

CAMPUS EN-COUNTER: COUNTER NARRATIVES OF THE PERSISTENCE OF  
BLACK MALES AT A PWI

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A Dissertation  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri – Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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December 2015

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
dissertation entitled

CAMPUS EN-COUNTER: COUNTER NARRATIVES OF THE PERSISTENCE OF  
BLACK MALES AT A PWI

presented by Jonathan A. McElderry

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in times of comfort and convenience, but in times of challenge and controversy.” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This quote has helped guide my personal and professional development throughout the past 12 years of my life. It has motivated my continuous work in higher education and to serve as an example to the students I continue to work with.

I would first like to thank my grandmother, Betty Smith (Nanny) who has been one of the strongest support systems the Lord could have given me. The memories we have shared, lessons learned, and your unwavering love for me is more than I could ever ask for. To my mother, Darlene, thank you for your continuous love and doing your best for me. To my father figures, Jonathan W. & Norris thank you for believing in me and pushing me to be great. My sister and brother (Jonae' & Jordan) I hope that I continue to serve as a positive role model for you all and continue to push you towards your dreams. To my Uncle Mike (and family) I thank you for your listening ear and support since I was a child. You have always been like the older brother I never had and I appreciate that.

To my foundation that has led me to this momentous occasion, my time at George Mason University has impacted my life more than I could put into words. As a first generation college student, the support of university administrators and upperclassmen helped me successfully navigate uncharted territories. The challenge and support of university staff (David Atkins, Amy Snyder, Dr. Benson Cooke, Michelle Guobadia, Maha Fadle, and many others I worked with) allowed me to see my full potential and go after my goals. Additionally, the lifelong friendships developed through this time have contributed to where I am today. My involvement in various student organizations (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Orientation Leader, NPHC, Black Student Alliance,

and many more) provided me with many of the foundational knowledge and experiences that I use today in current practice. So thank you to my chapter (Iota Alpha), my line brothers (Fall 2003), Tiashia, Whitney, Victoria, Byron, My Sandz, My Specs, and many more for your friendship and support.

I am blessed with a wealth of friends that have helped me physically, mentally, and emotionally through this journey. Even at times where I didn't think I could make it they pushed me towards this ultimate goal. To my best friend since 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Brandy Wrenn Lowry, I thank you for being on this journey through life with me and contributing to the person I have become. To my other best friend, Cameron J. Harris thank you for standing by me for over 10 years and allowing us to grow together. We have so many memories that I often just sit back and laugh at. Dr. James Dabney your friendship and mentorship have meant the world to me. At a time when I didn't think I could go on you pulled "Lil Jon Jon" up and made sure I obtained every goal I had set before me. Dr. Cameron Beatty thank you for making me a better scholar, your supportive friendship, and the many memories we have shared. Dr. Keon Gilbert thank you for opening your home as a "getaway" when I needed it and the many writing sessions we had together. To Chiquita Baylor I thank you for serving as my conference roommate and friend for many years. To many other friends (Maurice, Aisha, J., Tracy, Letta, the Daquins) I thank you for your support.

To my professional network and family (ACPA & the Pan African Network), I am thankful for your wisdom, guidance, and support. Dr. Tracey Cameron, Dr. Phillip "Flapp" Cockrell, & Dr. Ron Jackson, your love and support are beyond anything I could imagine. As senior professionals in this field you have helped mentor and guide the

younger generation to really make an impact within the field. My generation of colleagues (Shawna, Kourtney, Brent, Josh, Diontre, Jordan, Shante, Krystal, & Janel) I am thankful that we continuously push each other to be better and take over the field of higher education. The presentations, conference memories, and mini vacations will never be forgotten.

To my Ohio University family I thank you for instilling in me theoretical knowledge and foundation of the principles of higher education. Emily & Dustin I am thankful that we had each other to make it through our CSP program and Athens, OH. To all the students and staff I worked with through BSCP, and the Multicultural Center I appreciate the memories made. Alicia Boards, thank you for becoming more than a supervisor, but a lifetime friend. Dr. Winsome Chunnu your mentorship and guidance has helped propel me to this day. I also want to thank other OU Staff members who had a positive impact on me during my time there (Linda Daniels, Dr. Brian Bridges, & Dr. Stacey Brinkley). Lastly, to the students I worked with during my time there (Mark, Leah, Quinn, Lynnette, & JB) seeing you all succeed in your individual fields lets me know that our time together was purposeful.

“To Jonathan, words will never describe the impact you have had on my life and that of many others. You have served as supervisor, advisor, confidant, mentor, brother and friend. You have sculptured the image of Black Excellence in your likeness and for that I will forever be grateful. Jonathan you are the heart of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, to MBMI, to LBC and to our family. Without our heart we are nothing more than another building, another organization, another program. But we are much more than that. We are a family taught to never see glass ceilings and to paint our own Mona Lisa.”

- - Curtis Taylor, Jr. (MBMI 2015 Banquet)

This quote from the 2015 MBMI Banquet sums up my experience thus far at the University of Missouri. Thank you to my family at the University of Missouri for continuously believing in my leadership and trusting me through the process. To my

colleagues and friends at Mizzou (Dr. Mark, Janna, Donell, Lisa, Stephanie, Laura, Kathleen, & Dr. Spain) I'm thankful for the time we have spent together. To my staff (past and present) at the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center (#bccholditdown) you will always hold a special place in my heart. Through the good times and bad, long hours, a multitude of programs, lots of laughs and enlightening conversation, we have collectively transformed a center into a safe space and "a home away from home" on Mizzou's campus. To Velma Buckner, thank you for standing by my side through this process as a colleague, friend, and confidant. You constantly checking on me to make sure I was writing and completing this degree meant more than you will ever know. To Curtis and Jordan, I hope that I have been to you what my mentors have been to me. Watching both of you grow through undergrad, entering graduate school and almost completing your degree is probably one of my greatest moments in higher education. We have collectively been through some life experiences that will forever keep us bonded and have grown from it all. To the Mizzou Black Men's Initiative (2013-2015), thank you for continuously pushing me to be a better person and allowing me to learn from you each day as you have learned from me. The Legion of Black Collegians Executive Boards (2012-2015) thank you for the many memories, challenging times, and opportunities to better myself. To the National Association of Black Journalists, NPHC, and other students I have been blessed to work with, continue to challenge the status quo and to succeed at Mizzou. You all are a powerful force that can move mountains and I admire your diligence, strength, and tenacity.

To end this section I have to thank my dissertation committee for the time and effort they put in to see me to this final moment. Dr. Jeni Hart there isn't enough words

for me to thank you for your guidance, support, and strength through this process. I am forever indebted and thankful to you. Dr. Toni Castro thank you for your work as a professor and willingness to serve. Dr. Noelle Arnold thank you for your caring spirit, long talks, and breadth of knowledge. Lastly, many thanks to Dr. DeAngela Burns-Wallace for serving as a mentor, confidant, and challenging me to strive for greatness.

