, additional focus on families can be implemented into new student orientation and summer bridge programs.

For most students, attending college is the first time that they have been away from immediate family members for an extended period of time. Getting family members involved in the college transition process could have a positive impact on the first semester experience of African American college students. This connection seems to be missing from research in the area of academic persistence. For example, having resources available for families when they attend new student orientation such as helpful tips, financial advice, and university expectations may improve the transition process for students and their family members.

In addition, university administrators, particularly those at historically Black colleges and universities, might use the findings of this study to develop new programs for students. Programs may center on faculty mentoring during students first semester, getting local community families and religious institutions involved in collegiate experiences, and encouraging student participation in campus social organizations. Such programs may contribute to higher retention rates for African American college students.

Limitations

This study has contributed to the understanding of African American college students' academic and family experiences; however, several limitations should be noted. First, cross-sectional design was used for the study, meaning that data were collected during one time point. Therefore, longitudinal effects and outcomes on perceived family support and academic performance could not be examined. Perceptions of participants may have changed over time and that was not investigated as a part of this study. For example, answers to questions may have differed if interviews had taken place earlier in the academic careers of participants. In addition, interviews were conducted during the second half of a semester, a time when participants may have had distractions of upcoming assignments, finals, graduation, employment, and summer housing, among other concerns. Narratives given by participants may have been different if interviews were conducted at a different point in the semester.

Another limitation is that perceptions regarding family support were only provided by the participants included in the study. Other family members and non-kin family were not interviewed. Family members may have given a different account of the events that have taken place in the collegiate experiences of the participants. For instance, several participants expressed disappoint in their first semester GPA, however parents and family members may have

perceived participants as doing well. Further, their interpretations of childhood events may have differed from that of participants' reflections.

A third limitation is that participants from this study were recruited from only one state supported or public, historically Black university. It is possible that students from another HBCU, a private institution, or PWI would differ in thinking in some way from those who participated in the current study. Further, certain contacts at the university, specifically those in the psychology, human ecology, business, and music departments were more willing to send out recruitment materials and allow me to attend their courses when needed. It is possible that the findings for this study would have been different if the sample had been from a more diverse group of academic majors.

A fourth limitation was the gender composition of the study. Female participants nearly outnumbered the male participants 2 to 1 for this study. This was an accurate representation of the male to female ratio of the participating institutions and was sufficient for this study. In addition, no student athletes participated in the study. Student athletes may have contributed to additional diversity in the study. In addition, for the most part participants for this study were from Christian background, not offering diversity among religious backgrounds.

Finally, demographic questionnaires were self-reported. As the researcher for the study, I had no way of knowing if the information listed was accurate. Participants may not have intentionally been deceptive, however when reporting family demographics there was a possibility of error. For example, several participants pondered about the overall income of their family household, however none questioned parents or relatives about their income level. They based their choice on their own perception of the family household income.

Direction for Future Research

There are a variety of research ideas that have emerged from the current study. This study focused on the experiences of 14 African American college students beyond their second year of coursework attending one HBCU. In order to expand this area of research, longitudinal studies beginning in the first semester of college students and examining the college experiences of this population over time would improve our understanding of key factors in retaining African American college students. In addition, exact figures for retention and the number of years it takes to graduate could be added as factors in the study.

Further, studying students specifically by socioeconomic, single parent or grandparent/extended family households, parental education, and other family factors would offer a more in-depth examination of individual family factors. Although each of the factors was reported, the focus of this study was on family support and academic persistence. Further examination is needed to distinguish specific family background characteristics that may or may not contribute to academic persistence.

Finally, although not specifically asked in the interview about music and peer relationships, these factors were cited more often than any others by participants as a coping mechanism that contributed to academic persistence. Future studies should further examine the impact of music and peer relationships as coping mechanisms for African American college students and their importance in the African American community.

Conclusions

Literature suggests that college students' likelihood of persisting through graduation depends on the level of social and academic integration into collegiate living; however family relationships were rarely cited as being a contributing factor. This study addressed that gap in

the literature. Further, the study contributes to the family studies research on African American families from a strengths perspective.

The connection between family and academic performance has been well established for school-age children; however the literature on college students is limited (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Therefore, this study has contributed to a limited body of research examining the nature of family relationships on academic persistence among college students, specifically African American college students. Related to African American students, the research on college persistence and retention is abundant, however much of the research reflects apparent differences in the persistence of African American students versus students of other racial backgrounds (Bailey & Moore, 2005) and focuses on students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). This study was not comparative and allowed African American students to give their perspective in their own right. Further, participants for this study attended an HBCU, a population that is rarely utilized when studying academic persistence. The findings presented convey the importance of family relationships in academic persistence of African American college students. This information can be used to better prepare students and their families for navigating collegiate experiences, therefore contributing to academic persistence for this population and improved retention rates for institutions of higher education.

