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The successful transition of Black men at historically White universities

Regina M. George

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The Successful Transition of Black Men at Historically White Universities

by

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of Teacher Education

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Educational Studies

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Abstract

There is something going on with Black men in America who go to college. As university enrollment has become more diverse with all ethnic and economic groups attending in greater numbers, as Black women are graduating at unprecedented rates, as postsecondary education becomes an increasingly significant employment requirement, the persistence to graduation rate of Black men as a group is among the lowest. Historically White institutions of higher education seek to ensure academic success and increase 4-6 year graduation rates for all students. Perhaps Black men can inform the process and lift everyone with their knowledge.

This is a qualitative inquiry with 21 Black men between the ages of 18 and 25 years, most of them from the city of Detroit, who have successfully completed at least a year of college at one of three historically White universities. Although all three selected schools are located in Southeastern Michigan, they are of markedly different size and situation. The research framework is strength based, an approach acknowledged as positive and pointed. The conceptual underpinnings for analysis include liminality, critical race theory, and identity development. Everyone crosses multiple thresholds throughout life in changing role or residence, age or stage, belief or bias. The time between high school completion and successful college performance is one of these transitional and transformative periods that requires the acquisition or enhancement of associated skills. The co-researchers shared what was relevant to their decision to attend college and how they selected where to go, their academic performance and achievement, their personal and social adjustments, and how they endure and persist towards the goal of graduation. Their reflections reveal the relevance of K12 focus on and preparation for postsecondary education, the significance of institutional support in college, and the importance of caring and community at all levels.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

“There is nothing permanent except change.”—Heraclitus of Ephesus, 535 BC

Perhaps the Greek philosopher Heraclitus was not translated exactly, but his words have endured over the centuries. The times they are a changing…again. In 2008, a Black man, raised by a single mother, was elected President of the United States. When we consider how the job had been normalized as something that, for over 200 years, only White men had done and were expected to do, the election of Barak Obama can be recognized as the serious challenge to racism and business as usual that it truly represented. The presence of this man selected by the voters as the national leader for two terms was a remarkable and major deviation from the predictable plot perpetuated over so many generations. Appendix A provides a definition of terms that will be used in the exploration of these changes and this project.

The significance of Barack Obama's election in 2008 was recognized internationally even if U.S. citizens, some in astonishment, were adjusting to what it all might mean. The President was quickly awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for being the person who could bridge and broker this mighty change away from only White in the White House (Nobel Peace Prize, 2009). The spotlight was focused on race relations during his tenure, particularly the experiences of Black men and women at the hands of law officers. In the speed of social media, the nation could witness in real time the misuse of power and the punishment of Black citizens. The less visible systemic inequities of opportunity may be more difficult to picture on a screen, but they continue to impact across education, employment, housing, and health.
Class is a secondary component of racism. The gap between the haves and the have-nots had been expanding for several decades worldwide. But following the U.S. recession of 2008, the growth of income disparity is notable. The wealthy rebounded significantly with a stock market growth of 230% and relative recovery in real estate (Long, 2016). Those with middle or lower incomes fared less well as earning power for average post-tax income within the bottom 50% of earners has decreased rather than increased, as Figure 1 illustrates.

![Figure 1: U.S. national income share top 1% vs. bottom 50% (2016).](http://money.cnn.com/2016/12/22/news/economy/us-inequality-worse/index.html)

The turning point seems to have originated around 1980. The bottom 50% went from earning about 20% of the national income through most of the 1970s to just 12% in 2016. Meanwhile, the top 1% has reversed positions from 12% to 20% of the national income. There are multiple dynamics that have played into this economic shift, such as the loss of skilled labor jobs, the stagnation of wages, the shift from manufacturing to information, outsourcing, the growth of technology, and public policy (Gordon & Dew-Becker, 2008). While the issues are complex in nature, the World Economic Forum cites three reasons for the rising increase in income disparity in the United States and these are the new technological skill set with its high
earning potential, the globalization of trade and the accompanying loss of U.S. jobs, and government policies of deregulation and tax sheltering (Baranoff, 2015). The impact is felt even more in communities that have experienced inequities for generations. It continues to be especially acute for Black Americans in earning power. The highest rate is apparent for Black Americans as compared to Asian, Latinx, and White citizens over the age of 25 years. Education levels are associated with the unemployment rates also and illustrate that, even with education, Black Americans appear to have fewer opportunities.

Unemployment Rates of Individuals Age 25 and Older, by Race/Ethnicity and Education Level, 2015

![Unemployment Rates Graph]

SOURCE: The College Board, Education Pays 2016, Figure 2.12C

Figure 2: Unemployment rates of individuals age 25 and older
The times keep changing. The election of 2016 that followed President Obama’s two terms demonstrated a frustrated and reactionary backlash by some voters and a complacent overconfidence in progress on the part of those who didn’t exercise their vote. Conservatives were seeking a return to some never present status quo that would “make America great again.” It appeared to be a “whitelash” similar to other periods in U.S. history when Black or immigrant citizens have exercised or experienced their civil rights. Facts were labeled “alternative” and the reported news called out as “fake.” Much of the nation reeled in shock at the election and challenged the outcome, but the results would stand. The 2016 election gives evidence to the despair and fear of the vanishing middle class and the power and persuasion of the wealthy who assure their own interests continue to be protected. Gerrymandering and challenges to the voter rights act of 1965 are only two indications of this misuse of power (Soffen, 2016). Out from under a rock, into the full light of day, White supremacist groups have reappeared that include Nazis in polo shirts and Ku Klux Klan in white robes parading for all to witness (Heim, 2017). They were never gone, but only concealing their presence until a time when it would be sanctioned and even welcomed by other Whites.

Galvanized by the election consequences and the rhetoric they hear, many others have also taken to the streets to protest and to speak up about inequities, abuse, and injustice. The number of women and Black and Brown people running for and elected to political office has never been higher (Brown & Atske, 2019). An increasing number of mass shootings, too often in schools, has generated a stronger and more insistent demand for gun control and regulation of weapons. The nation has become more deeply divided on issues of abortion, race, voter rights, and immigration. Or perhaps it’s just that the division is more apparent and obvious though it may have been present all along. But there is no doubt that the times have become particularly
volatile and contentious. This is what it looks like when power is challenged, and the people push for human rights as we know from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The disparity in earned income contributes to volatile times as the gap widens between the haves and have nots.

The United States is amid a liminal period where one way of thinking is thrashing violently to hold on and another is deeply and firmly expanding its roots. Perhaps this is what transition and transformation look like. There is a push and pull, a back and forth, a neither-here-nor-there aspect that is essential to all change. It comes in stages and phases that are not always sequential or measured. Yet these in-between days can give birth to a better society. We stand in a doorway, uncertain about what comes next and how to even talk about it. We sense that something is different and has shifted. Only time will demonstrate how far we have moved forward and shaken off the ugly restrictions of racism and nationalism. It is an exciting moment in time in which we are called to move forward to greater equity and true freedom for everyone in the pursuit of happiness. Part of the change entails conflict, resistance, discomfort, and effort as well as excitement and anticipation.

These feelings of being in transition are often mirrored in the lives of Black men as they enter college and move beyond where they once were. Why is their success in college important? What is the value of education to the individual? Education is a means of shifting one’s class and “movin’ on up” to a higher level of income. Education can change the economic trajectory of one person and of one family at a time. Higher education has a defined mission statement to prepare citizenry for success in a diverse and changing world so that equity and opportunity are assured for all. In obtaining a bachelor’s degree, the potential income earning power of the high school graduate may be doubled as Figure 3 illustrates. Education has been
and will continue to be a means of accessing social, political, and financial power. Education and income are inexorably intertwined. Degrees are one means of developing a greater stream of income and build economic security for oneself and one’s family.

**Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment, 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Median usual weekly earnings</th>
<th>Unemployment rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>$1,623</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional degree</td>
<td>$1,730</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>$1,341</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>$1,137</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>$798</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, no degree</td>
<td>$738</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>$678</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a high school diploma</td>
<td>$493</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All workers: $860


Figure 3: Earnings and unemployment rates in the U.S. (2015)

The earnings gap reflected by ethnicity is compounded by a gap in college graduation rates as well. If the degree is meaningful for employment and earnings over a lifetime, it is a social good to assure education for as many of those who can complete a bachelor’s degree or higher. While support programs and tax dollars have been committed to increasing the number of citizens with a four-year degree, successful admission to and completion of college remains a barrier for first generation, low-income, and Black and Brown individuals. Figure 4 graphs the differences in these graduation rates, which have remained relatively fixed even as the levels of enrollment have grown (Yeado, 2013).
Figure 4: Educational attainment in U.S. by race/ethnicity
From the Russell Sage Foundation, 2019, retrieved from https://www.russellsage.org/research/chartbook/percentage-us-population-age-25-to-29-who-have-completed-4-or-more-years-college

Is there value to the individual or society beyond economics? Research would suggest a number of situations are positively enhanced by the information that can be acquired with education. Quality of life is significantly improved as the level of education increases, not just with the ways income impacts it, but within every aspect of one’s life (Bowen, 1977; Fuller, 2010; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; Pascarella, 2006; Perna, 2005). Individuals with more education report greater satisfaction and happiness. Health and well-being, marriage patterns, parenting practices, and continuous employment are all positively impacted as level of education
increases. People with more education are more likely to exercise, less likely to smoke, and less likely to be obese, which translates to a reduced medical burden. Social contributions are also significant as those with more education are more likely to volunteer and more likely to vote. These non-pecuniary experiences, how one lives life away from the job, are also improved in quality. All of these factors are especially relevant for men of color, who are disproportionately unemployed and underemployed. Education could also positively impact the life expectancy of Black men, which at 71.5 years is lower by five years than women or any other ethnic group. Conditions of morbidity, including obesity at 37% and hypertension at 40%, are also significantly higher for Black men (Xu, Murphy, Kochanek, Bastian, & Arias, 2018).

The current state of Black males in their transition to university accomplishment is the focus of this study. Perhaps in focusing on this group of individuals, who have significant barriers and are less likely to graduate (Allen, 1992; Ma et al, 2017), will provide insight in assisting any and all people pursuing a college degree. The conditions related to the experience of growing up Black in America are relevant to exploring the transition to college. Where we are today is a result of where we were yesterday. This moment in history is fraught with many challenges as the United States continues to openly struggle with issues of racism and sexism. The national mindset has always moved quickly past error and injustice in the pursuit of economic progress. Now, we find ourselves stuck until the dirty laundry is aired. It is a liminal period of transition that can lead to positive social change.

These are pressing and compelling problems that demand our attention and response as a society. Conflict, resistance, and discomfort are endemic during times of change and progress. We are in between two rooms standing in a doorway. One room is the past, and it is behind us. The room we face is where we step next. It must include the demands of all citizens for equity
and respect or the conflicts will continue. For social change to bear fruitful progress, the voices of all must be part of the visioning conversation about where we’ve been and what comes next. Diversity in higher education is to the benefit of all learners and positively impacts all participants (Bowen, 1977; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtada, & Gurin, 2002; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Hurtada, 2001; Milem & Hakuta, 2000; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001; Smith, 1997).

Despite significant barriers, Black men are enrolling in colleges and universities at the highest rate in U.S. history. Almost one-third of all Black male high school graduates enroll in a community college or university (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This number is still significantly less than other groups, however, and so the retention of these young men is a critical imperative. They represent an important talent base the nation needs in the new millennium. A. Gorden-Reed, Harvard history professor, perceives Black and Brown students having “something of an existential crisis because of what is going on outside--with Ferguson, police videos, examples of racism. They’re in a privileged space and sometimes don’t know how to deal with this” as cited in Pasque, Chesler, Charbeneau, Carlson, 2013. Compound this with the reality that 90% of White undergraduates have had little or no interaction with Black or Brown people. Something different is occurring for them when they enter college. As other members of the population have moved forward, many Black men fall further back (Mincy, 2006).

Across the board educational attainment has risen significantly as it has increasingly become a requirement for employment. Almost 90% of the total U.S. population now have a high school diploma and nearly 35% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. These numbers reflect the levels of school completion for the White population. Black men and women have almost as
many high school degrees at 87% but fall 10% lower in completing higher education at 24% (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The proportion of those 25 to 29 years old who have completed at least come college has doubled over the last three decades from 34% in 1971 to 66% in 2017, unless you are Black or Latinx. These young men and women are half as likely to have completed a college degree as young adults who are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). So, while men of color may start college, they are less likely to persist to graduation. Even with the degree, however, employment earnings are negatively impacted for Black Americans. The Pew Research Center reported the following numbers as shown in Table 1 (Reeves & Guyot, 2017):

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s +</td>
<td>$106,600</td>
<td>$82,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>66,700</td>
<td>46,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS diploma</td>
<td>54,100</td>
<td>33,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>31,600</td>
<td>21,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From “Black women are earning more college degrees, but alone won’t close race gaps” by R. V. Reeves & K. Guyot December 4, 2017 in Social Mobility Memos retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2017/12/04/

In 2015, the average hourly rate of pay for a college educated White man over the age of 25 was $32 but $25 per hour for a Black man of comparable age and education (Reeves & Guyot, 2017). This is more than a number on a page as it has real life consequences in lifestyle. These persistent differences are a significant impact on the emotional and economic well-being of Black families. It computes to a difference of almost $15,000 a year in earnings. Why do some
men persevere, making the transition to college, and working steadily towards graduation when the rewards seem so tenuous?

What do these men have to say about how and why they continue? What is unique in the experience for them? What do they observe about their brothers who leave without completing a degree? Students all arrive with the same intended goal of graduating and charting a positive course for their future. At some point during each ensuing year, their resolve is either solidified or they do not return. Returning for a second year is recognized as a predictor of graduation because of all the necessary adjustments made during the first two semesters (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What makes the difference between a successful transition from their high school or community college to a historically White four-year university? It is a given that they would possess the intellectual capacity to succeed if they are admitted. What non-cognitive traits must they utilize to acclimate to the expectations of college performance? Who better to answer these questions than Black men themselves who have moved through at least the first year or two successfully?

**Purpose of the Study**

The focus of this project is to identify strengths Black men evidence in their transition from high school to college. The framework of this research will seek to better understand Black male student success in college and focus on their achievement. The first year is an especially powerful liminal moment. How they successfully navigate this transition can be informative about how to successfully move from one experience or environment into another that is foreign and different from what we know. What are their reflections and feelings about moving through the physical, social, and emotional space of one way into another way and doing it with success? Most of the co-researchers grew up in the city of Detroit where they were immersed in Black
community life in their neighborhood and in their K12 schools. Enrolling in historically White institutions of higher education is a jarring culture shock that demands rapid and recurring adjustments. The challenges of the usual college transition experience are compounded because they are Black and they are male, factors that contribute to additional stress and strain in the United States today.

This project is an examination of the tenacity and triumph of purpose demonstrated by so many young Black men. They work with hope and fortitude facing all that it means each day to survive in these changing times. To look through their lens is to perceive a means of transitioning from the current state of racial conflict and confusion to a better one. By listening to what Black men say is necessary and significant to their academic achievement, we can best develop and utilize tools and strategies to support their success and the success of all.

Institutions of higher education have increased support systems and interventions for undergraduate students as the composition of the student body continues to change. The function and purpose of higher education in the United States has changed dramatically from its earliest inception. Its beginning was designed for the elite for civil progress and it is still perceived as a means of social growth for all participants. More education is a predictor of a higher annual income (U.S. Census, 2014). For many families and individuals, it has been a means of moving beyond the constraints of poverty. Access to the opportunity is not as free and easy as we would like to believe. The disparities in graduation rates bear evidence that gender, ethnicity, and income level are constraining variables.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that between 2000 and 2017 the number of individuals aged 25 to 29 years with a high school diploma increased from 88% to 92% across the population. Whites increased from 94% to 96%, Blacks from 87% to 92%, and Latinx from
63% to 83%. Similar increases in the same time period are seen in higher education as well with associate degrees increasing from 38% to 46%, bachelor’s degrees from 29% to 36%, and master’s degrees from 5% to 7% (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The research related to Black Americans shifted in its focus in the late 1980s (Polite & Davis, 1999). Prior to that point, the emphasis in literature had been on the consequence of slavery and the social problems of Black Americans. This included single-parenting, unemployment, lack of education, poverty, and related psychosocial adaptations. There have been and continue to be a number of studies about Black men, but the topics of success and achievement are still under-represented. Today the issues of incarceration and racial profiling are at the forefront of our attention. There is also a greater understanding of how the general health and longevity of Black men has been impacted and compromised. The negative realities of being a Black male in American society cannot and should not be minimized. But what could be learned by focusing on the strengths these men possess and practice? What could be gained from examining the experiences of Black men and identify how they demonstrate resilience and persistence? This project asks them to speak about how and why they have pursued academic achievement.

It has been asserted that the examination of the experiences of those who are socially marginalized may reveal powerful indicators of general social issues (Guinier & Torres, 2002). The analogy of a miner’s canary is used to illustrate that the consideration of what Black and Brown people experience may provide insight into social change. A mining safety practice was to bring a canary into the mine shaft with the workers. Only the male canary sings. As long as he sang, the miners knew the air was safe for them to breathe. When the canary went silent, he was giving them a warning of danger so they might escape disaster and save themselves. There
was something odorless and noxious in the air they were breathing that threatened their survival.

With so many compelling issues begging for attention in the United States today, how are the ones most key to betterment, and perhaps survival, identified? Where is attention placed to deepen an understanding of what most compromises and threatens equity and justice?

There is a unique insight found in the perceptions of Black males who live with significantly negative outcomes in education, employment, health, and well-being. Their stressors are a signal pointing to the necessity of social change that could benefit everyone. Just as the canary’s silence was a message to be ignored at one’s own peril, so the status of Black men holds an urgent signal for change. The injustices that impact the daily life of these young men are toxic to all of society and ultimately threaten each of us. A consideration of the dynamics that imperil men of color from the perspective of these young Black men themselves and an examination of how and why they have overcome the pitfalls in their path may give us the means to a better way. Examining their personal experiences in historically White universities illustrates what is needed to build the strongest and healthiest community that has the capacity and skills to address a future ever growing in complexity.

This project seeks to uncover the stories of success and triumph from young Black men in institutions of higher education, structured environments that were not conceived to serve their needs. The origin of the university may have been to equip the elite, but today its doors stand open wide for all. There is a greater acceptance of the need for student support, especially during the first year of transition. Where once this may have not been recognized, today support programs are in place to assure that students can succeed and earn their degree. Information about graduation rates is now a data point to which public institutions are held accountable and a reference when high school students look at where to apply. To understand the needs of those
experiencing the challenges of college will inform how better to meet the needs of all who come with their dreams of a degree.

**Justification and Significance**

“Herein lies the tragedy of the age:

Not that men are poor,---all men know something of poverty.

Not that men are wicked,---who is good?

Not that men are ignorant,---what is truth?

Nay, but that men know so little of men.”---W. E. DuBois, 1903/1953, p. 226

Much of the literature on the state of Black males today is negatively or deficit focused (Harper, 2012). Research about support programs focuses on GPA and retention but less often on the opinion of the participants. Which programming has been most helpful from their perspective? What do they think has contributed to their success? This project intends to ask the men themselves directly and personally about how they managed the move from high school to college. This is the qualitative component of the research. It is considered in the context of their experiences as young Black men in a society that has criminalized Black youth, even as it fawns over athletes and entertainers. How they have managed to navigate this culture with some success provides insight for any of us.

The heroic stories of young Black men typically remain untold. Instead, the focus is often on the defeats, the deficits, and the decisions to leave rather than their successes in college (Harper, 2005). While it is important to understand the needs of these young men, a focus on the lack of achievement or underachievement contributes to a false image of who they are and what is required for their success (Fries-Britt, 1998). Erroneous assumptions are an unintended consequence of delineating the problems and challenges of young Black men in society today. It
is easy to do this considering the deep conflict and confusion in racist America. This project seeks to develop a deeper understanding of how and why Black men experience success in college from their own personal perspective. In so doing, it may inform how we prepare all students to be successful in college and engage them effectively once they are there.

Their experiences are unique and remarkable, even as they may be remarkably familiar to many other Black men. While each man shared events and feelings peculiar to his own life and learning, what he holds is a shared knowledge. In showcasing these individual stories, it is hoped that other men will see themselves and feel supported. As they proceed towards a goal of graduation, each may be encouraged that he is not alone and that what he is experiencing has been overcome by others like him. The picture painted by their own words counters the ugly and erroneous narrative of racist culture.

**Research Questions**

The factors that impact successful transition to college and persistence to graduation are varied. Although it is reasonable to expect that intellect would be the most significant quality needed for academic success, it is not the best predictor of how a student will perform in the classroom. Many young men and women who are very bright and competent do not begin or do not complete a college education. Researchers have sought to identify the characteristics that would contribute to student achievement with a desire to improve college graduation rates (Astin, 1993; Snyder, 1994; Tinto, 1993, 2012). The question of what qualities are associated with success in college continues to be asked.

Motivational constructs are one area of exploration and these include self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1982), optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985), grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Wolters & Hussain, 2015), and hope
(Oettingen, G. & Gollwitzer, 2002; Shorey, Snyder, Rand, Hockemeyer, & Feldman, 2002; Snyder, Shorey, & Rand, 2006; Tetley, 2009). These four constructs are inextricably connected and have demonstrated some positive correlations with one another (Snyder, 2002). Where one is evident, the others are likely to be present as well. Connections have also been made between these constructs and persistence to degree completion (Tinto, 1993, 2012).

An examination of how racism is so acutely and precisely experienced within a liminal period of transition from home and high school to college independence, may provide a unique insight. This project recruited a micro sample of Black men in Southeast Michigan, most from the city of Detroit. The geographic area is itself a tipping point. It has historically supported the economic success of Black Americans, first with the Underground Railroad and later as the center of auto manufacturing. Many Black families were part of the Great Migration to the area for employment in the early 20th century (Sugrue, 2014). They pursued the middle-class aspirations of owning a home and car and sending their children on to higher education. Detroit has experienced division and contentious unrest related to race and poverty. It provides an interesting background to the exploration of how young Black men successfully navigate the change from high school to university life.
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Context of the Study

Historical Context: Education of Blacks in the United States

“History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.”---Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning,” 1994

To read a biography or autobiography, one expects to learn about the childhood and growing years in the life story. In fact, the story would seem incomplete if it neglected to include information about the development and definition of the self as the subject evolved over time. The early years are particularly formative as values and principles are shaped by response to obstacles and opportunities. These often establish a guide for behavior that may be unstated or presumed, embedded under what soon becomes the usual manner of operating. But it exists there nonetheless, whether stated or assumed, exerting its influence and generating consequences. A nation has a life story, too, and its character grows in expressed choices and demonstrated priorities. Appendix B provides a historical timeline of events relevant to issues of equity and equality in the United States. The country was shaped by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights without acknowledgment of the prevailing belief in White superiority and Black inferiority. What is left unsaid is significant. There is a practice of racial inequality and economic injustice embedded from the earliest of colonial days that is often difficult and uncomfortable to recall. To remember times past may be unsavory because they were filled with tyranny and terror on native soil. To remember times past may seem irrelevant because the world has changed and continues to change dramatically at what seems an ever-increasing rate. It is important to look closely and unflinchingly to see how
beliefs of superiority have persisted and carried forward over the decades and influence the United States today.

The United States founders committed to publicly fund education as a vehicle for the pursuit of happiness and self-actualization. In a new country where religious freedom had sometimes been the very reason for immigrating, being able to read the Bible was important. But the churches were not staffed to teach everyone. The state would have to be involved, decreeing that towns provide schooling even if it was only for the elite. Eventually elementary schools grew locally to teach numeracy and literacy to children in preparation for farming, planting, and trading. A literate populace was also a recognized component of a functioning democracy. Education would be necessary for the families of indentured servants, who were often illiterate to assume their position in society. Some schools were established in the name of religion and incorporated the Bible into class instruction. Other schools in communities with a large population of immigrants offered the native language as an additional subject or occasionally conducted instruction in the native tongue (Ramsey, 2012). In this way, immigrants could use their ethnic power to preserve old country traditions. But these were schools for White immigrant children only. Black immigrants would have to provide for their own education as well if they wanted something to call their own. Black citizens were involuntary immigrants, captives who had been kidnapped and whose labor was exploited (Ogbu, 1978). There would be regional concentrations of Black populations who adapted and responded as the laws would allow.

There was probably some discussion among the men who put a price on the head of each captive about just how much knowledge would be tolerated. Too much could be dangerous, but a certain amount could increase the value of their investment (Woodson, 1919). In 1661, the
legalization of slavery in Virginia made reading and writing illegal to learn or teach among the captives. Quakers and Catholics did it anyway in preparation for and hope in the abolishment of slavery (Morgan, 1995). They were not situated in the Southern states, however, and usually only free Blacks in the North were able to take advantage of the reformers’ efforts. Of course, some of those forbidden to learn were smart enough to just teach themselves. Phillis Wheatley in the late 1700s is an example of a proficient writer who taught herself reading at an early age while enslaved. Her use of the English language in poetry was celebrated in New England and Europe for its beauty and poignancy (Adams & Pleck, 2010). Some of the plantation owners, who were “always a law unto themselves,” ignored the restrictions and provided instruction to captives or allowed teaching on their properties to improve performance as workers, artisans, and managers (Woodson, 1919). But most slaveholders considered an intelligent and informed captive to be dangerous and suspicious. Educated and literate captives could conspire and communicate for rebellion so literacy must be deterred. Should a slave be found writing, he or she would have the forefinger of the right hand cut off (Anderson, 1988). There was also an assumption that Blacks were inferior in intellect and any education beyond vocational training would be wasted on them (Kendi, 2016).

The city of New York was home to the first African Free School established in 1787 by the Quaker Manumission Society, which expanded over the next 30 years in the city to seven elementary schools for Black children. Small community schools for Blacks existed throughout the states but were often looked upon with suspicion and deemed as “subversive” in the Southern states where they were few and far between (Morgan, 1995). On many occasions the schools were burned to the ground at night by marauding White citizens. Children might go to the home of another Black person to be tutored for a small monthly sum, but this was sometimes
problematic as well. If more than one or two Blacks were together, they were suspected of plotting rebellion. Gathering together, even for the sake of education, would not be tolerated.

The Act to Establish Public Schools was passed in 1796 after multiple attempts on the part of President Thomas Jefferson to federally fund schools (Jefferson, 1781/1955). He was convinced that a more educated populace would mean a more free and happy people. It was the responsibility of the government, in his opinion, to foster the education of a meritocracy in which all citizens might compete. Although this idea of centralized public schooling was unpopular, the act was passed. While Jefferson may have promoted education as a means to a better nation, it was not intended for all (Woodson, 1919). He believed slave holders were responsible for educating their captives and that Blacks did not have the same intellectual capacity of Whites. They were suited for training in construction and agriculture (Morgan, 1995). This was the period of an intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment in which secular knowledge for the sake of social and economic progress was espoused. The idea of “light” as insight or knowledge was applied to skin color as well (Kendi, 2016). An Enlightenment Swedish scientist of the 1700s constructed a classification system for human beings according to skin color. To be White was to be of higher intellect, to be morally superior, to be most pure, to sit at the top of this racial hierarchy. To be Black was to be “sluggish, lazy, crafty, slow, careless…covered in grease, ruled by caprice” (Kendi, 2016, p. 82). Not surprising that another follower of Enlightenment Benjamin Franklin claimed to be “partial to the complexion of my Country, for such kind of partiality is natural to Mankind” (Kendi, 2016, p. 80).

Throughout the 1800s churches continued to provide formal education for Black children and adults, but this was primarily located in Northern states. Teaching literacy, while still illegal in many Southern states, was necessary for any Christian to dutifully read their Bible. Religious
observance and practice by Blacks was supported by White church leaders who suffered minor, if any consequences, for transgressing the prohibition so as to expand their congregations (Woodson, 1919). The one room schoolhouse was most common for White children in both the North and the South. It was usually staffed by an untrained teacher who was often expected to bow to public opinion and the demands of the community. Attendance fluctuated with the seasons of farming and curriculum usually did not go beyond an elementary level (Tyack, 1974).

There was resistance in the Southern states to provide funding for Black schools with the argument made by Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi that the “government was not founded by negroes nor for negroes,” but “by White men for White men” (Kendi, 2016, p. 208). Integrated schools could be found in the Northeast, but were still uncommon (Morgan, 1995).

Free and literate Black men would teach reading and writing to others in their homes but were sometimes restricted from doing so. Carolina felt the need to pass a law in 1834 prohibiting Blacks from meeting unless a White person was present (Morgan, 1995).

Despite the fear and suspicion of punishment from Whites, Blacks continued to support schools, holding a deep desire for and hope in education. The African Institute, that would later become Cheyney University, is often considered the first historically Black college and university (HBCU). It was funded in 1837 by a reformed slave trader and converted Quaker to assure that free Blacks might pursue vocational education and training primarily in agriculture and mechanics (Woodson, 1919). The curriculum included literacy and numeracy and continued as a secondary school until 1914 when it became a normal school for preparing teachers and awarded its first degree. By that time there were over 90 HBCUs across the nation awarding degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). The desire of Blacks for higher education is evident in the number of institutions that were established and struggled to exist with only
private financing and funding, unlike the public institutions for Whites that received government monies.

The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 changed the legal status of slaves from that of “property” to citizens of the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1868 established “equal protection” for all citizens. The Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 guaranteed the vote for all male citizens including Black men. Women would not get the vote until 1920 with the Nineteenth Amendment. The literacy rate of newly emancipated Blacks in the late 1800s was more than 20%, which seems remarkable considering the barriers to education that existed (Jackson, 2007). But knowledge is a component of living as a free person and a hope to assure a better life for one’s children. Black communities aspired to the skills of literacy and numeracy as a means of social advancement, perhaps even more than White families did. “Sabbath” schools were established and supported by ex-slaves and educated thousands of adults and children (Anderson, 1988). They operated out of churches and ran classes evenings and weekends to accommodate those who could not attend on weekdays.

More than 4,000 schools were established for Black children by the U. S. Freedman Bureau after the Civil War. As these opened in every state, they were designated for Black children only and usually staffed with Black teachers, which both Black and White families often preferred. Black citizens worked hard to acquire functional buildings for the classrooms that would be given names, like White schools, instead of numbers as White administrators planned (Tyack, 1974). Ex-slaves were the strongest proponents of education in their communities, raising money for salaries and supplies (Anderson, 1988). In the era of Jim Crow that began after the Civil War and continued until 1950, every force was exerted to limit the rights of Black citizens. State and local governments enacted laws or “Black codes” that would maintain the
racial divide in housing, transportation, employment, health care, education, marriage, entertainment, business, voting, and even burial (Kendi, 2016). But there were always those who recognized the importance of equal access, especially in education, and Jim Crow was repeatedly contested in the judicial system with discouraging results.

The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School was founded in 1881 by the State of Alabama legislature. Booker T. Washington was recruited from Virginia to serve as the first school leader. He was a graduate of the Hampton Institute where he was serving as a teacher. Washington was notable for his dedication to education and his heroic efforts to attend school (Washington, 1900/2016). The years of persistence and determination are detailed in his autobiography and paint a true picture of what it was to be a Black man with ambition in the South. Washington was committed to opening educational opportunities for all Black citizens and make the paths of others less arduous than his had been. With a focus on agricultural and industrial curriculum, Washington was able to raise funds from White contributors who may have still held racist and separatist ideologies. Under their noses, he would fund and insure education for Black men and women that included liberal arts and foreign languages (Anderson, 1988). He preached accommodation and effort as a means of overcoming racism. Washington was convinced that time and human advancement would heal the wounds of slavery and oppression. This approach was not popular with W. E. B. DuBois, another prominent Black educator of the time who was awarded a doctorate in history from Harvard 1895. DuBois was adamant in his demands that Black civil rights be respected and was eloquent in his arguments (DuBois, 1903/1953; 1973). Washington’s more conservative approach became a point of philosophical contention that would divide the Black community for many decades.
The Supreme Court upheld “separate but equal” education in *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1896. Each state could fund schools as they chose, in amounts they chose, with students enrolled in schools as designated. This would maintain the division of Black and White children in separate school buildings and arrest the efforts of those seeking to integrate the educational system. The schools were not equal, of course, because those for Black children were not funded with the same level of public dollars. They were usually staffed by Black educators, however, providing employment for Black men and women. More HBCUs both private and public had been established, especially in the South, and were often established as “Normal Schools” that were dedicated to the preparation of teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

Even as public opinion favored assimilation of immigrants and a common core of learning, this would not include Black Americans (Tyack, 1974). Despite these burdensome and significant roadblocks, literacy rates among Black Americans continued to grow (Anderson, 1988). The national statistics demonstrated this growth, especially in the Northern states. From 1870 to 1900, the percentage of the Black population of children attending school increased from less than 10% to more than 30%. Illiteracy among the population of all Black Americans dropped during this same period from 80% to 45% (Tyack, 1974). Change and progress moving forward could not be stopped.

Barriers fell slowly and the price was painful. The documented number of Black men, women, and children lynched between 1870 and 1950 is over 4,000 souls (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). Racial terror lynching is a strategically violent act outside the arm of the law intended to inspire fear and exert control. Its public nature is designed to intimidate and to illustrate dominance. These horrific events were sometimes conducted in the public square or in front of the court house with impunity. They were often attended by the White community,
including children, as an exciting and entertaining social event that might be promoted for several days before it took place. The only crime of the victims may have been a failure to follow one of the social conventions regarding acceptable Black behavior. Lynching was significantly and deliberately a means of intimidation to stop any attempt at exercising the civil rights that had been guaranteed in the 14th and 15th amendment, voting in particular. Despite the fear inspired by lynching and racial violence, resistance would persist.

Ida Wells-Barnett, known as Ida B. Wells, was one Black woman who demonstrated great courage. Her first job in 1878 at the age of 14 was as a school teacher in Memphis, Tennessee (Morgan, 1995). She began writing about the injustices of racism several years later with compelling articles published in newspapers and magazines around the country. Lynching was a topic she put front and center speaking publicly and carrying her message as far as Europe. Ida was one of many who stood up to this heinous crime and challenged people of conscience to stop the brutality. The march forward continued as Black Americans aspired to pursue knowledge and education. Sadie Alexander was the first Black women to be awarded a doctorate in the United States and it was from the University of Pennsylvania in 1918 (Morgan, 1995). DuBois continued to advocate for education beyond the vocational and industrial schools that were popular at the time and championed by Booker T. Washington (Anderson, 1988; DuBois, 1903/1953, 1973; Morgan, 1995). DuBois would be one of the founding members of the National Association for Colored People in 1909 along with the educator John Dewey and the social activist Jane Addams.

This new century would be transformative for the world in many ways. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, every able-bodied citizen was needed to serve and encouraged to enlist. But segregated units maintained separation of Blacks and Whites,
especially in the barracks located in the South. Tasks and assignments were also relegated based on ethnicity with the most menial assigned to Blacks. The Black men and women who were stationed in Europe returned after the war with widely broadened perspectives and expectations. They believed they had saved democracy in Europe and had every reason to expect they could experience it themselves back home (DuBois, 1973). Many had already begun the Great Migration out of the South to improve their lives, but this sense of a new and better way being possible contributed to over 500,000 Blacks moving North in just a few years. With immigration curtailed after the war, job recruiters toured Southern towns encouraging new workers to make the move, the city of Detroit being a popular destination (Sugrue, 2014). Leaving the South was particularly attractive at the time because the restrictions of Jim Crow had been galvanized by release of the film The Birth of a Nation in 1915, the same year in which over 100 Blacks were lynched (Kendi, 2016). The Ku Klux Klan, formed by Confederate veterans in 1865, was revitalized in its efforts to terrorize not only Blacks but also Jews, immigrants, socialists, and Catholics.

The Great Depression of 1929 hit every family hard and Blacks harder than most. Already struggling with high levels of unemployment, Black citizens were plunged into greater social disadvantage. Certain street corners in Northern cities were identified as a source of finding cheap labor. The locations were sometimes referred to as “slave markets” where Black and Brown men mingled each morning in hopes of finding work that day (Kendi, 2016; Sugrue 2014). Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt the New Deal program was implemented with the Federal Emergency Relief Program and a plan to provide work opportunities. The Department of Education would initiate a number of educational projects that focused on public schools in both Black and White communities (Morgan, 1995). From adult education to nursery schools
there was a focus on increasing literacy. The data collected in some Southern states indicates almost 40% of the adults enrolled in literacy programs were Black, as were 30% of the teachers. Classes were assigned more students if the teacher was Black and the teacher could expect to be paid less than White teachers (Morgan, 1995). But overall the records for the administration of these programs seems to have been fair as it benefited a high number of Black citizens and engaged field supervisors to assure equitable allocation of the funding. Loans and grants were also made available for building and repairing schools, and this was much needed in rural areas, especially in Southern states. Until the 1940s most high schools in the South for Black children were located in urban areas, leaving rural Blacks with little opportunities beyond elementary school (Morgan, 1995).

The United States entered World War II in 1941. Black men and women answered the call to enlist, just as they had done in WWI. But the attitude of the military had changed very little in the ensuing decades. Units were still segregated as “colored” and relegated to the most menial and arduous tasks. They often encountered hostility and violence from White soldiers. None would see combat until 1944 and none would be recognized for valor or receive a medal of honor (West, 2004). But they would be fighting for democracy in other countries and return home revitalized to fight for it in America. The war lifted the economy out of the Great Depression and provided new opportunities for training, employment, and education in its wake. Another wave of workers, both Black and White, migrated from the South to manufacturing jobs in the North (Sugrue, 2014). Returning war veterans from both WWII and the Korean War were able to use the G.I Bill for college tuition and the enrollment of men in college increased dramatically. Black veterans were often unable to reap these educational benefits because many
institutions of higher education remained segregated, especially in the South. Qualified Black applicants were repeatedly denied admission.

Citizens had continued to utilize the legal system in pursuit of equity in education during the 1940s, just as they had in the 1930s with the support of the National Association for Colored People (Brown, 1999). Black teachers filed lawsuits because of salary disparities with their White peers. Black communities sought equitable funding for schools, often in the South, where White schools received a greater share (Siddle-Walker, 1996). Black citizens, often the business owners and ministers, would negotiate with the White school board for money and supplies. If they could raise a certain amount, the school board might agree to match it. Sometimes the answer was just to check back in a year. The school board might even agree to let the Black community have a school building. They would just have to move it piece by piece to the Black part of town (Siddle-Walker, 1996). The desire for learning was so strong that it would be acquired by any means necessary.

State universities in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Kentucky desegregated in the 1940s. Louisiana State and the University of Virginia admitted Black students to their law schools in 1950. The University of Tennessee accepted Black students to graduate programs in 1952 (Eagles, 2009). Graduate school would be the preferred point of admission as the institutions of higher education gradually cracked open the doors of entry. The NAACP was involved in many of these lawsuits providing support and representation as more of its chapters opened around the nation. There would be some claim to victory with the decision of Brown v Board of Education in 1954, often considered the beginning of the civil rights movement (Morgan, 1995). Desegregation of higher education continued with the University of North Carolina and the District of Columbia Colleges the same year of the court decision. A young Black woman was
admitted to the University of Alabama in 1956 but expelled in just a few days for technical reasons. The Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama the same year would have as its figurehead a young Baptist preacher by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1960 all of the public universities in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi remained segregated at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Eagles, 2009).

White supremacy was fiercely maintained. The 14 year old Emmett Till would be brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955. Two men identified as the murderers were tried and found not guilty in less than a month. There were many other killings of Blacks that went unpunished. In 1959, Mack Charles Parker in southwestern Mississippi was accused, but never tried, for raping a White woman (Eagles, 2009). He was taken from his jail cell in the middle of night by a group of men, beaten, shot, and his body dumped in a nearby river. Despite admittance of their crime by a number of the men, no one was ever charged in Parker’s death because the judge and prosecutor refused to try the case. Nearly 25% of those lynched in the South were accused of sexual assault across racial lines. Sometimes the “assault” consisted of a look or just one’s mere presence in the same room. Always the word of the White woman was taken as truth. Of all the lynching crimes perpetuated after 1900, only 1% of the perpetrators were ever brought to trial or convicted. Between 1877 and 1950 Mississippi had a higher per capita number of Blacks lynched than any other state in the union (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). The culture of maintaining Jim Crow and “Black codes” of behavior was still strong and pushing back vigorously at any suggestion of change. The civil rights movement was spawned in this environment of terror and intimidation.

Local school boards in the South ignored the federal court’s desegregation ruling in 1954 and within a few years schools were even more segregated as White supremacy asserted itself.
Politically active individuals seeking integration, whether Black or White, might find themselves fired from jobs or refused service in White operated businesses (Morgan, 1995). The NAACP, which was active in providing legal support, was prohibited from operating in Alabama by the state legislature. When the Supreme Court in 1957 ordered the desegregation of a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, the governor ordered the state’s national guard to prevent Black students from enrolling. These nine teenagers, the Little Rock Nine, demonstrated remarkable courage and conviction in the face of an ugly and violent mob of over 1,000 White men and women.

With the advent of the relatively new medium of television, it was broadcast for all the world to watch. President Dwight Eisenhower tried every solution he and his aides could construct in an effort to placate Southern voters and somehow maintain the nation’s image of equality. But it was quickly becoming tarnished in a very visible manner and negatively impacting international opinion. After two weeks, Eisenhower reluctantly placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal authority and federal troops were called in to enforce the order (Kendi, 2016; Morgan, 1995). They would have to remain there for the duration school year. When the oldest of the nine students graduated the following year, Martin Luther King, Jr. would attend the commencement ceremony.

Federal marshals would be needed again in 1962 when James Meredith enrolled in the University of Mississippi. Although more Blacks per capita lived in Mississippi than any state, resistance to civil rights was deeply entrenched (Eagles, 2009). Meredith, who had served in the U. S. Air Force from 1950 to 1959, was galvanized to challenge the segregation of this public university and applied for admission twice in 1961. With the support of the NAACP, he filed a case that would eventually be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court alleging he had been denied admission solely because of his race (Meredith, 1966/2019). Eventually, a decision was made in
Meredith’s favor in 1962. But the governor of Mississippi announced that no school in the state would ever be integrated. The Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Jr., like Eisenhower just a few years earlier, struggled to resolve the conflict and address conflicting interests. He was resistant to using force to uphold the law. President John F. Kennedy, however, was prepared to take a stand and issued a proclamation citing his authority to enforce the law and override the state’s governor. His brother Robert negotiated with the governor, and Meredith was admitted. He would be allowed to come on campus to register and attend classes. State and federal troops numbering over 500 were in place to accompany him for his first day and ensure the law would be respected. The day before Meredith would enroll, there was unrest on campus as White rioters vandalized university property and pelted the federal marshals with rocks. Two of the rioting men were shot and killed (Eagles, 2009). But the following day Meredith came to campus, with more marshals to watch his back, and became the first Black student at Ole Miss. He graduated in 1966 and has continued to be active in human rights work (Meredith, 1966/2019). Like many Black men and women before him, Meredith was determined to exercise his right to education.

These were contentious and suspicious times with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn into office and initiated a series of reforms and programs to build a “Great Society” for all Americans. The Civil Rights Act in 1964 expanded federal involvement in education establishing Head Start preschools to support early learning and creating new opportunities for young adults with Job Corps and VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America). This would be part of Johnson’s “War on Poverty” to lift the lowest income citizens improving and increasing educational experiences (Morgan, 1995). Title VI of the Civil Rights Act had significant impact on higher education. It restricted federal
dollars from being provided to any segregated school including postsecondary schools. It would allow for litigation against colleges and universities denying admission or hiring because of race, and lead to the implementation of educational support programs to support under-represented students (Brown, 1999).

The conflicts continued with the assassinations of Malcom X in 1965 and both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968. Race relations were at the forefront of everyone’s mind. Most U.S. public schools had been integrated by then with busing measures transporting students within districts from one neighborhood to another. This was a complicated process in most larger urban districts where residential patterns determining enrollment had contributed to funding inequities. The schools in low-income neighborhoods were understaffed, often with uncertified teachers, and struggled with deteriorating buildings and insufficient equipment and supplies (Tyack, 1974).

For the city of Detroit, it would mark the beginning of a “White flight” as families moved to the suburbs to avoid having their students bused to an inner-city school. The frustrations and fury of Black residents was evident in the riot of 1967. Many businesses did not reopen after the looting and destruction. Those who did often opted to relocate and join the flight to the suburbs (Boyd, 2017). They would be following the large automotive manufacturers who were struggling with race relations in the assembly plants (Sugrue, 2014). The NAACP initiated legal action in *Milliken v Bradley*, citing numerous policies that effectively segregated school enrollment (Meinke, 2011). Black families could not choose to live wherever they wanted because of housing restrictions that effectively segregated neighborhoods within the school district (Sugrue, 2014). When White students left to avoid being bussed and the number of Black students became a majority, school conditions deteriorated. The largest tax base was
taking their children and leaving the city limits for White suburbs. The attorney for Detroit Board of Education was in support of the case, but it was eventually decided by the Supreme Court in 1974 that inter-district busing would be restricted (Meinke, 2011; Kendi, 2016). Divisions within the city of Detroit became even more solidified.