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## ABSTRACT

Given the low retention and completion rates, research on Black men typically focuses on the *problems or barriers* they face, even when successful. Rather than focusing on the problems Black men are experiencing, it is important that scholars give attention to those Black men who *are* succeeding to create a counter narrative to the stereotypical misogyny of Black men in our society. These counter narratives remind us that Black men can and do succeed, which is a truth not often heard. The current research identifies concepts in this literature that serve as hermeneutics to examine counter narratives of student departure. The theoretical frameworks used throughout this study are theories of masculinity and Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, which were used to examine the experiences of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, predominately White institution in the Midwest (The University of Missouri or Mizzou). Seven students were recruited through purposeful sampling and participated in a three interview sequence model (Seidman, 1998). From this, five overarching themes developed. (1) Peer pressure, external influences, and institutional support; (2) Finding an academic path; (3) Black Mizzou; and (4) Establishing identity. Within the context of the study, a conclusion, recommendations for research, and implications for practice were discussed.

## Chapter One: Introduction

“*Endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous* are many of the terms often used to characterize African American males” (Jackson & Moore, 2008, p. 201). In fact, there are few positive words used to describe this demographic. And even for those who challenge such stereotypes, like the Black men who go to college, their experiences are largely described from a deficit position. For example, we are reminded that “more than two thirds who start college do not graduate within six years, which is the lowest completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education” (Harper, 2006, p. 11).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) publishes retention and graduation rates for students enrolled in postsecondary education. The most recent data available report on the high school graduation class of 2004. By 2006, approximately 80% of those graduates were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (NCES, 2012). Out of the 80% enrolled, approximately 49% of those students had obtained a postsecondary degree by June 2009 (NCES, 2012). Overall, a higher percentage of females completed bachelor’s degrees than males within 6 years (NCES, 2012). When broken down by race, Black students accounted for 17% of the graduates, compared to 36% for White students, and 46% for Asian students (NCES, 2012). When disaggregated by race *and* gender, among those obtaining a degree within the 6 year time period the greatest difference in completion rates between males and females was among Black students, at approximately nine percentage points. In addition, only 35% of Black males compared to 51% of White males were successful in this journey (NCES, 2012).

Given the low retention and completion rates, research on Black men typically focuses on the *problems or barriers* they face, even when successful (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Henderson & Moore, 2002; Strayhorn, 2010). This research collectively reinforces the master narrative that Black men should not succeed in college. I will discuss this literature in the proposed study; however, my purpose in doing so is to identify concepts in this literature that serve as hermeneutics to examine counter narratives of student departure. Rather than focusing on the problems Black men are experiencing, it is important that scholars give attention to those Black men who *are* succeeding to create a counter narrative to the stereotypical misogyny of Black men in our society. These counter narratives remind us that Black men can and do succeed, which is a truth not often heard.

Bamberg and Andrews (2004) provided two different interpretations of master narratives. He states that there is:

the existence of master narratives that delineate how narrators position themselves with their story. The second interpretation argues that in a much broader sense, speakers are principally subjected to grand recites and metanarratives from which there seems to be no escape. (p. 6)

The problem with master narratives is that they are often misleading and reify stereotypes and norms. Further, those subject to master narratives face difficulties in diverting from the path that society and their surroundings have laid out for them (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Instead, counter narratives explore how to “create a sense of self and identity that maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one’s actions but at the same time constrain and delineate

one's agency" (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. 9). For this study, I present counter narratives to establish different images of Black men, that challenge the socially constructed notion that Black men should not succeed in, let alone attend, college.

### **Background of the Study**

The state of Black men in our society, specifically those enrolled in institutions of higher education, is continually getting worse. Harper (2006) reminds us that Black men have the lowest 6-year college completion rate among both genders and all racial/ethnic groups in postsecondary education. Additionally, Black men earn degrees at a rate more than 10 times longer than White men (Harper, 2006). Further, there has been little change in the percentage of Black men in the overall student population since the mid 1970s (Harper, 2006).

Persons of color, specifically Black Americans, have undergone extreme measures to receive the same quality education as all of U.S. society (McFeeters, 2010). Collectively, Black people in our society have been denied access to higher education, were schooled in areas separate from Whites, and experienced desegregation policies in the school system (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). More recently, the repeal and removal of affirmative action policies in the admissions processes in many states has again curtailed access and equity for people color (Card & Krueger, 2005; Gesheker, 2008). Simultaneously, non-minorities argue that affirmative action is a form of reverse racism, sending strong messages that continue to marginalize and disrespect people of color (Card & Krueger, 2005; Gesheker, 2008; Mukherjee, 2000).

The aforementioned statistics about Black men in higher education are alarming. When specifically considering trends at public flagship universities in the U.S., such as

the university where of the current study in conducted, Black women outnumber Black men in enrollment by 27.2%, which is the largest gap between genders across all ethnic groups (Harper, 2006). In addition, while Black men represented 7.9% of the 18 to 24 year olds in the U.S., they comprised 2.8% of undergraduate student enrollments in 2004 among 50 flagship universities (Harper, 2006). Despite these numbers, Black men do succeed in academia (Harper, 2005; 2009; 2012).

For those Black men who do choose higher education, they must consider myriad factors, including whether to attend a Predominately White Institution (PWI) or Historically Black College and University (HBCU). While both graduate Black men, experiences at each institution type can vary significantly. For example, studies have shown that Black students attending HBCUs are “better integrated, academically and socially, than their peers at PWIs” (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002, p. 316). These students have experienced closer relationships with their collegiate peers, have higher GPAs, and interact with their professors on a greater level (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). The same study showed that students who attend HBCUs typically come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have lower test scores, utilize less than adequate facilities, and are taught by lower ranked faculty (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Unlike at HBCUs, Black men enrolled at PWIs face a different set of challenges because they are the minority on most campuses. They must learn to succeed in this environment, address issues within the Black community, as well as confront situations where they are representatives of their entire race to the greater majority (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). To survive, and in many cases, thrive, Black students attending PWIs have learned to be “bicultural, developing a repertoire of expressions and behaviors from

both the White and Black community and switching between them as appropriate” (Harper, 2006, p. 342). By doing so they are better able to successfully matriculate through the professional world post graduation (Harper, 2006).

Another factor that may affect persistence and eventual graduation of students is whether they enter college without declaring a major. There is a negative stigma around students who enter college as undeclared majors (Cuseo, 2005), despite a wide variety of reasons for this. For example, students may enter college as undeclared majors due to a diverse set of interests or because they are looking for more information to select a major (Cuseo, 2005). Yet, the three most common stereotypes of undeclared students are that they are academically unprepared, developmentally unprepared, and/or are exploring various majors (Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). Although these stereotypes (and master narratives) exist, Cuseo states that there is not enough empirical evidence to support these assumptions. The literature on the intersection of race/gender and being undeclared is scarce (John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004). However, the stereotypes about undeclared students parallel those about Black men. Thus, it is likely that if Black men are also undeclared, the challenges they face in college are multiplied.