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Appendix A: Historically Black Colleges and Universities

ALABAMA
Alabama A&M University
Alabama State University
Bishop State Community College
Concordia College Selma
Miles College
Oakwood College
Stillman College
Talladega College
Tuskegee University

ARKANSAS
Arkansas Baptist College
Philander Smith College
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

CALIFORNIA
Charles Drew University of Medicine & Science

DELAWARE
Delaware State University

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA/ WASHINGTON, DC
Howard University
University of the District of Columbia

FLORIDA
Bethune-Cookman University
Edward Waters College
Florida A&M University
Florida Memorial University

GEORGIA
Albany State University
Clark Atlanta University
Fort Valley State University
Morehouse College
Morris Brown College
Paine College
Savannah State University
Spelman College

KENTUCKY
Kentucky State University

LOUISIANA
Dillard University
Grambling State University
Southern University and A&M College
Xavier University of Louisiana

MARYLAND
Bowie State University
Coppin State University
Morgan State University
University of Maryland, Eastern Shore

MISSISSIPPI
Alcorn State University
Coahoma Community College
Jackson State University
Mississippi Valley State University
Rust College
Tougaloo College

MISSOURI
Harris-Stowe State University
Lincoln University of Missouri

NORTH CAROLINA
Barber-Scotia College
Bennett College
Elizabeth City State University
Fayetteville State University
Johnson C. Smith University
Livingstone College
North Carolina A&T State University
North Carolina Central University
St. Augustine's College
Shaw University
Winston Salem State University

OHIO
Central State University
Wilberforce University

OKLAHOMA
Langston University

PENNSYLVANIA
Cheyney University of Pennsylvania

Lincoln University

SOUTH CAROLINA
Allen University
Benedict College
Claflin University
Clinton Junior College
Denmark Technical College
Morris College
South Carolina State University
Voorhees College

TENNESSEE
Fisk University
Knoxville College
Lane College
LeMoyne-Owen College
Meharry Medical College
Tennessee State University

TEXAS
Huston-Tillotson University
Jarvis Christian College
Paul Quinn College
Prairie View A&M University
Texas College
Texas Southern University
Wiley College

VIRGINIA
Hampton University
Norfolk State University
Saint Paul's College
Virginia State University
Virginia Union University

WEST VIRGINIA
Bluefield State College
West Virginia State University

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. By answering the questions you are implying consent. Your answers are confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research study.

1. How old are you? _____

2. What is your race?

_____Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander
_____Black or African American
_____Hispanic or Latina
_____American Indian
_____White, Caucasian, European, not Hispanic
_____My parents are from two or more racial backgrounds
_____Other (describe): _____

3. What is your current academic year?

_____ 1st year of undergraduate coursework
_____ 2nd year of undergraduate coursework
_____ 3rd year of undergraduate coursework
_____ 4th year of undergraduate coursework
_____ beyond 4th year of undergraduate coursework

4. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother/primary female guardian?

_____completed 8th grade or less
_____attended high school
_____completed high school or high school equivalent (GED)
_____attended any college (did not complete degree)
_____completed associate's degree
_____completed bachelor's degree
_____attended graduate school
_____completed advanced degree (i.e., master's degree/doctorate degree)
_____other (specify): _____

5. What is the highest level of education completed by your father/primary male guardian?

_____completed 8th grade or less
_____attended high school
_____completed high school or high school equivalent (GED)
_____attended any college (did not complete degree)

_____completed associate's degree
_____completed bachelor's degree
_____attended graduate school
_____completed advanced degree (i.e., master's degree, doctorate degree)
_____other (specify): _____

6. Which of the following best describes the total combined income in your family household annually?

_____Under $30,000
_____$30,000 – $59,999
_____$60,000 – $89,999
_____$90,000 or more

7. For the most part, what type of household were you raised in?
_____ Single Parent Household
_____ Two Parent Household
_____ Grandparent or other blood relative led household
_____ Other
Explain _____

8. Expected graduation date (example: May 2012) _____

9. Major _____

10. Religious Affiliation (if any) _____

Appendix C: Recruitment Materials (Flyer and Email Scripts)

Participants Needed

Are you an African American college student beyond the second year of coursework towards a Bachelor's degree?

To be included in this study participants must:

- **identify as African American**
- **be over the age of 18**
- **be beyond their second year of coursework towards a bachelor's degree**

Participation will include completing a brief demographic questionnaire and a 45-60 minute interview.

Those who are selected and complete the interview process will be given $20 as a token of appreciation.

If you are interested in participating in this study contact:

Jada E. Brooks, Ph.D. Candidate, Virginia Tech
jebrooks@vt.edu

Note: The Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at Virginia Tech and your university have granted approval to conduct this research.

Recruitment Email Scripts

Email Script to faculty/staff:

Dear [insert name]:
My name is Jada E. Brooks and I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Human Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institution and State University. I am writing to request your assistance in gathering data for my dissertation research. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the ways in which African American college students attending a historically Black college perceive family relationships and support as impacting their academic persistence. The study is being supervised by my advisor, Dr. Katherine Allen.

I am asking faculty and staff to assist me in distributing research materials to students of their respective courses and organizations. I am also willing to attend class sessions or organization meetings at to give brief introductory presentations to students regarding my study if needed.

The Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech and your university have granted approval to conduct this research. All information obtained will be kept confidential and any data collected will be used only for the purposes of this study.

Below is an email message to be forwarded to students. I have also attached recruitment materials to this email to be distributed to students. I do hope that you will support this research study. You may contact me at (804) 301-4951 or jebrooks@vt.edu with any questions or for further details.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,
Jada E. Brooks
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Email Script for Responding to Potential Participant:

Hello [Name of student],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study on African American college students. Attached to this email is a copy of the demographic questionnaire that you should complete and return to me via email. All information in the questionnaire will be kept confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this study. Your completion of the questionnaire implies your consent to participate in the study.

Also the informed consent document is attached for your review. Please read over this document and contact me with any questions you may have. If selected to participate in the study, you will be contacted via email with further instructions regarding the interview date, time, and location.

Thanks again for your interest,
Jada E. Brooks
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Email Script to Participant selected for study:

Hello [Name of Student],

Thank you for completing the demographic questionnaire. You have been selected to participate in my study on African American college students. Interviews will take place at the university library. The following dates and times are available for the interview:

[Insert dates and times]

Remember that the interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be audio recorded. Upon completion of the interview you will be given a token of appreciation in the amount of $20. Please contact me as soon as possible with your preferred meeting date and time. If you are no longer interested in participating in this study please let me know.

Thank you,
Jada E. Brooks
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

General Questions (Getting to know you)

- Tell me about what it's like being a student here.
- What brought you to this institution?

Part I - Family Background

1. Tell me about your family of origin - who did you live with while growing up?
Probe: What was your relationship like with each member of the family members that you mentioned?

2. What role did your family members play in your academic choices?
Probe: Have members of your family attended college?

3. While growing up was going to college discussed? In what ways?

Part II - Collegiate Transition

4. Tell me about your first semester of college. In what ways were your parents/family supportive?
Probe: In what ways did you support your parents in your transition out of the family? Siblings?

5. What was it like leaving your family (those living in your household)?

6. Describe your parents' expectations of you while attending college?

Part III - Family Support

7. Tell me about your parent's involvement in your academic life before college? How were other family members (if mentioned above) actively involved?

8. Describe how your family shows interest in your collegiate experiences?
Probe: Day-to-day life, organizations (band, choir, etc.), attending campus events, parents weekend, grades/GPA, social interactions.

9. In what ways, if any, has your family financially contributed towards your college education?
Probe: How does that make you feel?

10. Do you think your college experience would be different if you had more/less family support?
Probe: Are there ways in which you feel your family could do something differently?

Part IV - Academic Difficulties/Accomplishments

11. Tell me about how you feel your accomplishments impact other members of your family.
Probe: Can you tell me a story about this?

12. You mentioned on the demographic questionnaire that were (insert religion). Describe how religiosity/spirituality helps you while attending college, if at all?
Probe: What other methods of coping are useful during difficult times?

13. Are there other factors that you feel are helping you get through college?
Probe: Are you involved in any campus organizations, teams, etc.?

So what are your plans for the future (career, graduate school, etc.)?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me to help me understand your experiences?

Appendix E: Final Coding Scheme

FAM. Family
- EXT FAM - Extended Family (Aunts & Uncles, Cousins, Grandparents)
- FIC FAM - Fictive Kin (Faculty/Staff, Peers, Significant other & their family, Church members)
- IMM FAM - Immediate Family (Parents & Siblings, Those living in the home)
- FAM REL - Family Relationships
- PAR EXP - Parental Expectations
  - -Expectations/participation during childhood "Laying the foundation"
  - -Current expectations
  - -Importance of Attending college

SUP. Support
- ACD INV- Parental Involvement – Academically (Application Process, grades, Major)
- ACT INV – Parental Involvement – School events/activities
- FAM COM - Communication with family members (Phone, Skype, Facebook)
- ENC. - Encouragement/Motivation
- FIN SUP- Financial Support (Paying tuition, Care Packages, Sending money)
- FAC SUP. – Support from Faculty/Staff
- PEER SUP – Support from Peers

STR. Struggles/Difficulties/Stress
- FIN STR – Finances (Being a "burden")
- ACD STR - Grades/classes
- FAM STR - Home/Family circumstances
  - parental job loss (Joseph)
  - illness of parent (Charlotte)
  - death in family (Jacob)
  - parents' separation/divorce (Mary)
  - End of relationship (Harmony)

TRAN. Transitions
- LEAV - Leaving Home – "saying goodbye"
- FIR SEM - Story of "my first semester"
- STU LIF - Student Life (Classes, Making friends, HBCU environment)

COP. Coping
- RLG – Religion (Praying, Church Attendance, Having Faith)
- MUS - Music/Poetry
- EXER. Exercise
- PEER REL. Peer/Friend/Organization Relationships

PER. Perseverance "The sweetness of success"
- SELF MOT - Personal desire to succeed "Self-motivation"
- FAM MOT - Families desire for success

ACOMP - Accomplishments (Academic, Organizations, Graduation)
FAM PRD - Family Pride/ Serving as a Role Model (for other family members)
ADV - Advice to others