The enrollment of Black students in higher education increased during the 1960s and 1970s to about 10% of the total college population. This was part of a general trend nationally as more students of all groups attended and graduated from college (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). By 1985, most of the U.S. schools were segregated again. Charter schools were met with much opposition but Minnesota opened the first one in 1991 (Prothero, 2018). The charter model of education provides public funds to schools that families may select for their student. The usual district residency restrictions do not apply. Oversight and accountability is more relaxed than with an elected board of local citizens. Within a few years, charter schools would be approved and begin opening across the nation. They were often situated in urban school districts where school performance was challenged and compromised by poverty and inadequate resources. Families could choose where their student would attend, and they often opted for the closest and the newest with hopes of something better. Unfortunately, this served to redirect public funds and would significantly weaken the budgets of urban districts that were already struggling with a reduced tax base.

Several significant events at the turn of the millennium would redefine educational environments. In 1999, a mass shooting was perpetrated by two students at Columbine High School that would leave 15 dead. Located in an upper-income White community in Colorado, this event challenged perceptions about privilege and violence. Students began to consider one another in a more guarded manner, and most schools adopted increased on-site security
measures. On September 11, 2001, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon would shake our sense of security and safety even more profoundly as almost 3000 souls would perish. Schools and public areas which had once been held as safe and trusting spaces were now the scenes of carnage and despair. A federal initiative to improve education in the U.S. was enacted in 2002 (Klein, 2015). The purpose of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was to increase accountability and raise the academic performance, especially for students considered disadvantaged. Each state would establish its own standards based curriculum and measures of achievement for teacher qualifications, basic skills, and assessments at every grade level. Federal Title I funding would be contingent on reported progress towards meeting these standards. The NCLB goal for 2014 was that all students be academically “proficient” and instructed by “highly qualified” teachers (Klein, 2015).

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 marked a decisive turning point for Black Americans. He assumed the role as president just as the country plunged into what would be called the Great Recession. The shift in manufacturing jobs, as corporations moved off-shore for tax benefits and lower costs, caught up with the U.S. economy (Sugrue, 2014). There were massive layoffs as plant closures continued and the jobs went out of the country to workers who would be paid less. The cost of health care and pensions had become a burdensome benefit some manufacturers no longer wanted to support. The consequences of White flight and decentralized schools would compound over time and by 2010 urban districts found it necessary to consolidate resources, close some schools, and lay off teachers. Black students were undoubtedly invigorated by the new Black president and the number of Black college students had grown to 15% by 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). But graduation rates for Black students
have continued to lag behind those of White students, even accounting for comparable admission criteria (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The economy was stabilized with President Obama’s steady leadership with regulations for lending and unemployment reduced. The lack of gun control measures has not spared other schools and public spaces from mass shootings, which has contributed to a culture of fear and anxiety across the nation. Meanwhile, the complexion of K12 schools has continue to become less White and Brown students are currently greater than 50% of the enrolled population (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). We are confronted and confounded by the “Aryan” omnipotence that seeks to “make America great again” with an old and odd familiarity. This resistance to opening doors for others sits squarely in the paradox of the Declaration of Independence. The words may be “all men are created equal” but there is ample evidence of the unwritten qualifiers that cannot be ignored.

**Historical Context: Status of Black Males in the United States**

“The value of history is, indeed, not scientific but moral: by liberalizing the mind, by deepening the sympathies, by fortifying the will, it enables us to control, not society, but ourselves—a much more important thing; it prepares us to live more humanely in the present and to meet rather than foretell the future.”—Carl Becker, 1915.

Black males are significantly marginalized in multiple measures from the moment they enter the world. They are more likely than all but Latinos to be born to teenage mothers and twice as likely as the national rate to die during the first year of life (Kochanek, Kirmeyer, Martin, Strobino, & Guyer, 2012). Once they enter the school system, Black males are more likely than their peers to be referred for special education services, to be disciplined and ultimately pushed out of K12 schools (Robbins, 2008). Of all U. S. students detained or
committed in 2014, 43% were Black males although they represent only 16% of the school population. The national youth rate of incarceration is 152 per 100,000. For Black youth it is 433 per 100,000 compared to White youth at 86 per 100,000. Although juvenile placements have decreased in the last two decades, the disparity between Black and White youth incarceration has increased by 22% since 2001. Today, Black youth are five times more likely than White youth to be sentenced (Sentencing Project, 2017). The world of middle and high school is markedly different for Black males. One in five received an out-of-school suspension in the 2009-2010 school year (U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights, 2012). “Zero-tolerance” policies intended to reduce in-school violence have generated costly consequences by decreasing academic achievement and increasing youth incarceration (Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2008). It is estimated that 59% of all Black male students graduated “on time” from U.S. high schools in 2011-12 as compared to almost 80% of White male students. In Michigan, the difference between White and Black male graduation rates is more than 26%, making it one of the lowest performing states in serving Black male students. Less than 53% of Black males in Michigan graduate on time, while nearly 80% of White males do so (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).

The consequences of these inequities in education are evident. Black men are more likely than all but Latino men to be unemployed and underemployed (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Blacks are twice as likely as Whites to be unemployed, and this ratio has remained unchanged since 1954 (Guo, 2006). Black Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 who left high school before graduating are unemployed at a rate of 69%, while the figure for Whites is 54% (Giroux, 2011). Even when a Black man has the same level of education as a White man,
his earnings will be less (Reeves & Guyot, 2017). The disparity exists at every level of educational attainment.

Black males are three times more likely to be arrested and four times more likely to experience the use of force when interacting with police officers. Incarceration rates for all men have risen 500% in the last 30 years for a variety of reasons: reactionary approaches to a crime rate that was once expanding, policies associated with the war on drugs, an increased number of life sentences without parole, and the proliferation of privatized for-profit prisons as reported by The Sentencing Project (2017) and others (Alexander, 2010; Gopnik, 2012; Howard, 2008). Who has been most negatively impacted by this astonishing increase? It’s Black males who are significantly overrepresented in the prison population (Alexander, 2010; Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011, Jackson, 2007; Kunjufu, 2001). There are seven times more Black men incarcerated than White men (Gopnik, 2012). In his lifetime, one in 17 White men will be imprisoned, one in six Latino men, and one in three Black men (Alexander, 2010). There is a high cost for the development of this criminal complex, both financially and ethically.

What is happening in colleges and universities reflects these inequities as well. Black male students arrive at these institutions less prepared, as compared to others, for the challenge of college level academics (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Loury, 2004; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). The total number of all undergraduates enrolled has increased almost every year since 1983 when it was 10.8 million. The total number of students enrolled in 2012 was 17.7 million. The percentage of Black and Brown students increased steadily between 1976 and 2012 and reflects the changing demographic of the nation. Latinx student enrollment rose from 4% to 15%, Asian/Pacific Islanders from 2% to 6%, Blacks from 10% to 15%. The number of White students dropped from 85% to 60% (U.S. Department of
However, Black men were only 4.3% of all students enrolled in higher education in 2002 and this is the exact same percentage as 1976. It is Black women who have pushed the total percentage point up. In 2009, Black men were only 3.6% of all undergraduate students. And their completion rates are the lowest among both genders and all racial/ethnic groups attending college (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). Meanwhile, Black men are significantly overrepresented on intercollegiate sports teams that generate income for universities. More than 55% of football and basketball players at public NCAA Division I institutions in 2009 were Black men (Harper, 2012).

This minimal increase in the enrollment of Black males in colleges and universities is representative of issues related to their experiences there. They endure racism every day and face multiple microaggressions that foster a sense of otherness and non-belonging (Bonner II, 2010; Harper, 2009; Singer, 2005; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2007). This environment, which may be unfamiliar and less than welcoming, contributes to stress and lack of focus. It makes going to speak with the professor or asking someone to study together to be a risk-taking activity. Black men are more likely to study alone and perhaps spend less time studying in general. They often take fewer notes in class and hold back from participating in campus activities. It’s not surprising that they report lower grades overall (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004).

Black men who graduate from college and enter the work force do so at a disadvantage. The consequences of these inequities in experience exact a high social cost. The loss of voice and knowledge cannot be assessed or measured. It can only be mourned. The men who endure are changed by the experience in powerful ways that may be both positive and negative.
How do we consider the experience together and then move through it together? What kind of framework would assist us as a community in a close examination and an open discussion? To this purpose the theoretical context provides a lens through which the challenges may be considered.

**Theoretical Context: Liminality**

The experience of transitioning from one place or stage, from one moment or experience, to another invites a period of liminality or uncertainty. What is to come next is not always apparent and how to move into this next phase is sometimes confusing. This project focused on the successful transition experience of Black men, most from predominantly Black high schools in the city of Detroit, to three institutions of higher education that are historically and predominantly White.

Place and time are so inextricably connected as to be outside of conscious awareness. Where and when are woven together in memory and mental constructs. Wright Mills (1959) described how society constructs images of what it believes itself to be. There are prevailing practices and ideas of how things should be or how they are meant to function. These become part of the culture or milieu in which experience is predictable and expectations are met. Education is one of those arenas where agreed behaviors and roles are established. In this place and at this time, act this way. Schools are defined spaces often with especially fixed perceptions of how each of the participants will behave. Van Gennep (1908/1966) might consider college as a "rite of passage" as it evidences all the defining characteristics of changing place, social position, age, and state. It is also characterized by the three stages Van Gennep described in his ethnographic research. These are the separation, the threshold, and aggregation.
The student is *separated* from what is familiar and known. He remains on the *threshold* (*limen*) as he detaches from what was, seeks to establish himself in a new environment, and is exposed to a new set of demands and expectations. For the college student, this in-between period may extend for several years before he is fully *aggregated* into society as an adult. The threshold is a social state that is both temporal and spatial. In other words, it exists in a place or physical space and it exists within a measure of limited and finite time. Turner (1967) wrote of how "invisible" one may feel, or in fact be to others, as a novice or newbie in an environment. In this state, he believes one may be perceived as dangerous or threatening because identification is primarily with the self and other newbies and not the dominant group. This focus on self and agency is a healthy developmental characteristic of adolescents and young adults however. It is an essential part of coming to know who you are and what you want to do as a functioning adult (Erikson, 1959, 1968). The college student is suspended between adolescence and adulthood economically, socially, and personally. Turner identified members of the Ndembu tribe of Zambia, Africa who are in-between as a "transitional-being" or "liminal persona." They are neither child or adult but can consider each from the threshold. This perspective is respected in the tribe as a point from which there is insight as to the meaning of now and then, one and all, space and time. The awareness of and in liminality may contribute to an understanding of community and social imagination.

Courage is needed in transition because there is a sense of separateness and being apart from others. This sense of aloneness provides a unique point of self-examination, self-reflection, self-definition, and self-acceptance. The consideration of place and time as experienced by Black males is a significant theme with this project. Each co-researcher knows the transition to college because he is either still navigating it or has sailed through it. It will not be his only
transition in life and he will require continuing skills. To know the change process of one person may be a microcosm for current overarching social change, in this case around issues of ethnicity and gender. Black men are situated at a place and time to expose and elucidate what is required for social progress and educational innovation.

**Theoretical Context: Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) will be utilized as a framework for analysis. The components of CRT have been utilized in qualitative educational research. Its use by scholars was spearheaded by Derrick Bell (1992) and developed in practice with much discourse and consideration (Delgado, 1990; Harper, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT has roots in the Frankfurt School and critical theory. Both focus on the importance and significance of language and social constructions. CRT perceives the concept of race to be a social construct generated to perpetuate systems of power.

Critical theory as applied in sociology and philosophy originated in the German Frankfurt School or Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) in the 1930s. A group of philosophers expounded on the writings of Karl Marx and his criticism of social traditions and economic practices that served to subjugate the masses. The goal was to assess and critique social practices and the ideology behind them as a means of defining needed change. This reflection on society focused on the use of language and communication patterns. Symbolism and the social construction of values, mores, and beliefs are closely examined with an intent to do more than just interpret or explain. Where traditional theory seeks to understand, Critical theory is purposeful in its desire “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). The more recent or postmodern development of critical theory has focused on the political nature of social problems and consideration of these issues in
historical and cultural contexts. Research uses a lens that encourages personal reflection and interpretation rather than objectivity and distance (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002).

Fifty years after critical theory’s German origins, its principles were applied in the United States as a perspective for the consideration of how the distribution of power along lines of race is maintained and reinforced by the law of the land. The United States has an espoused theory of freedom and equality. This is the set of principles we offer to explain how things are or should be socially, economically, and politically. What we can infer from how things actually function often does not align with this. The theory in use may seem contradictory and inconsistent. During the 1970s, studies focused on how the legal system had been more responsive to the interests of power than the rights of individuals (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). The courts continued act on the preservation of what was instead of providing for actions consistent with the stated national ethos of equity. Critical race theory (CRT) evolved at the time in response to the failure of critical legal studies to effectively address the effects of race and racism. CRT scholars redefined racism, not as the thinking or actions of an individual, but as a systemic and institutionalized structure (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). CRT may be described as a lens through which we consider the significance and impact of race on attitudes, actions, and outcomes. As a theoretical framework, it has evolved over the last thirty years to examine constructs around issues of power and precedent.

Delgado and Stefanic (2001) outline five specific tenets developed by critical race theorists to guide its practice. The first tenet of counter storytelling is the powerful use of narratives to present another perspective on experience. Stories that are dominant in our cultural ethos are those that support the status quo and its distribution of power and prestige. Each of us is hobbled in some way by the accounts attached to our training and socialization. As the
character Rodrigo asks, "Are you and I free of that narrative?" (Delgado, 1995, p. 32). CRT celebrates the telling of the other tales, the individual lived experience that can shed light on racism. Stories contain a remembrance of consciousness that can be recalled and shared so as to continue through the telling. Essed (1990) notes that the storytelling can demonstrate that racism is real even when it may no longer be so obvious and overt even to those who experience it. We have been conditioned over thousands of years to savor storytelling that makes us feel and remember. Everyone can learn from the sagas and see more clearly in the recounting what may be hidden.

Stories are a defining component of CRT, especially counter-storytelling that serves to illustrate and contrast the dominant narrative. The individual expresses “truths that only exist for this person in this predicament at this time in history” (Delgado, 1991, p. 11). Critical race theory can be integral to understanding the experience of Black men in educational environments. The stories and their telling become critically relevant in exploring and understanding experiences from other viewpoints (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Essed, 1990). Stories are a way human beings carry on or counter belief and meaning. One story may challenge what another story has made to seem true. The story becomes a window that changes our view and perhaps our hearts and very way of being. The words of stories have long been the means by which humans have built connections and understandings between one another. CRT employs the narratives of people who are marginalized in society to generate conversations about race and related issues. In sharing and listening, we can bridge the differences, discover commonalities, and explore the history and meaning of ethnic and gender imagery (Delgado, 1995). How the factors of being male and Black impact education are relevant to this research (Soloranzo & Yosso, 2009). We may learn the social reality or lived

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experience for this group of young men in the stories they share about their individual situations. The stories then are a context for understanding and uncovering what they have come to know attending a historically White institution (HWI) of higher education.

Counter-storytelling is a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). What is most often reported about young Black male collegians are their failures or their prowess as athletes. The counter-story is another perspective and one that is often overlooked. There are three kinds of counter-narratives identified by Soloranzo and Yosso: personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. The first is selected for this project and the focus will be on the personal story of Black males as they tell it themselves (Soloranzo & Yosso, 2009).

How important are the stories we tell? James Baldwin wrote that,

What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors. It's astounding to me, for example, that so many people really appear to believe that the country was founded by a band of heroes who wanted to be free. That happens to not be true. What happened was that some people left Europe because they couldn't stay there any longer and had to go someplace else to make it. That's all. They were hungry, they were poor, they were convicts (1985, p. 324).

The true narrative has been replaced with a myth of the Founding Fathers as men we would recognize today.

A second tenet of CRT is the permanent nature of racism. It cannot be eradicated or eliminated by laws or social movements. Racism was too significant of an influence on the nation to be dismissed or overlooked today. It continues to permeate every facet of our society whether we acknowledge or recognize its presence. Knowing that its impacts ripple on is only
part of the awareness. Vigilant critical examination and analysis of social policies and practices are the only way we can be alert to the subtle and unseen ways racism corrupts. Bell (1992) tells tales that unfold multiple legal and civil efforts to assure equity but fail to protect or guarantee individual rights in U.S. society. He notes, "The presentation of truth in new forms provokes resistance, confounding those committed to accepted measures for determining the quality and validity of statements made and conclusions reached, and making it difficult for them to respond and adjudge what is acceptable" (Bell, 1992, p. 143). Racism is a permanent part of how U.S. society originated and continues to corrupt even from within.

A third tenet of CRT is that of Whiteness as a property right. The significance of property in ascribing value and power to individuals was evident in the 1700s when the voting rights were initially defined. There is an interaction between race and property that for Whiteness has provided access to land ownership since colonial times. This early and continuing possession has contributed to the persistent inequity of wealth and capital into the second millennium. Property ownership has become synonymous with freedom, success, and identity. The issue has become more relevant and compelling as the nation endures a crisis of foreclosures that has so significantly impacted Black and Brown families. Whiteness as ownership, as the preferred norm, as entitling is not always evident or consciously perceived (Harris, 1995). The male gender is similarly associated and accepted with preference as only men could hold property.

The metaphor of a fishbowl has been used to illustrate the power of social context to constrain awareness and foster tacit acceptance (Morrison, 1992). The fishbowl holds both the water and the fish. It is the framing concept or context assumed to be so natural and normal and part of the whole picture that it's hardly seen. We focus on the water and the fish and not the
fishbowl itself. Whiteness became the assumed norm in Western culture and other races would be the exception. History as it has been written and continues to be taught illustrates this point. All year "regular" U.S. history is the subject in K12 schools while identified months are dedicated to the Others - Black Americans, women, Latinx Americans. To have property is to have rights of possession, use, and distribution (Harris, 1995).

Derrick Bell (1992) analyzed the Brown v. Board of Education decision and described interest convergence as a singular means by which social change will occur. This is a fourth tenet of CRT suggesting that change occurs only when the interests of those who make decision align with the interests of those petitioning. Bell used this landmark Supreme Court action to illustrate the many influences that rendered the case, the decision, and the consequences. Bell aligns political and economic power with Whiteness, the law, the North, the White House, and liberalism. His argument challenged the purely principled explanation for Brown that most accept as the important part of the story. What Bell calls the freedom of association, the freedom to choose one's space and place, was now regulated by federal law and would be enforced in community schools. Federal authority supersedes state and local authority. While his analysis holds many assumptions to be questioned, our ongoing global environmental crisis and the most recent banking crisis illustrate how vehemently and foolishly we will pursue our own interests. CRT uses this lens of interest convergence as a means of facilitating activism and designing social progress.

Challenging liberalism is a fifth and final guiding tenet of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The certainty that the law acts neutrally and is a fair means to justice is one liberal notion that curtails an awareness of racism. The judicial branch of government is far more populated by men of color and women now than it was when Bell wrote in 1980, but it continues to be used as
a means of oppression and control. Most significantly, a disproportionate number of Black men are controlled and caged from an early age. What can we expect from the courts and lawmakers? The idea of being colorblind and dismissing color as an identifying and influencing characteristic is equally naïve. Liberalism may also justify slow incremental change working within the system as the only route to address injustice. It is easier to be content even while dissatisfied when one feels relatively comfortable and safe. This criticism of liberal thinking has been leveled at both the Black and White middle class. As Harry Truman said, "It's a recession when your neighbor loses his job; it's a depression when you lose your own" (Keyes, 2006, p. 224).

This logic is tolerable only as long as we see one another as separated in experience. The words "they" and "them" increase in frequency and "us" or "we" become more defining. It's not my son or my father or my brother or… This begs the question of who is my brother.

**Theoretical Context: Personal and Racial Identity Development**

“You can’t join the throng til you write your own song.”---Lester Young (2012, p. 18)

The adolescent and young adulthood years of 18 to 25 were the focus of this project. These years represent a unique and significant period in developing a sense of self. They are marked with rapid and dramatic physical and emotional changes as the youth transitions into adulthood. The young person asks most seriously the eternal question "Who am I?" with greater urgency and interest. How it will be answered is influenced by where and when and with what prior experience it is asked. Adolescents and young adults encounter situational and environmental dynamics that become part of their identity development. The social and historical context within which the individual lives influences how the question serves to develop identity. The cultural contexts of gender, class, geography, and ethnicity significantly define and shape the experiences. For Black males entering college, there are particular and peculiar
insights and understandings that come with their late adolescence. The subject of race compounds and complicates the transition. What are some of these changes and how are they experienced by Black men? How does identity form in late adolescence? What developmental steps are likely to occur during late adolescence and young adulthood? What is racial identity and how does it develop?

Ethnographers, sociologists, and psychologists did some of the earliest observations of adolescence and the transition into adulthood. In some cultures, there are ceremonies and rituals that mark this period and celebrate the new responsibilities and opportunities of being an adult (Mead, 1928; Van Gennep, 1960). The accompanying initiation rites are often clear demarcations that define one's role within the family, tribe, or social group. The older child becomes a young adult and his or her economic and social status undergoes an immediate, tangible, and often visible change. The transition in Western culture is not so formalized or recognized beyond sweet sixteen parties or getting a driver's license. But the development of identity is occurring nonetheless and is influenced by prevailing social and cultural conditions. The individual is processing experiences and information in shaping a concept of self.

Developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1959, 1968) formulated a theory of growth and change that has impacted many approaches. He perceived that our growth as human beings was the consequence of crises and conflicts both within ourselves and within our environment. How we respond to these challenges is shaped by our earliest experiences. These lived experiences are the tasks by which we develop incrementally. The first five years of life will consist of defining encounters with others and with our world from which our basic trust, sense of autonomy, and sense of initiative are developed. Erikson (1959, 1968) observed the development of the human character as a result of psychological, sociological, and biological
influences that occur within the definers of time and space. He referred to this as the epigenetic principle, that is, we are biological beings changing and growing within our environment and circumstance. We move through developmental phases in a progressive direction that is compelled by the destiny of our physical maturation process. It is through our encounters and experiences with others that we develop and change. We are social beings living in communal relationships and we do so with varying degrees of health and well-being.

The development of basic trust during the first year of life is evidenced as we are able to establish and maintain emotional and social connections with others (Erikson, 1959, 1968). With trust, there is a confidence and willingness to engage in new experiences. Autonomy and pride develop during the second and third year and are significant components to self-esteem and self-control. By the fifth year, we learn to exercise initiative and control within our activities and responses. How we navigate these changes is impacted by our relative success within each sequential phase. What will constitute "success" in our progress? This will be defined and determined by the skills and talents esteemed by our culture and society.

After each significant encounter or event, which Erikson (1959, 1968) considers a crisis or shift in our way of seeing the world, we may undergo a developmental change in our personality. We have an opportunity to reflect on our experience and shape a new viewpoint of ourselves and of our environment. These crises continue throughout our lifetime and the healthy response is to remain open for new growth and understanding. We can choose to engage cognitively and process the crises experiences for positive purpose. Or we can choose to deny or avoid critical reflection and then our resisted introspection may become a source of greater challenge to living well. Unresolved grief, anger, shame, or fear often leads to self-destructive patterns and practices. These are the shifting paradigms of which bell hooks (1994) wrote and
which she describes as painful and uncomfortable. She reminds us that the pain is to be respected because we can use it to usher in new ways of thinking and being. We are not happier or wiser just because we endure or survive the experience of living. If that were the case, everyone would have wisdom because everyone has crises. It is in the conscious and intentional reflection and commitment to learning and growing that we move along our own continuum of development. This approach may be fostered in the early years when the time and space in which one lives is loving and secure.

An adolescent who attends college will encounter some unique developmental experiences. These have been closely examined with a focus on persistence to graduation. Vincent Tinto (1993, 2012) has worked many years to establish a working model of the undergraduate experience and considered how students might be supported to graduation. Basing his theory on the earlier work of Van Gennep (1960), Tinto observed three transitional phases in college students. First, the student must separate from his or her past groups or communities. There may be some uncertainty here as goals are determined and intentions clarified. Next, the student is in a period of transitioning from high school into college. Uncertainty may persist and the process becomes personal and specific. The final phase occurs when the student becomes part of the college community and establishes compatible associations with others. Tinto (1993) notes that these stages may blend together and not sequence so clearly or separately as they appear when named.

Peer relationships and social connections are essential aspects of the adolescent development (Cotterell, 1996). Whether college students establish these relationships through student organizations or social groups, the connections are critical to student persistence and academic success. There is security and structure in social roles that provide a grounding.
purpose and an arena for self-exploration. The social experiences that occur outside of the classroom can exert a positive net impact on self-esteem and self-concept as well as academic self-confidence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The effects will be cumulative and not usually specific to a single event or experience. Identity develops within a social context as one holds membership in a social group and adheres to the values of this group (Belgrave & Allison, 2006).

During the college years, it is also expected that students will learn to think more critically about complex questions and to be more reflective in their thinking process. Their development is cognitive as well as social. This shift reflects identity development although the degree to which it is expressed may vary (Erikson, 1959, 1968). There is a natural maturation process that will occur during the late adolescence and early adulthood, but it appears that the college experience exerts some influence on identity development. Research suggests that college graduates express greater self-control, higher self-esteem, greater acceptance of differences, and enhanced leadership skills than when they were in high school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A development model created by educator Arthur Chickering (1969) was originally designed for adolescents and young adults. He was seeking to promote greater understanding of what occurs cognitively, psychologically, attitudinally, and socially with college students. In recent years, the model has also been applied to adult growth and change (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 1997). It consists of seven vectors or intersecting, overlapping, congruent perspectives. These were developed researching college students using both qualitative and quantitative measures. Self-assessments, short reflection exercises, interviews, and autobiographical writing samples were used to construct the model. Chickering (1969) selected language that would be gender free and appropriate for all ethnicities, levels of income, and prior experience in his
attempt to avoid bias. The vectors provide a conceptual lens with which we can examine the change process and consider support where needed. Each has additional stages within it and an individual may move back and forth between and within vectors.

The first vector is developing competence intellectually, physically or with manual skills, and interpersonally (Chickering, 1969). A student develops new frames of reference or points of view to examine and understand experiences and relationships. The competence comes with observations, reflection, self-discipline, and practice. It involves listening to others as well as oneself, communicating effectively, and working with others in a group. These activities build one's sense of self-assurance and foster a trust in one's capacity and ability.

The second vector is managing emotions (Chickering, 1969). Feelings can be simplified as mad, sad, glad, ashamed, or afraid. College involves some strong emotions related to anxiety, fear, boredom, stress, loneliness, sexuality, and shame. It may also include the heady feelings of joy, excitement, satisfaction, belonging, wonder, and awe. Some students have been conditioned socially and trained to bury feelings. Men especially may be discouraged from appearing vulnerable or weak. One popular and prevalent method of coping with trauma in life is to deny emotions and turn away from exploring sensations. Learning to identify and connect with feelings may be difficult when they are triggered in a disproportionate manner that is confusing and difficult to control. For some students, feelings may flow like water rushing from an open faucet and the challenge is to direct and manage the emotions. Self-expression and self-control go hand in hand during this process.

The third vector is moving through autonomy to interdependence (Chickering, 1969). Relationships with family and friends may be realigned during this stage. The adolescent learns to function with more self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. It will mean developing
critical thinking and decision making as the young adult sees how thoughts and ideas can become directed actions. When personal needs and desires are clearly defined, the student seeks the resources and information to make plans become reality. There may be some renegotiating of relationships with parents during this time. There is a delicate balance of independence and inclusion in being interdependent.

The fourth vector is developing mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering, 1969). This requires an understanding, tolerance, respect, and appreciation of and for diversity and differences. It will also require a capacity for some level of trust and intimacy. Erikson (1959, 1968) would say that this is reflected in the willingness of an individual to participate in relationships and connect with others, rather than separating and isolating oneself. Chickering (1969) sees honesty as a cornerstone to healthy interactions. This means accepting the flaws and failures of the self and of others without dominance or dependence. There is real sharing over time and through good and bad times. The result is satisfaction and fulfillment with oneself and in one's friendships.

The fifth vector is establishing identity which is influenced by the previous four vectors. Chickering (1969) likens it to assembling a jigsaw puzzle or remodeling a house. The individual seeks to discover where he or she experiences the greatest sense of being known. It is a continual process of going too far or not going far enough as we seek this level of being through our experiences and interactions. The house of our self has many rooms, but only one person inhabits it. That one owner and occupant is the identity. We seek to know the "I" who coordinates all the rooms, all the facets of our self, so we can be comfortable in every room. College students explore this especially as they come to know their own physical body, how it looks, and how it functions. They seek to become comfortable with their gender and sexual
orientation. The sense of self is developing within a cultural, social, and historical context as they clarify their own place in the world. Reflection, exploration, and experimentation are needed to define the self. There is response and feedback from others that can encourage self-esteem and self-acceptance. This vector requires the integration of multiple aspects of the self and the coordination of all parts of the person to clarify and crystallize identity (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1997). The core self can experience good feelings of being worthwhile, capable, and stable. We can see that this vector involves a lot of experimentation during the college years, but all people at various points in life will have new identities to incorporate as roles and tasks change.

The sixth vector is developing purpose or a sense of where we want to go and what we want to do (Chickering, 1969). During this stage, we have clarified who we are and where we come from, and we have considered our interests and our strengths. The student integrates these personal interests with vocational goals and aspirations. One's values and philosophy of life are important components of deciding on a career direction. Life style and personal relationships are additional factors that impact this phase. Again, this vector is not isolated in the college years as many adults experience a crossroads where they examine these same issues.

The seventh and final vector is developing integrity, which Chickering (1969) defines as using our core values and beliefs as the foundation for our life. With our personal philosophy of life as a guide, we can select our behavior and act in a way that supports our self-respect. Integrity, like identity, develops in overlapping and sequential stages. First, we humanize our values and learn to compromise and consider with compassion. This means moving beyond an adherence to absolute rules and becoming more understanding and aware. It means being explicit about what we believe and why. We also personalize our values accepting them as our
own while acknowledging and respecting other viewpoints. We can see that we develop our own values and challenge our underlying assumptions. And finally, we develop congruence in what we say and what we do. We act with conviction and determination. We are congruent when we walk our talk and practice what we preach.

Racial or ethnic identity refers to one's perception of heritage or group identification (Helms, 2005). Ideas about racial status are often based on dichotomous and irrational categorizations that say more about the embedded assumptions than about race (Cross, 2005). Race is socially constructed, and this challenges the conversations about its meaning and significance. The concept of race has been given enormous significance so as to influence our perceptions, expectations, and behavior in ways that are conscious as well as unconscious.

Although Chickering's theory is well respected and comprehensive, it does not adequately consider the unique experience of Black college students in identity development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The student who attends an HBCU is more likely to have positive attitudes and feelings about personal identity (Willie, 2003). This student may adjust more readily to college life and is less likely to experience the feelings of isolation and loneliness that Black students report when they attend a historically White institution (Evans et al., 2010). How do these young men come to understand the self and shape an understanding of who they are? What are some of the models for developing identity living as a Black man in the United States of America?

There are multiple approaches and definitions to be found in the literature about racial identity, although much of the research has been focused on social identity (Phinney, 1990). It is challenging to address the concept of race as a factor in defining the self when the concept is fluid in its meaning and continues to change with time. Despite the ambiguous nature of race, it
has been and remains a defining point of social operations. Race is a status that impacts and interacts with economics and politics as discussed previously (Willie, 2003). It is also described as a sense of self that can develop through the maturation process. Studies of ethnic identity development are complicated because each racial group will have unique and singular characteristics that distinguish it and make it difficult to draw generalized conclusions about all groups. There are some common elements between groups, however, and there has been a dedicated focus regarding Black identity development. It has been defined as being Black and knowing one's self, one's worth, and one's responsibilities in a predominantly White culture (Davis, 2004). But what does it mean to be Black? This is an integral question that is socially and personally constructed. There are external and environmental factors that will impact how one develops ethnic identity (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). This can build self-esteem when one is supported in a space with positive associations to promote feelings of belonging and a sense of personal value (Porter & Washington, 1993).

Nigrescence is a French term that means "to become Black." Psychologists have developed nigrescence models of Black ethnic identity development. Some of these psychologists include Charles Thomas, William Cross, Janet Helms, and Thomas Parham (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1997; Belgrave & Allison, 2006; Davis, 2004; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Phinney, 1990; Willie, 2003). Racial or ethnic identity is collective as well as individual, shaped by the narrative around what it means to be of a certain color or origin. The college transition period is a particular period of questioning the self in terms of gender and ethnicity (Evans et al., 2010).

Cross's theory is perhaps the most well-known and he has continued to revisit and revise it since 1971 when it was first introduced. He also considers the adolescent experience
specifically and how it is unique for Blacks. Cross's approach addresses identity development over the span of a lifetime as it ebbs and flows within three central areas. He names these as first, the personal identity or one's personality; next, the reference group orientation or one's filter for seeing the world; and finally, race salience or the significance and importance of race in one's approach to life (Cross, 2005; Evans et al., 2010). This is further organized into four patterns that are evident in the maturation process.

Nigrescence Pattern A describes the development of Black identity formed in result of lived social experiences. From birth through adulthood, the individual interacts with family and friends and adopts an identity. Over one's lifetime, there may be several identities shaped by these personal encounters. Cross believes this is the dominant pattern experienced by most Blacks in the development of ethnic identity (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2005). Nigrescence Pattern B represents the conversion experience where a healthy Black identity is not fostered during early development and forms later in adulthood. It is usually precipitated by an experience that has personal meaning and impact. Nigrescence Pattern C, or Recycling, can follow either one of the earlier patterns as they repeat. It is the healthy adaptation and expansion of one's ethnic identity throughout adulthood. The individual continues to modify and develop self-identity with each relevant encounter and experience. This model of Black identity development describes six developmental sectors that can encompass and include all three of the nigrescence patterns.

Sector One is infancy and childhood (Cross, 1971). The child life is experienced within the family, school, neighborhood, and church communities with the associated traditions and practices. This is usually all the child knows and awareness of racism or racial identity may be
limited or unquestioned. It is especially defining when the community and experiences are not
diverse and limited by virtue of environment or economics.

Sector Two is preadolescence (Cross, 1971). The influence of the immediate family and
parenting patterns is significant in this sector also. Children will begin to demonstrate one of
three identity types at this age: low race salience, high race salience, or internalized racism. Low
race salience children have few messages from their families about race or its significance. High
race salience children have been instilled with a positive sense of racial significance, and it's an
important component of their self-concept. Internalized racism is a result of miseducation in the
family or the community. The child has accepted negative ideas or stereotypes about race and
applies them to the self although they may not be articulated.

Sector Three is adolescence. Cross (1971) separates this period from adulthood as a time
of exploration and growing self-awareness. There will be some sense of racial identity although
it may not have been consciously shaped and selected. Adolescence is a time to examine one's
own beliefs and make choices about one's self-concept. The adolescent begins to be self-
reflective and critically astute. These years may only serve to confirm or reinforce ideas brought
along from childhood, but with growing awareness, the individual may develop greater
understanding of being Black and establish self-confidence. Some college students are at this
level of initial examination or conscious awareness of their racial identity.

Sector Four is early adulthood (Cross, 1971). The three identity types found in
preadolescence and explored in adolescence may be evident in early adulthood, although a
majority of Black Americans typically have high race salience identities. They have clear
reference points, a group orientation, and an awareness of Black culture. They recognize the
importance of race in their lives and acknowledge its significance. The self-concept is owned
and consciously constructed, with recognition of the racist messages embedded in the dominant culture.

Sector Five is adult nigrescence. This stage represents Cross's (1971) original model as it involves the four stages of pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization/internalization commitment. Pre-encounter is a period of low race salience or internalized racism that he now recognizes with some preadolescents. There is a lack of awareness or denial regarding the significance of race. Or there may be negative attitudes regarding one's ethnicity. Encounter refers to the conversion experience or defining event described in Nigrescence Pattern B (Cross, 1971). An unexpected event or series of encounters results in a new way of thinking or a change in perspective and opinion about race. This sector is sometimes referred to as "dissonance" describing the active way the individual will seek to harmonize and fine tune what is known and believed. (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). The outcome may serve continued development, or it may foster an intractable attitude. A Nigerian proverb describes the risks of encounter experiences: In the moment of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build dams (African Proverbs, 2018). Immersion-emersion is the significant and seminal transition point in Cross's (1971, 1991) model of racial identity development. The individual immerses the self in being Black and celebrates all that is unique and special about one's race. There is a growing awareness of racism and how it oppresses. What is not wanted is clear, but what is desirable may be less so. To be anti-White is not to be pro-Black. The challenge is moving to emersion which will be expressed in a connection and commitment to Black identity and to all Black people. Internalization is a stage that represents the resolution of dissonance, a consciousness of race, and a loving appreciation of the self. There is an
understanding of the need for social justice and a capacity to act on behalf of civil rights (Belgrave & Allison, 2006).

Finally, Sector Six is nigrescence recycling (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995). New questions emerge and with maturity and wisdom comes reflection on how to address these questions and adjust the understanding of who we are. A Black individual will continue to encounter issues and events that prompt questioning and self-examination. The identity may seem well established, but it is never finished as the individual lives in a changing world. The house of the self does well when it is constructed on a solid foundation. Still one considers how it might be remodeled and updated for greater ease in living and better utilization of resources. The identity is often under construction and renovation. Recycling expresses how the sectors are not necessarily distinct or progressive. Like Chickering's (1969, 1993) vectors, there may be overlapping and concurrent developmental experiences. These transitions are not experienced as phases or separate stages. They are experienced as "me." Developmental models serve as tools to enhance an understanding of the self and others (Nakkalu & Toshalis, 2006).

Some research has been done examining the connections between racial identity sectors and academic achievement. This is important in preparing and equipping preadolescents and adolescents for a successful college experience. A strong Afrocentric identity has been associated with higher achievement (Belgrave & Allison, 2006; Davis, 2004; Porter & Washington, 1993). The development of racial identity in a social, historical, and cultural context is an integral part of strong and healthy self-esteem, self-knowledge, and self-confidence. The awareness of and commitment to racial and ethnic identity development is critical in the college environment. Institutions of higher education will evidence their understanding of its significance when Black faculty are well represented, multiculturalism is appreciated and
celebrated in the curriculum and in the community, and there are high expectations for all students (Astin, 1993). These visible and palpable manifestations of institutional commitment to student development engender an environment that is supportive and conducive to social, academic, career, and racial development.

The research related to Black Americans shifted in its focus in the late 1980s to achievement and educational attainment (Polite & Davis, 1999). Yet the literature is still focused on single-parenting, unemployment, lack of education, poverty, poor health, early death, violence, crime, drug use, and related psychosocial adaptations. There have been and continue to be studies about Black men, but the topics of success and achievement are still underrepresented. Certainly, the ways in which gender impacts the experiences of Black males in educational environments is significant and relevant in any research agenda. Sex is biological, but gender is a cultural construct. Black men develop racial identity within the context of American culture where their prowess as athletes and entertainers is celebrated, but their personal expression is sanctioned as hypersexual and hostile (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Women and gender studies developed along with Black studies during the 1970s. The sense of who we are as an individual and the way we determine our identity will continue to develop over a lifetime. There are significant markers in a life where transition occurs as we learn to identify ourselves with one group or another and experience how this alters our interactions. The development of one's identity is an ongoing process that involves personal insight and observation of oneself socially and culturally. This does not occur as a single event and our identity is not static. We continue to change how we see ourselves throughout our lives as our cognitive skills develop and our experiences expand. The formation of identity begins with our birth and continues through the span of our days. We are challenged to create some
new ways of thinking about race and how it operates in society. To approach race differently as we conceptualize it or theorize about it requires that we begin to think differently about ourselves and about others. This is the painful process of paradigm shifting that bell hooks encourages us to embrace and celebrate. A Somali proverb reminds us that wisdom does not come overnight (African Proverbs, 2018).
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

Qualitative Inquiry

**Phenomenology.** This study was guided by a phenomenological approach with a goal to attend to the personal experience of each individual as expressed in his own words.

Phenomenology research is based on the ideas of Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher writing at the turn of the century. The structure and appearance of phenomenon in one’s life provides meaning and definition to the self and informs how to live in the world (Husserl, 1967). The structure and direction of one’s life has an intentional purpose that is informed and shaped by how each person considers and reflects upon the experiences of daily living. Significance and relevance are determined by the individual and evolves from all previous interactions and experiences. When a commonly shared phenomena is examined, such as transition to college for the purpose of this project, each man defines an essence in the experience as it was made known to him (van Manen, 1990). While this essence is unique to the individual there may also be a shared knowledge for a group of individuals. Each phenomenon has multiple ways of being understood that differ because of the self, the one interacting with the world. The self develops a content of thinking about the perception of reality as it is experienced.

Identifying the essence gives insight about the nature of the phenomenon. The interaction between mortals and the world can teach us about both. Each individual brings to every event in the day all of what has been processed before in terms of attitudes, beliefs, values, thoughts, images, ideas, expectations, assumptions, desires, emotions, and memories. It is what has been learned about the self and the world through lived experiences. A person will formulate an understanding of what is happening using all that has been seen or heard or said in the days
before. As a community there can be reflection on how actions and perceptions shape the world and perhaps determine some direction with cohesion and cooperation (Roche, 1973).

The phenomenal self is an expression of self-awareness as the individual reflects with recall and memory while being in a moment encountering and interacting. The underlying knowledge about who the individual believe himself to be is informed through the phenomena and experiences of living. It is always relational – with others or with nature. Beliefs, values, attitudes, plans, goals, and interactions are decoded and defined over time and in varying situations. These concepts may become somewhat stable and self-referential, although they are each subject to change and adaptation should circumstances require. It is in lived experience and perceived experience, that we become self-aware.

The phenomenological approach is a ‘second-order’ perspective. “We do not try to describe things as they are, nor do we discuss whether or not things can be described ‘as they are’; rather, we try to characterize how things appear to people…descriptions that are relational, experiential, content-oriented, and qualitative” (Marton, 1988, p. 146). Each person holds a map in his head of how he has conceived the world to be that is specialized and unique. The researcher explores these characteristics to find categories of concepts around and about phenomena. These transitions or changes of thinking that occur while living in the world may lead to a more positive or more negative outcome, depending on interactions and the input. If a better way could be supported, the strategies to do so are required. The how may be found in consideration of the story told by the other.

There are several philosophical premises with phenomenological research that are significant in directing and shaping both the inquiry and the analysis (Moustakas, 1994). There is first and foremost a commitment to gaining wisdom and understanding. Of course, scientific
experimentation has a place in the formation of knowledge. But phenomenology is a commitment to thoughtful and intentional reflection and not mere empiricism. To do this effectively, the researcher must suspend all suppositions and assumptions and be as open as possible to hearing and seeing the experience of the other (Glaser, 1992). Bracketing or suspending one’s own beliefs and biases may be next to impossible as the researcher’s experiences cannot be erased (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). The self cannot be separated from the moment and the construct of all preceding events and experiences. Yet bracketing is necessary to mitigate the influence of what is personal on the part of the researcher and be open in the moment to the other (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). It requires a self-awareness and self-consciousness that is not the usual means by which information is acquired. The researcher seeks to suspend preconceptions and be totally open in the moment to receive and perceive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is a little understood process that seems to defy description. But with strong curiosity and a driving desire to understand, expectations may be set aside for a time (LaVasseur, 2003). An additional premise is that the conscious mind is intentional and directed towards objects in the world. Phenomenon is perceived by and with the self that has been shaped as consciousness. Any dichotomy of being separate from the world is false in that the individual is aware and interacting with his experiences. He is continually making meaning from his experiences and the objects he encounters as he builds his consciousness in tandem with others (Moustakas, 1994).

The experiences of Black men transitioning to historically White institutions of higher education was the focus of this research. Would there be a shared phenomenon identified by the students in three universities that are markedly different in their profiles? The goal then was to come to an understanding of what the men have experienced, how they have experienced it, and
what it means to them (Bonner, 2001; Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Identifying an essence or essential defining phenomenon shared by the men as they have experienced it was the premise of this project. The transitional or liminal experience would be known by every first-year college student who enrolled and sat in a class. But this project narrows the focus with Black men attending historically White institutions of higher education. As discussed previously, insights regarding the experiences of Black men serve as a “canary in the coal mine” or guiding indicator to inform us about the needs of all college students (Guinier & Torres, 2002). This phenomenological approach explores variation in the experiences of the men to identify what helped and what hindered their progress. Ways of supporting success in college are identified that will foster more diverse postsecondary environments that support all learners.