The host institution in this study is hoping to improve the retention and graduation rates of students who enter as undeclared majors. Recent data at the institution show that 23% of students who enter as undeclared majors do not graduate (MU Institutional Research, 2014). Those who are still undeclared majors by the end of their 2<sup>nd</sup> year have a 40% graduation rate within 4.5 years (MU Institutional Research, 2014). This number is in comparison to the overall 80% graduation rate. Leaders at the institution are particularly concerned about the intersection of race, gender, and being undeclared,

which supports the need of the study. However, a focus on why so many undeclared, Black male students fail adds to the deficit literature on this population. Hence, understanding the experiences of Black men at a predominately White institution who enter as undeclared majors *and* persist is both imperative to the research institution and the extant literature.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Throughout the last decades, Black men in postsecondary education has been a popular topic (Cuyjet, 1997; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2006; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). The current U.S. President has even instituted *My Brother's Keeper*, a new White House initiative, aimed at empowering boys and young men of color (Hudson, 2014). Two out six of the key milestones of this initiative focus on Black men graduating from high school and successfully enrolling/completing postsecondary education. (Hudson, 2014).

Many researchers have focused on the departure puzzle of Black men from institutions of higher education to determine why they leave (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). However, only a few researchers have focused on the counter narratives of Black men to develop an understanding of the influential factors that assists these students in their successful matriculation through college. “The disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black collegians, it creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement” (Harper, 2005, p. 9). Further, as previously noted, little is known about Black men who enrolled as undeclared majors (John et al., 2004). What we do know is that at PWIs, persistence drops for all students at year three,

not two, a time when most students focus on upper level courses in their majors (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). For those who may declare majors later in their careers, they may lack prerequisite courses or otherwise may not be ready to transition to upper level courses in a major, and may leave the institution as a result. Thus, we know that Black males are least likely to persist, it seems to follow that if they are undeclared males, the likelihood of graduating narrows even further.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, predominately White institution in the Midwest. This study contributes to the literature by examining the successful matriculation of undergraduate, Black male students. It also contributes to the scant literature about those who entered their first year as undeclared majors. Using Tinto's (1993) concepts of student departure as a hermeneutic, this study will present a counter narrative of persistence by drawing from the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation to understand how students have challenged the master narrative of departure.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide this study:

- How do Black male undergraduates who enter college as undeclared majors, and have matriculated to their third or fourth year, describe their college experience at one predominately White institution in the Midwest?
- What factors contributed to their persistence through college?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks used throughout this study are theories of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Harper & Harris, 2010, 2014; Harris, 2010; Kimmel & Messner, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and Tinto's theory of student departure (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011; Millem & Burger, 1997; Tinto, 1988). Theories of masculinity focus on the confining set of expectations that do not allow men full expression in society. Masculinity is developed through a culmination of sociocultural experiences such as ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status (Kimmel, 2004; Mutua, 2006).

Although the literature has discussed the crisis of Black men in higher education, another challenge exists in how some scholars define the acceptable Black man (Neal, 2006; Abu-Jama & Hill, 2012). Progressive Black Masculinity (PBM) is an approach to theorizing about Black men and college success (Mutua, 2006). By using both PBM with other theories of masculinity, I will attempt to conceptualize a theory of *Counter-Masculinities (CM)* to help explain how marginalized identities navigate surroundings, separate oppression of gendered and race power-full and power-less marginalized men, and lastly, disrupt the notion that there is one type of masculinity.

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure focuses on the challenges students endure that may lead to their decision to depart from college. Tinto identified three stages in this theory: separation, transition, and incorporation (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Tinto, 1988). Upon entering college, the separation stage focuses on students separating themselves from membership within their past communities (Tinto, 1988). The second stage, transition is identified as the time period when students move

from associations with their past in hopes of gaining new associations with their current communities. The last stage of the theory is incorporation; at this stage, students decide if they are prepared for integration into the campus community (Palmer et al., 2011; Tinto, 1988).

In later studies, Tinto (1993) recognized that minorities, specifically African Americans, face challenges different than their White counterparts when adjusting to the collegiate environment (Guiffrida, 2003). Therefore, it is particularly important for African American students to establish communities within their new atmosphere to lessen the likelihood of departure (Guiffrida, 2003). Many Black students at PWIs face issues of alienation, isolation, racism, and discrimination, and thus have been the group least satisfied with their college experience (Harper, 2006). Although there has been an increase in the enrollment of Black collegians, many still report being either the only or of a few non-white students in their classrooms (Harper, 2006). Thus, given the limitations of Tinto's theory for African Americans (Guiffrida, 2003), coupling it with theories of masculinities, including PBM, has the potential to robustly describe the experiences of undeclared undergraduate, Black men at a PWI and establish counter narratives of student departure.

### **Design of Study**

To gain an understanding of the experiences of third and fourth-year Black male undergraduate students who enter college as undeclared majors at a large, public, predominately White institution (PWI) in the Midwest, I used a qualitative method. Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 36). Qualitative research allows the researcher to collect data

in a setting that is natural and sensitive to the people in the study to attempt to make meaning of their lived experiences. It is used when there is a problem that needs to be explored, a complex understanding of an issue is necessary, or when the researcher wants to share the lived experiences of a certain population (Creswell, 2007). A combination of assumptions, theoretical lenses, and research problems are used to effectively study the social or human problem being under investigation (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies are concluded by giving a voice to the participants, providing an indepth description of the problem, and contributing to the body of literature (Creswell, 2007).

For this particular study, the qualitative approach to inquiry that will be used is case study. Yin (2009) describes case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context” (p. 18). The necessity for case study research is increased when there are not clearly defined boundaries between the context and the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2009). This study will be an embedded, single case study design (Yin, 2009). The context will be the PWI, collectively the Black male students will comprise the case, and the individual interviews and relevant documents will be the units of analysis.

Using both theories of masculinity and Tinto’s (1993) theory of departure, a qualitative approach is essential to allow the participants a voice to express their lived experiences and perspectives. Further, the theoretical frameworks will influence the development of the interview questions, the analysis of the data, and how findings are interpreted. Data will be collected using Seidman’s (1998) three interviews series, as well as through gathering documents to provide context to the case. The use of coding and the development of themes will help synthesize the data. Additionally, once the data

have been coded, a combination of within case and cross case analyses will be used to inductively develop the narrative about the participants within the study.

### **Significance**

National statistics about persistence and retention suggest the importance of my research topic. Black men, like all students, leave college for a number of reasons. Many PWIs saw a large increase in Black students in the mid 1960s due to the passing of affirmative action policies (Harper, Patton, Wooden, 2009). However, many PWIs made little effort to assist them in adjusting to a new environment (McFeeters, 2010), which in turn created an institutional climate wrought with barriers for persistence. From the research, we know more about why Black men leave institutions of higher education than why they stay (Cuyjet, 1997; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). This, in turn, reinforces the master narrative about Black men in higher education.

For students who entered as undeclared, the likelihood of persistence decreases (Gordon, 1984, 1994, 1995). Data from the host institution show that first year undeclared students have a lesser chance of graduating than other students entering with a declared major. For Black males who are undeclared, the likelihood of graduating is further diminished (MU Institutional Research, 2014). The pressure from the government for institutions to retain and graduate students warrants an increased understanding about why students persist and what institutions can do to foster increased persistence.

The plight of Black men in higher education at PWIs, coupled with the challenges faced by first year undeclared majors, create a unique study that will not only contribute to the scant literature, but to the host institution as well. The research findings from this

study will lead to recommendations that, if implemented, can be useful to facilitate the successful matriculation of other Black undergraduate males at the institution. By focusing on the participants' experiences of success, I will challenge the master narrative of departure, and remind us of the potential of others like them. Overall, the significance of the study is that it is establishing counter narratives that are unique in that they not only challenge the Black male master narrative, but that of undeclared students who are also expected to fail.

### **Definition of Terms**

- Black or African American: Citizens born in the United States of African ancestry.
- Predominately White Institution (PWI): The term used to describe institutions of higher learning where Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Lomotey, 2010).
- Persistence: A student's matriculation through college from one academic year to the next. Persistence is viewed as an *individual* phenomenon. "Because individual students define their goals, a student may successfully persist without being retained to graduation" (Reason, 2009, p. 660).
- Retention: The continued enrollment of students at a postsecondary institution from one year to the next. Retention is an institutional phenomenon.
- Undeclared: Students who entered their first year at a postsecondary institution without declaring a major or entered as a 'pre' major (e.g., pre-journalism, pre-business).

## Summary

This chapter introduced the study about the experiences of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, PWI in the Midwest. The chapter also provided the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical frameworks, design of study, and the definition of terms. Chapter Two will examine the relevant literature that informs the problem, including more detail about the frameworks. Chapter Three will focus on the research methods of the study. It will include the methodology, research questions, positionality, data sources, collection, and analysis. Chapter Four will review the research findings of the study. Lastly, Chapter Five will conclude the research study by answering the proposed research questions; discuss the study's contribution to research, policy, and practice; and provide suggestions for future research and implications.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Four key bodies of literature inform the current study about the experiences of Black undergraduate males at Predominately White Institutions: (1) undeclared students, (2) master narratives of the Black male in education, (3) counter narratives and (4) the frameworks that inform this study.

### **Undeclared Students**

This section discusses undeclared students in higher education. Although the literature is scant, there are several reasons why students may enter college without declaring a major. In addition, there is some research about the challenges undeclared and undecided students face. These will be discussed further in this section.

Undeclared and undecided students have been popular topics for higher education administrators since the 1920s (Alexander, 2013; Gordon, 1984, 1994, 1995; Van Wie, 2011). While these terms, undeclared and undecided, have different meaning, scholars sometimes use these words interchangeably. As I review the literature, I will introduce both terms as they are used in the studies explored. While administrators have been interested in these students for years, it is only recently that there has been slight increase in the higher education scholarship on students who enter college undecided or undeclared. In some cases, it is not the primary focus of a study, but is mentioned briefly (e.g., Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). This section looks at the limited literature on undeclared/undecided students, including scholarship about the persistence, or lack thereof, of these students in higher education and their academic performance (e.g., Alexander, 2013; Cuseo, 2013; Leppel, 2001).

Approximately, 20 to 30% of students entering college begin as undeclared majors (Alexander, 2013; Gordon, 1994). Students may enter college as undeclared majors based on their inability to make immediate decisions, having a diverse set of interests in multiple fields, or feeling the need to explore different majors before being committed to one (Cuseo, 2013; Gordon, 1984, 1994; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). Gordon (1994) distinguished undeclared from undecided: “The term undecided has been used to identify students unwilling, unable, or not prepared to make educational choices” (p. 6). However, as previously noted, these terms are often used in conjunction with each other, or in some cases, interchangeably.

Institutions identify students as undeclared or undecided based on admission surveys, personal statements, or their inability to select a desired major prior to starting their undergraduate coursework (Gordon, 1994). Undecided students may be uncertain about a specific major and/or their career aspirations (Gordon, 1994; Orndorff & Herr, 1996). Many campuses refer to these students as undecided or undeclared students, but others define them as general education or general studies majors (Gordon, 1984). Like first year students in general, major changers, undeclared, and underprepared undecided students are considered at risk for not being retained (Gordon, 1984; 1994; Lewallen, 1995; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). While students may be undeclared at anytime during their academic degree, the majority of undeclared students are entering first year students; thus, most of the research has focused on this population (Gordon, 1984, 1994; Van Wie, 2011).

Being undeclared is a risk factor due to perceived issues of persistence and academic performance (Cuseo, 2013; John et al., 2011; Leppel, 2001). However, some

research has shown that the retention rate for undeclared students is higher than those with a declared major (Cuseo, 2013; Gordon, 1994). Cuseo does point out that these findings are from the infant stages of research undeclared students. Thus, much more research is needed to better understand if undecided/undeclared students are truly at risk (Cuseo, 2013; Gordon, 1984, 1994). Moreover, I was unable to find any research related to Black males who enter college as undeclared. However, as discussed in the review below, Black males, like many undeclared students in general, are assumed to be at risk for persisting in college. Thus, these two master narratives about student success, when combined, suggest that Black males who are undeclared are particularly vulnerable.

### **Master Narratives of the Black Male in Education**

In this section, I discuss the master narratives of Black males within the U.S. society, and in particular in the educational pathway leading to college. There are several issues that reinforce messages about Black males and their place in society. The literature in this section is important to the study because it provides a context for how Black males experience college, either positively or negatively. I argue that it is important to examine education prior to college, as those experiences establish a foundation for future educational pursuits. Additionally, I explore the literature about Black males specifically, as it highlights what many Black males face in the U.S. society, including some aspects of education. The literature in this section is significant because it provides a context to the challenges that Black males endure into college and set the stage for the need for counter narratives.

## **PK-12 Educational Experiences**

This section introduces a review of the scholarship about the experiences of Black males in the PK-12 educational system. The literature provides evidence of numerous influences that shape the college going experiences of Black men, underachievement, acting White, the role of teachers and administrators, the school to prison pipeline, and the role of family. Understanding the educational experiences of Black males prior to college is important, as it sets the stage for their transition (or not) to higher education.

**Underachievement and the achievement gap.** Darenbourg, Perez, and Blake (2010) suggest that there are situational variables that immediately affect Black males once they enter the educational system. They include: harsher discipline practices, referral to special education programs, instruction from underprepared teachers, and feelings of detachment from the school. Yet, school is a prominent source of socialization for Black males (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). As such, it is often school itself that presents Black boys with messages that they do not belong in school. When these students are deemed inappropriate for mainstream schools, they are placed in special education classes or in alternative schools (Jackson, 2003; Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). Even if they remain in more “traditional” classrooms, they are often marked as failures or lost causes (Jackson, 2003). Ultimately, they are funneled into a pipeline destined for underachievement.

According to Hudley (2009), African Americans underperform academically compared to all other racial groups. The underperformance has led to what is known as the achievement gap (Jackson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Losen & Skiba, 2010). The achievement gap is viewed as a racialized and class issue, focusing on the disparities of

standardized test scores and academic achievement between Blacks and Whites.