**Grounded theory.** Grounded theory pairs well with phenomenology as it, too, is experiential and individual. The assumption with grounded theory is that the self has constructed patterns in how it frames the world. Imagine building a house. The foundation, the studs, the pipes, the wiring, the drywall, and all the finishing touches become the place where the mind lives. The self looks about and sees the walls and windows that may both limit and expand its thoughts. These paradigms or mental constructs reflect back to answer the question of “who am I.” This method is a systematic approach to examine the real world and generate theories that are rooted in it. The world is extraordinarily complex, and any theory about how it operates must originate in the world itself to also be sufficiently complex. “The task is to discover and conceptualize the essence of specific interactional processes. The resulting theory provides a new way of understanding the social situations from which the theory was generated” (Hutchinson, 1988). Interviewing and observing are done to gather information about and from
the other from which to build a meaningful understanding of their lived experience. This approach begins with open questions, rather than assumptions or expectations, that may be organized in categories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It is expected that theory will reveal itself with the review, coding, and analysis of the conversations (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). During this process, there is a rigorous questioning and examination of one’s own preconceived notions and paradigms (Strauss, 1987). This was particularly relevant as the topic of this project addresses the construct of race and gender with which the researcher and co-researchers are diametrically different. Theory can make itself known in the observations and responses of the co-researchers. Listening ever so carefully and repeatedly through transcription and reading, they succeed in illuminating ideas about the transition experience.

Grounded theory was utilized during the conversation period of several months and in the data analysis process. As conversations were transcribed during data collection, themes began to emerge. This informed the continuing process as new co-researchers were scheduled. Grounded theory presents a challenge for the researcher to remain present and open in collection and analysis of content. Remaining rooted in the lived experience of the co-researchers and still connected to one’s own world view is why this approach can yield rich and meaningful results (Glaser, 1978).

Race and gender function as dominant norms in American society and reproduce inequality in education, employment, and every other sector of human endeavor (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). As such, the influence of race and gender must be made visible. It is made visible in the words of the stories told by those who live the norms as an intimate and personal experience. As a researcher, I visit the home of another, and we sit in one of his rooms together. It’s a space he
has built slowly over time with love and with pain. There are pictures on the walls and rugs on the floor, and it’s decorated just so. The furniture is carefully selected to compliment the color of paint on the wall. It’s comfortable to him, even if it feels strange and unfamiliar to me as the guest. Race and gender in particular define how this house was established and constructed. It provided the building materials and prescribed much of the décor. As a guest, I am courteous and curious to receive as much insight as can be shared.

**Personal nature of the research inquiry.** It was after 7 pm on a cold Friday in November and most of the building was empty. University classes were done for the day and everyone had left to start their weekend. The big building was quiet and mostly vacant. I was transporting a few things back and forth from my car parked near the front door. Curled up facing the wall on a wooden bench in the hall was a young Black man who appeared to be sleeping. He had his large backpack nearby, his coat on, and his hood over his head.

My first two passes coming and going gave me pause. Who is he and why is he in here? Students were gone, although they did occasionally stretch out for a snooze on the benches during the day. Is he a thief? An addict? I was aware that my trepidation was probably unwarranted, and I didn’t like being so suspicious. The second set of passes I sized him up more and the sense of being threatened dissipated. I wondered if he was homeless. I could sense that he was more aware of my presence as well and probably wondered why I was trolling the hall. I grabbed some snacks from my office to offer him on my third trip knowing how hungry young people always seem to be. But the next time I walked down the hall he was gone. For some reason I was saddened that he may have thought I wanted him to leave and I wondered where he’d go next to rest himself. I regretted that I had not spoken to him even though he was turned away because I knew he was awake enough to sense my passing back and forth. I feared that my
frequent walking trips past him led him to feel unwelcome or too closely observed. It felt like a lost opportunity to connect, and in the following days, I found myself looking for him whenever I walked the halls.

Several weeks later this undergraduate student was featured in an online magazine article about succeeding in college while being homeless. He was described as a young man with “resiliency of steel” (French, 2015). He had grown up in Flint, Michigan, done well in high school, and completed an associate degree at his local community college. When he came to a university some 60 miles from home, circumstances changed within a year. If he paid for housing, he couldn’t afford tuition. So he had been sleeping in his van when it was warm enough and in campus buildings when it was too cold. Nights were sometimes spent on a couch in the university computer lab which is open 24 hours. He was working two jobs, showering in the recreation center, and stretching his food dollar. He was a senior determined to graduate and keep a promise to his grandmother. Fortunately, this young man’s situation has changed significantly since the article was published because he was brave enough to share his story. The online fundraising for him collected almost $26,000 to pay for his expenses and he successfully graduated from college as he always intended.

When I saw his picture at the top of the article, I recognized him as the student who was sleeping on the bench that night. I had to ask myself several questions as I studied his face and read the article. Why did I react with uncertainty about his presence in the building? Why didn’t I reach out to him as soon as I suspected he needed help? What kind of person is capable of such determination, desire, and discipline?

Why was I initially so cautious with the young Black man on the bench? Why was my first thought of him a negative one? Not because of my own experiences, but because of the
power of social conditioning. The dominant narrative, the majority story is so promulgated and promoted that we all suffer brainwashing of a kind. In my everyday world as an educator, I encounter many exceptional Black men. My normalized experience is that Black men are smart and kind and generous and funny and hardworking. And still, I find that I am culturally conditioned by all that is in the media. How would I be able to hear these men and even begin to understand their daily experience?

**Positionality and critical reflexivity.**

“To see, to remember, to comprehend. It all depends on where you stand.”—Liv Ullmann, 2018

Positioning influences what and how you can perceive. What is part of the landscape is narrowed or broadened because of where you sit. Faces are visible or turned away. Even one’s own shadow may obscure the immediate view significantly. When you drive a car, you are seated behind the steering wheel with a wide front window to view the road. You will need to often rely on rear and side view mirrors to inform you about surrounding traffic. Soon you’ll learn that even those mirrors will leave you with blind spots. So you adapt and learn to turn your head or lean this way or that to get a clear and true viewpoint. Where you sit and how you adjust with it determines positionality. The qualitative researcher is challenged to consider position and perspective always.

We are each situated in the world by virtue of our gender, race, class, and other attributes that mark our status and social position. This is positionality, and it is significant in qualitative research as it informs how the researcher plans, executes, and analyzes the project (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lareau & Shultz, 1996; Tancredi-Brice Agbenyega, 2013). To be clear about this for oneself is important when initiating research as it will inform every step of the process. The knowledge of one’s position and what assumptions may accompany it, both on my part and that
of others, is the first step. The second is to be critically reflexive and consider how this position will, in context and in relationship, impact decisions and conclusions. Critical reflexivity is the practice of thoughtful examination of our own assumptions, interests, motivations, and judgments (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

My growing up years were in Detroit during the 1950s and 60s, a city sharply and decisively divided by race and class. Neighborhoods and schools were deeply segregated with intention and sometimes active resistance on the part of White families. My K12 experience was strictly in White classrooms with White students and White teachers and White neighbors. It was a close-knit Catholic community on the west side of the city, and it was without divorce and without diversity. My father was a successful salesman and my mother an elementary school teacher who chose not to work out of the home after I was born. We lived comfortably enjoying the benefits of owning a home and cottage, and vacations with air travel to Florida and the Eastern seaboard.

Things changed dramatically the summer I was 11 years of age. My family was in an automobile accident and my father killed. I returned to school on crutches, feeling unmoored and very much unknown. It was a time when discussions of death were not done, and we were encouraged to just carry on. So we did. I was suddenly no longer a child in the way I saw the world. My bubble of surety in all things was burst absolutely. I was determined to be happy because I knew that to be my father’s wish, but I was awakened to mortality and carried profound grief.

In the early 1960’s, I encountered the ugly face of racism. President John F. Kennedy, the youngest person and the first Catholic ever elected to the office, spoke about the need for social changes to insure freedom for all Americans. I was shocked to learn that Black Americans
were still living with the restrictions and confines of racism. Different doors to enter a building? Different drinking fountains? Denied service? Unjust arrests and sentencing? The newspapers and television brought scenes from the South right into living rooms all over the world. We were watching events from far away happen in real time for the first time in history. We saw JFK killed and his assassin shot on live television within just a few days. We saw non-violent protests by Black and White social activists that elicited violent reactions from citizenry, police, and politicians. We saw Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking with eloquence and passion. We saw Malcolm X and the Black Panthers pushing hard in another voice. We saw heavily armed federal marshals escort James Meredith to classes at the University of Mississippi. Their assassinations followed JFKs within what felt like frightening short order. Change was not coming easy.

During high school, I went each week to an inner-city elementary school and tutored children who were Black. I made some Black friends through church camps and events designed specifically to broaden our experiences. But when we might be driving around later, which was the thing you did if you were a teen in Detroit then, the police would pull us over. The Black boy would be pushed up against the car or a building and frisked thoroughly. I would be pulled aside and either called a “n-lover” or asked pointedly why I wasn’t with my “own kind.” There was always a hassle and there was nowhere we could really be and feel safe. I was infuriated and confounded by the ignorance of prejudice. The Detroit race riots of 1967 erupted on 12th Street as an expression of the acute racial tension in my hometown. From our front porch, which was 10 miles out of the city’s center, we could see and smell the smoke of Molotov cocktails and buildings burning. I feared for my friends who lived downtown, and I hoped for real change to come.
Attending college in the city of Detroit, I married young and started a family. I bumped into sexism along the way and wondered again at human stupidity. The women’s rights movement provided a path for my expression and empowerment. In my mid-20s, I moved to a college town some 40 miles west of Detroit. The vestiges of segregation and sexism were deeply ingrained there, too, in where people lived, what they were paid, and where children went to school. It was a space in which I continued to explore careers, seeking an environment that might make a positive impact. Eventually, it was the field of education where I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. It seemed that too many talented young men and women were pushed out of schools before their time. The inequities in PK12 schools were, and still are, appalling.

Over the years, things have changed externally in Detroit and in the college town I now call home. We’re eager to believe that hearts are changing as well. But the events of the last few years make it apparent that the errors in thinking still run deep. Racism and sexism remain culturally embedded deep in our social systems, especially education. We can quantify the results with percentages and numbers. We can even watch and witness its consequences of violence and injustice. What we seem to find most challenging is identifying and altering the policies and practices that perpetuate the pain. That would mean changing the narrative, the assumptions, the stories we tell ourselves that underlie our beliefs.

The tales are linked in our brains with emotions and more tales. The paradigm is a fixed neurological structure of cells routed to one another in the electric link of synapses. Recent research suggests these patterns from trauma and fear may be genetically extended through 14 generations (Debiec & Sullivan, 2014; Gapp, Jawaid, Sarkies, Bohacek, Pelczar, Prados, Farinelli, Miska, & Mansuy, 2014; Sharma & Rando, 2014). Replication of the genetic code perpetuates the disruption as if it were still occurring. The house of the self has a foundation
built by ancestors in both cultural and physical reality. The body may respond suddenly and frequently with stress reactions of fight or flight such as hypervigilance, accelerated heartbeat, perspiration, and elevated blood pressure (Mujahid, James, Kaplan, & Salonene, 2017).

Over time, the demands this genetic memory makes on the physical body are compounded by daily socioeconomic stressors that seriously compromise the health of the individual. “John Henryism” is a recognized condition of illnesses that sometimes occur as a result of the cultural demands of just being Black (Mujahid et al., 2017). These include hypertension, a condition more prevalent among Black males, and digestive disorders such as ulcers (James, Keenan, Strogatz, Browning, Garrett, 1992). John Henry is a reference to the Black American folk hero who is said to have died after successfully besting a steam powered drill. He may have been a former slave who was imprisoned and leased out as a laborer for railway construction to tunnel through a mountain (Nelson, 2006).

Altering the patterns within these established routes of responses is experienced as physical and emotional discomfort. What is known is profoundly rooted in the cells because of background and birth. Even when the individual is intentionally accepting and seeking growth, he is first pushed through the confines of what is false to be born into the new and better self. The experience is liminal in its nature as he transitions from one state into another. He stands in a doorway looking ahead and looking back over our shoulders with feelings inside that seem to have a life of their own.

This project was developed to gather and share the stories of young Black men. Human Subjects Approval was obtained (Appendix C). The choice of topic reflects my lived experiences and my desire to give expression to their challenges and triumphs. It was my intention to listen to the stories these young men would tell, to hear their voices, to share their
stories. I cannot claim to be dispassionate or detached. It is important to me that these young men feel seen and supported. I believe their wisdom and insight can inform all of us about how to navigate change successfully. And the times, they are changing. We, too, must change, adapt, respond, lean into the future with some vision of better days to be. Where Black men live and work is a telling point for us all. Their insight and successful navigation in historically White institutions may suggest strategies and solutions for anyone seeking knowledge. Close consideration of the challenges these men have encountered can provide insight into the nature of moving beyond secondary school into the environment of college life.

Subjectivity.

“Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness--an empathy--was necessary if the attention was to matter.”---Mary Oliver (as cited in Cook, 2007)

Subjectivity is defined as the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires that informs one’s view of self and of others, of circumstances, and events in the world (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is a lens through which one considers and interprets what is experienced and perceived. The individual constructs her subjectivity with any and every input. Some of this input she self-selects to inform herself at a deeper level and expand her understanding. Some of this input is at a less conscious level of awareness and may have been formed very early in her life experience. When she is less than aware, she may come to assumptions and conclusions that are invalid and incomplete (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Where once objectivity or the ability to be detached and
separate from data collection was esteemed, today it is recognized that one’s subjectivity is significant to the execution and analysis of data. To execute research and analysis with subjectivity requires reflection and self-examination.

The most significant challenge in coding is to avoid one’s own preconceptions and assumptions (Charmaz, 2006). To do so requires a real suspension of one’s own viewpoint from both race, class, age, and gender. This means ferreting out the narratives that may lead to judgment and reaction without identifying the source or belief. I am the diametric opposite of participants in this study. I am a White female in my senior years. They are Black males with an average age of 23 years. One means of uncovering bias is “intimate familiarity” with that which is to be observed (Charmaz, 2006, p. 68). Although I have worked with young Black men on a daily basis for more than four decades and am married to a Black man, I sometimes feel that who they really are, both as Black and as male, is foreign to me. I sought to have these men lead me in questioning and discovery. It is because of this dramatic difference that I approached the project with participants as co-researchers. They were invited to challenge my assumptions and not hold back in the description of their experiences. It was important that they know my intentions are to inform others and to shine a light on their world. It was important that they realize they were actively contributing to a body of knowledge about their successes and triumphs that has been neglected and overlooked.

**Study Design**

Conversations were conducted with Black male undergraduates who have completed no less than one year of study successfully at one of three different historically White institutions of higher education identified in the project. The three institutions of higher education (IHE) they may have attended have significantly different cultures and locations, although they are all
situated within 20 miles of one another and are historically White. An overview comparison of the institutions is presented in Appendix D. The representation of these markedly different educational environments served as a control. Examining shared or similar experiences across different settings may serve as a stronger indicator of patterns. Trends across such different locations may be more suggestive. Trends in one institution or very similar institutions may reflect only that specific and unique culture. The three IHEs in this project provide significant variety in their admission criteria and student body demographics. As a result, this suggests that student experiences can be somewhat generalized across all three institutions.

The approach with participants was as co-researchers (Boylorn, 2008). Conducting this research as a mature White female, it was essential that these young Black men serve as more than just informants. The lens through which they perceive and act in the world could not be fully understood or known by me. The differences in our lived experiences are diametrically different because of age, ethnicity, and gender. Because of this chasm between the way we live in the world, my own perceptions could impede understanding and analysis of their words. Anticipating this challenge with positionality, they were engaged as co-researchers who would interpret and inform my analysis. They were approached in this manner in the invitation to collaborate and provide help with the research. As a control, an invitational script was used and is provided in Appendix E. Coming with this humility contributed to their feelings of trust and safety in sharing. Their willingness to be involved was also in part because they were touched by the topic and acknowledged the significance of their transition experience. This involvement encouraged them to involve others in the project and to participate in a learning event for themselves.
The first component of the project was qualitative semi-structured conversations with open-ended questions about individual experiences in college. Qualitative research methods included observation and note taking during the conversation as well as questions to guide the process. Participants were given a written informed consent (Appendix F) and then asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire to gather information about their background (Appendix G). The mode was to meet with approximately 20 Black men with academic success in three different four-year institutional settings. This is deemed a reasonable size from which to code and identify patterns, especially because the institutions have significant variations although they are all predominantly White in the demographics of their faculty, staff, and students.

The definition of academic success was the completion of no less than 24 earned credits (usually one year of college) and a GPA of no less than 2.0, which is considered “good academic standing” at each of the institutions included. Co-researchers were young adult Black males between the ages of 19 and 26 years. This age sample has the developmental maturity to be reflective about their transition experience and is still close enough to the experience that they could recall specifics about the period. Their perspective is still proximate to their transition and it was fresh and time sensitive.

The semi-structured conversation had guiding questions (Appendix H) which allowed for data collection as well as participant reflection. Although a standard protocol of asking questions and moving the conversation forward was used, discussions were invited and often occurred. It was expected that conversations would develop from the questions and provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their experiences with more detail and specificity.

A question was added after the first few conversations were transcribed asking if there was anything the individual would include that the researcher may have overlooked. This served
as an opportunity for participants to contribute to the development of questions explored in conversations that followed. The additional questions were added (about any external stressful situations during their first year and about whether they struggled with substance abuse or depression) because co-researchers felt they were critical areas to explore. The circumstances significantly impacted the first year at college. Conversations that followed included the two questions suggested and the question of anything that should be included. All co-researchers were advised that they would be given an opportunity to read the transcript of their conversation and provide additional comments or elaboration. Each transcription was emailed to the co-researcher within a week or two of meeting for their review and input.

Conversations were conducted in public areas on or near the campus of each of the institutions. Public space in cafes and restaurants provided enough privacy and quiet for conversation but was not hidden. Conversations ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes using the guiding questions in Appendix H.

**Study Population**

Co-research participants and institutions will remain anonymous. A convenient sample was available at three institutions in Southeast Michigan. These universities are located within 20 miles of one another. Snowballing from contacting offices and student organizations that involve Black men was done to identify participants. But the majority of those who participated were referred by other men who stated that they found the experience informative and insightful. They served as co-researchers in this capacity by thinking about who might contribute to the project effectively. Each man was asked to select a name for his reference to assure anonymity at the onset of the conversation.
The historically White institutions of higher education selected include one comprehensive regional public institution, one top tier public research institution, and one small private non-profit university. Each of these institutions have varied initiatives that provide academic and social support specifically for their Black male students. It is widely accepted that support programs are a significant predictor of success for all undergraduate students, but especially for Black and Brown students (Bandura, 1997; Light, 2001; Strayhorn, 2012). The perspective of students who have participated in these programs has not been well documented. When there is documentation, it usually references academic performance and persistence rather than personal reflections and opinions about the programs themselves. Participation in those activities was not essential to participation in the project, but experiences with any support programs were included in the conversation. This was an opportunity to ask the men themselves what they believed was of impact to them.

Data reported for the three universities references the 2014-2015 academic year and may be found in Appendix D. Graduation rates represent the number of students who are identified as being first time in a college (FTIAC) and complete their undergraduate program in 6 years. Although transfer students are not included in this calculation, graduation rates are viewed as a fair representation of how successful an institution of higher education is in fulfilling its mission of providing education for undergraduates. Some institutions, such as the top tier, have fewer transfer students and maintain rigorous admission criteria which suggests better preparation for the college classroom.

As a point of reference, the national average net cost in 2014 to attend a public in-state 4-year institution of higher education was $12,894 and $24,433 for a non-profit private university. All groups within the U.S. population have been enrolling in college at higher rates,
but the rate of growth is less for Black males. Black males ages 18-24 years have increased their enrollment at 2 and 4-year institutions of higher education from 25% in 2000 to 31% in 2013. The 6-year graduation rate of FTIACs is almost 60% nationally. However, completion of bachelor’s degrees among male youth ages 25-29 years reveals significant disparities: Asian 55%, White 37%, Black 17%, Latinx 13%, two or more races 29% (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Although young Black men are enrolling and attending college, they are not reaching the goal of obtaining a bachelor’s degree at the same rate as other groups of men. What experiences are they having and what are their thoughts about graduation? This project seeks to ask those questions of the men themselves.

The first selected university is a comprehensive regional public institution founded in 1849 as a normal school to prepare classroom teachers. The city surrounding it has a population of about 21,000. The university currently has 200+ majors/minors and more than 19,000 students in five colleges. Undergraduates number about 16,000 and graduate students about 3,000. The majority of these students do not reside on campus but commute to classes. In-state undergraduate tuition is approximately $300 per credit hour plus fees. or $9,400 per year. which is almost $3,500 less than the national average for a public university. First-year retention is 75% overall, and the graduation rate of FTIACs is 37%. The graduation rate for Black students is 18%. The student population is 65% White, 25% Black, 3% Latinx, 2% Asian, and 2% international (College Measures).

This institution has an identified intent to provide opportunity for low-income and first-generation students. The school is situated in a small city with about 20,000 residents that encompasses almost 5 square miles. The population is 60% White, 30% Black, 5% Latinx, and 2% Asian, with a median home value of $137,000. About 93% of the population are high school
graduates, and 43% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. The mean household income is $36,000, and 31% are people in poverty (U.S. Census, 2017). Unlike the research institution, any person who meets the admission criteria is accepted and may enroll. The main campus is a little over a mile across diagonally. A shuttle is available during the academic year that transports students to the college of business located a mile away in the city’s downtown. A large arena, football field, and indoor athletic field are located less than a mile from campus. The majority of students are commuters.

Because of its proximity to several auto manufacturing plants in the area, many Black families in the city were part of the Great Migration from the Southern states from 1920-1970. These union jobs diminished and eventually disappeared from the area. The largest truck manufacturing plant in the United States, which converted briefly to build bombers during WWII, was finally closed and its demolition began in 2013. Housing foreclosures accompanied this radical shift in employment and significantly impacted the working-class neighborhoods. The city’s population was actually reduced by about 7% after the 2008 recession (U.S. Census, 2017).

The university has been negatively impacted as the State has continued to reduce funding for higher education over several decades and the institution struggles to maintain enrollment. Even as employment expectations rise for a college degree in the current economy, public investment is whittling. This institution has managed to maintain its tuition and fees as one of the lowest in the region, although student debt across the nation continues to climb and boast a high default rate. Low-income students who are Pell grant eligible compromise almost 50% of those enrolled at this public regional institution.
About ten miles away is the second university selected for this project. It is a top tier public research institution. It was founded in 1817 as a Jesuit school and later became a public university. It has three campuses located within a 50-mile radius, but the main campus only is included in this project. That campus is situated in a city of 121,000 and heavily defines the culture there as a “university town.” It currently has 260+ degree programs and more than 43,000 students in 19 schools and colleges. A research hospital is affiliated with the institution. Undergraduates number 28,000. The majority of first year students live on campus in one of multiple learning communities that include research and faculty mentoring. Graduate students are 15,500 in number. Undergraduate in-state tuition is approximately $600 per credit hour with fees or $13,000 per year and represents the national average. The first-year retention rate is 97%, and the overall FTIAC graduation rate is 90%. The graduation rate for Black students is 80%. The student population is 66% White, 5% Black, 5% Latinx, 13% Asian, and 4% international (American Institutes for Research, 2015).

This university is also the largest employer in the state with prestigious schools of medicine, law, and engineering. The athletic department generates significant revenues with a legacy of games won on the court, the field, and the ice. The main campus is centrally located in a city that is 72% White, 7% Black, 4% Latinx, and 16% Asian with a median home value of $272,000. Over 97% of the population are high school graduates, and 74% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. The mean household income is a more than $61,000, and 22% are people in poverty (U.S. Census, 2017). The university sprawls widely across the city with its own bus service for students and staff. Admission is highly competitive, as are the programs of study once enrolled.
As internal analysis done in the early 1960’s determined Blacks comprised 0.5% of the undergraduate and graduate student body. Black and Brown students were being admitted but were unable to attend because of limited financial aid and high tuition costs and did not enroll. An effort followed to consider school counselor recommendations and to provide additional financial support for both Black and White students with need. By the end of the decade, Black student enrollment was at 11%. This attempt to increase the percentage of Black students enrolled demonstrated promise. But in 2003 a law suit alleging racial discrimination was brought by a White female law school applicant who was denied admission. The Grutter v Bollinger case was finally decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in and affirmative action initiatives for the purpose of supposed quota fulfillment were deemed illegal. Enrollment of Black students quickly plummeted and has remained slightly less than 5% (American Institutes for Research, 2015).

This institution continues to have more applicants than admissions. The majority of its students reside on campus, often in learning communities that promote and support research with faculty involvement that begins during the first year. It is heavily endowed, ranking in the top ten nationally with a portfolio exceeding $10 billion. In an effort to open its doors to more students from low-income families, it has very recently introduced an incentive program. Academically qualified applicants with a family income of less than $65,000 and assets less than $50,000 may apply for a four-year tuition scholarship. About 35% of its students receive Pell grants and would be considered low-income.

The third institution is a private, non-profit university founded in 1937 as a Catholic liberal arts college and is still affiliated with the Felician Sisters. It is located about 20 miles from the first two institutions and 20 miles from the urban center of Detroit. It currently has 135
majors and more than 3,000 students in one school and five colleges. Undergraduates number 2,400 and graduates are 650. The student population is 75% White, 10% international, 7% Black, 5% Latinx, and 3% Asian. Undergraduate in-state tuition is approximately $620 per credit hour plus fees, or $18,800, and is still $2,500 less than the national average for a comparable institution. The first-year retention rate is 86% and the overall FTIAC graduation rate is 36%. The graduation rate for Whites is 45% and for Blacks 9% (American Institutes for Research, 2015). About 35% of the students receive Pell grants.

The large suburb where the institution is located is 35 square miles in size. The population of residents in this suburb numbers about 94,000. The university sits on 80 acres of wooded land that includes a large gymnasium and several athletic fields. The surrounding community is 91% White, 4% Black, 2% Latinx, and 3% Asian with a median home value of $170,500. About 94% of the residents have a high school diploma and 36% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. The mean household income is $75,000, and 5% of the residents live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2017).

The area was primarily farm land until an automotive plant was built there in the late 1940’s. Soon a bedroom community developed, and the city incorporated. Just 15 miles from the center of Detroit, many auto executives still call it home and commute to their downtown offices. The community has remained overwhelmingly White in its demographics despite its proximity to the city of Detroit. Detroit was recognized in the 2010 U. S. Census as the city with the largest percentage of Black residents at 84% (U. S. Census, 2011). Other surrounding suburbs have a higher population of Blacks or other minorities, but this suburb has continued to maintain a predominantly White population exceeding 90%.
Each of these institutions has developed various types of support programs for Black males. These different approaches were explored from the perspective of the student experience. There is a lack of research, however, asking Black males directly what they believe has contributed to their college success. What is most often considered as measurement of impact is the students continued enrollment and degree attainment. Some programs evaluate with measures that include GPA and number of credits earned. Data related to student demographics and their participation with any available programming was included in the collection of background information on this project. This was an opportunity for students who have been involved or utilized support services at their campus to reflect and respond to the impact it made on their transition experience. Some may not have participated in any support programs as this was not a criterion for participation.

**Sampling Frame and Techniques**

The initial anticipated sample size was 30 co-researchers. Although this would seem a large sample for a qualitative project, it would assure saturation in terms of both the data quantity or thickness and its quality or richness. Thick data would be a sufficient or ample amount. Rich data would be full of meaning, depth, and detail (Fusch & Ness, 2015). It was expected that saturation would be met before completing 30 conversations, and it was. Data saturation in qualitative research must demonstrate three characteristics. First, there must be sufficient information available to duplicate the project and replicate its process (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012). Second, there is no new information being found (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). And finally, there is no further coding possible from new content (Guest et al., 2006). The sample achieved saturation at 21 conversations, and this will be explored further in the discussion of data analysis.
The goal was to meet and talk with enough students from each selected institution to identify shared experiences at all three locations, as well as to identify some experiences that might be peculiar to each. The three institutions are markedly different in their campus culture and environment. The size of each campus, both in terms of the number of students and the acreage it occupies, varies significantly. The communities surrounding each institution are also very different. If comparable experiences were described by co-researchers, this would suggest a shared phenomenon that transcends the space in which they pursued their degree.

The sample was designed to include Black men who had completed no less than one academic year at one of the selected institutions. To be eligible, they would have successfully passed no less than 24 credits or two semesters with a 2.0 GPA and be in good academic standing. The sample included men between 19 and 26 years of age. They are close enough in time to recall their transition year and speak to their experiences with accuracy.

A convenient sample of co-researchers was available at the regional public institution. These students were invited to participate in both the formulation of questions during the project design and in the process of meeting and talking together. They suggested other students to contact who they felt had something to contribute to the project and would enjoy the opportunity to talk about their own experiences. One of these referrals was to a student attending the top tier public research university. This student referred some of his friends and acquaintances as well. This snowball referral process became the most effective means of connecting with students from the top tier institution.

The top tier public research university has an office which provides support programming for Black and Brown students. Through shared associates, this office director was contacted, and referrals requested. He responded asking for evidence of Human Subjects Approval which was
provided. He did not respond to further requests. The private university also has a director for its current office of student support. This individual did not respond when contacted for referrals. Fortunately, the co-researchers themselves provided sufficient names from which meetings were scheduled and conducted. Institutional support was not received nor was it required to identify co-researchers. The men themselves valued the nature of this project and the conversations enough to enlist the involvement of their friends.

A former staff member, with whom the researcher was personally acquainted, was contacted to connect with students from the private university. He had been instrumental several years earlier in establishing a support program there for Black men from the city of Detroit. He had been actively involved in recruiting these young men, designing a summer program to get them started early, and on-going support once they started taking classes. He provided several contact names and numbers. Most of these young men were available and eager to participate. They respected this gentleman enormously and often referred to him as their mentor and credited him with their success. They would willingly refer their friends when the conversation was concluded.

A script was used for initial contact whether by phone or email (Appendix E). It clearly describes the intent and purpose of the project. Qualifying questions were asked at the time of initial contact to determine the eligibility of each participant in terms of academic status, attendance, and age. They would sometimes have questions as well about me and why I was doing this. They were always encouraged to ask questions before agreeing to participate. Their generosity and warmth were remarkable.

Most co-researchers were located within a 40-mile radius, which made scheduling meetings convenient. Those attending the private university lived in metropolitan Detroit and
conversations were scheduled there. All these meetings were conducted in locations that were deemed relaxing for the men and free from too many distractions. We met in coffee shops, restaurants, and university offices. One participant was working at a children’s summer camp near Grand Rapids. This conversation was done at the camp while I was visiting in that area. We sat together at a picnic table in an outdoor shelter on a glorious Saturday morning.

A total of 21 in-depth conversations were completed together, each lasting 45 to 90 minutes. At the outset of each meeting, the co-researcher was assured that all responses would be anonymous and confidential. The Informed Consent provides information about exactly how the conversation transcript would be stored and protected (Appendix F). Before beginning the conversation, each was asked to suggest a name he would be identified by in the analysis and advised that at no point would his own name be used. Most of them quickly had a name to suggest. Only a few had to think for a minute or two to come up with one. When the name had already been used by another participant, they were asked to suggest a different one so there would be no duplication. As needed, they were asked when the conversation concluded to recommend anyone they thought might enjoy the process and have something to contribute. Co-researchers were eager to share information about the project with their peers. They made contact with their friends by phone to introduce me as someone who could be trusted and whose questions were relevant. Because they found the experience thoughtful and engaging, they were willing to encourage the participation of their peers and edify the process.

**Data Gathering**

**Interview questions.** Conversation or interview questions were developed with reflection based on the observation of students transitioning to university and input from several Black men currently enrolled in college. The questions germinated when the researcher served
as an academic advisor with undergraduates on academic probation. It was evident from the analysis of probation data that Black and Brown students were overrepresented in the population. It was during that period that support programs were enhanced for all Black undergraduates and their enrollment in post-secondary programs across the country grew quickly. Special programs had been initiated at all three of the institutions included in this project and are still present today. The conversation questions are provided in Appendix H.

The questions as designed allowed for open ended responses and probing on the part of the researcher. They were divided into three groupings: before, during, and after college. Before college questions focused on experiences in the family and in K12 institutions. From whom, when, and how do they remember first hearing about college? Was it from a parent or family member? Was it a school counselor or classroom teacher? Did their friends and peer group plan to go to college? Did they participate in any college preparation groups or visit any college campuses? Once they were ready to go to college, how did they make their selection?

Questions about life during college asked them to recall when they first arrived on campus and started taking classes. What did it feel like when they got there? How did the experience match up with their expectations and academic preparation? Did they experience any challenges during their adjustment? To what or whom do they attribute their success? Did they encounter racism during this period, either on or around campus? They were also asked to reflect on the experiences of their peers during their college transition. Remembering and comparing other men who stayed and who left, they provided insight and opinion as to the factors that contributed to success or to stopping out.

Questions about life after college focused on their future goals and provided an opportunity for them to speak about their purpose in life. The majority of the men were still
enrolled in and attending college, although a number had already graduated. What does being a Black man mean to them? How do they enjoy spending their time now? What is motivating them as they move forward and where do they see themselves going in the next ten years?

The sequence of questions was intended to provide fluidity and generate probing questions when the co-researcher may have had more to contribute. After just a few conversations, the sequence of questions was adjusted somewhat. Questions that were emotionally loaded could not be followed by something more trivial like recreation activities. This was too abrupt of a transition and felt insensitive when a co-researcher may have described a powerful event in his life. With adjustments, the questions flowed more organically in response to the topics. The men suggested certain additions when they talked about reasons their peers stopped out. They were considerate of the complications life may have imposed on others who started college with them. Even as they shared their opinions and insights, they were not judgmental or critical of other men. There was an understanding and acceptance that circumstance and situation lead each of us to make decisions as best we can in the moment.

Data Analysis: Applied Methodology. Each conversation was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher for analysis. Personal observations were included in the review of the transcripts. These were written during the meeting and immediately following it. Transcriptions were usually done within a day or two for the purposes of good recall and memory. It is considered important to process data as it is being collected to identify emerging trends, to observe and improve one’s style of interviewing (Lareau & Schultz, 1996; Tancredi-Berice Agbenyega, 2013). Too much time in between the conversation and the transcription may impact the outcome of meetings that follow and may also lose the connection between observations during the data collection and its content. There is sometimes deeper meaning
found in reviewing notes taken while talking than with the data itself. This information is
tenuously rooted in memory and time. Every effort was made to transcribe as soon as possible,
even if it meant delaying the scheduling of another meeting. Transcriptions were completed
within five days after the conversations.

In listening to both the students and myself, the sequence of questions changed a bit after
the first several conversations as referenced earlier. Transcribing served as a powerful means of
immersion into the responses and the patterns of response. Listening and writing each word that
was spoken assisted in identifying what was most powerful and meaningful to the co-researcher.
It was interesting to note how much of what is comprehended in conversation is within the
context of the moment. Although there was rarely difficulty in understanding spoken words
when face-to-face with co-researchers, sometimes when transcription required listening to
phrases over and over to capture the words used, even if only a day or two had elapsed. The
intonation and inflection were experienced very differently when it is only audible and not
visual. Some of this is due to differences in language use and some due to age difference. On
occasion, the researcher would ask for a definition of terms and an explanation of what was
meant. Co-researchers were unfailingly generous and gracious in their willingness to break it
down.

When half a dozen conversations were transcribed, they were read individually without
notation to familiarize myself with the content again. When another half dozen were transcribed,
they were also read individually without notation. This provided feedback and focus for
conversations that followed. It was also a means to seek a saturation point where no new themes
were being presented. Saturation in qualitative research is not easy to define, but it is essential to
establishing validity. Although its presence is evident when it’s there, saturation doesn’t always
appear the same and defies the use of numbers as demonstration. The quality of the data must be rich and the quantity thick. Quality data is described as “many-layered, intricate, nuanced, and more” while thick simply means a lot or enough (Fusch et al., 2015, p. 1409). There is a sense to it, an awareness or realization on the part of the researcher (Brod, Tesler, & Christiansen, 2009). After completing a dozen conversations with transcription and reading, initial coding was initiated and the themes began to emerge. Saturation is met when there are no new themes and when there is sufficient data that the project could be replicated (Mason, 2010). This point began to emerge with 18 conversations and was evident when the 21st and final meeting was conducted.

Results were evaluated for patterns that emerge from the stories, perspectives, and experiences of the participants. This required a line-by-line analysis of the data with multiple readings. The first reading included my bracketed assumptions or thoughts. Margins of the transcripts were marked with my reflections, observations, comments, or interpretations. This was done after the first six conversations were transcribed. Then again with the next six transcripts. Patterns were identified across all the transcripts at that point. Recurring patterns or topics were grouped and coded with single words or phrases. But there were still new ideas presenting after 12 conversations and I was still seeking co-researchers from the top tier institution. After 18 conversations, another round of coding was done and data was closer to saturation. A third round of coding was done at this point using color highlighters designated for each theme that had emerged in the second coding. Three more conversations took place for a total of 21 co-researchers. It was at that point that transcription made the repetition of themes evident and saturation was determined. A final round of coding was done that included the last conversations.
A word cloud analysis was done with the patterns or topics. This was done for each individual conversation and provided some insight. Certain words needed to be removed from the text or they might give a false frequency, such as the word “like” which is often used in casual conversation. The word clouds can sometimes provide a visible illustration of what the co-researcher was focused on while speaking. Themes became more evident in the frequency of words used. The word cloud analysis of each conversation did not reveal any thematic pattern that was not already evidenced in coding.

A textural summary was produced for each conversation that noted what the co-researcher experienced and a structural summary of how he experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). These are the essential components of the phenomenological data analysis process. The coding of conversation content is an emergent process in which one may find unanticipated or unexpected insights or ideas (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis of the transcripts used the strategies of focused, theoretical, and axial coding. Each of these strategies employs an altered construct of the initial codes to seek deeper understanding and connections.

When coding was concluded, a selected sample of six transcripts with coding and themes identified were audited by a university faculty member who has recognized expertise and familiarity with the topic and the population. He affirmed the identification of themes and the method of coding and his letter of support is provided in Appendix I.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Qualitative Research.** Qualitative research can provide an intimate and compelling picture of another’s lived experience. It is a window into daily events that compile a point of view and appropriate with phenomenological inquiry. It was essential to find some understanding of the perspective of young Black men from my position as a mature White female. Quantitative measures could never capture the nuances and insights in
the many words of these men. The questions serve as a guide in the inquiry but provide flexibility in probing or adapting to the conversations. The input of co-researchers was sought in adapting and developing the direction of the research as it progressed which served as a significant advantage.

Qualitative research methods may utilize multiple approaches in analysis that include case study and narrative analysis as well as phenomenological inquiry. In addition, the counter narratives of the men and a focus on their lived experiences aligns with the tenets of Paulo Freire’s (2010) pedagogy of critical consciousness and Critical Race Theory. It is in authentic dialogue that we can explore dichotomy as it is experienced and begin to transform reality. The co-researchers find enhance their own self-awareness and understanding in giving voice to their stories. The themes discovered are rooted in the perceptions of the co-researchers as they describe them. Their emergence in the ongoing process of transcription and coding pairs qualitative research well with grounded theory. The focus on story and narrative aligns with critical race theory effectively.

As a mature White female talking with young Black males there could be a perceived disadvantage in my capacity to connect and relate to their stories. But perhaps this difference served as an advantage. The men could “school” me about what it means to young and Black because they could assume I was so far removed from their experience. They were willing to be specific and detailed in their telling of stories, illuminating the subtle points to be sure I understood. Yes, a couple of co-researchers may have been clipped and quick to summarize their experiences and end the conversations. They may have assumed I knew too little to understand what mattered to them. But the overwhelming majority were gracious and
courageous in opening themselves. The greatest disadvantage may have been my repeated need to apologize to them for the painful experiences of racism they all endured.

The content of qualitative research may appear confined to a local and limited environment. It may be a disadvantage when the stories seem specific to a single situation. When the co-researchers represent a narrow band of experience, it puts the themes at a disadvantage in terms of replication for a broader application. This was intentionally addressed with the engagement of three institutions of higher education that are markedly different in their culture and climate. Identifying themes that occurred in all three environments, despite their varying structures, strengthens the reliability and validity of the analysis.

One disadvantage of qualitative inquiry is if there is a power imbalance at the point of conversation. Should the researcher be in a position of authority with the co-researchers, the nature of the inquiry could be compromised and less valid. This was anticipated in this project and invitations to participate were restricted as needed. None of the co-researchers were students or current employees of the researcher when they participated as this could suggest an imbalance of authority in the process.

Another disadvantage is associated when the questions discussed are deeply personal and could illicit strong emotional responses. Some questions were not probed or prodded further because of consideration for the co-researchers’ feelings. It was deemed important to leave each co-researcher at a high point, feeling encouraged and positive about their experience both as a participant and as a successful college student. The flow of questioning was designed to sandwich the more difficult topics between lighter ones (Appendix H). There were still conversations, however, that concluded with the co-researcher needing to voice concern about the current state of race relations.
One disadvantage of qualitative research could be negative outcomes as a result of the publication of their stories. Every effort has been made to protect the identity of the co-researchers and respect their privacy. There are no consequences that would be detrimental to any of the co-researchers as part of the conversation content that has been selected. None of the co-researchers expressed concern regarding this and most wanted their words to find a public hearing. They each had an opportunity to review a written transcription of their conversation and edit it in any way they chose. None of the co-researchers made any changes to their conversation in writing, although several of them enjoyed discussing it further with the researcher once they had read the transcript.

**Conclusion.** The guiding questions for this project seek to examine the transition experience of Black men who succeed in college. What were their experiences before going to college and how did those impact their transition? What was it like for them on campus and in the college classroom? What do they think is important to their success? How do they experience being a Black man? The initial intent was to meet with no more than 30 men, but data saturation was identified after 21 conversations. The interpretive validity of the themes has been satisfied with consensual validity, structural corroboration, referential adequacy, and critical reflexivity.
Chapter 4: Summary

Overview of the Students

There were 21 co-researchers who participated in conversations with the researcher. Table 2 below provides an overview of their self-reported demographics related to age, family background, and academics.
Table 2

Demographics as Self-Reported

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic status</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Senior (85+ credits)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Junior (56-84 credits)</td>
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<td>Sophomore (25-55 credits)</td>
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<td>Low/middle income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper income</td>
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<table>
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<td>Pontiac</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
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<td>Lansing</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years</td>
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<td>19 years</td>
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Average age 22.5 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPA (grade point average)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Range 2.1 to 3.8</td>
<td>Average GPA 3.0</td>
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</table>

| First generation                 | 14     | (67%) |

Note. N=21

Of the 21 co-researchers, 19 identify as Black, two identify as biracial, and two identify as homosexual. About 43% of the men are from low-income single parent homes in Detroit as listed in Appendix J. The majority (57%) are also first-generation college students as also outlined in Appendix J. Their majors are varied and may be reviewed in Appendix K.
A number of experiences were reviewed within each conversation and these are delineated in Appendix L. Nine of the men recall a family member being the first person from whom they heard about going to college, seven credit teachers, and five say their friends started the conversation about college. Most of them (57%) don’t remember hearing about college until high school, some 33% in middle school, and only a couple in elementary school. More than three-quarters of the men visited colleges before they enrolled, although a couple started at a school they had never visited until the day classes started. Only five of the men participated in a summer or bridge program to prepare them for their first semester of college. A majority (80%) of the men did utilize support services on campus once they began classes. They report studying an average of 2 hours per day, with a range of 1 to 6 hours per day.

Most of these men (80%) are members of a student organization and many of these are Black affiliated. Most of them (90%) are employed while enrolled in school and work an average of 17 hours per week. Eight of the men have already graduated from college and completed their bachelor’s degree. Of these, three are pursuing a master’s degree and five are employed full-time or seeking full-time employment. The remaining 13 are still enrolled as undergraduates. Appendix M outlines their activities with employment and student organizations.

**Profile of Six Students**

**David: What is real life.** David will be starting his fourth year at the small private Catholic university in the city suburbs and he is 22 years old. He’s majoring in communications and has a 3.0 GPA. He grew up living with his mother who has an associate’s degree. His father was involved in his growing up and he has a few college credits. David has summer employment as a counselor with a youth group in downtown Detroit. We meet at a nearby coffee shop. He is casually dressed in athletic wear, confident, and relaxed in his demeanor. He
smiles and laughs often, using his hands to express his thoughts. The summer program engages middle school students on a university campus located downtown. The children have an opportunity to get to know college students, to identify their own goals, and to consider going to college. David is energetic and positive about his work with the young participants but admits that he finds them difficult sometimes. Their questioning and challenging nature tries his patience on many the occasion. But he laughs and tells me how much he loves people and connecting with them individually, even when they get on his nerves. There is a sense of mission about his work with the children, too. David recalls his own youthful exposure to college with a GEAR UP program in the eighth grade. Those experiences were significant in shaping his expectations for going to college. He wants to give back to his hometown community and help others. David is open about his Christian faith and commitment to service as an extension of what he believes.