Contributing to underperformance, many African American youth hold self-associated beliefs about their academic motivation and achievement. Hudley identified three types of self-beliefs: academic self-concept, academic efficacy, and perceived competence. Academic self-concept is defined as “the motivational variable that comprises attitudes and beliefs about one’s academic abilities” (Hudley, 2009, p. 188). Self-efficacy is “a judgment about the ability of the self to pursue action that will achieve a particular goal or level of performance” (Hudley, 2009, p. 189). Lastly, perceived competence addresses individual beliefs about their own abilities for success (Hudley, 2009). Much like stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which will be discussed later in this chapter, the culmination of these three types of self-beliefs influences the academic achievement (or underachievement) of African American youth and contributes to the achievement gap (Hudley, 2009).

**The boy/man problem.** Many have argued that there is a “boy crisis” in our education system. Husain and Millimet (2009) purport that a crisis exists because boys are falling behind girls in our educational system and thus, are losing ground in school. However, the real crisis lies within minority communities, especially for Black boys and men (Kafer, 2007; Rivers & Barnett, 2006; Von Drehle, 2007). Boys trail girls academically in most areas and are more inclined to focus on their hobbies rather than academics (Kafer, 2007; Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010). In addition, girls are more likely to run student organizations, take more advanced classes, and graduate as class valedictorian (Sadowski, 2010; Von Drehle, 2007). Further, boys are three times more likely to be suspended from school than girls, are more likely to drop out of high school,

and are two-thirds more likely to be in special education classes (Kafer, 2007). These experiences have implications for whether and where young men attend college.

Others have blamed the plight of boys on the feminization of schooling, and argue for single sex schools to cater to boys' learning patterns (Rivers & Barnett, 2006; Watson et al., 2010). However, when considering race, gender differences in schooling among White students are relatively small (Kafer, 2007; Rivers & Barnett, 2006; Von Drehle, 2007). Statistics introduced in Chapter 1 about Black underachievement, and low retention, and completion rates reinforce the magnitude of the problem (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010). While more research is needed to fully understand Black boys' and men's underachievement, stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) is another factor presented in the scholarship.

**Stereotypes and threats.** The challenges Black males face in our educational system cannot be discussed without addressing the notion of stereotype threat. Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) define stereotype threat as

When a negative stereotype about a group that one is part of becomes personally relevant, usually as an interpretation of one's behavior or an experience one is having, stereotype threat is the resulting sense that one can then be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype or that one might do something that would inadvertently confirm it. (p. 389)

Stereotype threat can manifest in a number of different scenarios. It can be a situational threat, where social identity plays a role in the interpretation of the person's behavior (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). For example, this can occur where

students are asked to represent their entire race in an academic classroom. Additionally, it can occur as a general threat that is experienced by everyone such that the nature of the threat results in the mistreatment of a group of individuals (Steele et al., 2002).

Stereotype threat can impact anyone regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation. However, Black males in particular must avoid internalizing negative stereotypes in an effort to avoid racial vulnerability that may contribute to self-imposed anxiety or developing a sense of inferiority because these messages are magnified through media and news outlets (Steele, 1997).

Contributing to a context where stereotype threat can occur, Black males must also overcome the conditions and blocked opportunities that exist as a result of the status of Black males in our society. For example, Mutua (2006) highlighted the following facts about Black males:

- Black men have the lowest life expectancy rate of any group within the United States.
- Black male suicide rates doubled between 1980 and 1995, constituting the third leading cause of death among Black men.
- Homicide is even more problematic than disease; in 1998 Black men represented seven of ten murder victims. (p. 19)

Additionally, Black males face historical stereotypes such as being, “violent, sexually aggressive, and lazy” (Mutua, 2006, p. 24). These stereotypes and facts highlight some of the challenges that Black males must overcome to become productive members of society.

**Acting White.** Another factor that influences the achievement gap is the fear of being stigmatized as *acting White*. Black males who are academically successful risk peers equating their achievement with losing their Blackness (Ogbu, 2004). The stigma of acting White can result in students being ostracized or excluded from Black activities (both inside and outside of school) or being physically assaulted (Harper, 2010). Thus, Black males often do not “aspire or strive” to get good grades (Ogbu, 2004, p. 1) because these behaviors are aligned with Whiteness and the consequences of that.

Oppositional social identity theory is related to notions of acting White. It argues that Black students unite in an effort to avoid things associated with White America (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). For Black males, such avoidance behaviors become a form of resistance against a perceived unfair power structure (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). The act of resistance plays a large role in the ethnic identity development and relations among African American youth (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Worrell, Cross, Vandiver, 2001). By rejecting the dominant culture during their development, they embrace the subcultural norms and values, including academic underperformance (Bergin & Cooks, 2002).

**Teachers and administrators.** Another barrier to the academic success of Black males is the perceived and lived discrimination and racism from teachers, counselors, and school administration (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Toldson, Braithwaite, & Rentie, 2009). For example, while teachers can play a role in reversing the negative stereotypes about Black males in school, they often internalize these same stereotypes and project them onto the students (Garibaldi, 1992). Teachers can foster a climate of discrimination that can lead students to feel inadequate and marginalized. This

can establish a self-fulfilling prophecy from which they may never escape (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011).

Often, teachers and administrators target Black males because they do not fit into the norms of the classroom (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Further, the tendency to overreact or to respond based on perceived stereotypes can lead teachers to misinterpret the language of Black students or their physical expression (Ferguson, 2000). They may also cast young Black males into adult roles, which may result in them being disciplined at a higher rate (Hirschfield, 2008). As such, these same students are suspended or disciplined on a repetitive basis (Fenning & Rose, 2007), damaging any relationships and trust students may have of teachers and administrators. Despite the previously stated research, there are some positive experiences between teachers and Black male students. Culturally responsive teachers take the initiative to establish positive classroom environments, show affection and empathy, and learn about the cultures of the students (Brown, 2004; Bondy & Ross, 2008). By doing so, they establish a trusting relationship with students which allows them to work with diverse populations and foster a supportive educational experience (Bondy & Ross, 2008).

**Family and community.** Not only do societal messages and educators themselves play a critical role (both negative and positive) in African American student success, but families do as well. Family involvement is viewed as one of the most important contributing factors to academic success (Leuchovius, 2006; Runnelll, 2006; Usher & Kober, 2011). Like with teachers and administrators, this area of social support has both direct and indirect influences that can either be positive or negative. In particular, parents play a large role in the academic success of Black males; therefore,

their involvement in the academic process is important (Garibaldi, 1992; Somers et al., 2008). For example, parent involvement resulted in higher grade point averages, regular school attendance, positive attitudes towards school, and enrollment in postsecondary education (Leuchovius, 2006). Thus, when school districts engage families by linking family activities to student learning goals, providing multiple avenues for parental involvement, and developing trusting relationships between school officials and families, students do better academically (Runnell, 2006).