When David was six years old and living with his mother, his father put him on a soccer team. This was despite the boy asking to play football or basketball or even baseball. He remembers his father telling him that he wanted David to “learn how to do something without using your hands.” He enjoyed the experience because he was doing something his friends weren’t able to do. Early in elementary school he also accompanied his father to events at the auto plant where his father was employed. The events were often populated with only White people, and David eventually asked why they were “the only ones with White people.” His father told him it was important to know how to interact with people who were different from yourself. Today, David says he is comfortable around people and sometimes even more comfortable around White people.
While he remembers the idea of college as present growing up, he doesn’t recall any conversations about it with his family. He was raised by his mother who did not attend college. It was in a Detroit public middle school that David first considered college when he participated in GEAR UP visits to several universities. GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a federally funded program to expose low-income students to college experiences. There were no direct conversations in his home, but he experienced the expectation that he would go to college as “floating in the air.” By the time he was in the 11th grade, he knew that would be his next step after graduation.

There was a college fair at his Detroit high school, and David chatted with a representative from a campus he had visited. He thought that would be the school he would select. But the recruiter seemed indifferent and detached. That was a turn off to David who is warm and conversational. The school counselor pointed him to another table representing the small private university. There he connected with a Black man in his 20s who encouraged him to think with the provocative question of “What is real life and what does it mean to you?” David could be part of a program for Black men at this university that would provide mentoring, scholarships, and a lap top. He was still unsure about applying because his grades were poor. He confided this to the recruiter who invited him to participate in a ten-week program during his last semester of high school to see if it was really what he wanted to do. He made the application “on faith” as he felt unsure about how it would actually happen.

For 10 Saturdays starting in January and continuing through April of his senior year, David went to a classroom located in downtown Detroit on the same college campus where he’s now working this summer. He was with a group of other young Black high school men who had applied to the private university. There were different classes to develop their skills in writing,
math, reading, and communications. There was tutoring available. He was informed that one of the instructors would be his teacher in his first semester at the college, which he described as “definitely a positive thing.” The students also watched a number of videos and had conversations about what it means to be a Black man and how they could support other Black men. They would begin their first semester together as a cohort in a program that served as a bridge and they felt prepared.

There were lots of support services available for David once he began his first semester and he believes he took advantage of them because of what he had learned during the bridge program. TRIO, originally named for three programs, is a federally funded resource to support educational attainment that now includes eight programs. The TRIO office on David’s campus purchased the books he needed for classes. It also conducted lots of college skill development workshops. It was with the mentorship he found in the TRIO office that David says he learned how to communicate with professors and negotiate assignments. The writing support center was also a well utilized resource, and he’s worked there since his first year on campus.

David is doing well academically and eager to graduate soon with a solid 3.0 GPA. He’s focused his communication major on public advocacy to speak on behalf of others and is excited to explore his opportunities with it in the future. David says White people have often been helpful to him and he has not experienced racism personally. When the conversation was to be concluded and he was asked if he would like to add anything, David wants to talk about the Black Lives Matter movement. He’s critical of how it portrays Black people as victims and how quickly some people perceive themselves to be victimized. While David says that there’s truth in saying all lives matter, the movement is expressing how current events have left people feeling that their lives don’t matter. But while things may seem difficult, David believes it’s not as bad
or as big a problem as some say. He’d like to see things play out more progressively and inclusively, recognizing the opportunity for change and growth without blaming and finger pointing and violence. On a recent visit to the Philippines, David saw the U.S. culture from a new perspective. People he met there were poor, but to him they seemed to have morals and values. He witnessed them living their lives to the fullest with a level of contentment and joy. In contrast, he described both Black and White Americans as “self-idolizing” and doing very little with all the wealth and opportunity that is available. David would have talked longer because he has a lot to say, but it was time to return to his group and make plans for tomorrow’s activities.

Duke: Certain growth habits. Duke, gentle and easy in his demeanor, is anticipating graduation as he is a little more than halfway to his credit goal. He’s 22 years old and has been chipping away at classes for five years, supporting himself and paying his tuition and fees at the public regional university. His GPA is 2.1, and his major is journalism. We meet on campus there in a comfortable and private office that has lots of sunlight. Duke speaks directly with brevity and intensity. He is reflective and takes his time considering what he will say. Although he seems uncertain at times, he smiles readily and often as he sits composed and steady.

Duke grew up with both parents in the home, and they have always promoted education and been encouraging, especially his father, who has a GED. Duke remembers his father emphasizing the importance of college from as early as second grade. Later, his father would point to the supervisors at the utility company where he worked and describe their lifestyle as it compared to his. He said they were able to travel and spend more time with their families because they had an education. Although Duke’s family is middle income, they have not been able to support him much financially during his college years, and he has lived independently since graduating from high school.
Duke grew up in Detroit with his younger brother and both parents who worked outside of the home. He attended public schools in the city. Duke remembers being certain by middle school that he’d go to college. He had cousins who were in college, and recalls the experience of visiting them when he was younger. It was exciting to be on their different campuses, where everything seemed big and beautiful. Once he started high school, he met other students who were focused on going to college. They made their plans together for what they’d do after high school graduation. While many continued on to college, a lot of them have not persisted. Like Duke, they had to support themselves and ended up working long hours. He thinks those work schedules negatively impacted academic success. He sees people choosing “money over the degree” and stopping out. Duke has managed to work consistently and maintain his focus on earning his degree, even while attending part-time when necessary for financial or health reasons.

The distance from his family, because he moved 50 miles away to attend school, left him with a sense of loss. He feels he missed people he knew in the community getting older and dying while he wasn’t there. Duke struggled with depression, addiction, and later anxiety as a college student. He felt he needed to develop “certain growth habits.” Eventually Duke was feeling desperate and he reached out for help to move beyond these challenges. The counseling center on campus has been a source of direction and support as he struggled to manage his feelings. He continues to remain committed to his regularly scheduled appointments there. He says that all these difficulties “taught me my world.”

The most significant support in transitioning to college he received was a peer group of Black men on campus who met regularly with Black male faculty and staff. He describes this as a “safe haven where we…can voice our frustrations, voice our discrepancies, voice our
opinions…voice our triumphs.” It gave Duke a sense of pride and made him want to work even harder with his courses. He also worked with a success coach assigned to him by the university when he was briefly on academic probation. The coach showed him how to take control of his calendar, to schedule time to study, to use the library, and to implement study strategies. Duke also built relationships with half a dozen other staff and faculty on campus who he describes as pushing him and stretching him to succeed. Through all his transitions and changes, his girlfriend and several friends have remained steadfast. In fact, several of his friends transferred to his university so they could all be together more. These relationships have been grounding and affirming to him and it is obvious that he has invested the time and attention to sustain them.

Duke is majoring in journalism, although his early career choices were to be a meteorologist or a painter. But he said his mother always encouraged his love of writing and reading. She painted a picture of the kind of work he would do as a journalist, and Duke got the “bug.” With his first college classes in journalism, he “fell in love.” He also became involved on campus when he enrolled. As a member of several student organizations with predominantly Black membership, he expressed feeling “shut out” at times. Event space on campus was not available for what he felt was “no good reason.” Scheduled events that may have had a religious or peaceful purpose were heavily guarded by campus police. Duke expressed anger at being supervised and followed unnecessarily on more than one occasion. He would like to be seen as any other college student paying his way who has the goal of graduation. He would like to be treated with greater dignity and respect on campus. His voice hardens as he speaks of this perceived injustice and his eyes narrow with intensity. It has been hurtful to him and that is plain to see.
Duke expresses his faith in God as being purposeful in overcoming his challenges. He has already started his own business doing advertising and promotional copy work, and it has continued to grow successfully. He looks forward to the future with positive expectation and recited a long list of affirmations as he pounded his chest with conviction. As he shared these strong statements, he was most animated and excited. One day Duke wants to help his parents retire to a Caribbean island, and he plans to visit often. Although he expresses doubt that his father, who loves working, will ever stop, he knows his mother will welcome the peace and quiet. Duke also wants to give back to the children in Detroit in some way with special community programs that would help them just as he feels he was helped along the way. Other pieces of his future puzzle include a house, a wife, kids, and riding motorcycles.

Jake: You got to do good. Jake is tall and lean with an easy confidence in the way he moves and a warm smile. He is dressed professionally and appears confident. He enters the coffee shop where we meet, extends his hand as introduction, and quickly takes a seat to talk. Although he’s most business like, Jake is friendly and chats easily. He is a graduate of the public research university and now attending graduate school at the public regional university pursuing a master’s degree in educational leadership. Jake is 25 years old and newly married. He grew up in Detroit with two parents in a middle-class home and always expected to go to college although he doesn’t remember conversations about it.

It was his goal to be a physician, so he knew that would mean college and medical school. When it was time for ninth grade, Jake received a scholarship to attend a prestigious high school in the city suburbs. He lived on campus during the school year and was successful academically. But it was definitely a “culture shock” as there were few Black students. Somehow, he learned how to work with people and get along. He remembers the culture there as
being all about college, where you would go, and what you would study. It was pointed out to him that living in the dormitory there was an excellent experience to prepare him for college life. The environment was highly competitive, but he felt well equipped and applied to 10 universities. When he wasn’t admitted to his first choice, he decided to attend the public research university as it was only 50 miles from home and the financial package the most affordable. Family is important to him, and he was excited that they could now boast he was attending the school with their favorite athletic teams.

But Jake soon found he wasn’t as prepared for college coursework as he thought. It was so much more difficult than he expected and couldn’t be solved by just studying longer. His big goals weren’t enough to get good grades. More hours were carved out in his schedule to study as he balanced working on campus and class assignments. He started writing and rewriting information and lectures and seeking out academic support services. As a pre-med student, there was one science class after another to take, and Jake felt unprepared. Although the first year “didn’t start out well” and he failed several classes, Jake just took them again…and again in an effort to get a better grade. This is a determined young man who accepted the praise of his professor when he retook a class and raised the failing grade to a C+. It wasn’t what he hoped for, but he took pride in his persistence and embraced the effort. Eventually he changed his major to movement science to just graduate after four years: “I don’t feel like I belong here, so why should I continue and bust myself to be here.” His work as a resident advisor and in other student support services on the campus inspired him to continue with graduate school and focus on student affairs in higher education.

Jake was part of living and learning community for health science at the public research university. There are multiple communities like this at the university, as most of the students
enrolled live on campus. The students reside in dorms together, take similar classes, and have an opportunity to pursue faculty guided research as undergraduates. Jake remained connected to this “circle” of students throughout his four years in college. He joined the men’s glee club his sophomore year and enjoyed traveling with these men. It wasn’t until his junior year that Jake joined a Black fraternity, and this seems to be where he found the most inspiration. Although he described himself as being successful in assimilating to college life, being with other Black men was most beneficial: “Growing up you just be tough” but eventually you need “a space where you can feel that you can open up and not feel judged or not be put down or not feel vulnerable.”

Jake considers himself to be personable, caring, and empathetic. He seems mature beyond his years in many ways. He describes navigating his childhood in Detroit schools as being difficult. He was not the star athlete or the hustler with a wad of bills. He was “the nerd, the smart kid, and that’s not cool.” The dream of being a pediatrician propelled him forward even as he wondered how and where he would ever “fit in.” Jakes speaks eloquently about feeling he must always be more of a Black man than he is. When he excels academically, people act surprised as if they don’t expect him to do well: “It’s kind of like you never really fit into anything. It’s always this moving target.”

There were several incidents on campus of drive-by racial slurs shouted out at him from moving cars. It happened more than once, but he dismisses the incidents with the comment “they were drunk and it was what it was.” Although Jake was often the only Black person in his classes, he does not recall any experience where he felt singled out because of his race. As we talk for an hour, his frequent comment is “that’s an interesting question.” Then he pauses to think, collect his thoughts, and launches into his response.
Faith is important to Jake and he prays daily. He states that this defines his identity more than the color of his skin or his gender. The focus for him is more about being Christian than being Black. He feels there have been and continue to be so many paths and options in his future. There is uncertainty expressed about which to choose when there are “infinite possibilities.” So he releases his concerns and seeks to live contentedly in the moment awaiting direction in prayer about what he should pursue. With the deepening of his faith, Jake realized he had been stressed about “you got to do good.” Prayer helped him successfully adjust his career goals, move on from a failed relationship, and appreciate his daily life more. Meanwhile he plays basketball recreationally, watches sports on his TV, and savors the company of his new wife.

**Marcus: Condition the mind.** Marcus exudes energy and smiles openly. He is of medium build and has been referred by one of his friends. He responds eagerly, thoughtfully, and thoroughly with little prompting. The conversation is something he clearly enjoys. But he doesn’t wander in his reflection or get off point. We meet on his public regional campus one afternoon. He is concise, to the point, and speaks plainly about his experiences. Marcus is confident and comfortable describing his feelings and circumstances. He grew up in Detroit with both parents in the home and an older sister. They had a relatively comfortable middle-income lifestyle. He’s just finished his second year in college successfully and is 19 years old. He’s majoring in business management with a human resources concentration and has a 2.98 GPA.

It was grades that were important when Marcus was growing up, and his mother, who graduated from college, encouraged him to perform in school. But he feels the connection as to why grades mattered was missing. There was no long-term goal articulated, and he recalls no conversations about college. His parents thought he should be a professional baseball player and
“drilled” this into him. It was nothing he had any ambition to pursue because business is where he sees himself succeeding. In college, Marcus met students who had determined what university they would attend when they were very young. He heard how it had been actively promoted as a goal by the adults in their life. Marcus thinks this is missing in Black families and should be promoted sooner and more often with children. It’s a distinct difference he has observed between Black and White college students in how their expectations were formed growing up. He believes being more focused on education earlier with children builds a “productive and goal-oriented mindset.” Let’s talk about this in elementary school and “condition their minds” to “perfect themselves to get into their dream college.” Marcus is putting this in practice with his five young nieces and nephews and shares promotional videos about his college with them all the time.

When Marcus was in the eighth grade, the school counselor asked him if he was interested in going to college. He recalls his response as “Sure, I guess. I don’t really know.” But she told him that if he maintained a certain GPA, he would qualify for a scholarship. Although Marcus’s sister and mother had attended college, he does not recall any discussion in his home. His father had never attended. Marcus went to high school where his teachers and his peers talked about education being important for one’s career. He was able to select classes in business there which was his field of interest. In his junior year, “outta nowhere” he was told he qualified for the scholarship. He had watched seniors leaving and announcing where they would be going to college. So he decided he would definitely be going to college because it would be free.

The public regional university was not Marcus’s first choice. He thought he had the scholarship to attend the public research university and was excited to go there with his
girlfriend. She received the award and he did not. The university admissions office told Marcus to apply, even when he explained that his grades were “just okay.” They reassured him that he’d get help to “get on track” once he was enrolled. But he wasn’t admitted. He regretted that his grades weren’t better, but said he had never made the connection of why it would matter. He went to his high school counselor and asked what to do next. He’d been accepted at a number of other state universities, but finances were an issue. Fortunately, there was a scholarship available for the public regional university, and Marcus took advantage of it.

He had never visited any college campuses, not one, until the day he arrived on campus as a first-year student. College was just as hard as he had imagined it to be as he describes himself as not studying much in high school. He wasn’t motivated to study much his first year in college either and spent much of the week partying. He doubted himself after the first year when he had poor grades, but he decided to put in the work to be successful, taking advantage of university support resources. The freedom “to do what I wanted” challenged his focus because he had quickly developed a group of friends, and his girlfriend was 10 miles down the road at another school. But he managed to “discipline myself academically,” and once he experienced some good results for his efforts, he gained confidence. Marcus went to the library to study and developed his strategies for earning good grades. He needed help learning how to write a research paper and how to manage science lab coursework. The support services are what Marcus credits to helping him succeed academically.

Describing himself as very social and having an outgoing personality, he maintained two different groups of friends during his first year in college. These were “two completely different worlds.” One group consisted of five of his high school friends from back home in Detroit. They enjoyed partying and drinking and hanging out. They were popular with the rest of their
freshman class. The second group were the Black men who belonged to a support group of scholars who met regularly and associated with Black male staff and faculty. Marcus’s high school buddies weren’t interested in attending those events or joining any study sessions. The scholars were considered “nerds” and may have even been afraid to socialize too much and risk their grades, in Marcus’s opinion. But his goal was to be successful academically, so he said he was willing to “sacrifice a little” and study more. They had certain courses together his first two years and they often studied together. When the weekend came, he’d split his time between the parties and the library. Somehow, he managed to be part of both groups, although only a two of his five high school friends have continued in college with him. He also joined the NAACP and a Black men’s student organization. Marcus relishes being part of this “close knit community.”

Marcus describes the way he developed himself and came to feel more confident and comfortable just being himself. He calls it his “social character,” and he found it in being true to who he was. He decided to “display” his habit of being himself wherever he went. Being smart was something he found he really liked. He regretted all the times he had dumbed himself down to make other people comfortable or “fit the environment.” Marcus found his voice and decided that being the quiet one had just been part of his insecurity and immaturity. He has embraced being the knowledgeable person with something to say and considers himself outgoing today. With deliberate intention, he has started reading more frequently and more widely. He wants to be informed with his opinions, critical of what he reads, and comfortable with his own ideas: “College has molded me into just being myself.”

Perhaps some of this development has been a consequence of classes his first year in which there were only a few Black students in his classes. He felt very singled out. Marcus was uncomfortable asking questions or contributing in class discussions. He felt that everyone else
knew more than he did or knew something he didn’t know. Motivated to improve his grades, he finally started participating near the end of the semester. He was pleasantly surprised when several students asked to study with him for the final. After this experience, he decided to “step outside of that shell” he had created to protect himself. He could usually find one person who, he said, “would make me feel comfortable,” and that helped sometimes. But once he started initiating conversations and taking control, the feelings of discomfort dissipated. “Communication was the variable” that changed the dynamic for the better.

Marcus is very much about becoming, experiencing, and “moving past obstacles.” He thinks of life as a foot race and is convinced there are more obstacles in the lanes of Black men than any of the other runners. But he is proud and satisfied with his efforts to keep going and quotes a Black male motivational speaker who told him to love the process. He expresses gratitude for the challenges and experiences he has overcome. All the energy and exuberance of his childhood that he felt was suppressed is now celebrated. Marcus feels that Black boys who are active are too often told to sit still or relax or calm down. This conditioning may lead them to disengage from life and not be themselves. Like Jake, Marcus talked about the challenge of fitting in as a Black man. He thinks society tells men they can be one of two images: quiet and positive or loud and negative. The dichotomy is self-limiting. Marcus sees that some men can’t figure out what to do next to be successful. He observed this with his friends who were locked in their own behaviors and looking for the approval of others. Unwilling or unable to adapt and change, they pursued parties. If it means being different, perhaps they were afraid they won’t fit in. Somehow Marcus navigated the two sides he describes and is gleefully incorporating both into his phenomenal self.
Paul: Belonging and blending in. Paul stands tall and is solidly built with strong arms and broad shoulders. His hair is close cropped and his smile guarded. It would be easy to assume that he plays football at the public research institution where he is in his fourth and final year of studies in the nationally distinguished School of Business. He has a 3.0 GPA. But although Paul enjoys working out and playing basketball, he has dedicated himself to academics and not sports. He is well spoken and direct in conversation, maintaining a serious persona and a fixed face much of the time. We meet at a coffee shop near his apartment one afternoon, but he wants nothing to drink. Paul is strictly business.

Growing up in Pontiac, which is just outside of Detroit, he and his nine siblings were studying at the kitchen table from their early elementary grades. Paul remembers his grandmother telling them that education would be the means to break out of the cycle of poverty they saw all around them. The older cousins were involved with drugs and gangs. He understood that there was nothing “in the hood” for them. No one in their family had gone to college, but grandma made it clear there was a better life waiting for them with a college degree. He describes his family as low income and single parent.

When he was in the eighth grade, a suburban school’s Horizons-Upward Bound program selected Paul as a participant. The program would be at a private college preparatory PK12 day and boarding school located in a wealthy suburb of Detroit. The Horizons-Upward Bound program was established there in the late 1960s to educate Detroit area students who have “limited opportunities” (schools.cranbrook.edu/horizonsupwardbound) and equip them for success in college. It is federally and privately funded for the support of low-income students. Paul said he felt lucky to have been selected based on his ACT test score, which “was really good,” and an interview. In the tenth grade, Paul lived in a dormitory at Cranbrook. But he was
homesick and returned to his family for his final two years of high school in a district just north of Detroit.

Horizons-Upward Bound had an east coast college tour just before Paul returned to his family and changed schools. He said, “It made that dream of mine even more real.” He determined to work hard and fulfill his dream of college. The plan was to attend a HBCU with his cousin, but finances led him to attend the public research university where he received a full ride. Paul was enrolled in a bridge program to provide academic support and orientation to college life. He felt it was mostly too remedial, but enjoyed the writing class nonetheless. He negotiated an independent study instead of remaining in a math class he considered “two steps behind” what he had studied in high school.

Classes were much less difficult that he expected, although he observed that it required work and effort on his part to study. His ambition had been to major in sociology, but he heard about the prestigious business school. Everyone told him it was one of the “best degrees” and required lots of math classes. He was also told there were very few Black students admitted. This got his attention and he changed the plan to pursue a business degree and be one of the few. The business school curriculum was most challenging for Paul because of the group work. He believed that other students didn’t expect much of him because he was Black. He didn’t feel welcome in his classes and usually chose to “sit back in the corner” and get the grade with as little interaction as necessary.

The best thing Paul reports happening was in his first semester when he attended a Black Solidarity Conference at Yale as a member of his school’s Black Student Union. He applied to an HBCU hoping to transfer, but the scholarships were no longer available to him. Paul didn’t want to be where he was, and he didn’t feel welcome in an environment that was mostly White.
His grades suffered and he thought a lot about what he was working for. He describes himself as having “mental health issues” because, although he felt lucky to be at this university, he didn’t feel as though he belonged. Everything seemed to be “falling apart” and he had worked so hard to get where he was. Where all those efforts really worth it?

Paul found support joining a Black fraternity and studying at the university multicultural center. These groups felt like family to him and welcomed him warmly. Surrounding himself with people who looked like himself and had similar upbringings helped him feel safer, too. Paul was determined that he would overcome the drop in his GPA because of his first-year challenges and graduate successfully. He has persisted for four years, gaining admission to the School of Business, and now has only three remaining classes. Graduation is within reach. Paul has learned how to navigate both Black and White environments with ease, and he says, “I blend in whatever group I want to because I’ve been around all these groups.” He believes he can talk to anyone about anything because he’s learned how to read people for motives and intentions.

Paul has considered law school as his next career goal. This would be a good career for his long-term goal of entering politics. He hasn’t registered for the entrance exam yet, although he’s confident he would do well because he’s scored high on practice tests. But as graduation approaches in just a few months he thinks he’s done with school for a while. In the next few years he’d like to get a job and work, read and study the things he’s interested in, and travel more: “A lot of knowledge in this world has been hidden from us.” It feels to Paul as if he’s had it harder than most people and that he has done better than most people. He asks why the K12 education system is so inequitable 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education and wonders if there is intentional manipulation on the part of those with money and power to keep people poor.
and uneducated, especially people who are Black or Brown. It is a real question and yet the answer seems painfully obvious.

**Mark: Act more of myself.** His friends had encouraged him to see me and talk, so Mark and I meet at a diner he suggests near his parents’ home in Detroit. He is a slight but solid young man with gentle gestures. At first, he seems shy and guarded as he sits in the booth with his hands folded in front of him. It’s very loud in the small restaurant, so we decide to move to the front seat of my car in the parking lot to talk. Mark is 20 years old and has finished two years at the private university where he’s majoring in business administration and has a 3.2 GPA. He relaxes quickly without the all Black audience in the diner and talks with candor and in great detail about himself. Mark is confident and trusting. At the conclusion of our time together, he confides that some of the things he has shared were things he had only discussed with his family.

Mark’s mother “bashed” college into his head for as long as he can remember. He did well in high school, but he still had not applied to college in his senior year. One of his counselors asked him why he had not attended any of the college fairs or expressed any interest in college applications. He still can’t say why he had taken no action. Since eighth grade he had anticipated attending a public university located in downtown Detroit because his grandfather and aunt had gone there. He knew that if he had the qualifying GPA and ACT score he would have a full-ride scholarship because he had family members who were alumni. His GPA met the requirement, but his ACT score was too low. Without this generous scholarship assistance, Mark didn’t expect that he could attend college. After graduation in June, he returned to his high school to see the counselor. He was considering his options as a public regional university had offered him a $5,000 scholarship. But the counselor suggested a new six-week summer program the at the nearby private university was initiating that would help him transition successfully to
college. Mark and his mother agreed that the counselor’s advice was worth listening to, so he enrolled despite feeling that it would be no fun and waste his valuable summer vacation days. In retrospect, he says it was lots of fun, and he made good friends with other Black men there. There were 24 men in his cohort. Although the school is small and predominantly White, he knows that the support system made all the difference in his success.

Mark found that the experiences of his summer bridge program expanded his way of thinking about learning. The group visited the public regional university before classes started and met with a larger group of Black men there. The seminars and focus on communication were what he thought education should be about and these were the things he wanted to discuss and explore. The content of his bridge summer classes included computer proficiency and writing skills. But the first semester was still a challenge. Mark describes himself as a loner, an only child, someone who stayed to himself. Living in a dorm with two dozen other Black men who were also in classes, he found himself changed over time as he connected and established relationships. Several of them had attended high school with him. Although he says he “wasn’t ready to reach out or befriend people,” he now has solid friendships that he expects will last his lifetime. He gives credit to others when he acknowledges his academic success because “we all had to work together.”

The men played basketball at least once a week. They reminded one another about time and tasks. Mark said that when someone asked him about going to class, he wanted to act so as to encourage the other man to do the same or “he might start slacking.” These exchanges about responsibilities and agreements were respectful and intentional. They were about holding heads high, keeping promises, and following through to do what is necessary. A gentle but strong give-and-take built a sense of community and accountability to one another: “So when he ask me
about it, then I better be about it. And I got to do it just so we can clash back. So when he do the same thing, I say something to him.” This camaraderie with other Black men was critical for Mark as he adjusted to being in the predominantly and historically White space of the university. This was a new phenomenon because his family, school, and neighborhood had been exclusively Black.

When some of the students as a group were walking in a nearby neighborhood and heard the n-word shouted from a car, they looked to one another knowing they were right and the others wrong. Together they constructed an attitude that would enable them to move forward. Mark recalls a couple of different encounters that felt like racial profiling, but he was never alone when something happened. He and his friends recognize that there are obstacles associated with being a Black man in America. They’re not asking anyone to change, even if they do disagree. They only want to be treated with “respect and dignity.” Mark calls this “acting like who you are” and demands the same behavior from himself to act like who he is. To him this means being true to yourself and seeing the self in others. College has helped him, as he says, “to act more of myself,” and has released him from always measuring the opinion of others.

Mark has already taken out loans and paid them off in his second year. His parental income increased after his first year in college and he was no longer eligible for the same level of federal assistance. Mark also received scholarships from the private university. He has witnessed financial woes interrupt the education of many other students. Some of them were also commuting and often working. He saw that those who struggled most with time management didn’t persist. They may not have been able to resolve the challenge if they were both enrolled full-time and working full-time. So living and working on campus are opportunities Mark values as having been significant to his success.
Receiving all this help and support with college, has given Mark insight about himself. He recognizes how important the assistance has been for him and for the students he tutors in the TRIO center. He has worked there for a year and found that he can be of help to others. Now he identifies himself as a leader who encourages and lifts up others to be leaders themselves.

Mark said he wanted to forget about the racial profiling incidents: “But it happened.” He is comfortable talking about them in detail and trusting as he describes each situation. He laughs a bit awkwardly as he paints the picture of walking down a residential street one warm spring day and watching the front doors of houses close ahead of his path. He and his friend continue on their way past homes suddenly shut tight. They use what he describes as “the chip on your shoulder” as motivation to just work harder. He is determined to wring something positive out of a most negative experience. When I apologize for this thing happening, his response is somewhat resigned: “It’s gonna come with life.”

**Expanded Case Studies of Three Students**

**Charles: Education frameworks your perspective.** Charles is a tall and beefy young man who seems to fill the room where we meet to talk. He exudes strength and energy. He has a large head, close cut curly hair that is almost blonde, and big hands. He was raised by his White mother, who stopped attending school after the seventh grade, and does not have contact with his Black father. His is very conversational and expressive. It’s quickly evident how thoughtful and deliberate he is when responding to questions. He is in his sixth year at the public regional university majoring in social work with a 2.55 GPA. We meet in an office on the campus of the public regional university.

Charles was a high school athlete and loves football. He recalls the energy and the stress of applying to colleges in his junior year. All the applications were free because his school
counselor would submit them on his behalf. She had given him the application packets for a number of state schools, so Charles completed every application. He was filled with expectation and excitement even as he worried about taking the ACT. He would be the first person in his family to go to college. Then it was his senior year and Charles was back in the counselor’s office. He was going to be a father. He recalls exactly what the counselor told him about having two choices for what he would do after graduation: find a job or go to college. Unemployment was high at the time, so her recommendation was that Charles enroll in a community college. But he had bigger plans as he had decided to study nursing. He wanted to attend a four-year university and “set the bar high” for himself. Then the letters of denial began to come from all the schools to which he’d applied. Charles had a GPA that was “pretty crappy” and a 17 on his ACT. Two universities offered him a conditional admit that would require meeting certain stipulations. One was in Detroit, and one was the public regional institution 50 miles away.

Charles wanted to get out of the city, and he had visited the public regional university. In fact, it was the first college campus he ever visited and one of the conditional admits he was offered. He went back for a program interview and was impressed that day with the beauty of the campus. The big clock on the library seemed to tell him, “This is where I wanna be.” It would mean participating in a summer program of coursework while living on campus and completing the credits with a 3.0. Charles said yes even though he disliked the restraints of the summer program. There would be no phone, no TV, no visits home during the week, and no parties. The schedule was highly structured with study groups, classes, work on campus, meals together, and everyone in their dorm room by 8 pm. Charles describes it several times as a “boot camp.”
Despite chafing at many of the program’s restraints and testing boundaries, Charles was successful. He was with people he didn’t know, but there were girls to flirt with and everyone was in the same boat. Charles learned to study, something he said he didn’t bother with in high school, where he was focused on sports and his social life. The satisfaction he experienced from preparing and performing well on tests was a new experience. When he received the award for most improved at the end of the program, he realized his potential had been recognized and supported. Meanwhile, he waited on the birth of his son as fall classes commenced.

Weekends that summer Charles was doing painting work with his uncle. This is the man he calls his mentor and credits with his persistence in college. When Charles was in high school, his uncle would come and pick him up for long walks together. The uncle was doing this to improve his own health, but it provided them with hours of time to talk. His uncle also employed him to do home maintenance work with him. They cleaned gutters or painted, and they talked then, too. The uncle would “preach the importance of being a good person.” Charles remembers, “If you see a kid anywhere, they’re struggling. So take the shirt off our back and give it to him if he needs it. I’m doing that for you. I’m helping you. I just want you to pass it on to somebody else.” In these moments together a positive work ethic was established, and it would prove critical to Charles being successful.

Charles expected college to be more difficult and “way outside of my means.” Instead he found it to be something he could do by utilizing the strategies he was learning in his summer program. Instead of relying on his memory as he had in high school, he started writing things down and using the calendar on his phone. He used his course syllabi as a contract to be read and read again to keep on track. Charles always communicated with his instructors and participated actively in classes. This was something that came naturally to him and he enjoyed
the relationships and interactions. He had made many new friends on campus over the summer and established some good routines. Then fall classes began and he suddenly had “so much freedom.” He describes it as “too much freedom at one time after being so restrained.” The distraction of awaiting his son’s birth in December was a particular stress for him. So he and his son’s mother were navigating new relationship terms as well. The classes were hard, and his GPA fell below 2.0. Charles was on academic probation, and his son entered the world. He remembers feeling demoralized and helpless.

He thinks his “mindset” at the time was unwilling to take advantage of every opportunity. He was homesick for his friends and the old neighborhood. But Charles “buckled down” to reading, taking notes, highlighting, reading more. He recognized his second semester classes as being the “make or break point” in his college career. So he implemented the structure and strategies he learned in his summer program. “I didn’t have anybody helping me or anything. I was doing it myself.” In hindsight, Charles says he should have asked for tutoring help instead of trying to do it all on his own. It just contributed to his stress bearing the burden alone. He felt he was trying as hard as he could in the time he spent studying. Unfortunately, most of his time was taken up with going to the gym with friends, volunteer work, and his job delivering pizzas on four 12 hour shifts every weekend. He wasn’t in the library at all.

The girlfriend back home, his son’s mother, was finishing her last year of high school and thought Charles should be making more money. She wasn’t so sure that college was the best use of his time. Then she broke up with him and Charles fell apart. He went to an advisor in tears “freaking out” and thinking he was going to quit. The advisor gently walked with him across campus to the counseling center where he would get support enough to continue. They prescribed an anti-depressant that Charles took for a couple of weeks. It helped him process his
feelings. But then he wanted no more of the drug therapy. Charles had seen the consequences of addiction and substance abuse in the chaos of his childhood upbringing. But his mother has been clean now for over a decade and she encouraged him to visit with her therapist, too. Charles didn’t continue with this counselor because it took extra time to drive back and forth from the city. He also found this therapist spent too much of the session off topic talking about himself.

Charles began to discern what being a good counselor looked and sounded like. The questions the counselors at the college clinic asked him got him thinking about his own feelings and decisions. He began to see how consequences were connected to his actions and his excuses no longer made sense. Things turned around quickly, and Charles felt more in control:

I just didn’t have time for therapy. It was just get up and go, you know. I didn’t really realize what being weak minded was until I caught myself being weak minded, you know. I’m like, “you can either think of it this way or you can think of it that way.” And you go look at somebody else that’s actually weak minded and you’re like, “Wow. I’m glad I’m not like that.” It’s actually amazing. And then you see the opposite. You see somebody that’s not weak minded. You see somebody with a strong mind and I wanna be like that. I should be able to think like that.

He decided to overcome his depression with a high level of determination and positive self-talk. He wouldn’t let himself linger in the bed or miss class but would push himself to get up and go out to do his work.

The college math class was a particular challenge for Charles. There were four remedial classes required because of his placement scores. He had to take two of the four twice to move forward. Charles doesn’t like math but is confident that he knows how to do it. He wanted to get the college math class completed as quickly as possible. It took him three years. Charles
didn’t have patience with doing the problems for homework. His logic was that if he could solve a couple of them, then why should he have to do 50 problems. Tests would be a passing grade, but lack of homework submitted would mean his final grade was a C-, and he needed a C to take the next remedial math before moving on to college level math. He relied on the math tutoring center to help him pass every class eventually. He continued working almost 40 hours a week because now he had child support and the Friend of the Court was involved.

Charles thought nursing might be a way to give back as his uncle had always promoted. So he volunteered at a nearby hospital for three years when he started college. Unfortunately, the hospital environment was not what he imagined it to be. He found it depressing and, despite the promise of good pay, unappealing. Biology classes were presenting a challenge as well. He felt ill prepared for these classes, as well as other courses like anthropology and economics. Although he enjoys reading, the vocabulary in these courses impacted his comprehension and understanding. Today, he says he knows to look up an unfamiliar word immediately and then put it to use. But at the time he just felt stuck and wondered why he didn’t understand what he was reading. Other students from better high schools seemed to know what was going on and would tell him they had done all this before. He enrolled in four different college biology classes and took two of them twice. Tutors were available, and Charles met with them for help, but he didn’t feel it made a difference. When he finally passed one of the biology classes, an instructor who knew him well by that point asked what was different. Charles responded that his “brain just matured” and that he’d put in more time on his own to understand the “big terms.”

In his volunteer work, Charles recognized how much he liked helping people, he liked listening to people, and he had benefited from his own counseling experiences on campus. When he shared his distaste with pursuing nursing with an advisor, she asked him about social
work. “What’s social work?” he responded. She gave him a packet with lots of job descriptions for working in the profession and suggested he take a couple of entry level courses. Charles loved the conversations in class about “controversial topics” related to race, gender, and class. He felt he could relate to all of it and find a means of expressing his passion:

I had no idea about disproportionate social inequalities. I was like, “Man, people get mad about this stuff all the time. But they don’t understand it from the angle I’m getting it at right now.” And it still holds true to this day. And it’s amazing how education just frameworks your entire perspective.

Now in his senior year, Charles has continued to work long hours, but he puts the time into studying. He takes more notes and reviews content more frequently. Ironically, his higher-level classes seem easier to him now that he spends 15 hours a week in preparation.

Not surprisingly, Charles had little time to participate in any student organizations, even though he considers them to have real value. He was recruited by a fraternity but didn’t think he needed to “buy friends” and nixed it when they told him membership would be $1,000. He’s still friends with some of the men in that fraternity “just because [they] like each other’s company.” The closest friends Charles has known from middle school. There are four men who still enjoy one another’s company and get together often. His best friend completed an associate degree and his other friends started out in college but didn’t persist. Charles feels that these men are like family to him: “They don’t steal and they don’t rob and don’t do stupid stuff. Two of them got a house. One of them’s getting ready to get married, you know. So I mean, they’re all pretty stand up citizens. Good people.”

When he thinks about other people he knows who didn’t finish college, he believes they had parents who did “too much for them.” One of his friends, who may have been gifted
intellectually, still lives in the basement dependent on his parents. Charles obviously cares about this young man who left school before starting the 10th grade. His friend struggles with anxiety and depression, so Charles has tried to visit him often and encourage him. He sees his friend clothed, sheltered, fed, and even given a car. But he’s “debilitated” because his parents do all this for him. Charles thinks you have to want something enough that you’re willing to work hard for it. In the face of obstacles and barriers, you just “got to get over that.” Once you push it aside, “it’s not even a thing anymore. It’s over with.”

Charles at first says that he’s never encountered racism on campus. While things have happened to him out on the street, he thinks “people are more educated in college for them to act like that or treat someone like that.” He’s always felt comfortable and chosen to be actively engaged in all his classes even if he’s the only man or the only person of color. “Plenty of times” off campus he’s had to deal with racism. But he’s proud to identify as a Black man: “I embrace it. I know my history, so I mean I think knowing what my culture’s gone through and what they’re still doing kind of motivates me, you know.” He recognizes that he is “being judged” in the world, but that doesn’t stop him from being true to himself. He has worked hard to shape himself as an exceptional man.

But at the end of our conversation Charles shared an event that has had lasting impact for him. One cold night walking with a friend, they were stopped by campus security officers. His friend is also bi-racial and described as a “little kid…He was little. He was small.” In contrast, Charles described himself as “big…I fit the picture of a thug.” The officers asked who they were selling drugs to and Charles was shocked. He had a cup of coffee in his hand and his “Detroit skullcap on cause it was wintertime and you buy it at the gas station.” He was searched and his friend was not. They took his student ID to scrutinize and took his belt off to check his pants and
pockets. Charles continued to assert that he had no drugs and did not use drugs. When they
found nothing on him, both men were allowed to continue on their way. He knew his friend used
and sold drugs but didn’t know if he was carrying anything and wasn’t about to point that out to
the officers. The “little kid” was never searched and his ID not checked. There were no charges
of course. Charles was so angry about being profiled that he wrote a letter to the university
president to say “why [he] was here and what [he] was trying to do with [his] life.” No response
was forthcoming from university officials. Two years later a background check was done when
Charles was applying for his internship at the county sheriff’s office. He was told, “Yeah, we
have an incident of stopping you with something about weed.” He found this “crazy.”

Charles is quick to say that he has one demeanor hanging with his friends and another
when he’s in a professional setting. He has also learned how to manage his temper and
frustration interacting with others because “two wrongs don’t make a right.” Being reactive and
responding emotionally had been to his detriment in the past and taken him in the wrong
direction. “I been in plenty of fights.” He’s intentional about controlling his behavior in any and
all situations. It’s important to him that he responds in a manner to exemplify his belief that
patience and kindness are the better way of being. This self-control has become a personal
strength, a source of pride, and evidence of his greater awareness. One thing Charles has
observed is that people may know something is right but behave otherwise and not practice what
they preach. He is determined to walk his talk.

Because he identifies as multi-racial and describes his background as “diverse,” Charles
is comfortable in any environment. He attributes this to his being open-minded and having an
understanding of different cultures. Bringing the world to greater tolerance and acceptance is
important to him, in part because he is a father. Charles has always spent time each week with
his son and, in fact, has had the Friend of Court enforce his visitation rights. He is a dedicated and committed father who invests his time, as well as his money, in being with his son. Being strong for his son is the only real option he entertains. The other choice would be to quit and he’s not having that:

I never quit anything in life. The only thing I ever quit in life was playing sports was because I became a father and I gave up that time commitment for a different time commitment. I never, you could ask, I never quit anything. I tried. I may fail at something. But I’ll never quit. I know that someone trying is more of a man than somebody who never showed up. You know what I’m saying? I know people always say when you get older you don’t wanna have any regrets when you look back. So if you wanna do something, at least try it. Give it your all and if it doesn’t work out, you can always say I tried.

His son is a chief motivator for Charles, and he references him often as reasoning behind his decisions. Should he buy a flat screen TV? What if his son needs something the next month and Charles can’t afford to get it because he bought the TV? He briefly agonized over the purchase of an automobile that cost him $9,000: “This is the most expensive thing I own, and it just didn’t feel right to me.” But he needed reliable transportation for getting to school, getting to his jobs (one of which is delivering pizza with his car), and getting to his son. Still, he worries that he will not have enough money for his son.

Charles wants to be there for his son, his sisters, his friends. If any one of them were to ask for something, he wants to say, “I can help you with that.” He describes this as “[his] purpose.” Although he states that he is disconnected for his family, he dreams of having lots of close relatives and leaving “generational wealth behind.” Long term, he’d like to serve in
politics as a lobbyist or as an elected representative at the state level. He wants to be involved in policy making to positively “impact other people’s lives.” Charles likes to stay on top of political issues and believes greater diversity among those making decisions is needed. He is fearful about the discrimination he may encounter applying for work after graduation. But he references a Black man who served as his social work internship supervisor as being “credible” and respected. This is what he aspires to be and how he is choosing to be.

Noah: 365 Days of Being Black. Noah and I meet at a summer camp in west Michigan where he is employed as a counselor with middle school children from a city nearby. It’s a lovely day and we’re able to sit outside comfortably next to one another at a picnic table. Noah’s friends from the private university encouraged his participation and he is available on a day in between student sessions. We don’t see anyone else on the property during our time together. Noah is slight in his build, slim and refined. At first he sits sideways, talking with me over his shoulder as if to feel me out. Although he seems guarded at first, he is open and talkative. Soon he turns full around to face me and speaks with courage and conviction. After we have talked about half an hour, Noah wants me to know that he is a “homosexual.”

Noah grew up in Detroit with his mother and grandparents. He doesn’t know his father. He is currently in his fourth year at the private university majoring in communication and maintaining a 3.1 GPA. He recalls one of his friends in eighth grade talking about scholarships for college. But to Noah this seemed “beyond [his] reach.” He remembers, “It just felt unattainable. It was just something that was not really reachable. Like I wasn’t gonna be able to do it.” His teachers talked about the importance of studying and getting good grades. But to Noah it didn’t seem to matter because he couldn’t even imagine himself going to college. One of his friends during senior year of high school was “really, really ambitious about college, all the
time talking about scholarships.” Noah listened but didn’t participate. “I wasn’t ready for it at all.” He visited a number of colleges while in the ninth grade, but they all seemed “too big” for him. He didn’t feel anything except “terrified” by the thought of finding his way on those campuses. Math anxiety led him to think that he’d never be able to succeed in college.

One day a representative from the private university came to visit his predominantly Black high school in Detroit. Noah had never visited this small school located just outside the city limits. When the school counselor called Noah from chemistry class, he’s was gleeful to get out of a class he “hated.” The representative was coordinator of a program recruiting and supporting Black men. Noah had met some other college reps at his high school and not been impressed. They made him feel that they were just “trying to get you” and “get our numbers up.” This person was different because it seemed: “There was just something more. I felt like it was really serious.” He applied to a number of schools after that, but knew that he would go to the private university if he was accepted because of how he felt that day: “No one really showed an investment like he had.” And once he visited the campus, he “was so excited.” This was the place where he could go after high school and make his way.