Unfortunately, there is an often held assumption about Black parents within the school system: they are not invested in their children's success (Reynolds, 2010). Such assumptions can have deleterious consequences for Black student achievement. For example, Reynolds (2010) examined the role of racism in the education of Black males and the involvement of Black parents within the school system. The results of the study showed that parents felt their interactions with school officials were full of "misunderstanding and unspoken hostility" (Reynolds, 2010, p. 152). These types of interactions led parents to feel inadequate about contributing to their children's education because they perceived themselves as unnecessary obstacles for students to overcome (Runnell, 2006; Somers et al., 2008). This feeling can result in parents' lack of involvement in their child's education, which ultimately affects their achievement given the important role that families play in their education.

**School to prison pipeline.** While the existence of the achievement gap for Black males has been well-researched (e.g., Jackson, 2003; Livingston & Nahimana, 2006, Moore et al., 2014), little research has focused on the discipline gap in our K-12 system (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) and its adverse effects on achievement. The extent of the

issue is reflected by the disproportionate gap in school suspensions for Black males (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; McCarthy & Hogue, 1987). In fact, African American adolescents (both male and female) are three times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts (Gregory et al., 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; McCarthy & Hogue, 1987). When ranking the highest suspension rates by demographics, researchers list the following (from highest to lowest), (1) Black males, (2) White males, (3) Black females, and (4) White females (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). This overrepresentation of Black students who are disciplined is referred to as “racial disproportionality” (Wallace et al., 2008, p. 1).

School discipline ranges from office referrals and after school detention to suspension or expulsion (Heitzeg, 2009; Wallace et al., 2008). School-based zero tolerance policies were implemented in the late 1990s due to an increase in school violence and as a means to keep drugs off school grounds (Wallace et al., 2008). As a result, the use of exclusionary discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, became standard practice to regulate negative student behavior (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Because many zero tolerance policies are developed with predetermined consequences, the students disciplined often suffered the same consequences, despite the severity or circumstances of the infraction (Darensbourg et al., 2010). The zero tolerance approach has led to an increase in suspension and expulsions and has continued to rise since 1974 (Heitzeg, 2009). However, as previously noted, racial disproportionality is reflected in the suspension rates for students of color as compared to their White peers (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Black males had the highest

suspension rates, followed by White males, Black females, and White females (Skiba et al., 2002). Black students were also more likely to be sent to the office or suspended for more subjective reasons compared to their White peers (Skiba et al., 2002). For example, suspended students reported that a difference in communication styles, lack of interest displayed by their teachers, and being provoked led to higher rates of disciplinary action (Skiba et al., 2002).

The increase in school suspensions led to increased absences from the classroom. In addition to reducing opportunities to learn (Losen & Skiba, 2010), suspension from school impacts social quality (Skiba, Horner, & Chung, 2011), creates a negative academic identity, and ultimately may lead to dropping out (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), thus decreasing the likelihood of college attendance and completion.

Racial disproportionality often leads to tracking students out of school and into the prison systems. High school discipline records for Black males often predict the number who will be incarcerated compared to enrolling at institutions of higher education (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). As a result, the discourse of criminalization surrounding Black males in America begins at an early age. Students of color, specifically Black males, poor students, and students with disabilities are most likely to be tracked (Heitzeg, 2009). Heitzeg refers to the school to prison pipeline as “the growing pattern of tracking students out of the educational institutions, primarily zero tolerance policies, and tracking them directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems” (p. 1). The school to prison pipeline is also referred to as “schoolhouse to jailhouse, cradle to prison, or prison track” and disproportionately affects Black males

(Heitzgeg, 2009, p. 3). Thus, academic attainment is diminished for them because they are shifted from learning and into the justice system (Darensbourg et al., 2010).

### **Experiences of Black Males in Higher Education**

For Black males who have persisted and overcame the master narratives about their academic capacity in K-12, higher education may be their next step (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, Strayhorn, 2014). As in the K-12 system, there is a dominant narrative about Black males in higher education that characterizes them as “underachieving and unlikely to succeed” (Johnson, 2013, p. 116). If, and when, Black males do arrive on campus, they often bring with them the baggage of being academically unprepared; tagged as a discipline problem; saddled with financial hardship; and disadvantaged in light of their social, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Cuyjet, 1997; Owens, Lacey, Rawls, Holbert-Quince, 2010; Palmer & Young, 2008). Below, I introduce the following themes that collectively capture the experiences of Black males in higher education: campus climate, persistence and retention, stereotype threats, the Black male student/athlete, and the Black male student success movement.

**Campus climate for Black men at PWIs.** Campus climate is shaped by many factors: historical, structural, psychological, and behavioral (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, 1998). Each of these factors impacts the dropout and departure rates for Black males (Hurtado et al., 1998). The low number of Black males on college campuses (i.e., structural diversity) has a direct effect on the campus climate and relationship building among races and is dated back to the segregation of institutions (Cuyjet, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998; Strayhorn, 2010). Also, the lack of Black men on campus creates

little to no opportunity for members of other races to interact with them and to begin to debunk negative stereotypes (Hurtado, 2007; Saddlemire, 1996).

Research within higher education has consistently shown that Black males perceive the campus climate as “unsupportive, unsympathetic, and chilly” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 311). These perceptions are shaped by peers’ behaviors and attitudes as well as by those of faculty and staff. These individuals can play crucial roles in confronting and debunking negative stereotypes about Black males (Cuyjet, 2007; Sedlacek, 1999) and assumptions to create an inclusive environment. At the same time, by not doing so, they can contribute to a hostile climate.

Racism is a persistent problem that contributes to a hostile racial climate on many college campuses (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). The behavioral dimension of the campus is important in understanding the nature, and how students from different racial groups interact, both inside and outside the classroom (Hurtado et al., 1998). Like many other racial minority groups, Black males suffer from “racial stereotypes and racial microaggressions that undermine their achievement and sense of belonging” (Harper, 2012, p. 3). They are often perceived to have gained admission based upon a lower set of standards in order to diversify the campus (Sedlacek, 1999). Further, the level of racial tension is higher for Black males at PWIs compared to those at HBCUs (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). This tension is experienced both inside and outside the academic classroom (Sedlacek, 1999). These psychological stressors have been found to negatively affect Black male academic success and retention at PWIs (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007).

In addition to racial stereotyping, Black males face issues of assimilation, exclusion, marginality, as well as White resentment and ignorance (Davis, Dias-Bowie, & Greenberg, 2004; Lewis et al., 2000). The psychological dimension of the campus can impact students' perceptions of discrimination and how the institution embraces diversity (Hurtado et al., 1998). The dominant group often complains that Black males, as well as all students of color, segregate themselves on campus (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Lewis, 2000). However, what many fail to understand is that it is a survival mechanism and system of support for these students (Ancis et al., 2000; Lewis et al., 2000).

Having the potential to foster a more supportive racial climate, Black Culture Centers (BCC) have been used as places of refuge for Black students at PWIs. BCCs emerged during the Black Student Movement in the 60s/70s (Patton, 2010). For the majority population, BCCs can be looked upon as fostering self-segregation, but it is important to understand that they often act as safe havens for students at PWIs (Patton, 2006). They also provide learning opportunities such as involvement, Black identity development, and self-preservation (Patton, 2006). However, PWIs can fail if they place the weight of cultural education and programming solely on these centers, rather than creating campus wide initiatives (Patton & Hannon, 2008).