This journey has not been easy. Noah explained: “I didn’t have anyone to teach me about college. Not only about college, but I didn’t have anyone to guide me. I didn’t have a format, a platform, a navigation, a way to navigate through those resources.” Fortunately, he was connected to a bridge program at his university with support from a TRIO program. TRIO is a federally funded initiative with multiple components, one of which is to provide various supports for low-income undergraduate students. The man who had recruited him was developing a cohort model for first year students who were Black men. Noah needed this because he had only thought of college as an “extension of high school.” The amount of freedom and autonomy he
found living on campus was daunting at first. It was “this whole new world and [he] wasn’t familiar with much of it.” Time management was one of his biggest hurdles. Noah found he had lots of decisions to make about how to use his time even with the guidance of his program advisor:

It was really hard to manage my time because I wasn’t used to having so much freedom, like being so free and having so much free time. You go to this class and it’s three hours long and then you have nothing to do the rest of the day. I don’t have to do anything else? Really? I don’t have to go anywhere else? I can eat lunch if I want? I can go to sleep if I want? I can do whatever? Wow. It was so much free time I didn’t know what to do with it all….I had structure, but it wasn’t enough. I thought I had to de-transition my mind completely and flush a whole bunch of stuff out and bring a whole bunch of new stuff environmentally, which was kind of confusing to do.

All that and, as Noah described, “Being in this classroom with all these White people. They’re not me. I don’t know exactly what to do.” So he decided to cultivate some White friendships, something he had not experienced in his predominantly Black high school and neighborhood: “I hung around with a lot of White people that first year.”

The college classroom meant sitting in a three-hour psychology class with a “very long-winded” instructor and only a few brief breaks. Noah nodded off more than once, even though he deliberately sat in the front row to keep himself focused. His head would “fall on the table.” One day the instructor pulled him aside and told him that he “needed better class etiquette.” Adjusting to the different styles of teaching in his classes was difficult. One teacher was “extremely slow” and another was “sporadic and all over the place.” Noah studied with friends and they helped him sort this out. He was reassured talking with other students that he wasn’t
the only one confused when reviewing class notes that were “a spider web and all jumbled up.”

After one failing grade on a test first semester, he told himself, “I can’t be getting no more ‘Fs.’
What do I need to do?” The small classes provided him with an opportunity to “have access to
teachers and go up and talk to them.” It was a deliberate choice on his part to “interact with
these teachers and let them know [he’s] trying.” By the time he entered his second semester, he
had dramatically increased the amount of time he was studying. His GPA went from 2.6 to 3.5,
and Noah was pleased with himself:

That first semester I didn’t do as well as I wanted to. I passed all my classes, but that
wasn’t really enough for me. I didn’t wanna be average. And I felt like my entire high
school career I had been average. And I just felt I’m not an average person. So being
what I would think, what I thought were average grades as not really pleasing to see. So I
had to make a really big adjustment. And I did a lot more, a lot better the next
semester….That first semester I felt like I was thrashing around just trying to see. Even
though I was told “This is what you do.” I’m thrashing around trying to figure out on my
own. And then second semester I thought, “Well, that didn’t work. So I have to do
better.”

Noah was pleasantly surprised with how well he performed with his writing assignments.
He’s always enjoyed writing and felt it came “naturally” to him. Nonetheless, he wasn’t sure he
could handle college writing, which he knew would be an important requirement. He had his
first essay reviewed at the writing support center “multiple times” and earned an “A” grade. The
teacher looked at him and said, “You did really good.” He hadn’t expected it to be quite that
easy to write at a college level. This encouraged him to continue writing for purpose and
pleasure. He has been employed by the writing support center on campus to assist other students
with their work since that first year. Noah is working on a book he’d like to publish “about being Black and racism.” He intends to write something every day for a year and was already on day number 202. The book will be titled “365 Days of Being Black.”

It was during this first year that Noah says he “started the journey for finding” himself. He felt some resentment with his family because: “They couldn’t offer me any advice at all” about how to do college. By his second year he realized: “They didn’t have the resources, they didn’t have the tools to help me. So I couldn’t blame them for what they didn’t have.” He also became aware of racism, especially during the second semester of his first year. The cashier at the campus bookstore asked for his ID before accepting his debit card. The White students with him were not asked for theirs: “And what does that mean?” Noah also received a number of scholarships that semester for his sophomore year. He had written and submitted many applications. As he received notice of his awards, he was eager to share the good news with his new White friends. He is quick to say that he wasn’t “prideful or arrogant, just happy.” The responses surprised him. They told him that they couldn’t compete with Black students who have the same income because the Black student would always get preference in receiving a scholarship. They told him that “Black people have so much. You have BET (Black Entertainment Television). Can you imagine if there was a WET?” None of this set well with Noah and it felt “innately wrong” to him. But he didn’t think he had “the resources or knowledge to compete with this information.” It was a lot to unpack. So he just told his friends that if they only applied for a few scholarships they weren’t working the odds in their favor. And maybe their essay was bad: “It’s about the story that you bring when you’re applying for a scholarship.” But he saw them in a different light after that.
During the summer between his first and second year in college, Noah was hired to work as a counselor with a new program on campus. It would be an extension and expansion of the bridge program supporting Black men enrolling for their first semester. He would be with other counselors to support a cohort of 25 incoming Black men taking their first college classes. It meant “keeping track of all these people and being in charge of them 24/7.” It was a lot of responsibility for what Noah considered “not really very good pay,” and it was “very stressful” for him. The Black Lives Matter movement started that summer in response to the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Noah started listening to “a lot of podcasts talking about racism.” And then he started talking about racism with anyone and everyone: “Racism is more than just prejudice. It’s the system and it’s power.” There were arguments with others when Noah would assert that Blacks cannot be racist because they don’t have the power to do to Whites what has been done to Blacks. He came to see that information is not always easy to find and what seems to be true may be in fact false and vice versa. Noah struggled to find a way to express his struggles with understanding racism:

You have to recondition yourself before you are able to really detect it. Before you are able to accept it…and so there’s a lot of internal that you have to work through before you can really accept a lot of things.

When he posted on social media that “we have a responsibility to dismantle racism,” one of his White friends responded with “we have a responsibility to tackle ignorance.” Noah replied to her saying that it’s not fair to “tell people who are disenfranchised by a system that they have never created and are not responsible for and have no power over that they have a responsibility to clean it up.” His friend didn’t like this, and they fell out. It didn’t help that she was dating a Black man she described as hard to find in the dark because he was dark skinned or that she used
the n-word in some of her posts. There were several other White friends with whom he engaged on social media and from whom he grew apart: “They were not who I thought they were.” He didn’t want to hear about “all lives matter” when the issues of racism were so piercing to him. There were problems with his Black friends, too, who he perceived as holding “self-hating concepts.” Noah was feeling overwhelmed by it all:

I remember feeling hopeless and also really spurred on to learn a lot more. And then I also went into a really deep depression for a year… I started really feeling inadequate and stupid. My brain has never really worked the way other people’s brains works….I always felt I was stupid for a really long time. I was told that by family and all kinds of things….I thought about suicide a lot…. I didn’t wanna get out of my bed. It [depression] was my best friend and also my worst enemy because it caused a lot of problems. And I wouldn’t go to class sometimes.

Noah was also worried about having to take a required class in math. At one point in high school he’d been tested for a math disability because he was convinced that’s why numbers didn’t make sense to him. He did not have a math disability, but it still seemed an insurmountable hurdle to him. And so he worried.

Noah talked with a therapist on campus at the counseling center who encouraged him to consider taking medication for his anxiety and depression. She was a graduate student and he continued to see her for a couple of years until she graduated. But without insurance to cover the cost of medication, he just continued to suffer. He confided in his mother, who told him to “pray about it” when he felt suicidal or sad. She told him she hoped he would get better, but could offer nothing more. After his second year, Noah had a summer study abroad class in France, which proved a welcome distraction. Then he returned to work at an amusement park several
hours from his home in Detroit. Living there with other workers was very stressful for him, and his mood darkened. All he wanted to do was sleep all day, but knew that would get him fired. He often called a suicide hotline, but felt that he was taking time from others who needed the help more. He bought a bus ticket back to Detroit, left the job a few days early, and felt “empowered” by doing so. Returning for his third year of college, he was still in a deep funk. He was even late a lot for his job at the writing support center, a place he loved:

I can’t keep doing this. I listened to a lot of gospel music every day and I thought, “I can do this.” Eventually I think I just realized that no one was gonna come and save me. No one was gonna come and do the work that needs to be done to get out of this for me. If I want to be out of it, I have to do it myself. Which was painful and I think something people had been telling me that before. But I had rejected it because I had thought, “What do you mean no one’s gonna come and help? I need help here.” Eventually I realized I had to do it myself….Being able to take care of myself is something I didn’t think I would be able to do.

Noah made a conscious decision to persist and continue with his courses despite the feelings with which he struggled. Just as he had made a conscious decision to avoid using drugs or alcohol because he was certain that would bring its own “pressures and stress.”

There was another study abroad in Ireland just before he started his camp counselor position. He reconnected on this trip with an older male student he considers a friend. This was welcomed because he had become estranged from most of his social group. They had “grown apart” as he had to take a stand on racial issues and express his opinion. Noah couldn’t overlook or ignore racism anymore. Nor did he want to have to “explain racism to White people.” He has taken responsibility for educating himself on the topic and thinks others can do the same: “I feel
if you wanna know something, you’ll get up and find it or you’ll work towards it. Because knowledge is everywhere….So if you wanna know something, it’s easy.” Having to speak on behalf of Black people is “just exhausting.”

Noah acknowledges that he received a lot of resources to support his transition to college. But those were there for others to utilize and some of them didn’t do so: “It’s the willingness to accept those resources and use them.” Why is the transition so challenging? In Noah’s opinion, it’s more than just a shift from high school to college:

It’s from one environment to the next which are drastically different from each other.

When I got to college, I remember there being this expectation that you can’t act a certain way around White people. You have to act for the most part with their comfort in mind in order to make them feel comfortable and behave in a certain way. This may have been the biggest shift for some of his peers. Noah is quick to add that he would never “bash” anyone else because you never know what someone else is going through. Yet he sees himself as someone who was willing to grow, who sought out help, and who changed.

Noah was eloquent in describing the dichotomy of oppression with the gift of being Black in America: “I guess I have to use two words about being Black or being a man or being a Black person period. I would say it’s beautiful, but it’s also a really deep struggle.” As a gay man, he has experienced what he calls the “rigid” expectations around masculinity. Men are discouraged from hugging or having physical contact “without a hand obstructing us in between.” Working with school age children as a camp counselor has been especially challenging because he hears them using the word gay as a put down and insult with one another: “To them gay is synonymous for bad.” This makes him feel very sad. One of the regular campers is a White child who uses the n-word when speaking of her adopted Black sister. When
Noah told her not to use that word ever again, she responded that it’s what her mother calls her sister all the time: “That’s what we call my sister.” He is concerned that the Black child will “grow up hating herself…she’s drinking poison from the tap.” It is obvious how much he cares for the children in his charge and he confesses to “worrying about them all the time.”

Noah believes that to be Black is to be have “privilege” even with the “oppression” and the “patriarchy” of our culture. He delights in his ethnicity and is proud of the strength it represents:

America as a tree that is poisonous….If you plant a tree and its seeds are poisonous, then everything that comes from the tree will be poison. And so cutting off branches of the tree, aka rectifying laws or whatever, won’t mend because all of it still comes from poison.

Noah described being in predominantly White spaces: “I feel like I’m grieving and everyone else is walking around fine. People are talking and trying to talk and I’m grieving.” He wants to ask them if they see what he sees or feel what he feels about injustice and inequity. Sometimes he does ask, and the response never satisfies him: “If they do, it’s momentary. It’s like, ‘Man, that’s awful. It’s sad.’ And then they move on to the next thing and it’s over and I’m still stuck here feeling this.” Sometimes he attempts to create a “distraction” for himself with music or writing. But then he hears the news announce that another Black man is killed: “It’s just like I can never take a break. There’s no real break. There’s just moments that aren’t as bad. And moments that I don’t have to think about it as much as I usually do…But I try my best."

**Dante: Intentionally underwhelming.** Dante’s smile is warm and cheerful when we meet at a local coffee shop near his apartment on the campus of the public research university.
This will be his fifth and final year of enrollment. He is dressed casually in jeans, a jacket, and a ball cap. But somehow the immediate impression is of someone very pulled together and professional. Maybe it’s the tie he’s wearing. He is tall and seems confident and composed. But I soon learn he has had his share of struggles and that his easy smile belies his sensitive nature. He wastes no time getting to the point of how stress got the better of him.

It was just a given that Dante would attend this large research university. His mother, who has a master’s degree in “something like human resources,” has friends who are alumni and the families spent summer weekends together while Dante was growing up. He remembers as early as elementary school that the cottage up North they visited was decked out in the university theme in dishware and decor. He was “brainwashed” to think that’s where he must go. He also knew that he wanted to be an engineer, like his aunts who are mechanical engineers and who held degrees from two other public universities in the state. Their brother, Dante’s father, did not go to college but “did well” working as an electrician.

Dante remembers being recognized growing up as “a smart kid, the special one who automatically gonna get into whatever university” he selects. His family members, cousins and kin, talked about him. They would say, “Oh, he’s always thinking about something, you know. He’s constantly having deep thoughts. You know, you don’t bother him because he’s got a lot on his mind.” But at his predominantly Black middle school in Detroit he doesn’t recall any talk of college from teachers or staff. By the time he remembers the topic coming up, he was in high school and Dante’s mind was made up as to where he wanted to go. There had been visits with a cousin who was attending the favored university. She was pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering, too. Dante met her friends who were Black, and they hung out together:
“Everybody was so relaxed and cool….They were all very nice and inviting and they all wanted to hear about my own experiences which was kind of new for me.”

He worked hard in the high school AP calculus class available to him because of his standardized test scores and academic performance. The students at his high school had advocated for this class be offered for them and petitioned the principal for it to happen. Later, he would question its curriculum and content. The summer before his senior year, Dante attended a special program for 30 students at the university for “engineering exposure.” Each participant completed and presented a portfolio of their high school accomplishments including “all the classes that we’ve taken, the extracurriculars, the volunteer service, the employment.” There were 12 who received scholarships of $10,000 per year for four years, and Dante was one of them. Now he was assured that he could be admitted to the university of his dreams.

But he also knew he’d need more money for tuition, so Dante started applying for scholarships. His family had lost their home a few years before in the 2008 recession when his mother was laid off and there was little work for his father. Even though they were able to recover financially, Dante didn’t want them worrying about paying for his education. He was motivated to find scholarship money and submitted many applications. Dante won two significant regional scholarships that would help him cover all his college expenses: “I won more than enough money to go to college debt-free all the way up to a PhD program.” One of these was from the General Motors Foundation and Dante was the first Black person to receive this award. There was a lot of recognition and acknowledgment in the media for his success and distinction because the total amount he won was large and substantial. He was “on nationwide news for winning so many scholarships.” When it came time to apply for college, there was only one application he thought was worth completing, even though he had thought he wanted to
apply to lots of schools. He handled the applications from several other schools, including one out-of-state although the costs would be prohibitive. But in the end, he completed and submitted only one application and that was to the public research university that had long been held up to him as a worthy ultimate goal.

The summer before beginning his first year in college, Dante attended another select program on the campus with 60 students, several of whom he knew from his program the preceding summer. The group was “diverse,” and he was pleased to meet some other Black students. “So I had that community. I had that feeling.” The feeling he describes as a belief that he could do anything and everything. He could party and get good grades and “accomplish so many things.” The first semester was to be “just the starting point and …[he] would be spring boarded and propelled forward even more.” Dante acknowledges that he experienced doubt but attributes his accomplishments to having a “network of people to rely on.” He was able to “just collaborate and succeed together” with his Black friends from the summer programs. His roommate was someone he knew from middle school and they became fast friends during their first year. His high school girlfriend was part of his social circle, too, as she was attending the same university.

Dante said he “found out early” that it was easy to ask questions and seek out help from instructors and tutors. Although he sometimes observed “they might have treated [him] differently than someone else which [he] had seen.” The hardest thing was “feeling like [he] belonged.” He recalls an introductory engineering class that first semester where students generated a product concept with steps to make it a reality. After their presentations, one of the other students had them complete a questionnaire that was part of a research project she was doing. Although Dante can’t recall exactly how the questions were worded, he will “always
remember the feeling.” One question asked your race and another asked how you had contributed to the project: “I felt that because of my background, because of the experiences or lack of experiences that I’ve had, it meant that, it affected, whether positively or negatively, they realized that it affected how well the project was completed or how efficiently it was completed. I felt as though that moment that I didn’t contribute as much as I could.” Dante ended the first semester on the Dean’s list with a 3.5 GPA. That would be the only semester during his next five years as a student that his GPA would qualify for the Dean’s list.

During that first semester, Dante started writing and researching a book while planning how to market it for a summer release. He was a man with high ambition. As his first year in college progressed, the demands of coursework coupled with his book project led to a serious problem that would have long term consequences:

I ended up having to be hospitalized because I had been so stressed out. And then the fact that I didn’t see myself in such a high regard anymore. I lost confidence because I stressed out so much and I had to be hospitalized. Like they thought there was something wrong with me. And I ended up not being as social anymore that sophomore year. I was kind of a shut in, in the sense that I didn’t really like to leave my room or I would just go to class, go to the cafeteria to eat, and then watch TV for the rest of the day….I had a disorder….Just my mindset changed when I felt overwhelmed. And then I was advised to intentionally underwhelm.

Dante reduced his course load with permission from the university to maintain his scholarship eligibility over five years instead of four. He and his girlfriend decided to “take a break” for a year as part of the underwhelming process. Although he lived in a single room his second year, Dante’s first year roommate lived in the same dorm. Dante is thankful for the support his friend
gave him as this was his only social “outlet.” He stopped going to his student organization meetings, the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), in which he held a leadership position as a junior board member.

In Dante’s second year of classes in mechanical engineering, he found the number of “Black faces” to be fewer and fewer. As he progressed in his program of study, other Black students in class went from “5 or 6” until he was the only one. His social group from the summer programs had also “dissipated”:

I really felt isolated. And I thought I would have a lot more fun with, you know, especially with people that looked like me, but also just with, like I always enjoyed diverse experiences or meeting new people from different cultures, different backgrounds. But I didn’t feel like people were willing to reach out to me. So that kind of hindered a lot of things in a sense….When it gets to the point where I’m one of the few faces that look like me and I can’t really, you know everybody kind of has their groups already. And I was pretty much the only mechanical engineering student that I knew that was in my classes from previous years, I felt kind of caught off guard in a sense. Because I didn’t have the study groups….I struggled. I just worked at all times because I didn’t necessarily have anyone to just reach out to me.

The White students often seemed better prepared for the advanced classes. Dante learned many of them had a number of AP classes available to them in high school. Looking back on his only AP calculus class, it was late in starting and actually a pre-calculus curriculum. He realized he didn’t really have AP calculus instruction, despite all their student advocacy to have the course offered:
It just struck me the wrong way when I, I guess I was proud of myself being as a senior in high school that, you know, working with the students who wanted to take the class, that we got there. We didn’t actually have the class. This was a sour feeling that always comes to me when I think about the life experiences of people sitting next to me [in college] who are basically done with all their pre-requisites before they start their first term.

There were a number of situations being reconciled in his mind with all these insights. Why was his education so different at a Black high school from the schools his White peers had attended?

Things began to improve Dante’s third year. He joined the Gospel Chorale when he and his girlfriend got back together. She was the organization’s president. There he found a group of mostly Black friends and, although he “hadn’t been raised in a church,” an opportunity to “boost [his] relationship with God”:

It just increased my faith and changed my outlook. It kind of rerouted me back into the positive, optimistic, always smiling spirit that, you know, that I always had. It just wasn’t there sophomore year.

He renewed his involvement with NSBE and joined another organization specifically for men of color on campus. Dante pulls out his phone to find the exact name as the group uses its acronym of HEADS. The title is Here Earning A Destiny through Honesty, Eagerness, And Determination of Self [Two HEADS are better than one]. Each meeting is a conversation where the men address their feelings about various topics relevant to them-- the state of hip hop, mass incarceration, the murders of Black men at the hands of police: “You find a lot of reasons to feel a certain way about certain things.” They don’t all agree, but Dante savors the “sense of
community” and “that openness” that he has not found in other places on campus. The Gospel Chorale and HEADS supported him significantly during his junior year:

I just found it welcoming. It was an environment where I could say what I wanted to say and feel what I wanted to feel, and nobody was there to punish me for how I felt or judge me. I could just be myself and be honest, I think. It’s just a sense of where can I be real with people. Where do I have to...you know on campus you find that you might have to sugarcoat or, you know, kind of have a different way of carrying yourself.

As he speaks this, Dante holds himself higher in his seat as if standing tall and straightens his tie. These social groups helped him navigate and persist in his courses the next two years where he was often the only Black person.

Dante states that he never felt he had to represent the entire Black community in class or that he should do something to maintain appearances of some kind. He has no intention of speaking on behalf of all Black men. But he did hold himself to high standards and he did consider the opinions of others:

I would always try to put my best foot forward….I would always try to do as much work as I could. I would take on assignments or tasks that we wanted to carry out and especially if I knew how to do them. But even if I didn’t know how to do them and nobody else wanted to do it, I would still take it on. So I kind of felt that sense of I need to prove myself because I look a certain way and I don’t want people to judge me based on that. I need to, I need to, you know, put my best foot forward. And if they only expect me to do this much and I only do that much and I kind of prove them or give them some sense of, what is it, what’s the word? Some sense of evidence or proof. I give
them proof that other people who look like me aren’t gonna work as hard as someone from my background.

He’d seen evidence of racism on campus in the way others would avoid him in an elevator or on the street. For Dante to be a Black man means to “overcome” and be a “stronghold” for others, both Black and White, to improve their lives. This does not feel like a “burden” to him, but a necessary part of achieving his goals and being successful.

These goals have been clarified for him through his experiences at a historically White university. In the future, Dante wants to work in some capacity helping other Black and Brown students succeed. He’s employed on campus at a diversity office that provides advising and support programs. But he sees a need at the K12 level to better prepare students and “bring forth ideas and concepts” that would positively impact the educational system “nationwide.” His girlfriend is now his fiancé and he prefers time with her family than with his. They “stress [him] out.” As part of his underwhelming process, he created a concept map of all the things he does to relax. These include listening to music, writing poetry, kick boxing, running, drawing, rapping, playing video games, reading, watching You Tube and movies. Dante plans to keep this “balance” in his life between work and play so he can maintain his mental, emotional, and physical health. May the overwhelm never get the better of him again.

Commonalities of the Lived Experience

Table 3 presents the primary, secondary, and tertiary themes that emerged from coding transcripts. While each individual is uniquely remarkable and distinguishable, there were recurring themes. These were guided in some way by the nature of the questions posed during each conversation. Responses to these questions did reveal similar topics, ideas, issues,
observations, and attitudes. These perspectives began to develop during the period of meeting with co-researchers and then carefully listening to and transcribing their conversations.

Table 3

*Essential Themes and Subthemes Coded from Student Narratives*

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<th>Secondary Themes</th>
<th>Tertiary themes</th>
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<td>Input from family, friends, and school staff about college</td>
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Chapter 5: Analysis

Pre-College Experiences

The topic is college: You wanna go. At the beginning of each conversation, each man was asked to think back and recall when he first heard about going to college. Half of the men mentioned a family member who had encouraged or directed them to go to college, usually once they were in middle or high school. Several could name a specific person who talked about the importance of education and expressed the expectation they would do something to further themselves after high school.

Sometimes this expectation was directly and specifically expressed. Charles, a first-generation college student, had a grandmother who started telling him at 5 or 6 years of age that whatever he wanted to do or be in life “you got to go to college, you know.” Duke’s father, who is also first generation, kept a little black book that was not for names and phone numbers, but in which he tracked “all his news.” In it he had recorded colleges and their required ACT scores. Duke recalls his father saying, “higher education, higher education” over and over beginning in second grade. His father would talk about his job with a utility company. He described himself as financially comfortable after being employed their 18 years. But he would compare his position to that of his coworkers who had more education. They had acquired more financially, and they were “able to spend more time with their family.”

David’s father was quite direct and specific. He told David, who would be a first-generation student, frequently, “You can do one of two things. Go into the work force and get a job or go to college. But if you’re not doing either one of those, I can’t support you.” James’s father, who had not finished high school, would say again and again to his wife and his children would hear, “They going to college.” The message was clearly understood that college would
follow high school. Rob, also first generation, remembers hearing, “You need to go to college. You don’t wanna just not know what’s going on in the world.”

Sometimes the expectation of attending college was unspoken but experienced as a given assumption. This was usually in the families where members held degrees. Then there was talk in the home about different universities with expressions of loyalty and preference. Well, of course you’d go to this university or that college because someone in the family attended or graduated from there. There was talk of different professions as well with a focus on medicine, law, engineering, and teaching. If your aunt or your uncle was degreed, then you “just knew” that you would go to college.

Several men could not recall any talk of college or higher education as they were growing up. As Marcus said, “My family doesn’t have a strong history of going to college. It wasn’t really a discussion at all.” And even when it was an expectation, Tommy explains: “I knew my mom wanted us to go to college. But she didn’t really talk about how we would get there. It wasn’t really talked about, but she wanted us to go.” Tommy’s family lived in a low-income neighborhood during high school that was near a large university. He had friends who attended the university and he often visited the campus: “But even with college friends, we didn’t talk about college. I just seen the college lifestyle….It just seemed like I was more interested in the lifestyle, I guess, because it was better than my current lifestyle and different as well.”

Friends and peers were named by about a quarter of the men as having a significant influence on their entering college. When their friends started doing applications, so did they. Sometimes they were doing them together with their friend taking the lead. When their friends started talking about where they would be going after graduation, it became more real. For Marcus, his friends had the strongest influence on his decision:
My peers when I was in high school…knew what college they wanted to go to. People started talking about college more and then I started seeing seniors graduate, making college announcement, going to people’s open houses celebrations, them announcing what college they going to. You know it really got me inspired. It made me wanna go to college.

When Neal took the ACT in 11th grade, it dawned on him that this “wasn’t just another standardized test. It meant something.” To himself he thought, “Oh, crap. I got to go to college. What? Go to college?” But his friends had started to do scholarship applications and were talking about where they wanted to go. Neal recalls how one of his friend's actions influenced him to go to college:

His mother was real adamant about him going to college. Not so, my mom….he [his friend] would be in the computer lab filling out college applications….I did my first college application sometime at lunch because my friend wanted me to….That was the first, that was really the first time it hit me…I was just doing what all my friends were doing.

Neal was moved to apply because his friend encouraged him and took him by the hand to get it done.

Duke discussed his peer group, their comradery, and how this impacted his decision to apply and attend college:

I had a lot of friends who were talking about going to college when I went to high school…it wasn’t until high school that I met a bunch of friends and we were like, “Hey, we’re all going to college together.” And that’s what happened.

Duke, like Marcus and Neal, was influenced by his peers in a positive manner.
It was March in Matt’s senior year of high school. He still had not made a decision about where he would go to college. One school did not accept him, and another school had not yet made a decision. His cousin told him to contact a specific person at a private university in the city. The man he spoke with told him, come and see him and he’d get him situated:

Me being a senior, I just wanted to get my hands on anything faster because it was so short notice. Graduation was coming around and I wanted to have a university to put on the sash [to be worn at high school commencement with his cap and gown]. So that really got me to go to college.

Matt was concerned about the opinion of his peers, many of whom he knew were going to college. It wasn’t until the final hour, with the help of a college recruiter, that he took the step to apply and enroll.

K12 life: How about college? Teachers, counselors, and coaches were identified as a significant influence for a more than half of the men as they considered college. Middle school and high school educators talked about how important GPA and ACT scores were for admission and scholarships. Support from their high school staff provided direct assistance in completing applications and in reviewing financial aid packages. It was counselors who could advise students when they started high school that scholarships were available if they maintained a high GPA. They could arrange for application fees to be waived. They could communicate with parents and families about completing financial aid forms.

First generation students expressed how especially helpful teachers and counselors had been for them. There was an acknowledgment that they and their family needed assistance in navigating the process of application and admission. Ian’s mother tried to help: “She didn’t go
to college, so she really didn’t know a lot about college….She didn’t know a whole lot.” He relied on the direction and information from his high school counselors.

Almost all of the men don’t remember actively considering what they would be doing after high school until at least middle school, and more than half of them not until they were in 11th or 12th grade. A few participated in GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) or Upward Bound or other after school programs while middle or high school students. These programs focus on conversations about going to college and seek to expose students to colleges with campus visits. It was because of these programs that some students experienced campus environments before their high school graduation. Steve spent a whole week on a university campus the summer before his 11th grade: “They had us living in the dorms. We had meal plans. That experience at that point, that just made me like I got to go to college now. Cause that week was so fun. It just gave me my first taste of college.”

Two men attended a college preparatory boarding school with a strong focus on postsecondary goals. They both were accepted and enrolled at the public research university. Jake intended to be a physician and was at the residential school for four years. Paul went to the same elite residential school as a tenth grader. But he found himself homesick so went back to his family of ten younger siblings. He enrolled in the public urban high school in his home district. Paul realized that things were different:

Living there, being a boarding student radically changed, just like my education upbringing. The public schools, the education I was receiving was nothing like what I did when I went to private school….It was just AP classes, ACT prep, everything just, getting all the things off the checklist that I need to get done so I could get to college.
College recruiter visits hosted by high schools were an opportunity for students to meet and talk with representatives from different universities. David found a mentor at one of these college fairs. He approached the first school, the one he hoped to attend. The recruiter “was so unenthusiastic. And it was really just like, ‘Here’s the school. Here’s the information.’ It kind of turned [him] off to the school.” Perhaps the school counselor could see the way David was turned off. The counselor directed David to a different table because “they needed some Black males over there.” The recruiter at that table did promote the university he was representing, but he said some other things that got David’s attention:

He told me that I need to go to college. He told me what it looks like being an African American male in society. Like what does it mean to be a Black male…He told me about a program he was having where you could get a mentor who would be him. You could get a scholarship and you can get a laptop.

David knew his grades at the time were “not up to par for like any real college application.” When he confided this to the recruiter, he was invited to join a program the following year that would support him academically and prepare him for college. This was a significant turning point for David.

One of Mark’s 12th grade counselors, who he said, “bonded with us a lot,” asked him why he wasn’t coming to any of the college fairs. He couldn’t tell her why he hadn’t gone, so she signed him up for the next one:

And I just went. And at first, I was just going just because I would just listen to these college people talk cause I wanted to go to college. But I ended up learning a lot about colleges because I never really heard anything about them. I never did any research
about them. But the further it went on, the more I got tuned to really having to think about that. Because college was coming faster and faster.

Despite getting this information and having family who had graduated from college, Mark still needed help:

So I graduated and everything. I didn’t know what school I was going to and I had already graduated. This is like the summer. It was about June and I went to talk to my counselor because how close we had gotten throughout school. I went up to talk to her. I just went up there. We were outta school. I went up to talk to her. “Ms. M, I don’t know which college I’m gonna go to.”

She suggested he call an advisor at the private university and consider participating in their summer bridge program. Mark and his mother knew that “Ms. M wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

Jason had graduated from high school several years earlier and was working a minimum wage job. A former high school counselor came by his drive-through window:

She asked about college and told me that it’s where I was supposed to be instead of where I was. So she brought the conversation back to me and got me thinking about my life and my next phase and where I should be….She assisted in the process. So she already had college applications prepared for me when I went and met her….I went to the first one that accepted me.

Jason had never visited a college campus, but he was motivated to leave his old neighborhood behind: “I had no preference. I just knew I wanted to go to college.”

Two young men were athletes and participated in sports camps on college campuses before finishing high school. Spending time on a college campus was eye opening for them. Steve remembered, “My varsity basketball coach was a big influence. He always spoke to us to
get to college and do better.” Sometimes visiting a school felt like another world beyond their neighborhood. Matt was in 10th grade when he first traveled with his team mates to visit colleges:

I don’t wanna say it was a culture shock. But it was overwhelming. Because we were just out of our freshman year and our mind wasn’t really focused on college. So just to be there and see that was, wow. We have to step our game up and we have to get here one day. And that was our mission.

Several men navigated the application and selection process on their own. Alex said the focus when he was in middle school was on which Detroit public high school he would attend. And he was successfully admitted to one of the top city schools. His family expected that he would go to college and his sister was in college. But he completed all of the application steps on his own with no assistance from anyone in his family or at his college prep high school.

While most of the men had visited a campus, some had never been on a college campus until it was time to choose a school or they were registering for classes. Charles recalls going right from his job to complete his admission at the first and only school he visited although he had applied to many: “I looked at the campus…I remember just walking on campus and seeing how beautiful it was.” Marcus, whose friends influenced his motivation to attend college, said he thought he wanted to go to one of the big-name schools in the state. He applied to lots of schools:

It was free for like a week….But I really didn’t have motivation or anybody to support me. “Let’s look at this school. Let’s study this school.” I really just went with the flow and that’s not really a safe thing to do. Especially when it’s thousands of dollars going to a university.
When Marcus wasn’t admitted to his first choice, he opted for another public university nearby although he had never been there. He went to campus and registered for classes on his own.

Selecting a college: Just getting away. The men who applied to a number of schools had usually visited several, including HBCUs out of state. They may not have decided where they wanted to attend, even after campus tours and visits. There were other factors that often had a more significant impact their decision process. How far was the school from their family? Where were their friends going to college? Which school would offer them the best scholarship package?

Finances were the single most critical factor considered by the students and by their families as well. This is not surprising when nearly two-thirds of the men identified their family income as being low or low to middle. This was how Steve came to his decision:

It just made sense financially wise. They offered me a good amount of scholarships. So it just made the most sense. And it was still somewhat close to home….But mostly the scholarships they gave me. It just worked perfectly.

Ian had a similar experience. He had a few friends recommending one school: “And so I had scholarships there. I had scholarships at a couple of other places, so I did tours. And then [the school he selected] was where I think I could save the most money with my scholarships.”

Jake, who attended boarding school on a scholarship for four years and aspired to be a physician, never visited any of the ten colleges to which he applied. He was disappointed when he was not accepted at Rice in Texas as that was his favorite. Then he concluded that his decision would be about finding “the best places for the lowest amount of money.”

Location was another important factor in college selection, whether it was distance from home or the campus culture. John enrolled in a nearby college with a couple of his high school
friends: “I did not want to move two hours away from my parents or the city I grew up in.”

While several men expressed a desire to escape the old neighborhood, they remained connected to their families and friends. Being close to their parents or siblings was important to most of the students. For the most part, their families could provide emotional support and financial assistance.

Several of the men had started at a university out of state before opting to transfer back to the Southeast region of Michigan. James attended an HBCU in South Carolina where he received a full scholarship. The scholarship required James work as a mentor and tutor, and he got another job to earn money. He was enrolled in six classes:

I’m coming from high school and I just thought that was what you were supposed to do.

A lot of people were just taking four or five and I was taking six. So I was really wearing myself thin.

James returned home and selected a college he had liked when he visited in high school. It was the only campus visit he had done as a secondary student and he fell back on what he knew.

Tommy went to an HBCU in Arkansas for his first year. He felt strongly about getting away:

“The environment…the neighborhood and stuff. So I have to go somewhere….Really I just need to be away from here.”

Neal chose to be “close to home which at the time [he] was happy for” because he was eager to start classes. He expressed regret that he did not leave the state to attend Alabama A&M, but the letter of acceptance arrived by mail the first day that classes were to begin. Neal wasn’t expecting an acceptance because he’d had several declinations. Without a plan, there was no way he could transition from Michigan to Alabama in just a few days. But he wonders what would have been different if he’d moved south then instead of remaining close to home. Paul
didn’t want to move out of state by himself. He and his cousin planned to attend Howard, an HBCU in Washington, DC, together. But his cousin’s “financial aid situation got messed up.” So Paul went to the public research institution in state: “I had ten younger siblings. I saw it as a great opportunity to stay home and still have the opportunity to watch them grow up a little bit before I did move on.” A year later, when Paul had grown disenchanted with the school he was attending, he explored transferring to Howard. But the financial support was no longer available, and that meant he remained in Michigan.

Many spoke of their need to feel comfortable with their selection, that it would be a place they could belong. Rob’s described his choice: “Just the right distance because I didn’t wanna be too close to the city of Detroit because it’s a lot of nonsense goes there.” He wanted to see his parents and cousins often, but still distance himself from what he saw as the games on the street: “And then I just liked the school from what I heard. And then when I came and visited, I liked the school.” Liking the school and feeling some comfort about going there was identified as important by some of the men. Noah visited a number of colleges in the region, but he “just never felt anything.” The bigger schools left him thinking he wouldn’t be able to “find [his] way.” When he discovered a small private school, that was where he felt he could succeed academically.

Alex visited a couple of in-state public research institutions his family were advocating. But he found a smaller school:

It appealed to me the most. I think it was, honestly, just like the campus, the way the interview went on campus. And I was like, “I think this is where I wanna go.” I didn’t even know what I wanted to major in yet….Just the atmosphere [of the big schools] did not catch me and I did not feel like I wanted to go there. But of course, you know, a lot
of my family, brothers were like, “Oh, yeah, you should go to [the big school].” Football things, you know. But I was like, “Ehh, but I really don’t want to.” What helped me decide…was looking at the cost of tuition.

Referrals by someone they respected was also an influence in selecting a college. For some it was an adult who extended his or herself to them. For others it was their peers and friends. Todd was significantly influenced by a university professor who visited his school. He describes himself as a leader in his Detroit high school, active in a number of student groups. But he didn’t want to leave home, feeling attached to his mother after his sister’s murder: “I was kind of scared to leave Detroit.” The professor, a Black man, had a strong response: “He cussed me out and then he got my transcripts and my ACT score.” This man helped Todd complete the application and make the move into college once he was accepted.

Jason’s former high school counselor who encountered him in the McDonald’s drive through window three years after graduation prepared his college applications for him. Jason applied to three schools in the area and choose the first one from which he received an acceptance: “When I got the acceptance, I took it. I didn’t wait for [the other two schools].”

John and half a dozen of his friends in high school did their college applications as a team. He helped one his friends complete his application in the hopes they would go to college together. Although his friend was accepted, he opted not to register: “He didn’t understand it, but I feel like he had an opportunity.”

The likelihood of succeeding academically was considered by several of the young men as they pondered where they should go to college. Rob considered the largest institution: “It seemed like it would be very hard. Not saying I wasn’t able to do it. But it seemed hard and it cost a lot more, too.” If the student had identified an area of interest to study, he might think
about whether or not the school would be effective in helping him pursue his major. Ian visited one school because he wanted to major in art:

The school was really nice. And I asked about art…cause I’m going for a BFA…and asked about their art program and they said it was really good. But you had to have a portfolio just to get in. So that was kind of unsettling.

Ian chose another school with an equally strong fine arts program that was not as “pricey,” was closer to home, and did not require a portfolio to declare an art major.

The timing and manner of receiving acceptance for admission made a difference in which college might be selected. Neal’s high school GPA meant that his acceptance was conditional at one school and denied at two other universities. When his acceptance from a southern school arrived by mail the very day classes were beginning, he opted for the one school that had accepted him: “The only people, the only university that was like, ‘Yeah, we’ll take you. Come on.’ With no restrictions. I was like, okay, that’s fine.” Matt connected with a mentor at the private college who sent him “the paperwork” and invited the family to visit: “I wanna go to college here because he [the mentor] was there. It wasn’t like no phone call like, ‘Yeah, come here. Tell us.’ He said, ‘Come see me and we’ll get you situated.’” This personal connection created a smooth and speedy path to admission so Matt could show his peers he was going to college. Serendipitous circumstances made the selection for him.

**Imagining college: Just like in the movies.** How was college envisioned and imagined as it would be? Jason, who is entered college two years after graduating from high school, identified his expectations as have been shaped by the media:
Watching television and seeing movies depict the college life and this is what college should be. I had a very, very, very stereotypical ideation around college. It’s gonna be parties, fun, you know.

James remembered, “Movies and TV shows and people be like struggling in college and they be having these hard questions and theories and things like that. So I thought college is gonna be like super hard.” Todd summed it up when he said he imagined college would be like *Drumline* [a 2002 movie]. That meant “parties and hanging out and just like doing brand new stuff.” He said he had no idea of what to expect from college other than images from TV and movies. Several of the men responded similarly. Neal acknowledged the same expectations: “My perception of college had sort of been framed by the media. So I was like parties and drinking and blah blah blah and lots of sex and all that crap.” What Duke described was highly visual and right out of the movies: “I imagined it [college] being a bunch of people, dressed up, briefcases, book bags. Just a lot of movement. Parties, of course. Just that energy, that aura, of everyone being here for the same purpose.” David said that TV was where “we get all our information about college.” He remembers his thoughts about what college would be like: “Less free time…more structured like high school, in terms of you go to this class and go to this class. I didn’t too much know what to expect.”

Matt acknowledged the influence of the media on his perception of what college would be like: “We had the movies to persuade us on how college would be.” He is not first generation, however, and was also influenced by his family:

I never really took it upon that way [as in the movies]. I knew there were some bruises going along the road due to stories I heard from my cousins and family members. So I
never pictured college a cake walk. I knew there’d be times that you could have fun. But I also knew that there was a time to handle business and set forth with some action.

Abe, who was a fourth-year college senior at the time, thought back to his first year: “I can’t technically remember cause I mean it has been a long time.” He admitted he had gaps in his knowledge: “What was college gonna be? I thought it was gonna be like high school. You just go to class, then go home pretty much….I didn’t really imagine anything.” He was eager to leave his family home because of financial stress. Abe’s last summer before starting college was stressful for him as he wanted freedom from his parents “telling you what to do.” Matt dreamed of freedom, too: “Mom isn’t here, dad isn’t here, your grandparents aren’t here. So it would be basically you by yourself and they’re depending on you to make something of yourself.” This desire for independence is developmentally appropriate for adolescents. They begin to chafe at the directions and demands from their parents. But for some of them, leaving home was more about starting a new way of life for which they longed.

Tommy couldn’t wait to leave his neighborhood which he described as “impoverished” where he became “tired of wanting and not having.” He said, “I don’t wanna be here because the environment.” It was filled with drug and alcohol abuse. When he imagined college, it was about “having all this freedom and just live this lifestyle, this dorm life.” He said he never thought about school or grades or classes beyond high school. What he did think about was getting away as his older brother and cousin had done. They went to college together, and he saw their escape as something to model. Tommy knew that he had to be some place other than living with his family. An uncle who lived with them was a “serious alcoholic” who would leave the house at 7:55 am to get to the nearby party store at exactly 8:00 am when its doors opened. To himself Tommy would say, “This just cannot be. This cannot be me. This life cannot be like
this.” He wanted something different than what he saw in his surroundings. As Jason said, “If it was away from my environment, it was cool.”

Noah, who is first generation, said he could never have imagined the freedom of college life.:  

Just the little things like not having to ask to go to the bathroom were really shockers to me….College would be an extension of high school. Like it was gonna be you go do these optional things and you go take these classes and you learn these things. I didn’t imagine, I’m not sure completely what I thought it was gonna be like….I didn’t think about it.

Noah doesn’t recall thinking about what college would be like at all before he went. He does remember being told that “no one’s just gonna come and help. We’re not gonna be reminding you every day to do your homework…[he] was told over and over.” But he was very excited about going, especially after visiting for the first time the small private school he selected.

Marcus expected that there would be a lot of work. Rob, Jake, and Bryon thought it would be difficult. Elijah expected college to be “super stressful and really tough and the professors aren’t like high school teachers. And it was like extreme in all the ways.” This message of how college would be different from high school was repeated by several men. They heard it from their high school teachers and, in some cases, from their family and parents.

Paul spent one year at a prestigious boarding secondary school before returning home to his ten siblings. He missed his family even though he realized how important a quality education would be to his future. As the first in his family to go to college Paul understood “that’s pretty hard.” Although he’d planned to attend an out-of-state HBCU, he ended up at the public research university because of the financial aid package:
I just thought it was going to be like a lot, very challenging academically, and then a lot of fun socially. Those are the only two things I was really thinking about. I was finally gonna get the challenge that I wanted academically while still being able to go out on my own and then have fun for the first time.

Ian laughed when he was asked to recall his expectations of college: “Fun and pretty women and people that have like-minded like me and being able to study and learn something I never learned before.” He saw his family members working hard in business and wanted to be successful, too. But most of his high school peers didn’t seem to be thinking about that:

I understood why I had to go to college…I wanted to put myself in a college environment. Hopefully the people I come across we can have some conversations that I was thinking about versus just talking about rap songs or the latest beef or the latest cars. I wanted to come across somebody I could have an intellectual conversation with.