The campus climate for Black males at PWIs has a direct impact on the retention and attrition rates (Hurtado et al., 1998). Black men, like all students, leave college for a number of reasons. Pre-entry attributes (e.g., high school rank, perceptions of social adjustment); goals and commitments (i.e., commitment to institution); institutional experiences (i.e., negative experiences that distract from learning, e.g. campus climate); and personal and normative integration (i.e., student involvement and connection to

campus) all directly impact student retention and success rates (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2012; Mbuva, 2011). How students perceive the campus can impact their involvement, whether they are committed to the institution, and ultimately their matriculation through college. Collectively, these factors have proven to be strong predictors for retention for not only African Americans in general, but Black males as well (Mbuva, 2011).

**Persistence and retention.** Reason (2009) defines *persistence* as a student's matriculation through college from one academic year to the next. He further explains that *retention* is the continued enrollment of students at a postsecondary institution from one year to the next. Both are often used interchangeably. However, the terms, while related, are not the same. Persistence and retention research has shown that there are multiple factors that influence student success. In addition to those described above, other factors include: sociodemographic traits, academic preparation, personal and social experiences, and dispositions (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000; Reason, 2009; Swail, 2004; Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Additionally, Schreiner et al. (2011) found that social integration and the students' perceptions of the institution's commitment to student welfare affected retention. Not entering college directly after high school, attending part time, working more than 30 hours a week, and parenting are additional factors that threaten persistence and graduation from college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001).

Persistence and retention are both important factors when discussing the experiences of Black males in higher education. The retention of students has been a goal for institutions of higher education for decades (Reason, 2009; Purdie & Rosser,

2011). Despite efforts of colleges and universities to improve retention, a little over half of students who begin their first year actually graduate within 6 years (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; NCES, 2015; Ross, et al., 2012). This number is even more dismal for African Americans, as they continue to lag behind Whites and Asian Americans in part due to different experiences in higher education (Kuh et. al., 2008; NCES, 2015; Schreiner, Noel, & Cantwell, 2011).

**Stereotype threats in higher education.** To demonstrate the impact of stereotype threat in higher education, Steele and Aronson (1995) administered a test composed of the most difficult questions from the verbal section of the Graduate Record Examination to a group of Black and White, male and female, sophomore students. The study determined how Black students interpreted the test based on whether it was presented as ability diagnostic or ability nondiagnostic. A diagnostic test is an instrument that would measure the intellectual ability of the test taker; a nondiagnostic test is a laboratory problem solving test (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The study showed the impact of stereotype threat on the students' test taking abilities. Black students scored lower when the test was presented as measuring their ability diagnostic, but scored equally to their White counterparts on the nondiagnostic test (Steele, 1997). Once Black students were made aware that their intellectual ability was being tested, it negatively affected their performance. This demonstrated the influence of stereotype threat, because the stereotype held by many about Black students is that they are not as intelligent as White students. However, it is important to note that the study did not disaggregate the data by gender.

The anxiety of avoiding prejudice or affirming a negative stereotype can cause students to develop quick defenses to avoid the situation (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Some students avoid being placed in scenarios where the stereotype may apply, may perform negatively in a stereotype threatening domain, may try to disprove said stereotype, or could become disengaged altogether (Steele et al., 2002). Regardless of how students choose to deal with stereotype threats, for Black males, the constant reminder through the media, academic literature, and day-to-day experiences that they are an endangered species, uneducable, and dangerous has a negative impact on their ability to succeed academically (Strayhorn, 2010).

**Black male student/athlete.** Although much of the extant scholarship describes the low enrollment of Black males on college campuses, one area where they are overrepresented is in intercollegiate sports teams. Harper (2012) stated, “In 2009, they [Black men] were only 3.6 percent of undergraduate students, but 55.3 percent of football and basketball players at public NCAA Division I institutions” (p. 3). This is problematic for several reasons. First, the message is that Black men are available to higher education when it is time to generate revenue (Lederman, 2012), but are scarce when considering other aspects of campus life. Second, because Black males are highly represented on revenue generating sports teams, non-athletes are assumed to be athletes, because they could not possibly be on campus for any other reason, such as academic purposes (Harper, 2014). This stereotype is reinforced by the low graduation rates of many Black male athletes.

Black male athletes graduate at lower rates than non-athletes (Harper, 2012; 2014). Black male athletes from the seven major NCAA Division I sports conferences

have a 50% graduation rate (Harper, 2014). This number is in comparison to the 67% graduation rate of athletes overall, and the 56% graduation rate for undergraduate Black men (Harper, 2014). However, some NCAA athletic programs justify these statistics, arguing that these students leave college early to pursue professional careers (Harper, 2014; Lederman, 2012).

Ladson-Billings (2005) argued that the treatment of Black male college athletes is institutional malpractice. She stated that these students are contracted to perform an athletic service in return for their “tuition, fees, books, meals during the season, athletic gear, and medical insurance” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 118). These men are commodities, rather than students whose academic talents are cultivated. They are subject to malpractice because they enter college often underprepared for college level work or are enrolled in easy classes, which both fail to lead to degree completion (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

**The Black male student success movement.** The aforementioned sections explored a number of the factors that can contribute to the departure of Black men in college, and some of the mechanisms that can facilitate dropping out. Another effort to improve the status of Black males in college has been the Black male success movement. Between 2000 and 2015, 15 years 11 books, 60 articles, and many initiatives have been developed to improve the status of Black males in college. However, this movement has failed to fully achieve its goals (Harper, 2014). This is largely due to the lack of direction or strategy for these initiatives. Although many scholars and practitioners recognize the need to create change, it is being done haphazardly and at the detriment of Black men (Harper, 2014).

Examples of initiatives have included one to two day summits, Black male initiative programs, and the establishment of offices that focused directly on Black males, such as the Todd A. Bell Resource Center at The Ohio State University. The Center provides scholarships, a lecture series, and an annual retreat for Black male students (Harper, 2014). Yet, while well-intentioned, such initiatives have not led to an overall increase in Black male student enrollment and degree attainment (Harper, 2014).

Harper (2014) cites a number of weaknesses of the movement, including: “misplaced onus for student success, amplification of deficits, and the homogenization of Black undergraduate men” (p. 125). Another reason why the movement has not achieved results is that programs have been created based on incomplete data about Black males, failing to consider what helped them to be successful (Harper, 2014). Moreover, many conferences, summits, and male initiatives discussed issues about enrollment management and academic engagement, but ignored the role of masculinities in their healthy development. Thus, these programs lacked the necessary tools that would allow Black men to critically reflect on their roles as men in society and to acquire the knowledge necessary to combat homophobia, sexism, and misogyny (Harper, 2014). By addressing these issues, Harper argued that the development of Black men into “healthy and productive” members of our society would increase. Ultimately, Harper calls for a more comprehensive agenda focused on Black masculinities that disrupts the notion of Black men as deficit and welcomes counter narratives.