**College Transition Experiences**

Transition to college is a liminal experience of being out of what is familiar and in what is new and unknown. The first year is a time of movement and adjustment, letting go of how he did everything in high school and learning what college requires. As a new college student, he has no course credits yet and may not have declared a major. A young man is still his family’s son, but he doesn’t see them or talk with them as he has for so many years. The first year is a time in between, looking over his shoulder at the past and up ahead at his future life. In the moment, he finds himself with new demands on his time and talents. To be successful in his academic progress requires a series of insights about himself and alterations to his old habits of thinking.
The men had varied expectations of what college would be like. Media and film were frequently identified as contributing to those anticipations, so it’s not surprising that the reality of campus life was often other than what they had been envisioned. As Jason explained,

The climates of the classrooms and the community at the university was not what I expected for it to be. And it was not was it was projected to be from, you know, television and movies and things like that. Often when you watch movies and they show college, they show this big community, and everyone is happy and it’s a diverse community and everyone is getting along with one another. But that was completely different from my experience….It blew my mind really. It was fun the depiction that you get from the movies. They had it on point with the parties and the community. It did require for me to have a vision. It did require for me to be determined to graduate college. So that wasn’t really sold to me beforehand. But I learned along the way.

For some it was easier than they expected, but most admitted they encountered challenges in their transition in different ways. Several participated in orientation programs prior to the beginning of their first full semester, and they had an opportunity to develop their skills and establish relationships. Peers and mentors had a significant impact on academic and social adjustment. Student groups and associations, often with other Black men, were especially important to the students.

Ian could vividly recall his first day moving on campus. After his mother and aunt left, he and a high school friend who was also starting college, went out and sat near a pond close to their dormitory:
Our parents had left, you know, and it was just us still there and it was kind of crazy. The feeling was pretty intense. Going back to your dorm for the first time and then setting your keys down that get you into the dorm. It was all pretty strong stuff. It was cool.

**Academics and support: A change of mindset.** Entering college, every student holds the goal of completing academic requirements and graduating in a timely manner. But the day to day work of earning course credits with a sufficient GPA can be a bit trickier. Most students reported studying an average of about 2 hours a day. The range was from 30 minutes to 6 hours a day. For some men the hours increased as their classes became more challenging and they became more strategic about their GPA. And all of the men recognized when they put more time in to prepare for an exam or complete a special project. But most said they spent less time studying as they progressed because they knew more about what they needed to do to meet the demands of any given class. The task of succeeding academically was like playing any game to win. It meant learning the rules and then developing the skill set with practice and reflection.

Jake, who had attended an elite secondary boarding school and was pre-med, expected college would be “difficult” and already knew what it was like to “be around people competing to do well.” But it was not exactly what he anticipated. The work was challenging:

I had to work harder to do better than I thought. So it was kind of like I was okay not doing so well initially. And I’m kind of like, okay, I just have to work harder and do something different. Then after doing something different and working harder and not paying off the way I thought, I was kind of like, wow, this is a little bit tougher than I was expecting.

For Jake, this would not just be about effort. It involved something more than just longer hours studying: “It was not necessarily the time. It was how I was studying and the resources I was
using and looking at things a little bit differently.” Instead of relying on his memory as he had done in the past, he started writing things out and rewriting them as part of learning the information.

Classes didn’t seem very difficult to Alex because he can “naturally pick up things pretty quickly….It was just coming up with a routine for it.” So he focused on his routine and he was able to establish a schedule for classes, studying, working, and socializing.

Abe found his course load to be “strenuous” and didn’t anticipate the amount of time required for study. His scholarship required that he be enrolled in five classes: “Five classes? I been taking 8 classes for the last four years. Five classes is nothing,” he remembers thinking. But then he discovered something: “Oh, it’s like no. It’s a different ballgame because the work is a lot more higher tiered….There are papers as well as readings.” He was surprised that he would have to buy his own textbooks, and further surprised that he was expected to read them:

No, you have to actually read this stuff and actually get it done. That was a whole different experience for me and my education because of the fact I didn’t even fathom they’ll be a lot more intensive than regular high school classes. Cause back in high school, you can really get by just by cheating….You can do a couple assignments, still do good. Fail a test, but you still do good.

When he did fail some quizzes in his college classes, he took responsibility. Abe had stayed up late “eating junk food and watching Netflix or whatever’s on TV, for some odd reason.” He planned to get up at 9:30 for his 10:45 class but overslept. He missed the class and missed a quiz that he realized was indicated on the syllabus for that day:
So stuff like that did happen where it did spark an initiative in me…I’m here for a reason. I’m not about to fail. I’m not gonna come to college and be mediocre. So I had to make sure to continue that same tenacity.

Although Abe recalls a conversation with a friend in which he said he’d worked hard in high school to earn straight A’s, so he could be “borderline” in college and not stress himself out. He figured it was just getting the degree that mattered. But once he started classes, he realized how much a GPA mattered in terms of scholarships and opportunities. He graduated in four years with honors.

Some men had also earned satisfactory high school grades with what they described as not much effort. Marcus said in high school he “didn’t really study,” so he was afraid that he wouldn’t be able to succeed as a college student: “I really doubted myself. I figured I’d go for a year, not have good grades, and then just end up leaving.” He entered expecting that college would be a lot of work and wondered if he could produce what would be required:

I just didn’t think that I could produce that amount of work until I really just tried. And did everything that I could. I just started to produce. Papers became simple. Getting up going to class. Studying became pretty simple. And taking exams became simple once I, you know, I had to practice and prepare myself.

He was pleasantly surprised that the amount of effort required was easier than he anticipated and that he could be successful.

Noah loves to write and said that it “comes naturally” to him. But he was still concerned about whether or not he could “handle” writing a college essay. He worked on his first assignment diligently, getting assistance in review and editing from the college writing center:
Turned it in and got an A on it. When the teacher, before she even gave it to me, she
looked at me and said, “You did really good.” So that aspect was a lot easier than I
thought it was gonna be.

Steve’s lowest grade was in writing as it was difficult for him. He felt unprepared for the
science classes in which he was enrolled and needed to study longer hours to pass chemistry and
biology. But he said he’d always had a head for math, so those classes were enjoyable, and he
earned strong grades. Charles also struggled with biology and took it multiple times before
finally passing. He observed other students “answering questions and they knew it and they
understood it.” When he asked them how they knew so much already, they told him about their
high school AP courses. Charles had been focused on football in high school more than
academics. With persistence and determination, he finally passed biology after several attempts
and a couple of years. The instructors in the biology department were impressed and asked
Charles how he finally did it:

It was just a change of mindset….I think my mind, my brain just matured a lot more now
than I was…and I just put more time into it now than I did back then. I wanted it more
now than I did as a freshman.

Charles said, “I envisioned college being a lot harder than it was. I imagined it was just this far-
fetching idea that it wasn’t possible to do. It was gonna be super hard and challenging. I thought
it was way outside of my means.” He participated in a summer orientation program living on
campus, taking classes as a cohort, and receiving success coaching. He would continue to draw
upon these skills throughout his five years in college, especially during his second year when he
was on academic probation. Preparing for a significant test in history, Charles said,
I just buckled down. I just told myself to go back to that structure that I had in the summertime, to just think back on the things that I did then. I didn’t have anybody helping me or anything. I was doing it myself…I just stayed focused.

Charles also had a goal to complete his math requirement as soon as possible. He took the first remedial math course, based on his placement scores, his first year in school. He took it twice before taking the second remedial math course. Twice also. It was three years before he could register for the college level math course. He said he had resisted completing the homework assignments during those first two years. He’d start solving problems, do a few, and then say, “I know how to do this. I don’t have to do 50 problems.” Charles just wanted to take the tests where he knew he could get the minimum required letter grade of C. But test scores alone would not get him a passing grade. Homework submission was part of the grading scale as a demonstration of proficiency. He believes it was “how the classes were structured” that impeded his progress. He always availed himself of math and writing tutors for help: “I took advantage of all those resources. For sure.”

Almost all of the men utilized support services for tutoring in math or writing and most of them also participated in study groups with their peers. Abe recognized that he wasn’t strong in math and decided to take it his first semester to get it out of the way. He said, “I was always in the math lab, asking for help, getting math projects done. I was doing extra problems just to keep my brain ready and active.”

Matt attended tutoring sessions with his friends as they had registered for classes together:

Instead of us doing it solo we all went to be there at the same time getting the same information and getting the same knowledge as each other…We all could come together
and have the same feeling about the environment and the path we’re on and we all know what we have to do…. We were always doing homework and assignments together that we would get from the professor. And by doing that we were able to critique each other well and let each other know like, “I don’t remember her saying this. But since you wrote it down, you have to get it from somewhere. You must have got it from her.” By us doing that we were able to refresh our memories on stuff that we could have missed out on or stuff that we did miss out on. They were basically like my backbone in the classroom. Because anything I didn’t pick up on, I’m for sure they picked up on it and they’d have it documented for us to use later on.

Some men chose not to seek out support. Ian said, “I had some classes that were kind of like looking kind of shaky. And I feel like I just powered through them.” His art history classes were especially difficult, although he acknowledged that he “definitely could have put more time into studying.” Not having done that in high school, Ian didn’t think he “really got good study habits.” To power through, he would go to the library to study in a more focused manner. Neal also described himself as having “just pushed through it” when he struggled in his math class. He didn’t seek help because he “didn’t want anyone thinking [he] was an idiot” and he “felt stupid.” He observed the study habits of successful students and emulated them, like sitting at a desk alone with earphones on to minimize distraction and interruption. Both of these men stated that they should have used academic resources available to them and regretted not having done so to help themselves.
Tommy thought that classes would be more difficult:

But school in general is just about applying yourself and being dedicated and being disciplined and you’ll get an A… When it’s something you just have to do, it’s not really that difficult. You just have to do it.

This may be the best description of leaning in and powering through a task you have selected for yourself.

Several men did not initially utilize academic support services. Jason was one of those who did not seek help at first. He decided to “tutor” himself when he failed a course:

Pride was in the way because I felt as if I was supposed to have known this and I was fearful of going and seeking help from European tutors because I felt as if I was being judged.

So he would spend four or five hours a day in the library: “I would force myself to go in the library and be amongst those individuals who were studying and getting their work done, too.” Once he felt stronger in his fundamentals, he was more comfortable with academic support services and able to use them. The services were helpful, and he realized how he had made it harder for himself.

**Time management and assignments: Routines.** Time management was a significant challenge for many of the men. Mark said, “Once you’re able to focus your time and be organized, which I wasn’t a very organized person when it came to schoolwork.” Duke remembered his first days on campus vividly. It was a new environment and he was eager to jump in and get acclimated:

I had to time manage. I had never been woken up by my parents and stuff like that growing up. But it was even more of a push because I knew I was paying for classes. So
I have to show up for the most part….Discipline. Discipline. Trying to establish that discipline and get that going. Just trying to be able to stay afloat, you know, throughout that first semester. Because I now that’s a huge pivotal part.

James enrolled in six classes because he “just thought that was what you were supposed to do.” That’s how many he took in high school and no one suggested he do otherwise in college, even though other students he knew were registered for only four or five classes. Managing his time was overwhelming:

Like just trying to find time to study, social life, and then eventually have to take on a job. And as part of my scholarship I had to tutor and mentor kids and things like that….So I was really wearing myself thin.

But he did it and passed all of his courses. The next semester he registered for only five classes.

Alex identified his biggest obstacle the first semester as just getting up on time and going to his 8 am class, which was an hour earlier start than his high school schedule. He realized that no one was going to come and wake him up: “I guess the transition knowing that, hey, you have to do this on your own, it kind of pushed me a little bit further.” He acknowledged that he had learned how to take care of himself living with his sister and being on his own a lot as a teenager. But the total responsibility for getting to class on time was hard at first.

Todd said the classes were easier for him because they were small groups which made it comfortable to ask questions. He believes that because he does “a lot of personal reading” to be familiar with ideas he has broad background knowledge, and this was helpful in his academics. But Todd remembered, “I had been labeled a procrastinator since fourth grade when my fourth-grade teacher told me to look it up.” So he believed this. “It followed me into college because
I’m a procrastinator and I know I’m a procrastinator.” He often found himself doing things at the last minute because he’d put them off. How powerful the words we hear as children.

Noah said that time management was definitely his biggest obstacle. He associated managing time ethnicity and culture: “Being in this classroom with all these White people. They’re not me. I didn’t know exactly what to do. And then I had to do these assignments. I didn’t know how to navigate anything.” He struggled to establish a routine for managing his time: “But it still felt like there was more that I wasn’t getting. There was more that I wasn’t finding out.” He was nagged by a feeling of being out of step, and a sense that others knew something he did not.

Paul was confident in his academic skills. Schoolwork had never been much of a struggle for him and he considers himself to be a strong test taker:

It’s really not hard as long as you study. All the material is there. As long as you put in the work, you’ll get the grades you want. Your grades are a reflection of your effort….I could do all the work I needed to. It was just motivating me to help me realize to put my best foot forward. Like why settle for a B when you can get an A?

Conversations with his RA helped him focus on his GPA and push himself to exert more effort and excel.

Interacting with instructors is a necessary component of college academics. While some students like Dante went to all office hours and did their studying with their professors, other men found these relationships confounding. Matt thought it was challenging to have instructors with varied methods of instruction:

You have to learn the different teaching styles that you have with each professor.

Because each professor is very different. Just like high school where each teacher is
different. But in high school the teachers lay it out for you. In college you may get a professor that would lay it out for you. But you also get professors who give you vague information, but you have to find some of the information out yourself. So I learned that really fast. And I had to pick up where these classes were because I didn’t want to get left behind. Because once you’re left behind it can be hard to come back.

**Finances and spending habits: The hustle.** Money was often a determining factor in which college students selected. Once they got there, money issues became more complex and often required their energy and attention. All of the students were employed in some part-time capacity even if they had a full scholarship. This is sometimes confusing for first generation students and their families who may perceive the offer of a “full ride” to include housing, meals, books, and fees. It is sometimes a rude awakening when the first bill arrives.

Abe described the experience of exploring college costs:

They tell you that you have…funny little thing we have…a full ride. It’s not necessarily a full ride nowadays….Until you actually look at the bills to see what it actually costs, depending on your parents, if they want to take out a parent loan or not. Mines didn’t.

So it was still a surplus of money that was missing from my financial aid. Abe had to come up with $1,500, and that would be all of his work study award. When he was advised that work study was intended to pay for tuition, that’s exactly what he did with the money he earned. Work study is paid directly to the student who finds employment on campus over the course of the semester. It was a challenge not to use the money for other things he needed—like food. He found it “strenuous” to manage his bills.

For Neal, as for many college students, money was the biggest issue in coming to college. He said he grew up in poverty: “But my mom never let it fully take me. It tickled.” He’d
always wanted to do more and go out with his friends. But “doing stuff for fun is expensive.”
His first refund check of $1,500 was more money that he had ever seen, and it disappeared quickly. Neal spent all of it on drugs and drinks for himself and for people he wanted to be his friends: “I had to come to the realization that they weren’t my friends. It was real tough.” Once the money and the friends were gone, Neal felt poor again.

Tommy also said that money was his biggest obstacle:

I was just really impoverished….Before I even went to a dorm room, just the necessities, like simple stuff like that bedding, pillows, covers. We were very poor. My biggest issue was just money. I didn’t know how I was gonna do it. But I don’t like to accept no or it can’t be done for an answer. So I just figured it out.

He acquired a credit card, even though he wondered if it was the smartest decision because he had heard they “aren’t the best thing for people.” He was approved for $2,000 but requested a $500 limit and lived within that margin. Tommy was able to get himself to a university that was out of state for his first year. But the expenses of continuing--tuition and travel home-compelled him to transfer back to Michigan, where he would incur less debt.

Jason was 21 when he entered his first year of college and moved in the dormitory. He had moved out of his mother’s home when he was 16, and been independent since then working a minimum wage job:

My biggest obstacle was finances. My EFC [external family contribution] was zero. So I had no financial support from family or any external revenues coming in….I worked two or three jobs. I just did what I could. I mean, making ways out of no way was something I knew how to do. We call it hustling. So if I had to hustle, which means if I had to work
2-3 jobs and go to school full-time just so I could make it and get by, that’s what I was gonna do. And I was determined to do so. And I did that. Jason developed strong money management skills, and those served him well as he entered graduate school after college.

Charles started paying child support during his second semester. He was understandably worried about being able to provide for his son and cover all of his college expenses. So he started delivering pizzas from 4 pm to 4 am. He acknowledged that his grades suffered: “I was working way too much.” But his bills were getting paid, and that was important to him. His work ethic and dedication to being fiscally responsible may have actually contributed to his academic success. Time spent working was not time spent distracted from his studies. The social scene that had been a temptation his first semester didn’t fit in his schedule anymore because his priorities had changed dramatically.

**Social life: Friendships.** Mark, who was at a small private institution, was quick to say his biggest obstacle with transitioning to college was making friends: “I’m the only child so I never really been around that many people where I had to let them know who I was. I’m used to being by myself.” He had to push himself past feeling shy and awkward. Steve felt the same way:

My biggest obstacle was more of making those connections, like really going out of my comfort zone. Because pretty much when you kind of grow up from Detroit, you kind of stay to your own friends and you stay to who you know. And that’s just a problem I had…and I’m an introvert as well. So I normally stay to my own circle. But making friends and making those connections is just a big part that I struggled with at first.
Steve remembers the advice his father gave him when Steve left for college: “You can’t be all that trying to be cool, trying to be only messing with your boys. You got to go out and actually meet people, talk to people.” It was hard for Steve, but the longer he was on campus the easier it became.

James and a few of his friends went from Detroit to Columbia, South Carolina for their first year: “One of the biggest obstacles for me was just trying to figure out how I’m gonna get to know people…just being cool with a lot of people.” But his roommate, who he really liked and got along with, was on the basketball team and introduced James to the other players. The proverbial ice was broken quickly.

Tommy’s first year was at an HBCU in the South. He realized that he was judging the intellect of others based on their accent: “People sound a little uneducated, but they are educated.” He felt confused and was surprised at how his perceptions were so biased and based on something so shallow. Tommy liked the HBCU for good reason. He said,

It kind of felt like home. People were really friendly….I noticed the professors took the time there to actually tell us about college….It was more like a family conversation through the whole university for the first couple of weeks. Just like telling you about college and about loans and just everything. I thought that really helped a little bit.

That’s when I kind of started understanding a little bit. It was definitely an experience. When Tommy returned to Michigan his second year because he missed his family, he found his new university didn’t have “the same type of vibe.” But he had transitioned to college successfully by then and adjusted quickly to the new school. Tommy was grateful he could go home more frequently than once a semester to see his family.

Marcus described his challenge of leaving home to go to a place that was unfamiliar:
Staying focused was difficult for me when I first got to college. It was a new environment. First time being away from home, not in the watchful eye of my parents. So I was literally able to do whatever I wanted. I was an adult. I never experienced that. So that freedom was also another thing that threw me off.

Marcus felt his first semester grades would have been better if he had been less socially active and dedicated more time to his studies.

Rob imagined he would be in college for four years, “just take classes, and be out.” His first couple of years were lots of fun, or in his own words, “extremely fun.” But his classes became more difficult: “You don’t have that time to go party and do other stuff you don’t need to be doing. You got to do your work.” Rob had succeeded in making lots of social connections his first year. He learned the hard way to prioritize his studies when he saw his grades dropping for lack of study and focus.

Ian admitted to being scared when he went to college:

More so because it was big, and I was a Black person on a White campus. And that was the honest truth. But I felt safe at the same time….It was fun because I was with my boys and everything. But I let my grades slip. And what I ended up realizing was they came to college because I put in their application and they see another way out to lifestyle that they was living. But they didn’t really want it. So I would say my first year my friends that I came with which was eight of them, it went down to three. And it was tough for me because I looked on my left and my right and I don’t have nobody. And my parents couldn’t tell me too much about it cause they never went off to college. Yeah, it was tough.
Fortunately, Ian participated in a program for Black men on his campus beginning with his first semester. He found important connections that were very helpful to him:

New friends and stuff…that was nice to have and really helpful in transition. It made it easier to not always be so focused on missing family when you have friends to hang out with….I do miss going home a lot….Not seeing my family as much as I used to, that’s kind of weird.

Ian said adults had described what college would be like and he could remember what they had said over and over:

They told me it would be super stressful and really tough, and the professors weren’t like high school teachers and it was like extreme in all the ways. That was pretty much my impression until I got to college. And then it seemed like it wasn’t as scary.

Ian had an opportunity to interact with Black faculty and staff when participating in the first-year program for Black men. He soon realized that each professor is different: “You can just get one that’s like a nice professor whatever and they’ll help you through it.” Ian learned to feel comfortable going to office hours and seeking out help from his instructors when he needed it.

When Todd arrived on campus, he felt comfortable because he was with a lot of people from his hometown of Detroit:

I knew about 60 or 75 people. So I had a big network and a big set of friends. And they could be distracting at times….That was my biggest pitfall because I was suspended my freshman year from a situation that dealt with being around one of my friends from high school who kind of didn’t wanna leave the hood mentality behind. And I got tangled into that.
Todd recognized and acknowledged a problem with alcohol: “I’ve struggled with drinking the majority of my life. A whole lot. It was at a point where I had drank almost 40 days straight….Addiction is heavy because of levels of stress. So people do anything to take the pain away.” Todd was implicated in activity on campus and suspended for a semester. He returned and successfully graduated.

Once Alex figured out a routine to be successful with his classwork, he found himself not “knowing how to deal with people” although he had “always took a level of pride” in understanding “behaviors.” He had always been able to get along with others and “as bad as it sounds, get what [he needed] from people.” He worked on this for over three years before he felt confident again in relationship building. Alex had thought that everyone in college would be “thinking the same,” so the “large range of mindsets…was fascinating” to him. He described the “culture shock” of discovering that one of his new college friends, who was a White male, didn’t know “some of the Black history icons.” He perceived his friend as having attended a good high school and thought he was kidding. As it turned out, his White friend “felt really, really awkward about it.” Alex said to him, “You don’t know? You’re serious! You don’t know!” This felt like a new way of seeing the world for him. Not only did people just think differently, “everybody is also taught differently.” It made him look more closely at what he was learning, examining ideas and information for truth. Alex pondered this new view of reality for weeks.

Several men participated in summer bridge programs that provided extended orientation while living on campus and a class schedule shared with a cohort of peers. This helped Matt tremendously as he admitted being quite scared about starting college:
You’re scared cause you don’t know what to expect….I didn’t have a lot of confidence coming in. I didn’t feel like I was going to live up to the expectations….So I was down on myself a lot.

Matt was pleasantly surprised that his fall semester was manageable and just like the routine with which he’d become familiar during his summer program. And he’d done it with his “brothers” who he had “to help [him] throughout the obstacles.” He took classes with three of his roommates who were also Black men: “We all would be accountable to each other. And no one would be left alone. No one would feel self-conscious about being in the class by themselves.”

Charles had an interesting way of describing his mentoring: “Everybody fits together like a puzzle. I use everyone for different types of resources.” On campus he would ask people for help: “You think you’re bothering them or inconveniencing them. But they’ll go out of their way. They’ll walk you to a different building. They’ll call somebody for you.”

**Emotional life: Stressors.** As first year students, all but one of the men were under the age of 19. It was a new environment for most of them arriving on a campus to live in a dorm their first year. They found themselves surrounded by people they didn’t know, most of whom were White. For many of the men, this was quite different from their high school and neighborhood which was predominantly Black. Now they would be part of a crowd.

Abe was anxious that he’d feel depressed and would be unable to make friends. He worried about how he’d figure this all out. Attending an orientation activity he felt, “It was too many people….I could not take it.” But he pushed himself to meet people and discovered that they thought he was entertaining:
I didn’t know I was a funny person….So it’s like I didn’t know its more things to my personality that I figured out….It’s kind of like you can start over and basically meet new people and make new friends. You can be yourself. You can relax.

In his first few months on campus, Abe lost almost 60 pounds with working out and eating healthier food. He overcame his social anxiety.

Charles didn’t especially like his first semester courses, but he had lots of friends on campus and became a new father in December:

Then the winter hit, after that first semester, the winter hit. I had the blues, that depression, like everything was hitting me. It was a lot. I missed my friends from high school and my son. I started eating. I stopped working out…Then I broke up with my girlfriend…I went through a really deep depression after she left me. I never really was depressed before that. Once I had a kid, I was scared….I went to a couple of counseling sessions that helped a little bit. They prescribed me Ativan. It’s an antidepressant. And so I was taking that. I took that for maybe a week, two weeks. And then I just didn’t want it. I was like, “I don’t need pills. I don’t need to be on this crap.” And then I stopped seeing the counselor.

Charles has an aversion to drugs for good reason: “I always see my parents struggle with addiction with drugs and stuff like that….I’ve seen how it ruined basically almost destroyed my whole family.” He managed to get through this period with hard work and perseverance. He intentionally stopped associating with people who were quarrelsome or negative.

Marcus said, “My biggest obstacle was self-doubt. I just didn’t think I could do it. I got over it though through support systems, making friends.” He surrounded himself with other men who were successful, and his self-esteem flourished as he succeeded in his classes.
Rob experienced depression as he found himself in college longer than he expected:

When I maybe failed a class or had to take a class over again, and I know it was just cause of stupid mistakes I did. I didn’t study two days for the test, or I messed up on one test or didn’t turn in something….I really beat myself up.

Rob never expected that he would be in college for as long as he was:

But procrastination, taking the wrong classes, stuff like that really kind of messed me up. I took a lot of classes I shouldn’t have took. And I procrastinated on some assignments and didn’t turn them in. Just didn’t do what I was supposed to a couple of times and it cost me at least a year or two.

Despite his discouragement and regret, Rob persisted and graduated.

Just before starting college Neal was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and began taking medication. He stopped soon, however: “It makes me feel like I’m not at the top of my game…I feel like I’m smarter when I’m not on it.” He believes he is now in a different stage: “Now that I’m older and more mature, I have more control over, and I know the signs of when I’m about to go into a manic or depressive stage or whatever. So I just have to find the middle ground and bunker myself there and wait it out until I’m okay again.” Neal expressed concerns about his mother’s health:

One of my biggest problems right now is being afraid for her. She’s sick. She’s diabetic….I think I need to really consider and talk through it with somebody. I think I put too much stock in my mom and that’s weird to say….I don’t know how I’m going to be when she dies. I’m not sure….I have to deal with this before she dies, because if I don’t, after she dies it’s gonna be real messed up. But I don’t know if it’s possible to love somebody too much. But if it is, I think that’s a problem.
Noah had contemplated suicide in his teen years. He is an openly gay man from a conservative Baptist home. He confided in his family in high school that he was despondent:

They didn’t really have the resources. When I told them I was depressed, they were like, “Yeah, pray about it.” Like that was all they could really give me….They were just really freaked out about that, but they couldn’t offer me anything else. “I hope you get better. Pray about it.”

Noah availed himself of counseling services later at his private university but couldn’t continue with the sessions during the summer when he felt worse. He found himself sleeping the day away and not reporting for his summer job, which was at an amusement park out of state:

So I started calling this hotline service for people that are dealing with those issues. I remember I wanted to call suicide hotline, but I felt like I would take time from them. But I was talking to someone every week whenever I would feel overwhelmed. Eventually I realized I had to do it myself. I started going to work just trying to get through.

Dante had been featured in the national news for winning a noteworthy number of college scholarships. He expectations about what college would mean to him:

College was a place where I was gonna be able to accomplish anything that I wanted to accomplish even though I had succeeded so much as a high school student….I thought it was just the starting point and that I would be spring boarded and propelled forward even more through my college experiences.

Although Dante had visited his selected public research institution with his older cousin who attended there and engaged with a Black professional student organization and participated in a summer orientation program, his freshman year was very challenging:
Just to accomplish so many different things. You realize you have to kind of balance between your social life, sleep, and studying. And I think I stressed out a lot more than I had expected….I ended up having to be hospitalized because I had been so stressed out. And then the fact that I didn’t see myself in high regard anymore. I lost confidence….They thought there was something wrong with me.

Dante had earned a 3.5 GPA his first year in college, met lots of new people, and worked on writing a book. He was studying “40 to 60 hours a week” in the library most days from 6 pm to 2 am. He had what he called “a disorder” at the end of the academic year and spent the summer recovering. When he returned for his second year, he described it as being very different: “It just wasn’t the same anymore…I didn’t have that network of people to rely on….Feeling like I belonged was the hardest thing….The isolation.” At the advice of his doctor, Dante was enrolled only part-time and so was no longer moving as a cohort with his friends from summer orientation. He found classes were more difficult now:

I don’t know why I stressed so much because I did very well in the pre-requisite classes at least….It became more difficult. It kind of changed direction….Just my mindset changed when I felt overwhelmed….I was advised to intentionally underwhelm. So I kind of took that too literally.

Dante said he changed his study habits, reducing his study hours down to 15 or 20 a week. He said he stopped reading textbooks and worked from class notes more. The textbooks were now for reference and clarification of ideas presented in lecture, not for reading and outlining. His social circle changed, too: “It dissipated….I just felt like people were just on a different level than me. And I didn’t know how to either acclimate or, hate to say it, assimilate just to
communicate.” But he kept going and reached out for support from faculty and staff. He was able to progress and graduate in five years.

**Career goals and interest in major: The future.** A developed sense of purpose or clear career path helped some men transition successfully with their studies. They could more clearly see their destination and kept the end in mind as they adjusted to their new environment.

Paul had a high school exit portfolio with sociology as a major he was considering. He remembers hearing “everybody talking up” the public research institution’s prestigious school of business:

They were saying how it’s hard for Black kids to get in. There’s not many of them that do. And I was like, it’s just math, math. And I’ve always been great at math. So I kind of set my mind out that I would be one of the few Black kids who could get into the school of business. So that’s the plan. I took my freshman year is to make that happen.

Paul wanted to prove something to himself and to others. After his first year, he attempted to transfer to an HBCU where he had been offered a scholarship. He was not happy at his university where only 4% of the students are Black. The former scholarship was not available for second year students, and he was fully funded where he was at. So Paul persisted, despite feeling disenchanted and disappointed. The goal of demonstrating his prowess and being admitted to the business school fueled him to carry on and complete his degree. He’s eager to take a year off after graduation to find himself again.

James and Todd started college with the goal of becoming teachers. James wanted to be an elementary teacher and Todd a high school teacher. It was their desire to return to Detroit and teach children in schools there. These selected majors provided a guide for their program of study and selection of courses.
Abe thought he wanted to study journalism because he’d taken an AP English class his last year of high school and the teacher suggested this as a career path. He took a couple of journalism classes his first year and found it “tedious.” He described his next step: “A self-discovery journey trying to figure out what I did like to do.” He listed what he likes to do: “Watching TV, watching movies, acting, directing, talking with people socially, social media stuff, my love of photography.” He took a film appreciation class and, despite a lot of work required in the course, found he enjoyed it immensely. Abe looked in the catalog to see in which program this type of study was included. It was electronic media and film, which an advisor had already recommended for him. Once he latched on to that major, he moved quickly to completing all his requirements in four years.

John thought he would major in electrical engineering until he saw all the math classes he would need to take. This discouraged him as he felt his high school preparation in math has been very poor with substitute teachers and more advanced classes not offered. So he decided to pursue information technology, although he believes engineering would have provided more for him financially after graduation. Rob at first wanted to be an anesthesiologist until he discovered how long this would take. Then he considered pharmacology, but that seemed to take too much time as well. So he went with a biology major and hopes to eventually open some kind of business.

Charles had considered a career in nursing until he took his anatomy and physiology course--several times. He eventually graduated with a degree in social work because this aligned with his desire to help others. This was a process of discovery during his first two years as he adjusted and made peace with himself. Long term he has political aspirations and sees himself
as an elected official in the House of Representatives or lobbyist. Charles just wants to “impact other people’s lives” for the better.

Jake had to change his route to graduation, too. He aspired to be a medical doctor but found the competition at his public research institution to be arduous. His grandparents had attended the same school and Jake had attended an elite private high school. He expected to succeed in college. Instead he found himself taking classes over in an effort to raise his GPA and complete the prerequisites in the pre-med program of study. He stated that he “took pride” in these efforts and found the work rewarding. But in his fifth year in the midst of retaking a class with dedication, he decided it was just time to graduate: “I’m gonna finish this out. I’m gonna be on my way….I’m just gonna focus on graduating and making sure I do the most with my degree.” Jake was working with an office providing student support and decided that would be a great field in which to use his degree. He graduated with a bachelors in movement science and then entered a graduate program in higher education student affairs.

Ian’s degree will be in graphic design. He’s always been interested in drawing and art. His goal would be to intern with a clothing company and be involved in the marketing and design. But he is also considering a graduate program in fine arts and being an art professor.

Jalen was influenced by his uncle who is an assistant college football coach. He watched his uncle start working at the YMCA in Detroit and progress towards his current position. So Jalen’s major is sports management and he expects help from his uncle: “I can ride his [uncle’s] coat tail and he can network me to get me into the same position that he’s at or to even get me to a better position.” Jake figured he “already knew everything about sports” coming out of high school.
Tommy wants to be a tour manager and see the world traveling with musicians. But he’d be happy to work as a tour manager in any capacity. He’s participated in some tours and this is what captured his interest. His goal is to see the world: “Because every time I go somewhere, I’m growing.” David’s curriculum in communications began in high school where speaking was identified as his interest and a strength. Now it is his desire is to serve the community in a leadership role and he intends to change his major to public advocacy. David’s real “dream is to be somewhere in England on a stage performing poetry.” It may happen or “who knows…maybe that’s a blank.”

A number of the men expressed goals to start their own business. Rob intends to invest in a ticket brokerage along with some of his family members. Neal and Jason both want to establish a community center to provide mental health services and support for Blacks living in low-income communities. James and Steve would like to build a recreation center and operate after school and summer programs for youth. Mark, who “picked a major in my head,” wants to invest in real estate and be a property manager. Entrepreneurship is viewed as a means of being independent and exercising self-determination.

**Racism is Real**

The three institutions of higher education these young men attend have distinctly different environments that are unique from one another despite a shared proximity and purpose. All schools seek to educate students and equip them as contributing citizens. It is in the greater interest of society to support these efforts and endeavors. All schools state their intention clearly to engage and encourage their students. Yet every student reported experiencing racism during their college years within each of these university communities. The geographic locations of the institutions, although proximate to one another within a range of about 20 miles or less, have an
influence on the environment and culture of each university. Students are embedded within a local community and influenced by the racial and economic history within each of the locations. They interact with faculty and staff who may live in the surrounding vicinity. The surrounding neighborhood is where they often shop and eat and just hang out. Place and its past are powerful and influence what they experience.

The institutions as well as the local communities have widely different representations of diversity in both income and ethnicity. Yet there were remarkable similarities in the stories the men recounted of their daily encounters. They also shared a sameness in their responses when describing experiences when it felt that race was a significant factor. In the classroom, on the job, or walking the neighborhood, racism was waiting to remind them, “Don’t forget who you are and where you are.” The image of Black men as threatening, violent, and hypersexual is represented throughout social media so prevalently that the message is incorporated at a subconscious level (Enteman, 2001). Reactions may come so instinctually that they are not questioned until after the fact, if at all. These men enter spaces knowing they may be seen as a something other than themselves and that hostility may be their only welcome.

Experiences with racism on campus: Like it wasn’t nothin’. The classroom is a microcosm of the university community. The instructor may or may not be intentional in providing a safe and secure space for learning. New students often feel vulnerable and uncertain entering the unfamiliar territory of a college classroom. Even if the environment is well managed by the instructor, interactions between students cannot be controlled. Black students on historically White campuses may find themselves under-represented in their classrooms. Those who participated in bridge programs attended classes as a cohort. These cohorts were usually primarily comprised of other Black and Brown students. But once they begin taking other
classes, they may find themselves with just a handful of Black faces in the room if any. Their professors and instructors are also likely to be White. How do these men adjust successfully in this new environment? It is a particular challenge for those men who attended predominantly Black high schools in urban areas that are also predominantly Black.

Several students went out of their way to speak up and participate during classes. Matt said he is very active and outspoken in the classroom to “show out” for the other students. Duke felt there was a “preconceived notion” that because he was a Black man it was expected that “he’s probably gonna sit back…he’s probably not even gonna show up for class half the time.” To counter this, Duke worked extra hard and exerted more effort to “show up and show out” just as Matt did. Dante also said he needed to “prove” himself academically to be taken seriously as a student.

Paul found the public research campus populated with lots of White students who have limited experience with people who are Black or Brown. But they have clear opinions, nonetheless:

They have this idea in their head about you just from what they hear or see about Black people on the news….So the ideas of Black people and what their culture or how they operate is totally skewed by what they see in media, news, music, TV, having never actually experienced it in real life.

Paul felt his presence, as someone tall and muscular, often intimidated people, and they were cautious around him. He is confident in his intellectual capital and set out to prove himself in every class. He was sure that people assumed he was not as smart as they and had been admitted just to play football or because of affirmative action. But, no. Paul didn’t play ball and
affirmative action was no longer legal in determining admissions. Paul knew he had been admitted because of his GPA and ACT, both of which were exceptional.

Jason described the experience of living within the stories other people tell:

Being an African American male and then attending a predominantly White institution, there is this narrative of who you are, how much you are willing to participate, how well you can articulate, how competent you are….I found myself proving myself and feeling as if I had to prove that I was credible to be in this space and that I was smart.

Several students chose to hang back in class and remain more of an observer. Ian identifies as biracial and attended predominantly White K12 schools: “I’m used to that feeling of being alone in a classroom….It’s sort of a feeling of being different than everybody else in the class you just got to get used to.” Ian usually keeps quiet and participates when he can. His girlfriend is also biracial, and they talk about the images portrayed about Blacks in the media that are negative. They are determined and intentional in maintaining a positive image for themselves.

James had attended an HBCU his first year, but he returned to Michigan to complete college and be near his family. During his first semester at the public regional university, he took a children’s literature class in which he was startled when the professor, “an older White gentleman,” used the n-word. It was on more than one occasion and “it just rolled off his tongue like it wasn’t nothin’.” James was confused with the movies they often watched during class and unsure as to how these related to the final exam. First the professor told him not to worry. Then he told him to drop the class. Then he posted a failing grade for James: “I kind of felt that was strange….if I say something, I wonder what would happen. I didn’t even know who to talk to at that point because I’d just moved here.” He took the class with another instructor the next
semester and earned an A. James often felt that other students who were White didn’t want to be around him sometimes. He recounted one incident: “Coming into class and sat down and a couple students just moved away from me. They didn’t say anything. They just moved their chairs.” One day in class, another student arrived late. The only empty spot was next to James, but the latecomer “grabbed the seat and she moved it to the other side of the classroom.”

Duke also felt that other students didn’t want to sit near him in class. He perceived them as alienating themselves from him. Black students would tend to sit together: “Everyone else would be spread out in a different area. A lot of individuals didn’t want to sit next to us.” Duke would notice it when he found himself being the last one to have a paper returned or have a professor lecture without ever looking at him. “Favoritism may have been shown” is how he put it.

Rob, who studied biology and chemistry, said the stereotypes were especially evident once he started taking his higher-level courses:

Some people don’t think you know what you’re talking about….So they just think they know more than you. And then when you actually know what you’re telling more than them, they act surprised sometimes.

Group projects were frequently a challenge for the students. John, who described himself as naturally shy, found them especially uncomfortable:

I hated group projects. Only for the simple fact I was the last one picked….You know, I would be sitting next to somebody and…it always seemed like everybody knew everybody and they’ll pick around and the only time I would get picked is if they go 1-2-3 and count off to group.
Neal had just completed a research methods course in psychology where he was the only male and the only Black person. The course work was in group which he finds challenging because he “lessens [him]self in front of people.” He’s intentionally countering his perceived expectation that they are thinking, “He’s a scary Black type.” Neal said, “I’ll change that cause ain’t nothing wrong with me.” He wanted the women in his group to know they were safe but didn’t want them to think he was “an idiot.” Over the course of the semester, they came to respect his knowledge and skills. It was difficult for him to execute that because he felt “they didn’t listen” to him. Neal would give an answer and then someone else in the group would give an answer and everyone would acknowledge the second person: “Didn’t I just say that? That just came out of my mouth! But okay. That’s fine.” Working in residence life, Neal was a distinct minority both in gender and ethnicity.

They would leave me out of stuff…I remember one time I got called colored. She was like, “that colored boy.” Me? “Yeah.” She was trying to point me out, like I was walking down the hallway….Is this the 60’s?

Marcus participated in a march on campus his first semester. He joined in when he saw other people, mostly Black, walking peacefully across campus demonstrating for justice on behalf of a Black man killed by police officers. As they passed a large dormitory, other students were “screaming racial slurs” out of the windows. He was looking at posts on a social media chat that referred to the marchers as “monkeys.” This was something Marcus had never experienced or witnessed. He was wide-eyed and still appalled as he described that day.

As racial tensions escalated nationally, Alex observed a growing level of discomfort between Black and White students in his classes. He took pride in being understanding and tolerant of different viewpoints:
People have certain mindsets based off of when they grew up. They think off of other people…but at some point, you have to think about why this is a wrong thing to say or a wrong thing to do. You have to understand that you’re making people uncomfortable.

Alex corrected some White students he knew for making light of the death of a Black man killed by police officers. They claimed they were just trying to be funny and said people were being “too sensitive about these things.” Alex was “extremely upset” and “really, really irritated” and told them that if this was how they thought then they best keep it to themselves.

Noah was the only Black student participating in study abroad courses on two different occasions. They talked about lots of things during their program. But if someone wanted to discuss racism, he would leave the conversation:

I don’t like explaining racism to White people. I just don’t wanna have to do that….I’m not gonna educate you. I feel like if you really wanna know something, you’ll get up and find it or you’ll word towards it. Because knowledge is everywhere….If you wanna know something, it’s easy….There’s no excuses or reasons for not wanting to or knowing something.

Noah had to “distance” himself from some of his friends when they talked about Black Lives Matter. White people often want to say All Lives Matter and Noah said he “just can’t do it.” He’s grown apart from many of the White friends he made his first three years in college because of conversations about racism. He’s expressed sorrow at having had to move on from these friends, but they grew apart because he was hurt and angry at their insensitivity.

Todd questioned whether or not Black students were unfairly sanctioned for campus behaviors, just as they are in K12 school environments. He had experienced this personally with being stopped and questioned often by campus security. As a member of a Black Greek
organization, he expressed annoyance at often being asked about whether they step and stroll. To him this feels “like the zip coon stereotype and the Sambo stereotype.” The organization does active community service in shelters, nursing homes, and community centers while requiring that each member maintain a strong GPA: “You make it seem like the only things that we do is step and stroll. It’s maniacal.”

David had to represent when he was asked to address use of the n-word. He was the only Black person in the class and managed to remain an observer of the group’s conversation for a period of time. But then the instructor, a White man who was his advisor and with whom he was comfortable, said, “Let’s approach the elephant in the room. How do you feel about it, David?” All eyes in the classroom turned toward him. He felt he was put in the position of having to speak on behalf of all Blacks. So he qualified his response as just being only his personal opinion and not a blanket statement representing what any other Black person might think or feel.

**Experiences with racism in the community: Ye olde drive-by.** Ian works as a barista in a local book shop café. He is biracial with lighter skin and tight blonde curls. As he was ringing up an older White woman, he asked for her information to apply a membership discount. The system failed to recognize her number and she “was getting more and more cranky and agitated…and pretty rude.” A coworker entered the information manually and the customer went to her table. When she left, Ian overheard her telling his coworker how well the coworker had handled the situation. Then she said, “Some people, some people just don’t learn….Some people can’t be taught.” Ian was shocked because he knew she was talking about him:

That was pretty much the first time I’d ever experienced that ignorance directly targeted at me….Now I’m more paranoid to that type of experience….I’ve noticed more just
because I’ve never had my eyes opened to that sort of thing because I’ve never experienced it before….It’s pretty upsetting.

Now Ian finds himself looking at everyone, especially older White people, with suspicion anticipating another offense to come. His trust in others has been forever damaged.

The drive-by shout out continues to persist as a cowardly means of expressing racial intolerance. It provides the protection of anonymity, often under cover of darkness, and the company of others to bolster bravado. The automobile is such a separate environment that people say and do things that might otherwise be out of character or socially sanctioned. Drivers who control themselves when out of the vehicle get behind the wheel and suddenly become irritated and aggressive at everything on the road. They flip others off, yell at bicyclists, shout profanities. The sense of being separated from what is outside, in full control, and somehow invisible is so strong that people still drive drunk or talk on their phone despite knowing how deadly this may be to oneself and to others. Why does being in a car give its occupants license to shout out words they might otherwise only do in private or in secret? Shame and good sense are too often absent inside a moving vehicle. It is a place where bigots ride, or should we say hide, and feel emboldened to roll down the window and shout out the n-word. Then the car speeds away, usually into the dark, and they crawl back into their hole.

Steve was riding his bike home from work one night about 10:30 during his first year as a college student. He was just a mile or so from his dorm on a busy main street:

Somebody yelled out the window, “Go home, nigger.”’” And then I’m like, “What?” And then I seen something go out the window. I think it was a can or something….I’m on my bike and it barely missed me. It probably hit the back of my bike, like a little bit missed
the back of my head. And I turned back and then the car just turned at the light. It kind of scurried off. That night was kind of crazy.

Jake had similar experiences on several occasions near his campus. People would “yell out racial slurs” as they drove by him. He dismissed their behavior because “they were drunk, and it was what it was.” Dante was on the same campus at night and had the same experience several times. He, too, dismissed the men in the car “calling us a bunch of n-words” as “drunk or whatever.” He’s is able to recognize when people he passes on the street are looking at him or “just trying to get away from” him. It feels to him like a “microagression.” Dante will take the stairs instead of the elevator to avoid encountering this reaction from someone.

Mark and a number of his Black friends used to walk a couple of miles off campus to play basketball at a local YMCA. The quickest route meant circling through White neighborhoods. One day a car drove by and someone shouted a racial slur out the window “and just rolled by.” They felt uncomfortable, but they were in a group: “We just took it like, whatever. We know what we’re doing. We just going to play basketball. It’s something that’s going to come up with being who we are.” Another time, someone in one of the neighborhoods through which they walked, called the university to “file a report” saying the men must not walk as a group anymore. The report alleged the men “were running, and…going down the street taking selfies or taking pictures.” The university representative told them, “Yeah, you guys are getting basically racially profiled because you’re walking down these people’s street.” On another occasion, when Mark and his roommate were walking in the neighborhood, they could see at first that everyone’s door was open: “Now we walking down the street, people’s doors closing, and it was like the middle of the day.” They watched the doors shutting as they passed, and it didn’t feel good.
Todd likes to attend parties, and most of them near campus are open to anybody. As he said, “They don’t have guest lists or anything. It’s a college party.” He was specific about where the parties located. Go one block one way off campus for parties that are primarily Indian and Asian. Go a block in the other direction and the parties are mostly White. Yet another block has parties that are mostly Black. He’s learned that, even if he’s accompanied by someone the host knows, he will be asked to leave unless he’s identified by someone who’s already there. If not, he’s told in a direct manner that “you have to go.” Todd said a White person at a Black party would stand out in a similar way, but he’s sure would not be asked to leave. He also sees an unfounded suspicion promulgated by the “timely warnings” sent out to members of the university community about criminal events as they occur. These messages come through email and texts. The suspect will be described by gender (always male), height, weight, clothing (often a hoodie), and ethnicity (too frequently Black): “It paints a picture that Black men on campus are a danger.” Todd has also observed stronger police presence at campus events attended by more Black students:

- White students they can have a big event and there may only be one or none [security officer]. We don’t even have to be doing anything and the police are there. That sends a message that you guys need to be policed. Somebody needs to be watching you guys all the time. It’s a lot of little messages that collectively say that we are a threat, or we are unwanted.

**Self as a Black man: To be or not to be.** American society venerates many Black male athletes and entertainers. These men rake in enormous amounts of money for their performances in sports or singing. They are esteemed for what they do, not necessarily for who they are, and earn exorbitant salaries. Respect and reward are given to roles in American culture that provide
entertainment and escape. There is significant power and dominance, whether correctly or not, attributed to the demonstration of these skills. But also associated with this power is a threat of violence and physicality. What is the experience of being perceived as dangerous and hyper-sexual, judged in an instant by your gender and color? How does this impact the way a young Black man comes to see himself, navigate his world, and express his personhood?

Most of the men acknowledged that it is difficult to be a Black man in the United States today. As Jason said, “It’s doesn’t matter how educated I am. It doesn’t matter how many degrees I have. I will still have to fight against that narrative.” Wherever you go and whatever you do, the image of who you are expected to be is perpetuated throughout society. But James asserted, “The moment you stop being yourself is the moment you let someone else win. You can’t be afraid of yourself. You can’t worry about being judged by other people.”

Marcus thought about himself as a child in elementary school and recalled the sanctions he experienced about who he was even then:

We are so often frowned upon, especially when you’re younger and conditioned to suppress who we are….We just very, very energetic kids. And we’re always taught to not be so energetic, calm down, relax, sit still….We always have to suppress who we are and what we do.

Until he got to high school, Marcus said he had “no sense of who [he] was.” And it’s only been after a couple years of college, that he’s beginning to realize what he values and how to express that. He attributes this to reading, identifying his own opinions, and embracing being smart:

It’s really hard being a Black man and being yourself. You always have to fit this. You either one of two images that people want you to be….You’re either the positive Black guy or the negative Black guy. But a lot of times we just wanna be ourselves.
Duke talked about this, too: “We’re opinionated.” He has found it difficult to be a Black man when it comes to expressing himself: “Due to how society frames us, if we voice our perspective, we’re looked at as egotistical or menacing or mean or trying to do harm to someone.” It is especially difficult on a college campus, a space committed to the ideals of truth and knowledge, to feel you must squelch your ideas to keep someone else comfortable. And what if you disagree with or find error in what the other person is holding forth to be true? How do you speak up when you can sense the uncertainty and suspicion others have with your very presence?

Tommy said, “You can’t really be yourself. They can’t really understand you.” He finds himself torn by how his world view has changed: “You’re looking through different glasses now.” It’s difficult to visit his old neighborhood and be aware of the “aspects of poverty that [he] didn’t even see before.” He wonders if ignorance really is bliss because he was happier as a high school kid before he knew how “deprived” his neighborhood actually was. But he knows he can’t go back: “You will not be comfortable there. You will not see it the same.” There’s a sense that Tommy is still trying to pull these two selves together.

Alex points to two social groups that he sees assessing the behavior of Black men--White people and other Black people. He identifies both groups as having expectations that he should “be a man…not showing emotions, not being vulnerable at all.” Alex calls himself a “nerd” and “too smart about certain things,” which he has found to sometimes be seen as trying to “act White.” Other Black people might tell him that he doesn’t “act and talk a certain way” with which they identify, but he declares that he is “very much a Black guy.” It’s hard when Alex feels he has to “bear the torch” and “be the standard so everybody can see” the good in Black men. He is sensitive to being viewed as an individual and not as a stereotype.
Todd described the burden of stereotypes: “No matter how much good you do, that one bad can set the tone for all Blacks.” He paraphrases from Shakespeare’s play *Henry IV* when asked what it means to be a Black man: “Heavy is the head that wears the crown.” Todd described what this means to him:

We have so much power and so much influence, but the weight of the world and the pressure and the systems that follow us are heavy. So if you make it out, you’re bound to be one of the greatest people to walk the face of the earth. But if you succumb, then you just be another bust pipe.

Although Todd asserts that the opinion of others doesn’t define him, he recognized the “hyper masculinity standards” of his Detroit neighborhood growing up. He remembers being talked about for speaking “proper” and told that he sounded like he was “gay.” The gay label was used when men “didn’t sleep with enough women” or weren’t “violent enough.” Todd decided to code switch and not “talk hood” at school or on the job. But this need to adapt in different environments with so many different factors means “you sometimes lose yourself.” It intensified for him in college with a wider variety of social organizations and groups: “You constantly have to pick up on social cues and adapt to every social situation.” With all of this, he’s concluded that it’s not his task to “make anyone else happy.” He sees himself as being the same person even as he finds more ways to express who he is in pursuit of what makes him happy.

Noah thinks it’s very difficult to be a Black man because of the “rigid” and restrictive way that masculinity is defined. As a gay man, he’s especially annoyed by the way the word is used negatively by young people. He hears the n-word used often by young people as well and sees its use as generating self-hate. Noah can name Black contributions that have significantly shaped American culture, but questions how others “take advantage of a culture without caring
about the people who built and inhabit it.” Despite the challenges, he describes being Black as “a gift” and “really amazing.”

Jake could remember the way questions in mostly Black middle school would determine if you were cool. Did you play sports? Did you make money? Did you gamble? As one of the smart kids, he always felt the struggle of not fitting in and being like everyone else: “That’s not what Black males do. This is what Black males do.” From his perspective, there was an unspoken expectation that Black men don’t “do well.” When he was accepted at an elite secondary boarding school, folks in the neighborhood expressed amazement and surprise. It seemed to Jake that there was no real way to fit into any expectations: “It’s always a moving target. You could always be more of a Black male than you are.”

Neal has been told by other Black people that he is a “White person in a Black body” because he likes Harry Potter and likes to skateboard. He rejects these stereotypes with anger: “I can’t even be 100% who I am!? I can’t like certain things!?” Neal questioned how others define being Black with preferences, language, or behavior and that this is most often done by other Blacks. He did not associate any of this with his being gay, however.

Steve finds it challenging to code switch. His friends back home would say “he’s very educational” because he “speaks well.” But in another environment, he wonders about his way of speaking: “It might not be acceptable in the real professional world….Maybe somebody White, they just wouldn’t understand. It’s not like that I’m not as intelligent with my words. It’s just a different terminology.” Steve thinks that when Black men are not “really taught how to show communication the right way,” they may become “stuck in our own ways.”

David believes everyone is seeking identity, in part because of social mores that compel individuals to be part of something defining. The limitation is that American society is primarily
White, and the White way has become associated with the “right” way. Language was one way he’s experienced this. David was intentional in changing his speech patterns. For a while he thinks he went too far: “My voice was super high, and it be chipper. I’m not even a chipper dude…I felt as though I was trying to identify myself with them [Whites].” He recognized that after going to college he spoke differently and used less “slang” than people in his old neighborhood. But one of his Black friends asked him why he was talking that way, because it didn’t sound like him. Then David watched himself in some recorded interviews. He realized he was speaking in a manner that was not true to who he is and was not impressing anyone positively. He describes listening to himself and finding his own voice as “a struggle.” Language and voice are especially important to him as a powerful means of leading change, particularly in spoken word and rap.

Paul perceives difficulty in being a Black man as a consequence of social messages: “Is a Black man supposed to be someone who’s able to just take it and kind of relinquish yourself to appease others?....A lot of times to be a Black man means to scare other people, not necessarily physically, but with just the idea of Blackness.” He sees this as a serious and continuing pressure with which Black men must contend as they work to improve themselves. Success and accomplishment have a price: “It’s going to require making people uncomfortable.” This has been hard for Paul to accept, but it is the reality as he experiences it and he’s willing to pay the price.

Rob doesn’t find it difficult to be a Black man because he describes himself as “more laid back” and not “outrageous.” He thinks that some Black men would do well to “hold back” their outrageous personalities because they “rub people the wrong way.”
Matt is comfortable being himself, too, because he thinks you can’t be anything other than who you are: “We have no reason to hide our true selves. Because we stand alone already, so what’s the point of hiding our true selves or not letting our voice be heard.” Mark also believes people should just be who they are and respect one another. He finds it simple to be himself, although he’s observed some of his peers in college act very differently and change their behaviors over time. Mark’s logic is that his way of being himself was working before college, so why change up now?

John loves being a Black man and considers it to be a “beautiful thing.” He grew up in the Nation of Islam and attended a private Muslim school until the sixth grade. He attributes his comfort with being Black to his education about the history of Black people, something he did not see with many of his peers growing up in Detroit: “I feel like a lot of history has been tucked away from us for a very long time.” It was challenging when this school closed, and he transferred to Detroit public schools. Later John attended “one of the worst high schools in Detroit,” and he hated it. He was appalled by the ignorance, the profanity, the lack of respect for women he witnessed. John thinks that people have “a veil pulled over their eyes for a very long time” until they start asking questions and educating themselves. But sometimes he feels even that isn’t enough. One must apply the knowledge to choose health and truth, as he has found when trying to help his friends. Too often they turn away from his positive expectations and good habits: “Black people once they get reconditioned to a certain thing that’s negative, they don’t want the positive no more. You know it’s almost like that’s what they thrive on and it’s weird.” He delights in what he knows about the history and power of being Black, even as he grieves for his peers who he perceives as too often being self-destructive.
Dante joined the Black gospel choir at his public research university when he was trying to recover from his breakdown. It was with this group of Black students that he was able to relax and be supported in completing his studies:

I just found it welcoming. It was an environment where I could say what I wanted to say and feel what I wanted to feel, and nobody was there to punish me for how I felt or judge me. I could just be myself and be honest. It’s just a sense of where can I be real with people? You know on campus you find that you might have to sugar coat or kind of have a different way of carrying yourself.

**How to stay strong: It’s gonna be hard.** The journey to the degree takes a minute. It’s a long-term project over a period of years that requires persistence and perseverance for every student who will graduate. But for Black students the presence of both macro and microaggressions that are experienced day in and out takes a toll in every way. To be in a historically White environment that was not originally constructed or designed to include or welcome you requires a special kind of endurance. How have they managed to persist in the pursuit of their goal and remain strong?

When other students wouldn’t sit near James in class, his response was to be “more focused on what [he] had to do.” He sees himself as a role model for both Black and White males as he has observed how many White males look up to Black men and seek to copy them. James wants to “set a good example.” He is intentional despite it often being very difficult and seeks out the advice of older people who lived through times of racism:

There’s no way for you to make excuses or to try to not pay no never mind….So I always try to carry myself and hold myself to a higher standard….I just put my head down and not pay any attention and block out everything. That’s just what I would rather do.
James can see that some people “just don’t know,” and so he wants to have a conversation first and sort things out a bit. They may not realize they’re being offensive or racist until you “help them get a better understanding.” So he laughs to himself and takes his time talking with others helping them relax in his company.

Abe says a Black man must be strong for himself and for other people, too: “You have to hold yourself to a higher caliber because you will be held to a higher caliber….You have to be on a higher level of knowledge as well as intellectually.” Over time, he has concluded that he prefers to “keep the peace” with others who may have opinions with which he disagrees, and “become that person’s friend for better or worse.” He particularly dislikes the homophobic statements which some of his Black male friends may utter, but discounts what they say as perhaps being accurate based on what they have experienced.

John tells himself that “this too shall pass, and it can literally always be worse.” He recounted several situations where circumstances may have appeared to be problematic. In time, they were revealed as opportunities for his personal growth. So he looks on the best side, expecting good to come out of bad. He focuses on the health and happiness of his family as an indication that all is well rather than dwelling on what is wrong.

Tommy says, “You gonna have to work hard. Not even hard. Hard-er to attain what you want. Life is always gonna be hard I guess.” He draws upon his anger to push him sometimes, not to the point where it would be “destructive to my life.” But just enough to persist and finish no matter what it takes. Tommy tells himself, “There’s nowhere for you to go. So you just have to suck it up…You cannot go back…You can only go forward.” Duke also tells himself that “everything is gonna be all right.” He likes affirmations and uses them often to lift himself: “Get up. Don’t sit down. Stay strong. Stay in the fight. Keep going…You’re a champion.
You’re great. You’re powerful beyond measure. You’re intelligent.” These roll off his tongue like a mantra, so it’s not surprising when he shares that he tells himself these things every day. Mark relies on affirmations, too. He has a sign on his door that reads “stay strong” to encourage him every time he enters or leaves his room. Mark has also learned to be selective in the company he keeps. He’s sought out other men: “Who are as strong as me so when I get down, they will lift me up.”

Alex looks at any and every situation with a critical eye to identify all the options. His approach is analytical and reflective as he gathers information to consider. He uses this to frame an understanding of where people are coming from and why they act as they do. Alex acknowledges that sometimes his commitment to analysis will leave him indecisive and on the fence. But his experiences in college have encouraged him to move forward rather than “just standing there and not going anywhere.” He believes he has learned how to take more risks and step out with more confidence.

Todd describes his resilience as a source of strength. Despite many setbacks, including a difficult childhood and the murder of his older sister, he “always bounces back.” He tells himself things “could always be worse.” When they are difficult, he thinks about how life has “valleys and peaks.” Todd believes the valleys are there to transcend, to make you strong, so you can appreciate the peaks. In any circumstance, you either “succumb” or you “do better.” From his perspective, it’s not the circumstances but “how you take it.” His goal is to use the circumstances to identify what he wants to do and then persist in that direction.

Steve looks at other people and compares his situation to theirs: “I could be where they are right now. It could be way worse.” He has friends who are in especially difficult circumstances. So he views his own life positively. Steve believes it’s important to remain
optimistic in every situation. With patience, things change and turn around: “If you stay patient, over time you will get there.”

When Jake experienced a car full of men driving by and calling out the n-word to him, he framed it in a particular way: “It was what it was. They were drunk.” He describes himself as “stubborn” and proud of his accomplishments independent of other opinions. He prays for strength of guidance every day and seeks to be content in the moment. Dante also experienced a drive by near his campus late one night: “They were Indian. They were drunk.” Dante thinks that to be a Black man is to “overcome.” He sees Black men as the foundation for families and communities with a responsibility to help other Black and Brown people achieve their goals. He wants to make a difference to others and share what he has experienced with the help he’s received.

Mark sees obstacles for Black men so “you just got to be a little bit stronger because the way people look at you.” He uses these limiting or negative perceptions as motivation to work hard. They’re wrong thinking “is gonna come with life.”

Jason has given some thought to his role as a Black man in society and the racist reactions of others:

I try not to perpetuate the narrative that they believe is attached to me. Most of the time I turn a deaf ear almost or I become numb. Just so I can survive and be safe….They’re ignorant. Not myself. They lack a level of education and perspective. You’re not what they see you as. And then always show them differently. Transgress. Do the total opposite of what’s expected of you.

Neal revels in the “power” of being a Black man. He sees his “every step and every breath” as being revolutionary: “Because society is set up so you don’t exist and yet you do.”
He’s proud to be Black, although this is an understanding he has not always held. It’s “scary” to be a Black man: “We get killed a lot and that’s terrifying.” But Neal is active in the Black Student Union and actively working to change the system: “Even though the system wasn’t made for us, we shouldn’t have to fear it. The system should change to suit us, not us change to suit the system.” Neal has found a cause with his student organization’s activities into which he can throw his passion.

Paul found a mentorship program for Black men at his public research university. When new participants join the program, they are asked the question of what it means to be a Black man. It remains a continuing topic of discussion throughout the year. The group was titled Here Earning A Destiny through Honesty Eagerness and Determination of Self (HEADS). It fosters consciousness and awareness. They intention is to explore “the duality of how you see yourself and how they see you” in conversations and reflections together.

Reasons to Persist

These men succeeded in completing at least two years of college successfully and several of them have already graduated and are enrolled in master’s level programs of study. But the too many of the Black men who start college in this country will not persist beyond the first year. From their own perspective, the co-researchers talked about why other men have not continued their academic careers. What were their personal reasons for continuing? What made the difference to each of them?

Family: The dream. It is expected that those who promoted going to college and fostered entry would be significant in continuing enrollment. Family members who had been encouraging and expectant would be anticipating a graduation. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings were all watching and waiting to claim their new graduate and brag about him.
Wanting them to succeed was not the same as actually providing the help they needed to do so, however.

Marcus thinks it’s significant that his parents promoted college with him from a young age. They stressed the importance of getting good grades from the time he was in elementary school. By the time he entered college, this was an expectation set in stone.

Rob’s older cousin helped finance his education. Although his cousin had never attended college, he was generous with Rob: “He gave me money for anything I needed and continued to motivate me.” This combination of confidence and cash helped Rob persist even though it took him two years longer than he expected to graduate.

Matt never forgot that he had family looking up to him. He thought of his “little cousins,” his brother and sister, and his family: “They were depending on me to achieve some goals and to set some goals for my younger cousins.” Every time he went home to visit, he was reminded that he was a role model: “It’s a big push for me.”

Neal is motivated to purchase his mother a home. She lost one to bankruptcy when he was much younger. Since he was 10 years old, she’s been saying she wants one. He wants to get it for her. And a nice new car, too. He is an only child and his mother had put great faith in him to succeed in life. He is confident that with a college degree he will find a way to earn this money to provide for her.

Charles was intensely motivated by the birth of his son during his first year in college. He wanted to provide for him with something more than minimum wages. His uncle had also encouraged him for many years by listening, counseling, and keeping him employed at a good wage. Abe’s family wanted him to come home more often, but he didn’t have a car so that meant arranging transportation back and forth from Detroit. He preferred to stay on campus as
he was enjoying his independence. Some of his old friendships back home were forgotten as he pursued his education and was “basically partaking in a whole new lifestyle.” Neither of his parents had attended college and he realized they were not aware of what life on campus was like for him.

Noah recognized that he was provided with a lot of resources to succeed in college. These were part of his program at the university. At first, he “would resent” his family because they didn’t continue their education and they didn’t understand what he was doing. He felt he had no one to ask his questions or talk to about what he was experiencing. It took time for him to realize that his family members were not given the resources he had. Noah came to understand over time that he was being unfair to his family: “I was thinking they should be here because I need your help.” But it took a couple of years for him to have this perspective and not feel resentful.

A number of men shared the experience of separating with their families as they acquired new knowledge in attending college. While they may have relied on their parents as advisors growing up, college was unfamiliar territory. Jason, John, Tommy, Todd, and Neal each mentioned the challenge of not being able to have their parents understand their obstacles in college. They would have to find other advisors who could help them navigate financial aid, housing, registration, and all the details associated with college attendance.

**Friends old and new: Finding safe haven.** Some men had friends who started college at the same time and were often close enough to share in daily activities. John enjoyed entering college with 8 of his friends from high school. He recalls his first semester with them as being lots of fun until the grades were posted. Then he got serious about succeeding. John watched 5 of his friends leave and realized this was going to be up to him.
Marcus was part of a cohort of Black men on campus who lived together and would share some classes. Another half dozen of his friends from high school also started college at the same time and he hung out with them, too. His formal cohort provided academic support and his high school friends were his primary socializing group. Marcus thinks all around support is critical to college success. His cohort provided interaction with Black male student leaders and with Black faculty and staff: “They were people who were really prominent on campus. They were real popular and successful.” Being connected to this group of individuals inspired him to succeed: “It conditioned me to want to be the best that I can be, so I can help people that come in the future.”

These new friendships on campus could contribute to success, especially if the friendships were with more experienced Black male students who had already navigated the environment for a year or two. Student organizations, some with a specific focus for Black men, were significant for many of the men. James met several other Black men during his orientation. He had transferred from an HBCU after his first year and would be living in the dorms. He still hangs out with most of these men today and describes them as “just close and did everything together” when they lived on campus. With these friends he learned to “balance playtime and serious work time and [they] all motivated each other.” This was a casual and informal group of men who supported one another in both their personal and their professional activities with a goal on graduation. James had a full schedule working and studying and opted to “focus on school” rather than join student organizations or participate in any programs. He regrets this now and sees it as a missed opportunity. Several of his friends did participate in groups and he saw it work for them.
Tommy also transferred after one year at an HBCU. He joined student organizations and “relationships just started blooming out of everywhere.” He was instrumental in the development of an organization for Black men on campus. This community defined his social group after having been friends with “random guys” for some time. They “faded off” after he became more involved in several student organizations with a focus for Black and Brown students. The presence of Black male staff and faculty at events they hosted was important to him because he realized they shared experiences and stories. Tommy also felt it made him more academically accountable: “There’s more eyes watching me now.”

Abe joined organizations with upperclassmen who helped him “stay grounded and still following [his] dreams.” His social groups were primarily Black and Brown students: “We could instantly click because they’re like family already, because we need each other.” Abe wonders if he would still be in school without the support of these organizations over the past several years. College success isn’t simple, and you may need some guidance and good advice: “It’s so much stuff that goes along with it.”

Duke described the significance of his student organization: “It’s a safe haven where we can go as Black men to voice our frustrations, voice our discrepancies, voice our opinions about topics that are going on in the news and in the world. Plus, a place where we can voice our triumphs.” He is emphatic in asserting that this support is necessary on every campus for Black and Brown students.

David was part of a cohort of Black men who lived together and shared some classes. He thinks this program was essential to “sprint them right in” to being men. Having talked with other Black men at other colleges, he’s heard stories of more difficult transitions: “Having a community of brothers around you reaching for a common goal definitely lifted me up because I
had people to hold me accountable.” They would monitor one another’s attendance, assignments, study hours, test preparation and this made a real difference to David.

Matt was part of a similar group with two of his “godbrothers.” They started together and stayed together giving one another support. He met 5 other men in the cohort, and they have formed a tight group. Several young men from Mark’s high school went to college with him and joined the same cohort. Mark roomed with one of them with whom he’d played high school basketball. But he never expected to be as close as they now are. “Now it’s like a brotherhood rather than just a friendship.”

Rob made four good friends when he came to college and they continue to be his friends several years later. They’ve encouraged one another studying together, playing basketball together, and individually accessing support on campus as needed. Rob thinks asking for help and not trying to do it on your own is critical to being successful. Sharing this information and referring one another to where they knew there was help, made a difference in their all persisting.

Todd had a wide circle of friends and enjoyed being part of several groups. He knew lots of people from Detroit schools when he came to campus. The social component of being at college was important to him. Todd joined one of the oldest Black Greek organizations which he describes as originating in a need for “sheer survival” on the part of Black men at White universities.

Jake also joined a Black fraternity in his junior year. He had been part of several student organizations, including the Men’s Glee Club which frequently traveled together to perform. He lived in a dorm with other health science majors all four years he attended the public research university. Jake “took pride” in building relationships and utilizing available resources which he saw as opportunities.
Dante’s roommate first year was someone he’d been friends with since middle school. They were “super close” and had almost all their classes together. They were both in a concentrated STEM program of study at the public research university. Dante had a breakdown at the end of his first year. But he and his friend remained close and lived in the same dorm his second year. Dante is grateful that his friend often included him in activities. His junior year he joined the Gospel Chorale and found a supportive and inclusive network of friends.

Neal made lots of friends his first year and was deliberate in seeking out White students. Coming from a mostly Black high school, he was eager to interact with White people. But these relationships didn’t endure, and he became more comfortable associating with other Black and Brown students. His “family unit” of two current friends has been in place for several years. He recently became part of a Black male organization and was also elected vice president for the Black Student Union. Neal’s hoping his two friends will join BSU, too.

Noah found a mentor on campus, a Black male staff person, who was significant to his success. They met through meetings on campus and developed a rapport: “I didn’t have anyone else to teach me about college….I didn’t have anyone to guide me. I didn’t have a format, a platform, a way to navigate through those resources.” Noah was willing to seek assistance and then to follow the advice he received. He sees the mentoring this man provided as having made all the difference.

Paul continued to be in contact with a director of the Upward Bound program he was part of during his sophomore year in high school. The gentleman provided Paul with employment in the program every summer, and they talked frequently about college life. Being able to return to his community and work on behalf of young people there gave Paul a great sense of purpose and value. Once he started college, his social circle consisted of other Black students only. He
describes the public research university as being “two worlds”—one Black and one White. This sense of belonging and being with people who looked like him contributed a lot to his persistence.

Connecting with professors in the art department has been significant to Ian’s success. He is biracial and the faculty are all White. He has found them to be “really helpful and kind.” They assisted him in selecting his courses and planning his program of study. Most important to Ian is that they serve as a “reference point in the future.” He can see himself as an art professional, maybe even an art teacher. They provide a relevant model for him to which he relates.

Self-talk: If it is to be, it’s up to me. Jason arrived on campus with great determination. He had no intention of returning to Detroit and what he describes as the “trauma” of his growing up there. He built a vision of his new life and was willing to do whatever it took to get there. Jason wanted to change his “climate” and change the lives of others. He didn’t have “a cushion” back home: “The only cushion that I would have was the one I created for myself.” That would be his degree and his profession. While he recognizes the social support he received, he identifies his own will and desire to succeed as most significant in his persistence.

John said he quickly realized that the outcome of this college adventure would be up to him and his own decisions: “I looked to my left and my right and I don’t have nobody.” He, too, felt that he couldn’t go back to Detroit: “I guess I had a hunger. I had no choice.” To live the life of which he dreamed would require education. He wanted a car, a home, a family, and a means of helping his parents. Without a good paying job, he couldn’t imagine being happy: “That was my mindset…I just started grinding more.”
Tommy had a similar attitude about completing college: “You don’t have anything to prosper unless you don’t rely on yourself.” This sense of autonomy and reliance on self was a shared characteristic.

**Those who left: Not for everyone.** Finances, the money for tuition and living expenses, was and continues to be one of the greatest challenges for college students. There is no free college education available in the United States. At the beginning of the first year, students may be blissfully unaware of the costs involved. The family and school counselors have submitted the first financial aid application months before the semester begins. Students often move into the dormitory, eat in the cafeteria, use the gym, and go to class without an awareness of how these activities tally into dollars. It sometimes comes as a rude awakening at the end of the first semester or first year when they see the bill and realize how much this all costs.

Paul attended the most expensive university with a full scholarship. But he watched many students leave because they could not pay the bills. He also saw them struggle academically if their secondary education had been less than stellar in quality: “They start so far behind that it’s hard to ever actually catch up.” This despite meeting the admission requirements of SAT/ACT scores and GPA. The competition to excel academically is fierce at his institution. Paul said some students are behind in both their academic preparation and their financial resources. Either one can mean they have to go home.

Jason was a non-traditional student his first year in the dorms. He was 21 years of age and had been supporting himself since he was 16 and still in high school. He was eligible for financial aid as an independent adult with minimum wage income and no assets. But this wasn’t enough to pay all the bills. He worked two or three jobs while going to school full-time because he was “determined to do so.” Jason is proud of this skill to “make a way out of no way” which
he honed as an adolescent couch surfing and hustling. He also sought out every available resource for financial support and was awarded scholarships because of his efforts. What was surprising to him, perhaps because of his maturity at the point he enrolled, was the attitude of students around him. He perceived them as having “goals to change their climates and college coming from the hood is the way to do it.” But because they were moving away from something rather than towards an academic goal, they fell away and didn’t graduate. Historically White universities lack community space to support and include Black students in Jason’s opinion. He also feels that first year students are often immature and inexperienced with the world that awaits them as an adult. They fail to realize how important education can be to their future quality of life.

James had one friend who left because of financial reasons. He also observed a “dedication” to success with other students who persisted: “They were serious about what they were doing.” The ones who didn’t continue “were focused on playtime more than schoolwork. They would mess with different girls or they would just be partying a lot.” Dante also names this “sense of responsibility and maturity” as significant with those who persist. He thinks that some people don’t believe things will get better and leave when it gets hard. Without pushing harder, there’s no growth. He describes “struggle” as a “plateau” for some people, a point at which they decide not to grow any further: “When you look above that wall, around that wall, you find all the people who can help you get above the wall and you overcome it and get over it.”

Abe recognizes the attribute of persistence in college success, but he feels that a support system is a critical component. His recalls his roommate first year who was an introvert and not involved with campus life. When the end of the year came and he had a $4,000 bill, the
roommate didn’t know how to problem solve. His parents couldn’t help him, and he wasn’t working. Abe still thinks that maybe his roommate might have found help if he’d been connected to more resources and networked on campus: “There are options of what you can do to become a successful student.” Instead, the roommate didn’t return after his first year.

Most of John’s friends who started with him in college, left after the first year or two. He has fewer friends now because he’s spent his time going to class, working 30 hours a week, and being with his girlfriend. He was sad to his friends go, but that became a motivation to him to focus and work harder. John perceived those who left as coming to college for “the wrong reasons.” He thinks they wanted “fun, freedom, and the abundance of women that wasn’t bad females that they could pick from.” Their tuition refunds were “more money than they have never seen coming for them” and were squandered away instead of used for school expenses. John was surprised when their grades dropped that they didn’t even make an attempt to appeal or resolve their situation: “They just dropped out and left.”

Alex watched some students leave because “they didn’t really know what they wanted.” He thinks many young people graduate high school and go to college just because they didn’t know what else to do. Perhaps their families expect them to go. Once they figure out what they want, “they actually do very, very good for themselves.”

Jake thinks that “assimilation and just a sense of belonging” is lacking when students leave and do not persist. He also thinks it’s difficult when you don’t have a clearly defined end goal and a sense that your efforts are going to fulfill some purpose. Jake heard students say they didn’t feel like they belonged and didn’t know why they should continue to “bust myself to be here.” They’ve been told this is what they should do but can’t see the reason why or feel that it’s true.
Tommy observes that some Black families are content with their student just getting into a college and going for even a year. The focus is on that instead of on completing and graduating. He would hear people say, “At least you went, or you went longer than me.” He thinks this gives the wrong message and may deter students from persisting. Trying isn’t enough for Tommy. “That’s really not an accomplishment….I just like to finish what I started.” Being “sucked back” into the old neighborhood, a place where he experienced grinding poverty, is a risk because that’s where you feel you can “be at home.” He believes a lack of community on campus leads some students to return home too often and eventually leave altogether. For Tommy, you need to “have people around you to carry you in the right direction.”

Marcus came to college with six of his male friends from high school. His involvement in an academic cohort of Black men supported his academic success. His friends were not part of the cohort and “didn’t want to hang out with” the other men because “they pretty much wanted to do their own thing.” Marcus tried to engage them with the support that was available to them, but he viewed his friends choosing to pursue popularity over grades. They were well known and well liked in the first-year dorms, hanging out and having parties. Marcus managed to balance the “two worlds” and spend time with those who partied and those who studied. But he prioritized his grades and was willing to “sacrifice” a party to study when it was called for. Only he and one of his friends were still enrolled and the other five left after the first year: “Coming to college and trying to navigate alone or with people who don’t know what they’re doing, it can really hurt you.” Marcus thinks more Black families should promote college from a younger age. He’s discovered that many White students talk about knowing they would go and where they would go when they were just kids. He wants Black parents to foster a “productive
and goal-oriented mindset” as he believes this is essential to college success. His friends who left were not goal oriented in his opinion.

Steve also talked about a “mindset” which he thinks becomes evident when you talk to someone. He can tell if someone is “focused and on the right path.” David felt that discipline was key to persisting. He thinks living on campus helped him stay disciplined. He would have liked a car to get back and forth from the city to visit family and friends. But he observed those who were commuting had a lot of distractions: “If you’re not disciplined, your distractions can deter you from your goal.” Matt saw students leave who were commuting as well: “By staying on campus, you’re interacting with the faculty and with other students who you have in class.” Students at home will be distracted and “relaxed and basically chill.”

Many of Duke’s friends have not persisted. He sees them “doing great in what they do” and being successful in other ways. They had challenges with money, work, relationships, family, children: “Some people choose money over the degree. Some people choose certain things over other things.” He resists using the word “success” to describe persistence. Rob saw similar influences on people he knew: “If you have low income, you need to work to supply just your everyday needs….You can’t wait on the dollar.” Compelling needs for housing, food, or medicine mean you work to help the family. College is a luxury.

Noah was willing to transition, to seek out and accept resources. It was difficult to change behaviors “going from one environment to the next which are drastically different from each other.” He thinks that students who leave may have been unable or unwilling to change. He is quick to say that he doesn’t know everyone’s situation or “what they’re going through” so he can only speak for himself. But willingness is the word Noah uses as a quality for persisting.
Todd identified “application” as a key component to academic success: “It’s all about how much you study, how disciplined you are in making sure that you are getting things that you need done.” He observed the students with the best grades as those who were in the library the most: “People that are outside and hanging out and different stuff, those people don’t do as well.” At the same time, he spoke to the distraction of family issues that impacted his energy to study: “Death is a big thing that comes around.” His sister and a couple of his friends from high school have been murdered while he was in college: “Definitely external forces affect a student’s performance on a grade point scale.” He spoke of one of his friends who is legal guardian for a younger brother who was expelled from Detroit schools for a year. His friend is trying to navigate these issues while still enrolled full-time in college and living 50 miles from home.

Neal sees an “unwillingness to grow” as the biggest reason students leave. Some of the people he remembers were very smart, but they weren’t “willing to be different, to be flexible.” They continued to do what they were doing, what wasn’t working, and they flunked out. He describes people who succeed as like a leaf riding a wave. They can change and adapt to the situation: “Other people are like rocks and they just fall” when they’re dropped in a puddle.

Charles thinks people who don’t finish college “either have too much, like their parents do too much for them…or they just didn’t care.” The first group he perceives as being taken care of by their family and remaining dependent. They don’t take the leap out into the world and find their own way. The second group are people “who don’t want it…who aren’t hungry.” Charles says you must be willing to work and “understand it’s not going to be all sunshine and rainbows and easy.” Instead, he sees people who are “all about excuses.” His work ethic is remarkable as he’s held a full-time job while attending college full-time:

I’m telling you, I will do what I have to do whether it takes 12 years or 8 years. They’re
not willing to work three jobs at a time and then get five hours of sleep and study. And so I think the people that do stick it out, they see the outcomes of it and they understand it a little bit better.

There are half a dozen members of Mark’s cohort who did not persist. He thinks “time management” was a factor: “A lot of people just wanted money faster.” He saw people trying to work full-time and go to school full-time. Unlike Charles, they stopped out and turned their focus to employment instead of studies. Others were “caught up in parties and recreational things that weren’t good for the mind and good for thinking better.” His practice was to work part-time on campus and “carry your schoolwork with you and do that type of stuff even when you have some other thing to do.”
Chapter 6: Conclusions

Interpretation of the Research Findings

The transition experience. Transition is necessary after high school graduation as students move out of the secondary system of education. As a dependent child each day there is a rhythm of coming and going where expectations are familiar and predictable. Some graduates will opt for entering postsecondary education and enroll in college classes. There are variables that suggest how successfully a student will manage this transition and persist to college graduation, just as there are variables related to high school completion. Not surprisingly, these are similar and include household income, race, gender, ethnicity. They also include tangibles like GPA and courses completed, as well as intangibles such as a sense of belonging and relationships on campus.

This transition or liminal period lasts a year or two, as the student moves between the way it was in a familiar home and high school and the way it is now on a college campus. Many new skills must be honed to perform during this transition and progress to graduation. The experiences within those first tender months can determine persistence to graduation.

Institutions of higher education are actively engaged with assorted supports and services for all students. There is often a focus on low-income, first generation, and Black and Brown students recognizing the unique challenges that may be encountered by this population. Significant gaps exist when comparing the six-year graduation rates of one public institution to another (Yeado, 2013). Institutions with similar demographics in terms of SAT scores, Pell grant eligibility, and ethnicity have markedly different results in graduation percentages. It seems that there must be a commitment to dedicating the resources for an implementation of practices and programs that
have demonstrated success. This requires a recognition of civic responsibility as a recipient of public funds and a will to positively impact graduation rates. Students who qualify receive federal financial aid to help cover the costs of attending college and most of it is given directly to the institution. The government budgets these funds to increase educational opportunities for students who might otherwise be excluded because of their income. Each school is accountable for the outcomes of this investment. Are students actually passing their classes and earning credit? Are they maintaining an appropriate GPA? Are they making progress towards the goal of graduation within a reasonable amount of time? Institutions of higher education track this information as measures of success to assure that the awards are a sound investment. Where the college or university acts to put support in place, graduation rates are improving for all students, but most significantly for Black and Brown students (Nguyen, Bibo, Engle, 2012; Yeado, 2013). Gains are especially significant for Latinx students.

It was so thrilling for many of these young men to leave home for college. Most of them were living on campus and were gleeful at having escaped the perceived confines of parental control. It was fun to find their way around campus, locate every classroom, play ball in the gym, eat in the cafeteria, and meet new friends. But it was never long before reality insinuated itself and the elevated responsibilities of college life were apparent. Get up on time for class. Complete the assignment on time. Study for the test. Study better for the next test. All this in an environment where they may feel, as Duke described it, “like a shirt turned inside out” under scrutiny for just being different. Most of the co-researchers attended urban schools and expressed feeling less than adequately prepared for the academic rigor of college course work. This is compounded by their efforts to communicate with their instructors and advisors who are almost always White and college educated.
What do they believe about themselves and their new position in society? Historically White institutions expect everyone to assimilate and blend in with the environment (Guinier, 2015). Those who are admitted are perceived as likely to do this successfully and maintain the status quo of campus life. Unspoken but strongly felt signals communicate this message to fit in and behave in a manner considered appropriate. The liminal period of transition is fraught with pitfalls for all students but especially for Black men. Should they falter, as everyone does, they may be tempted to blame themselves and internalize the sense of failure. They may ascribe to a prevailing social myth that anyone who is smart enough and tries hard enough can do anything (Guinier, 2015; Tough, 2008). The transition will bring this story under scrutiny. Rather than reject that effort produces results or that intellect is quantified, valid but limiting pieces of the myth, they must learn to separate their human value from performance and respect that there are different ways of knowing. This is one of the new lens with which they can view the world so as to continue and move forward.

Another new lens is that of being a grown up. With adulthood comes autonomy, independence, responsibility, accountability, and ownership of outcomes. Sometimes this learning is difficult and hurtful as they discover how we each answer to ourselves at the end of each day.

**The development of racial identity.** Finding themselves to be Black and male on a campus with mostly White people was not surprising for most of the men. After all, these were the images they reported seeing in movies and on television in most cases. They just would have to insinuate themselves into the environment. There would be subtleties, however, that sometimes reminded them forcefully that their race or gender were not overlooked. Even as they are defining their Blackness in new ways, they are also in the midst of late adolescence with its
accompanying turbulence. At this point, they stand in a threshold between childhood and adulthood.

Pursuing options about their work and career, their peer and friends, their beliefs and values are core elements of an individual’s development (Erikson, 1968). Exploration during this transition is a key task for the adolescent who asks the question “Who am I?” as he probes his thinking about self, about gender, about ethnicity, and about race. Self-awareness is not all at once, but piece by piece as he considers the world around him. There is trial and error. Over time one’s identity is studied, selected, scripted, solidified, and eventually set in place operationally. These periods or pathways of refining the narrative about oneself occur at multiple intervals during a normal life span (Erikson, 1959; Cross, 1991). But the adolescent transition to adulthood is a particularly significant and substantial time. Family and peers will be significant in their influence, especially as it relates to ethnic or racial identity (Cross, 1991, 1995; Phinney, 1990). A critical consciousness evolves that watches with different eyes than those of a child (Friere, 1970/2010).

As the co-researchers transitioned through the stages theorized in the Cross model of nigrescence or understanding one’s Blackness is a social and cultural context, they do not affix firmly in one and leave another behind but about seeking stabilization and surety (Cross, 1971, 1991). College is a place of dynamic experiences with others and formative events in which the individual encounters self (Erickson 1959, 1968). The student arrives on campus with a level of confidence and trust that is soon put to question in the crisis of adapting to a new environment. Each event is an opportunity for reflection and introspection in which the individual finds new growth and validation of values. One may choose to turn away in the moment, but another opportunity will present itself soon. This is how it is to encounter the world. There are always
crossroads for change to occur. Cross (1971, 1991) postulates that Nigrescence Patterns repeat as identity expands and develops over a lifetime with lived experiences.

Black student organizations, fraternities, and structured cohort environments provide a positive immersion into ethnicity and contribute to the formation of racial identity (Cross, 1991, 2005). Each of the co-researchers involved in one of these groups expressed how important identity with his peers had been to his success. Although a positive attitude about or pride in one’s race, whether through family or peer encounters, may contribute to overall feelings of confidence and security, it has not been demonstrated as a predictor of academic success (Cross, 2005; Phinney, 1999; Schreiner, 2015; Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). But it mattered to each of these men who found the group identity to be affirming and supportive. Feeling that you belong and intentionally integrating into campus life is essential to success in college (Tinto, 1993). This additional support is critical because of the stress Black men manage in their daily lives.

As they recounted experiences with racism, there was evidence of racial battle fatigue. This psycho-social response has been especially associated with Black men on historically White campuses in previous research (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Racial battle fatigue is evidenced by a myriad of coping strategies developed to address the profound stress associated with the micro and macroaggressions of daily life. This group of students is identified particularly and peculiarly as both male and Black, gender and race, before they are perceived as a person. These two social identities have a number of negative social connotations when in combination. Black men are too often the target of hate crimes on college campuses with race being the most frequent reason for attack (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). The fatigue manifests in “frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 551).
Statements like “I become numb” or “It was what it was” express a kind of despondency with the way things are. “It can always be worse” or “It could be way worse” evidence a resignation or disappointment. Reactions to drive-by experiences where the men are called the n-word or told to “go back where you came from” were dismissive and excused away as “they were drunk” or it was just “their wrong thinking.” The racists are described as “ignorant” and lacking in education or enough experience to inform their perspective properly. These men struggle to “just survive” and endure another day. They are burdened in an environment that looks upon them as outsiders. These encounters are hurtful, and the men sometimes expressed anger. If they have had fewer experiences with racism, they may express surprise and shock. But they more often appeared tired and just sort of over the whole thing.

The extent to which Black men are racially profiled is known only by them. It is in the eyes that look away, the person who steps aside, the purse moved under the arm, the elevator not taken, the dismissive tone of voice, the glaring glance. It is having to be prepared to interact with the police at any moment and in any space. To know that you will be the one pulled aside, stopped, searched, questioned, held, controlled because your very existence is perceived as a threat and a danger. Black men know they can engage in the very same behavior as a White man and be sanctioned for it (Smith et al., 2007). The psychological and physiological toll of these repeating reactions because of color and gender that occur in any and every environment would be utterly exhausting over time. Fatigue is a predictable response. No matter how effective your coping strategies, the stressors are real and relentless. For the college student, the effects may be reflected in lower grades, longer time to graduation, and a higher stop out rate.

In the midst of their fatigue, these men build resiliency. They refuse to participate in being stigmatized and counter their feelings of fear, rage, pain, alienation, disbelief, and
disappointment. They recognize and acknowledge what they experience as they move through the changes and still remain true to their goal of graduation. They will not be deterred or turned aside by the actions of others. They stand a little taller and speak a little stronger. They resist the narrative and tell a story of their own making.

The significance in telling one’s story.

“A word after a word after a word is power.”

--Margaret Atwood, “Spelling,” 1971

When you tell your story to another, you hear yourself. Until you speak it aloud, it remains in pieces floating about in your memory. In the telling, in shaping it with words, you see yourself taking shape. The recounting of what you experience demands reflection on your part of the situations, the choices, the feelings. There will be details you may have overlooked in the moment that now become part of the narrative. You are able to stand in the memory with more self-awareness and consciousness. The experience becomes something that is uniquely yours because you have named it and set its boundaries with words. Describing and defining what you have lived is an assertive act of power. Listening to the telling with attention and admiration is an act of gentle rebellion.

For these young Black men who have demonstrated success in college to speak their stories was an opportunity to recognize and respect their own accomplishment. Remembering the challenges and successes, remembering from where they themselves came, remembering the crossroads they encountered, remembering the times they affirmed themselves, remembering other Black men, this remembering is an act of resistance to all that seeks to oppress or overlook.
In a safe and attentive space, these strong young men may construct their own narrative. They experience a consciousness of self and a connection with other men, each of which is a source of power and prestige. The moment becomes an opportunity for critical reflection, now with significantly more knowledge about himself and the world than just a few months earlier. The self is the subject and the object of our own story (Foucault, 1966).

The story is the means by which we advance knowledge. Over and again we tell of ourselves. Only because there is validity and reliability in the experience would we continue the never-ending story. It is the narrative from which we can deepen our understanding of ourselves and of others. All this to find harmony, peace, balance in the world we create with others and assure the pursuit of happiness for all. When parts of the story are omitted or overlooked, the next chapter changes in a dissatisfying manner. As the story unfolds, we feel loss somehow and sense that something has been left out. Instead of the delightful and remarkable epic that includes all voices, we have a limping along tale dominated with a narrower perspective.

Solutions to the problems of society require continuous human creativity at ever climbing levels of innovation. The continuation of life on the planet necessitates the inspirational effort of all spheres. In our diversity there is unity and strength. To have recognition of how we are all connected and inter-dependent with one another and with our planet is an aspirational educational goal. Story telling is a means of feeding this spark of consciousness and fueling the flame of critical reflexivity. Whatever lens we choose, our colonial roots are there to critique. We see the assumptions in any culture and the consequences of error over time.

**Implications for Higher Education and K12 Education**

Awareness of education as a cultural value began early with many of the co-researchers. Their parents, guardians, and extended family members may have attended college or not. What
was communicated was that education was of value and postsecondary education an expectation. Although, as one young man said, “Perhaps we should expect more than just going. We could focus on graduation.” Where families may not be leading the expectation, schools can build this focus on continuing education earlier in the K12 environment. Recognition and celebration of academic growth and achievement would serve to support and encourage scholarship.

Beginning at the elementary level, the intentional development of the self-concept to include “student” and “scholar” is critical. This will be most effective and successful when it is a collaborative effort involving the participation of family, school, and community.

Just after the fourth grade the academic performance of many Black males begins to flag (Harmon & Ford, 2010; Noguera, 2008; Tough, 2008). Suggested reasons for this are many: predominantly White and female teachers who may shape the environment to their own level of comfort and desire for control as evidenced in disproportionate referrals for special services (Enteman & Rojecki, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005); low expectations of Black students on the part of teachers and staff (Ferguson, 1998, 2005; Harmon & Jones, 2005; Sadowski, 2001); stereotype threat when others perceive them as threatening (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003); the association of academic success with “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1996; Majors & Billson, 1993).

The topic of college is sometimes used as a hammer to inspire or motivate academic effort. But we are none of us encouraged to succeed with the threat of a negative consequence, especially one that is not immediate. Higher expectations that are more positive and affirming are more likely to generate the outcomes for individuals that society would seek. In addition, Black males may attend an underperforming school where teacher attrition is high and teacher pay is low (Noguera, 2008; Tough, 2008). Improving working conditions and salaries for all educators is a pressing social need, but especially in underperforming schools.
Black males and females also experience higher levels of suspensions and expulsions beginning in middle school and continuing through high school (Harmon & Ford, 2010; Noguera, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The environment of schools demonstrates a more fearful response to Black and Brown students and a stronger punitive response than White students engaging in the same behaviors (Ladson-Billings, 2012; Noguera, 2008; Zamani-Gallaher & Callaway, 2010). The community requires a sense of security and safety to assure the comfort and trust of all participants, an essential component of learning.

The structures and systems within K12 and postsecondary education are built on ideological constructs that purport to convey and transmit knowledge and learning. But must be recognized and acknowledged that there are subtle yet potent messages embedded in the design of how schools conduct the business of education. There is evidence of a failure to respond to the needs of learners in the abysmal record of underachievement, disengagement, and low rates of completion for significant groups of students. When these deficits impact specific groups of the population disproportionately, there is evidence of inequity and a solution must be identified and pursued. The information about how to address the need will be found in the voices of those who are impacted the most. It is Black men who can speak to what they want and need from their educational experience to be more successful.

**Theoretical implications**

**Liminality.**

“I been scared and battered.

My hopes the wind done scattered.

Snow has frizz me,

Sun has baked me,
Looks like between ‘em they done

   Tried to make me
Stop laughin’, stop lovin’, stop livin’-
   But I don’t care!
I’m still here!”

--Langston Hughes, “Still Here,” 1949

Change is the way things work. As change happens a space opens that is both the way it was and the way it will be. What will be as the new way is not always evident or clear, but the former way is ending even as it remains a part of what is new. This transition or cross over is not always pleasant or comfortable. Sometimes there is resistance or push back that seeks to slow or stop the inevitable. It may feel like a little death as one way ends and another blossoms. Each time there will be a risk as the present state gives way to another moment. But change will come because only with death does the process cease. This pattern of transformation exists throughout nature in every atom, in every relationship, and in every galaxy. The human will participates with change in every choice executed, whether the choice be made conscious of consequences or not. To be alive is to be engaged in this inevitable flow of ending and beginning, death and birth, loss and renewal, the old and the new.

The finite nature of time in transition gives the experience an intensity and heightened awareness of significance. This may be contribute to a condition of stress for the individual and may serve to compound any stress already present. Transitioning to college life is a relatively brief period of time, but it has significant and long-term outcomes. The new student must accomplish academic success as well as engage socially if he is to persist to graduation (Tinto, 1993, 2012; Todd, 2014). Most of the co-researchers with this project left neighborhoods and
high schools that were predominantly Black to attend historically and predominantly White universities. The culture shock is pronounced. Now the classrooms and instructors are mostly White with a White way of interacting and a host of White expectations. In this new space and place, the men negotiated their identities and considered how to perform academically. There are multiple adjustments to be made all of which are focused within a weeks and months and have high stakes.

Black men already encounter unusually high levels of social and cultural stress in the United States as suggested by multiple measures. These include K12 education (Delpit, 1988; Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Robbins, 2008), employment (Giroux, 2011; Guo, 2016), incarceration (Alexander, 2010), as well as health and longevity (Hurley, 2015; Mujahid, James, Kaplan, & Salonen, 2017; Polite & Davis, 1999; Subramanyam, James, Diez-Roux, Hickson, Sarpong, Sims, Taylor, & Wyatt, 1982). They are impacted negatively in all these arenas when systems fail to serve Black boys and men equitably. While learning how to function in a college environment, they will experience additional stress (Harper, 2009; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). It is the kind of stress that is intensely focused at first as they find their way on campus. Then it may seem to abate, but it is only diffused over time. There will be grades every few months that serve as a measure of how well the student has engaged academically. There are many other variables to determine success, but it will be letters of the alphabet that build a grade point average and that becomes the ultimate measure of whether the student continues.

Knowing the significance of this liminal period, there is a pronounced need for intervention and support that considers all aspects of the student experience. All institutions of higher education operating with public funds, including student aid, have a social responsibility to account for the success of students who enroll and attempt coursework. When we recognize
the inherent demands of the experience, we must respond with a means to alleviate and abate whatever challenges can be addressed. Liminal spaces allow for high levels of complexity in one’s identity. The individual can and probably will experience the world with multiple perspectives while poised on the threshold. There are different views from that vantage point that lend the self to expand and engage.

**Critical race theory.**

“The past has been a mint
Of blood and sorrow.
That must not be
True of tomorrow.”

--Langston Hughes, “History,” 1992

Langston Hughes originally penned these words in 1934 and the nation continues to struggle with its past. The insidious issue of racism may be more glaringly evident, more widely acknowledged, and more of a hindrance today than it even was a century ago. We are living in a period of time where racial conflict and contention are evident in the daily news. The information and feedback are immediate, visual, and compelling in ways Hughes could have only imagined. Those who write and comment on the subject for public consumption are most often journalists, pundits, academics, and newscasters. The language is rooted in their trade which may swing from inflammatory and provocative for attention getting to distanced and detached to suggest impartiality. The first approach being subjective and the second supposedly objective. These ways of commenting often fail to capture or reflect the complex and layered nature of racial experiences. It is in the description and story as lived by an individual where the ambiguous and confounding truth of living Black in America may be revealed.
Critical race theory maintains a focus on the story where we may find the insights and information necessary to move beyond our present state. Each of us are too often unaware of the power we hold to address inequities and purposefully change systems of power. From our perspective and position, whatever that may be, we will have unrecognized gaps in knowledge and understanding that can only change with the stories of others. It is always the human story that can fully illustrate and illuminate any circumstance. This is counter storytelling where the narrative of the other is considered and celebrated. In the words, we can find our way.

The stories of these young men shed light on how they move in the world and experience it. It speaks to another tenet of CRT which acknowledges the nature of racism as something which cannot be excluded or avoided. It is pervasive and permanent with significant consequences expressed in daily living. The prevalence of these encounters with racism on the part of each and every one of these young men illustrates how deeply entrenched we remain in wrong thinking.

Critical race theory has origins in the 14th amendment’s guarantee of constitutional rights for every citizen or protection under the law. Liberalism, one of CRTs guiding tenets relies on the law to be just and fair. It is through the action of the legislature and the judiciary that the rights of each citizen can be defined and protected. How these rights appear in everyday life can only be expressed in the words of an individual who tells his own story of how he lives. The narrative is filled with power and potential. Words, whether our own or another’s, have a way of shaping how we view the world, one another, and ourselves. The words can generate transformation and emancipation for both the storyteller and the listener.

To be critical implies questioning and close examination. We examine our social mores and institutions with an awareness of our colonial origins as a nation. The individual examines
what he knows of his own background and it becomes his-story. We can author the narrative about who we are and how we view ourselves. Asking questions and pressing for equity and justice maintains an awareness of how things are and a hope for how things can be. We are the subject, becoming and changing, even as we are the object, loving and living (Foucault, 1966).

The courts have been an effective if slow means of creating social progress. The legal system has moved on behalf of civil rights and it will move so again when issues are tested there. When a law is on the books, governing officials must respect it and put it into practice. When they fail to do this, as they have and they will again, there is recourse and restitution available in legal pursuits. Unfortunately, some of what is wrong and racist cannot be quantified in this way. The task of naming it and calling it out lies in the voice of each person who is aware. The fatigue generated by attending to all these racial micro and macroaggressions is a real state of being that has profound social consequences.

**Racial identity.**

“I play it cool
And dig all jive-
That’s the reason
I stay alive.
My motto,
As I live and learn
    Is
_Dig and be dug_
In return.”

--Langston Hughes, “Motto,” 1951
Most of the co-researchers had a secondary school experience in majority Black classrooms and neighborhoods in Detroit. Some of the men may have had enough diversity in their encounters growing up to claim a level of comfort interacting with White people. But leaving one’s familiar territory to live most of each day in a new environment that is predominantly and historically White would be challenging. Co-researchers spoke of the odd discomfort they sometimes felt being in mostly White spaces. It was an awareness of their own racial status and the feeling of difference from others around them. This has the effect of feeling singled out or separate from others. But success in college is associated with a feeling of belonging (Tinto, 1993). He is often aware of how he seeks to keep White people comfortable and assure them that he is not threatening. When he enters a classroom, he is cognizant of every face and gesture. Still these men transcended historically White academic spaces that were often unwelcoming and created their own places that were welcoming and nurturing.

The norms and attributes of being a scholar were historically defined in White spaces by White academics (Ogbu, 2004). Black students who seek to excel have often felt they must “act White” to be acknowledged as intelligent and accepted in educational environments. Patterns of speech, style of dress, habits of work or leisure, and even choice of food become measures of how to assimilate successfully to White culture. The co-researchers were aware of these dynamics and, as Black scholars before them have done, managed the situations to their own benefit (Ogbu, 2008; Stinson, 2011). To “act White” is not a denial or betrayal of one’s cultural identity, but a strategic approach to acquiring privilege and access to social capital.

The transition to the university is compounded by the additional issue of socioeconomic status, which is so relevant to college where the bills are big and the stakes high. Often in the transition, a student is unaware of the cost of taking classes and thereby the consequences of
failing classes. His new community of learning is populated with mostly White people: his professors and instructors, his peers, his advisors, his dorm neighbors. There are likely few men in the mix in whom he can see himself and readily attempt to connect. Instead the Black male student must create his own meaningful connections, and these are often with his brothers, other Black men.

Identifying with other men and sharing experiences together was a significant contributor to the transition success in the opinion of many of the co-researchers. The organization of social time, whether formal or informal, could positively contribute to academic focus and achievement. To feel part of a group that is marginalized and vilified by so many builds a particularly strong sense of bonding and brotherhood. There is an understanding and undertone of acceptance whenever two or more Black men share a space. They are indeed fighting for their lives and respect the warrior in one another.

**Conclusions**

Race and gender continue to be defining and determining elements of lived experience, even as the populace of the United States moves in the direction of greater diversity and difference. Race and gender are more fluid today than just ten years ago. The number of individuals who identify as biracial or multiracial was reported at 7% of the population in 2015 with 10% of babies under the age of one year identified as biracial or multiracial (Parker, Horowitz, Moris, & Lopez, 2015). Meanwhile, the number of Black and Brown Americans continues to grow as a percentage of the population and White numbers do not. Perhaps because there is an inexorable change of course, the old status quo of White demands its final holdout and defense. We find ourselves in another period of “whitelash” as White supremacists resist the advancement of civil rights for those who are Black, Brown, or immigrant. These backlash
reactions asserting White supremacy and White power have followed periods in U.S. history when Black citizens experienced or exercised their civil rights. It was a whitelash that wrote the “Black codes” of the Jim Crow years to restrict Black life. It was a whitelash that violently and vehemently resisted desegregation during the Civil Rights movement and replaced lynching with mass incarceration. The current days appear to be another whitelash as a reaction to the presidency of Barack Obama. Patterns of injustice in the judicial system and in law enforcement are made visible with immediacy and intimacy because of social media. They are Black and Brown men and women. Now immigrants, both Latinx and Arab, are perceived as unwelcome.

But the old way is only one way and when it is exclusionary it will always and ultimately fail. All of society loses when voices are eliminated or extinguished because it is in the diversity that we are rich. The end of “Aryan” arrogance may not be readily apparent, but the strength of equity and justice is compelling as it exerts its rightness over time. There is a slow but irrevocable change in the nation’s complexion as we become more Brown and that influence is undeniable. The evidence is in our music and art, in our diet and dress, in our language and lifestyle. We can recall the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was quoting a Rev. Theodore Parker, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (Parker, 1853; King, 1958). While both of these men may have intended this as a statement of faith in the kingdom of God, it has served as comfort in the pursuit of social justice. We continue to call out the times and places where justice has not been served and ask questions about why and when and how justice will reign. An acceptance and adaptation to variations in culture is essential for the operations of a democratic state to protect the rights of all. How this may be accomplished is not a mystery. It calls for exposure, interaction, conversation, education, engagement,
cooperation, information, collaboration, and time. How to facilitate and execute the change together is where we struggle.

Unfortunately, the historical roots of “White being right” are embedded deeply throughout the culture of the United States and especially in our educational system. Institutions of higher education were one of the last social arenas to desegregate and remain places of continuing bias despite the glory given to knowledge and freedom. We cannot yet say they have truly integrated when patterns of bias continue to exist. This is evidenced in the profile of 60% of all university presidents [excluding HBCUs] who are almost 90% White, 70% male, and 60 years or older. (American Council on Education, 2017). The leadership has been changing slowly, ever so slowly, despite the stated goals of creating more inclusive and equitable educational institutions. While the president of a university alone does not determine the environment, the selection of the president reflects the expectations and values of the governing board. The community narrative on campus will include him, respond to his words and actions, and look to him for strength and direction. What does it say without words to all of us about the university that the majority of these presidents are White and male?

Effective learning environments must have high levels of trust that is fostered, fed, and defended. Building this place and holding the space for all learners is the leading role of the university president. Relating to others with insight and understanding is an essential component of making this happen. While race and gender do not predicate our capacity for leading others, the selection of the face that serves as president speaks volumes about values and priorities. The selection of faculty and staff also tells a story of how the institution views itself and its students. The under-representation of Black and Brown faces is evident there as well.
Postsecondary education holds out a hope for us. It is a means of building the insights and understandings required for social progress to develop. The safe environment in which an individual may seek knowledge with others who are markedly different can build awareness of how we are all connected. As the nation becomes more Brown, a certain amount of change will come just because of the increase in representation. But it is the deeper and more meaningful changes that will preserve society. We know that disruption of the status quo, whether the change is for the better or not, is often accompanied with fear and anxiety about what the future may bring. It’s unsettling to stand in the doorway of your house and watch the street out front change direction. It seems the very ground on which you’ve placed yourself is moving. It’s out of your control and this can be deeply unsettling. These sensations of fear and stress sometimes manifest as anger or rage when expressed.

Change related to race and gender has historically been and continues to be resisted, even in this notoriously expansive and innovative culture. Money and the economy are often used to defend inequitable experiences or limited opportunity. The resistance is too often violent, and we have seen schools become a selected scene for mass shootings. Exposure alone is not an answer for changing minds and hearts. We are exposed already; some might say overexposed. There is evidence of deliberate direction evolving in education as elementary, secondary and postsecondary schools focus on improving student success to foster learning in real ways that can translate into quality of life. This attention with intention can serve to usher us from the old way into a better world with greater evidence of justice, harmony, and opportunities for the pursuit of happiness.

“Believe in life! Always human beings will progress to greater, broader and fuller life.”
--W. E. B. DuBois, 1953
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Appendix A: Definition of Terms

**Acting White:** The behaviors, responses, and presentation of a Black person that emulate the middle class and are dominant in White culture: such as the use of formal English, way of dressing, or behavior in groups.

**Adolescence:** The transitional period between puberty and adulthood in human development which usually extends through the teen years and ends at the age of legal majority or 18 years of age.

**Advanced placement:** AP courses are offered at the secondary level beginning in 9th grade to students who can perform and excel in the content. With an appropriate end score on the national test, they may waive a required college course.

**Axial coding:** Using the concepts and categories identified in open coding, transcriptions are coded again to confirm and verify the concepts and categories and examine their inter-relationships.

**Bracketing:** The intentional suspension of one’s own beliefs, assumptions, and suppositions to be as open as possible to see and hear the experience of another in the process of doing qualitative research.
**Bridge program:** An intensive cohort immersion experience prior to the first fall semester of college that involves dormitory living and classes which may or may not be for credit. Students are coached in skills and habits that contribute to college success.

**Case study:** An in-depth analysis of a person or event within context to examine themes in a more detailed and nuanced manner.

**Classism:** The systemic subordination of a member of a group based on income who may be positioned with relatively less social power by members of another group with more income who may have relatively more social power.

**Code switching:** To transition between the social or cultural codes of different groups. Often used to describe how a Black person adjusts behaviors, responses, and presentation of the self in a predominantly White environment. Using different language patterns in varying social contexts in response to what one believes to be acceptable or preferred.

**Coding:** An analytical process in which quantitative and/or qualitative data is reviewed and categorized to facilitate analysis and the identification of themes.

**Colorism:** Color prejudices among people of color based on the shade of one’s skin. Regional and gender differences impact the significance or prevalence of such bias.
Co-researcher: Participants in a research project who inform the primary researcher before, during, and after data collection.

Counter-storytelling: A narrative or story told about personal experience that presents a different perspective or insight. Intentionally constructed to provide voice to anyone marginalized with the goal of building understanding and generating positive social change.

Critical race theory: An analytical framework which examines symbolism and the social construction of values, mores, and beliefs that limit individuals because of race. Social problems related to power and policy are considered in historical and cultural contexts.

Critical reflexivity: The personal consciousness of the researcher is examined to consider how it impacts the focus and objectivity of the data collection and analysis.

Cultural racism: The belief that the cultural ways of one ethnic group are superior to those of another ethnic group based on the social construct of race. This devalues, stereotypes, and labels those of a different culture rendering them less than or invisible.

Drive by: Occupants of a moving vehicle direct aggressive or threatening actions at others outside of the automobile. In gang disputes, shots may be fired from the car. Commonly done by Whites who yell out the n-word or other racist remarks at Blacks before speeding off. Also to fart while walking past someone.
**Ethnocentrism:** To perceive, interpret, judge, and compare using one’s own culture as the standard and ascribe values based on that culture only.

**Ferguson:** City in Missouri where multiple protests in 2014 and 2015 followed the death of a local Black man named Michael Brown who was 18 years old as a result of an altercation with a police officer. The incident was investigated by the U. S. Department of Justice and the officer determined to have acted in self-defense.

**First generation:** An individual enrolled in college whose parents did not graduate from a four year institution of higher education.

**FTIAC:** “First time in any college” descriptor for university students. This would exclude transfer students from community colleges or other universities. FTIACs are the only population used in the measurement of graduation rates over four, five, or six years.

**GEAR UP:** Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. A discretionary federal grant program designed to increase the number of low-income middle and high school students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education.

**Gerrymandering:** The manipulation of designated election district boundaries to give one party an advantage in electoral college representation by directing where blocks of voters concentrate. By redistricting the election outcome may favor one party in suppressing voter influence.
**Grounded theory:** The dynamic and flexible analysis of raw qualitative data which allows for the development and emergence of broad themes.

**HBCU:** A Historically Black College or University established to provide higher education for Black Americans. Most founded before the enrollment of Blacks was accepted in White institutions of higher education.

**Historically White institution:** Historically White Institution refers to a college or university originally established to provide higher education for White Americans that continues to operate with a White academic culture even as it admits a diverse population of students. Sometimes referenced as a PWI or predominantly White institution.

**Individual racism:** Actions, beliefs, and attitudes of an individual that support or perpetuate the subordination of another individual or group based on ethnicity.

**Institutional racism:** The manipulation of societal institutions to give preferences to one ethnic group and restrict the choices, rights, mobility, and access for another ethnic group based on the social construct of race.

**Intersectionality:** Concept often used in critical theories to describe how social institutions are connected and cannot be viewed as separate from one another or separate in how they impact the individual.
Liminality: From the Latin word for “threshold.” A quality of ambiguity during a transitional experience or period of time.

Methodology: The structured approaches or techniques used to collect, process, and analyze data for the purpose of understanding the phenomena being studies.

Macroaggression: The indirect and subtle behaviors of one group that are discriminatory towards a marginalized group. Often passive aggressive in nature as with a question. Actions or statements may be unaware or unintentional, but are experienced as an expression of bias which they reflect.

Microaggression: The indirect and subtle behavior of one group that are discriminatory towards a marginalized group. These actions or statements may be unaware or unintentional, but are experienced as an expression of bias.

Nation of Islam: The NOI is a religious and political organization founded in Detroit, Michigan in 1930 by Elijah Muhammad to promote the health, wealth, and well-being of Black Muslims. The tenets of Black superiority it espouses are not accepted by mainstream Muslims.

Nigrescence: A French term that means “to become Black” which is used in models of African American ethnic identity development.
Open coding: The analysis of the textual content of interview transcriptions to label concepts and then define and develop categories based on the properties and dimensions of the concepts.

Phenomenology: A philosophical framework for considering and examining the lived experiences of another that acknowledges the significance of the phenomena encountered interacting with others, the environment, and oneself.

Positionality: How a researcher is situated in perspective and viewpoint in relation to the research topic, the participants, and the environment. The values, beliefs, experiences, subjectivity of the researcher are examined and considered in analysis to demonstrate trustworthiness.

Predominantly White institution: Predominantly White institution refers to a college or university with a majority enrollment of White students and a prevailing culture of Whiteness in scholarship and academics.

Qualitative research: A method of inquiry and exploratory research for deeper insight and understanding of the motives, rationale, or opinions of an individual or group of individuals.

Racial Identity: Knowledge and understanding related to one’s race. Identity develops on a continuum as a result of experiences that may increase awareness of self, arrest development, or cause a temporary regression.
**Racism:** The systemic subordination of a member of a targeted ethnic group who may be positioned with relatively less social power by members of another ethnic group who may have relatively more social power.

**School:** To inform, tutor, or educate another in the social conventions of a subculture and teach them “how it really is.” Sometimes a representation of dominance or power.

**Social Capital:** Connections between individuals for the purpose of increasing social power through insight and knowledge of how to access resources.

**Social Power:** Access to economic, legal, governmental, educational, and religious status.

**Step and Stroll:** A percussive activity with members of a Greek organization in line moving together in the same or alternating motions. The body is used as an instrument to produce rhythms and sounds exuding high energy.

**Stereotypes:** An undifferentiated and simplistic attribution that involves a judgment of habits, traits, abilities, or expectations assigned as a characteristic of all members of a given group.

**Subjectivity:** The feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and desires that inform how one views experiences, other individuals, and events that occur. This constructed perspective becomes part of one’s social identity and a means by which life events are interpreted.
Themes: Patterns that develop in the review, coding, and analysis of notes and transcripts.

Transcription: The act of listening to recorded conversations and converting them to written text for analysis.

TRIO: A group of eight federally funded outreach and support programs intended to identify and provide educational services for individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds. Programs span from middle school through post baccalaureate education. Initiated with three programs (hence the name TRIO) under The Higher Education Act of 1968. The original programs were Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Talent Search. Now included are Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, Training Program for TRIO, Upward Bound for Math and Science, and Veterans Upward Bound.

White flight: White families move from residences or neighborhoods, usually from urban communities to suburbs, to avoid proximity with Black families.

Whitelash: A reaction asserting White supremacy and White power following a period in which Black citizens experience or exercise their civil rights. Examples include the “Black codes” of the Jim Crow, resistance to desegregation during the Civil Rights movement, the aftermath following the election of a Black president.

Woke: To be informed, aware, self-educating, questioning, to think for oneself, to know what’s going on especially associated with issues of race, class, privilege, and power. To understand
systemic injustices and to be willing to engage in the struggle for change. Also may be used ironically when referencing the mundane or ridiculous.
Appendix B: Timeline of Historical Events

1619  First group of 20 Black captives from Africa arrive at Jamestown
1620  The Mayflower lands in Cape Cod
1636  Harvard College established
1638  First printing press in the colonies and it’s at Harvard
1661  Virginia legalizes slavery and prohibits Blacks from reading and writing
1638  Harvard College established
1638  First printing press in the colonies and it’s at Harvard
1661  Virginia legalizes slavery and prohibits Blacks from reading and writing
1693  College of William and Mary established as the second in the colonies
1698  First public library opens in South Carolina
1751  English Academy established in Philadelphia later to be University of Pennsylvania
1773  Phillis Wheatley, a Black captive, publishes a book of poems
1776  Declaration of Independence signed
1785  University of Georgia the first state chartered institution of higher education
1787  African Free School for Black children opened by Quakers in the city of New York
1796  The Act to Establish Public Schools passed
1800  887,000 Black captives in the U.S.
1808  United States bans the import of captive labor
1820  Boston English the first U.S. public high school opens for White males
1837  Institute for Colored Youth, a vocational school, opened by Quakers in Philadelphia
1840  2,482,000 Black captives in the U.S.

    Irish immigration begins and will grow to a total 1,000,000 in a few years
1848  Massachusetts Reform School opens for truant or adjudicated males
1851  Massachusetts passes first compulsory education law intended to socialize immigrants
1854  The African Institute, now known as Cheyney University opens in Pennsylvania, the first HBCU, funded by a reformed slave trader and converted Quaker

1857  *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision that slaves are not citizens of the nation unless they are also citizens in every state and they may not exercise the rights of the U. S. Constitution

1860  3,950,000 Black captives in the U.S.

1861  Civil War begins with slavery as a core issue of contention

1863  Emancipation Proclamation signed by President Abraham Lincoln abolishing slavery and recognizing Blacks as citizens, not as property

1864  620,000 men die as a result of the Civil War

1865  Civil War ends and 13th Amendment prohibiting slavery is adopted

           Reconstruction period begins as opportunities open for Blacks

           Ku Klux Klan formed by Confederate veterans in Tennessee

           “Black codes” in Southern states seek to maintain control of Blacks

1867  U.S. Department of Education created

1868  14th Amendment grants citizenship to former captives and the vote to all males

           Civil Rights Act passed despite veto by President Andrew Jackson

           John Menard of Louisiana first Black Congressman elected but refused a seat

1870  15th Amendment prohibits the denial of voting rights for males based on “race or color”

           Hiram Revels of Mississippi first Black Congressman successfully seated

1874  State of Michigan Supreme Court mandates taxes for public education

1877  Compromise of 1877 ends Reconstruction and federal troops withdraw from the South

1878  Ida B. Wells-Barnett, aged 14, accepts her first teaching position
1881  Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School established by Alabama legislature with Booker T. Washington as its first principal

1890  Jim Crow laws in Southern states restrict civil rights on the basis of race

1895  W. E. B. DuBois first Black PhD to graduate from Harvard University

1896  *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision upholds the constitutionality of State laws requiring “separate but equal” segregation in education, housing, transportation, and business

1901  Ida B. Wells-Barnett founds the Anti-Lynching Bureau of the National African Council

1909  The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is founded with original members including W. E. B. DuBois, John Dewey, and Jane Addams

1914  Great Migration begins as Southern Blacks move to the North for opportunity

1917  U.S. declares war against Germany and enters WWI

Black men and women serve in segregated units in U.S. and in Europe

1918  Sadie Alexander first Black female PhD graduates from University of Pennsylvania

1919  WWI ends with about 10 million military deaths worldwide

1920  19th Amendment extends the vote to women

Great Migration has resulted in 500,000 Blacks relocating to Northern cities

1924  Native Americans are granted U.S. citizenship

1926  Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) first administered

1928  Oscar dePriest of Illinois first Black Congressman elected since Reconstruction

1929  Stock market crashes and the Great Depression begins

1932  Franklin D. Roosevelt elected President with U.S. unemployment at 20%

1933  New Deal programs initiated and benefit Blacks in employment, education, and the arts
Carter Woodson publishes *The Mis-education of the Negro*

1939  NAACP opens Legal Defense and Education Fund led by Thurgood Marshall
1942  U.S. declares war against Germany and enters WWII
      Black men and women serve in segregated units in U.S. and Europe
1944  United Negro College Fund established by Frederick Patterson, Tuskegee president
1950  More than 80,000 Black students enrolled in HBCUs
1953  WWII and Korean War veterans use G.I. Bill to enroll in colleges and universities
1954  *Brown v. the Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that schools must desegregate
1956  Martin Luther King, Jr. leads the Montgomery Bus Boycott
1957  The Little Rock Nine integrate Central High School in Arkansas under federal order
1961  Executive Order 10925 issued by John F. Kennedy: government agencies may not
      discriminate by race, color, creed, or national origin, and that “affirmative action” will
      assure fair and equal employment opportunities and treatment
1962  James Meredith first Black University of Mississippi student enrolls under federal order
1963  President John F. Kennedy assassinated
      People’s March on Washington and “I Have A Dream” speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.
1964  Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, or gender
      Equal Opportunity Act funds VISTA, Job Corps, Head Start
1965  Malcolm X assassinated
      Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funds education for low income
1966  University of Texas Austin mass shooting with 15 dead
1967  Thurgood Marshall appointed as the first Black Supreme Court judge
      “Sex” added to affirmative action decisions
1968  Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy assassinated
       U.S. public schools are integrated through busing measures
1969  Shirley Chisolm of New York first Black Congresswoman elected
1970  “War on Drugs” campaign initiated to reduce illegal drug trade and consumption
1972  Equal Employment Rights Act empowers a federal commission to enforce the 14th amendment and protect citizens from employment discrimination
1973  Andrew Young of Georgia and Barbara Jordan of Texas first Blacks elected to U. S. Congress from the South since Reconstruction
1974  *Milliken v Bradley* Supreme Court decision restricts inter-district busing
1975  All Handicapped Children Act requires equal access in public schools with federal funds
1976  Percentage of U.S. Black college students is 10%
1980  U.S. national income share for top 1% is 5% and share for bottom 50% is 20%
1983  *A Nation at Risk* report calls for reforms in public education and teacher preparation
1984  Emergency Immigration Education Act funds schools with immigrant students
1985  Most U.S. schools are once again segregated
1990  Americans with Disabilities Act becomes law prohibiting discrimination in education
1991  First chartered school in the nation opens in Minnesota
1992  First chartered school opens in Michigan
1993  Federal government begins direct lending (public loans) for college students
1999  Columbine High School in Colorado mass shooting with 15 dead
2000  Percentage of nonwhite K12 students in U. S. is 39%
2001  World Trade Center and Pentagon are attacked
2002  No Child Left Behind Act mandates testing and school accountability for achievement
2005  U. S. national income share for top 1% is 20% and share for bottom 50% is 13%
2007  Virginia Tech University mass shooting with 33 dead
2008  Barack Obama first Black man elected U.S. President
2009  American Reinvention and Recovery Act provides $90 billion for education
2010  Urban districts begin to close schools and lay off teachers in large numbers
2011  State of Alabama requires K12 schools check immigration status of every student
        Percentage of U.S. Black college students is 15%
2012  Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut mass shooting with 26 dead
2013  Emergency financial manager appointed for Detroit Public School District
2014  Percentage of nonwhite K12 students in U.S. is 51%
2015  Detroit Public School District closes 60 schools as cost saving measure
        Percentage of U.S. Black college students is 14%
        U.S. national income share for top 1% is 26%
2017  Parkland High School in Florida mass shooting 17 dead
        Tax Cuts and Jobs Act lowers corporate taxes and reduces educational deductions
2018  Santa Fe High School in Texas mass shooting 10 dead
        Detroit Public Schools return to local board management with greater debt than 2013
        Percentage of U.S. Black college students is 13%
Appendix C: Human Subjects Approval

Apr 10, 2018 9:24 AM EDT

Regina George COE Deans Office

Re: Closure - 892603 The successful transition of African American males to college

Dear Regina George:

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee acknowledges the closure of The successful transition of African American males to college. You may continue analysis of de-identified data and manuscript preparation. You may not conduct any other human subject research activities for this study.

Sincerely,

Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee
Appendix D: University Profiles
2015-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public Regional</th>
<th>Private Liberal Arts</th>
<th>Public Research</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total enrollment</td>
<td>17,780</td>
<td>2,906</td>
<td>28,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59%</td>
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<td>3%</td>
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<td>99%</td>
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Appendix E: Invitational Script

Recruitment Script

by phone or email from referrals

Thank you for your willingness to consider participating in this project. My name is Regina George and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at Eastern Michigan University. I am interested in talking with you about your transition from high school to college. I would like to know who and what, from your personal perspective, contributed to your persistence and academic success. The first year is challenging for most students entering college, but there are some unique challenges for men of color, especially those who are attending primarily White institutions.

We’ll meet in person for about an hour and talk about your experiences and reflections on that first year. I’m interested in how you decided to go to college and what it was like for you during your first year attending classes. You will have some observations about what it means to be a Black man in the United States today and I want to hear what you think. We’ll talk about your long-term goals, too.

You would remain anonymous and your name is not used in any publication or reference. Data connected to your name will be strictly confidential and maintained in a secure password-protected computer. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for your willingness to consider participating in this project. I look forward to meeting with you.
Appendix F: Informed Consent

Informed Consent Form

The person in charge of this study is Regina George who is a student at Eastern Michigan University. Her faculty adviser is Dr. Paul Ramsey. Throughout this form, this person will be referred to as the “investigator.”

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research study is to examine the successful transition of thirty (30) African American males from high school to institutions of higher education.

What will happen if I participate in this study?

Participation in this study involves
- An initial interview with the investigator
- Completion of a short questionnaire about your goals
- A second more brief interview may be requested
- The initial interview will be 60-90 minutes in duration

We would like to audio video record you for this study. If you are audio recorded, it will be possible to identify you through your voice. If you agree to be audio recorded, sign the appropriate line at the bottom of this form.

What are the anticipated risks for participation?

There are no anticipated physical or psychological risks to participation.

The primary risk of participation in this study is a potential loss of confidentiality.

Some of the interview questions are personal in nature and may make you feel uncomfortable. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

Are there any benefits to participating?

You will not directly benefit from participating in this research, although you may find it helpful to reflect on your own experiences and strengths.

Benefits to society include an increased understanding of how African American men transition from high school to college successfully.

How will my information be kept confidential?
We will keep your information confidential by using a code to label data. This code is linked to identifiable information in a key stored separately from the data. Your information will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and/or a password-protected computer. We will make every effort to keep your information confidential, however, we cannot guarantee confidentiality. There may be instances where federal or state law requires disclosure of your records.

Other groups may have access to your research information for quality control or safety purposes. These groups include the University Human Subjects Review Committee, the Office of Research Development, the sponsor of the research, or federal and state agencies that oversee the review of research. The University Human Subjects Review Committee reviews research for the safety and protection of people who participate in research studies.

We may share your information with other researchers outside of Eastern Michigan University. If we share your information, we will remove any and all identifiable information so that you cannot reasonably be identified.

The results of this research may be published or used for teaching. Identifiable information will not be used for these purposes.

**Storing study information for future use**

We would like to store your information from this study for future use related to African American men in higher education. Your information will be labeled with a code and not your name. Your information will be stored in a password-protected or locked file. Your de-identified information may also be shared with researchers outside of Eastern Michigan University. Please initial below whether or not you allow us to store your information:

__________Yes  __________No

**Are there any costs to participation?**

Participation will not cost you anything.

**Will I be paid for participation?**

You will not be paid to participate in this research study.

**Study contact information**

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Regina George at rgeorge@emich.edu or by phone at 734-417-3485. You may also contact Regina George’s adviser, Dr. Paul Ramsey at pramsey1@emich.edu or by phone at 734-487-3260.

For questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee at human.subjects@emich.edu or by phone at 734-3090.
Voluntary participation

Participation in this research study is your choice. You may refuse to participate at any time, even after signing this form, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may choose to leave the study at any time with no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you leave the study, the information you provided will be kept confidential. You may request, in writing, that your identifiable information be destroyed. However, we cannot destroy any information that has already been published.

Statement of Consent

I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers I received. I give my consent to participate in this research study.

Signatures

____________________________________
Name of Subject

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Subject                      Date

I agree to be audio recorded for this study.

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Subject                      Date

I have explained the research to the subject and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the subject.

____________ Regina George
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent     Date
Appendix G: Profile Information Form

Student Profile

First Name____________________ Last Name________________________________________

Email____________________ Phone______________________________________________

Date of Birth________________ City of Birth_____________________________________

City where you grew up______________ City where you now live___________________

High school name and location_________________________________________________

Mother’s highest level of education_____________________________________________

Father’s highest level of education______________________________________________

Family structure growing up (check one)  One parent
                                                Two parents
                                                Grandparents
                                                Foster parents
                                                Other

Family income level growing up (check one)  Low income
                                                Low to Middle
                                                Middle income
                                                Middle to High
                                                High income

University you currently attend_________________________________________________

Number of years in college to date________ GPA_______________________________

Number of credits earned to date__________ Credits this term_________________

Major and minor_____________________________________________________________

Anticipated date of graduation________________________________________________

Student organizations_________________________________________________________

Currently employed? If so, where and how many hours per week?

___________________________________________________________________________
Appendix H: Interview Guiding Questions

OPENING: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my dissertation study. During the interview, I’ll ask you to recall your experiences transitioning from high school to college and to describe things you felt or did during your first year or two taking university courses. I hope to learn what factors you think influenced you the most to continue in the pursuit of your goals. There may be significant people or experiences that you believe had an impact on you and helped you adjust and adapt to being a successful college student. Some of those things may have happened before you came to college and some while you were there. May I record our interview? I may make some notes while you’re talking, too.

PRE-COLLEGE: Thinking back to middle-school and high school, when did you start hearing about going to college? How did your friends or family or teachers talk to you about going to college? Was there anyone or anything that was a particularly strong influence on your decision to go to college? When and why did you decide to go to college?

How did you decide which college to attend? Did you visit colleges? Do you remember what you imagined it would be like when you went to college?

COLLEGE: Can you describe what it was like when you came to college? What do think were your biggest obstacles during your first year and how did you handle them? How would you compare what you thought college would be like to what it was actually like when you started classes? Was anything harder or easier than you expected?
Did you know what you wanted to study when you started college? If so, how did you figure that out? If not, how did you determine what your major would be?

Were there any courses where you didn’t feel academically prepared? If so, how were you able to overcome that challenge? Have you utilized any academic support services on campus like tutors or study centers for math or writing? How much time would you say you spend studying each week? What kinds of things do you do to help yourself study effectively?

Have you developed relationships with any staff or faculty at your University? Would you identify anyone as being your mentor? Who would you describe as your social group, the people with whom you’re close and spend time? What have you observed about others who are successful or unsuccessful in college?

Did you take part in any special programs or events or classes and were those helpful to you? Were there any programs especially for Black men on your campus? Do you think that’s beneficial? If so, why and how?

Were you in any classes where there were few or no other Black students? Do you think that would impact how you would participate in a class? Did you encounter any stereotypes on campus or experience racism? Have you ever felt excluded or singled out in college or anywhere else?
How do you like to spend your leisure time? Do you have any special interests or hobbies?

What do you do for fun? How would you describe yourself and your purpose today?

What does it mean to you to be a Black man? Do you think it’s difficult for Black men to be themselves? Is it difficult for you? What do you do to keep strong? What do you perceive to be your strengths? What kinds of things might you say to yourself if you were facing a challenge?

POST COLLEGE: What is your long-term career goal? Do you have any other long-term goals for yourself? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Is there anything we didn’t discuss that should be included? Thank you for giving so generously of time and attention and contributing to this research.
Appendix I: Coding Audit

TO: Doctoral Committee for Regina George
FR: John M. Palladino, PhD, Professor of Special Education
RE: Dissertation Method Audit
DT: December 13, 2016

Dear Committee Members,

I audited the qualitative method and techniques that candidate Regina George employed towards completing her dissertation, *Successful Transition of Black Men in White Universities*. A qualitative research dissertation attains validity and reliability when an auditor achieves intercoder agreement with the candidate. The following narrative details how she and I reached such an agreement, and how she exceeded standards of qualitative research rigor.

Qualitative research requires investigators to seek saturation in their findings as means to determine that a study is complete and representative of the population for whom their participants represent. Regina considered her recruitment efforts to have met this outcome. Thus, I requested that she select six of her coded transcripts for my review, a collective sampling that included all the colleges her participants attended. Her overall participant recruitment process alone warrants merit for having sought out various types and sizes of universities within the geographical location in which the study occurred.

Regina employed the “open” or “analytical units of common meaning” coding technique. I concur that the process was the optimal one, given the sample size and the overall intent to augment the richness of narrative that sometimes becomes lost with coding software programs. She began with highlighting the essential statements within each response a participant gave. She was able to do so because her interviewing techniques successfully elicited ideal qualitative in-depth participant dialogue that allows for the winnowing of comments throughout the hand-coding process. Her marginal notations captured the meanings associated with the highlighted transcript portions, similar to the concepts I identified throughout my coding of the transcripts. Her notes represented the complete essence of each statement without discrediting any outlining information. Furthermore, she did not repeat her marginal commentary across transcripts, thereby diminishing forced coding that can threaten the integrity of qualitative data.

After completing and comparing my analytical coding with Regina’s results, I reviewed her list of eight themes. She is to be commended for overcoming the trite concept of “emergent themes” that scholars often incorrectly state and explain. That is, thematic identification is a purposeful act based on what appears to the prevalent ideas throughout the coding process. Scholars should then explain how they arrived at their thematic identification and not haphazardly state that the themes simply emerged on their own. Regina’s listing included subthemes for each theme. I was able to trace each one back to her highlighted text and marginal notes. Thus, although the themes “emerged” in the sense that they captured her participants’ thoughts and actions, they were...
## Appendix J: Student Profiles

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## Appendix L: Student Experiences

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## Appendix M: Student Activities

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