### **Counter Narratives**

Despite the challenges for Black males found throughout the higher education scholarship (e.g., Cuyjet, 1997; Cuyjet, 2006; Palmer & Wood, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010),

and the inconsistent, but well intentioned, programming designed to support them (e.g, Dancy, 2012; Garibaldi, 1992; Harper, 2012, 2014; Harper & Nichols, 2008), Black males *are* enrolled in institutions of higher education and *are* succeeding. As evidenced in the preceding literature reviewed, the problems associated with the success of Black males in our society tend to dominate the discourses about Black men. However, rather than focus solely on the problems Black males are experiencing, it is important that scholars pay attention to those who are succeeding and to create a counter narrative to the stereotypical image of Black males in our society. In the following section, I explore the literature that challenges the dominant narratives about Black males in higher education. In particular, I review the literature focused on the experiences of high achieving Black males at PWIs.

The master narratives about Black males in higher education often overshadow the experiences of high achievers. As previously explored, many assume that all Black males are the same and they face significant challenges that inevitably lead to drop out and failure (Harper, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008). As such, Black males are often challenged to overcome stereotypes and battle the master narratives displayed in the media and in day-to-day experiences. Rather than to focus only on the barriers and stereotypes, Harper (2009) encouraged researchers to balance the negative and positive aspects of Black male collegians so that one narrative does not dominate the other. My study is framed in a similar fashion.

The literature on high achieving Black males in higher education is growing. To date, Harper (2005, 2008, 2009, 2012); Fries-Britt and Turner (2002); and Strayhorn (2009) are among those who have published in this area. These researchers have drawn

attention to Black males who are continuing through the educational pipeline into and through higher education, maintaining high scholastic records, and graduating with many accolades and achievements.

### **Experiences of High Achievers at PWIs**

In his research, Harper (2005, 2008, 2009, 2012) has focused on Black male student achievement at Predominately White Institutions. In one study, Harper (2009) interviewed 143 Black male undergraduates at 30 Predominately White Institutions. Results from the study showed that participants felt that their institutions failed to realize that Black, intelligent men existed at their PWI. Other participants confronted racism head-on and broke stereotypes by challenging ignorant behaviors. Additionally, some felt that Black men were viewed as “niggers” and, in an effort to combat negative stereotypes, they became involved in various student organizations such as student government and residential life. The use of the word nigger was intentional and important because it is often used in America as a term for Black people who are thought to be of lower social class, and have a predisposition of failure and disobedience in comparison to White people (Harper, 2009). Through his research, Harper wanted to reclaim the identity of Black men, demonstrating that it is inconsistent with what nigger means to many in the United States.

High GPAs, in class achievements, and involvement on campus are some of the markers of Black male success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2005), and are also indicators of persistence (Harper, 2005). Involvement creates opportunities for students to foster change on campus and to address issues affecting the Black community. Student involvement played a large role in capturing the emotional and social experiences

of Black students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Compared to peers at HBCUs, involvement was even more salient for Black males attending PWIs because a sense of family was not always there. However, Black women were “dramatically overrepresented” in the majority of these organizations in comparison to their male counterparts on college campuses (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), suggesting more work is needed to encourage Black men’s involvement.

In an effort to create an anti-deficit achievement framework and bring to light the experiences of Black undergraduate males, Harper (2012) conducted the largest qualitative study on Black undergraduate men to date. In his study, he interviewed 219 students on 42 different college and university campuses. While Harper recognized the challenges participants had to face in their collegiate experiences, he focused on their successes. Almost half of the participants came from backgrounds where neither parent attended college (Harper, 2012). For these males, parents, teachers, and extended family members were influential in helping them choose which college to attend; participants reported that their guidance counselors were least helpful and encouraged them to either apply to less prestigious colleges or to HBCUs (Harper, 2012).

Several participants discussed their transition into the collegiate environment and how the presence of Black upperclassmen assisted in their adjustment (Harper, 2012). One student described his experience and how he arrived at college with a “macho” mentality. He felt that he did not need any assistance matriculating through the college process, but soon learned that asking for help was not a sign of weakness. Like in Harper’s (2005) and Fries-Britt and Turner’s (2002) studies, participants reported higher grades as a result of their involvement in activities outside of class. They learned the

benefits of time management due to their busy schedules. They also had opportunities to interact with faculty and staff, and gained exposure to jobs and internships, study abroad programs, and graduate and professional schools (Harper, 2012). Lastly, participants described ways they productively combated overt racism and “onlyness”<sup>1</sup> on their respective campuses (Harper, 2012).

The counter narratives described above point to Black males who persist at PWIs. Their experiences are crucial to understand as PWIs seek to increase retention of all students. Next, I introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide my study beginning with Tinto’s theory of student departure. I also introduce theories of masculinity which also inform all aspects of my research.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure**

Student retention on college campuses is a popular topic among higher education administrators and researchers (Tinto, 2006). Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure focuses on the challenges students endure, which may lead to their decision to depart from college. “Tinto views student departure as a longitudinal process that occurs because of the meanings the individual student ascribes to his or her interaction with the formal and informal dimensions of a given college or university” (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, p. 7, 2011).

Tinto’s (1993) theory is an interactionalist theory that “is concerned with the impact of person and institution related characteristics on a particular phenomenon (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). It is important to note that this theory only focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, and Platt (2011) described the term “onlyness” as the emotional burden of having to navigate racially politicized space where few role models and peers existed from their ethnic group.

voluntary student departure, not on students who are expelled for academic or discipline reasons. The immediate focus of Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure is to explain how and why some individuals fail to matriculate through their institutions without completing their degree. Tinto views the individual characteristics that students possess prior to entering college as directly influencing their decisions on departure (Braxton et al., 2011). This makes Tinto's theory particularly compelling when considering the experiences of students perceived to be at risk, such as undeclared students and Black males, as my study does. It is important to understand that Tinto's theory attempts to predict departure, but in doing so also predicts persistence for college students. Although the theory has some limitations, including its potential predictability for students of color (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011), it serves as a starting point for this study.

Tinto (1988) identified three stages in the student departure theory: separation, transition, and incorporation (Milem & Berger, 1997; Palmer et al., 2011; Tinto, 1988). Upon entering college, the separation stage focuses on students distancing themselves to some degree from membership within their past communities, including families, high school friends, and local neighborhoods (Milem & Berger, 2006; Tinto, 1987, 1988). The process of separating from past communities can be challenging for students and can directly or indirectly affect their persistence. Separation from past communities, both socially and physically, begins the process for student success and allows students to begin adopting the cultural norms of the institution (Palmer et al., 2011; Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) notes that the process of separation may be different for students who attend college locally or choose to live at home while attending college. In addition, the process

of separation can be particularly challenging for first generation college students or those coming from a culture that does not value college attendance (Tinto, 1987), such as many Black males (Ogbu, 2004).

The second stage, transition, follows separation. This is the time period when students move from associations with their past in the hope that they will gain new associations with their current communities (Palmer et al., 2011; Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1987) states that during this process, students have yet to “acquire the norms and patterns of behavior” appropriate to fully incorporate themselves into the college community (p. 1). This time period can be difficult for new college students because it forces them out of their comfort zones and into new experiences. Depending on their background, the degree of difference between transitioning from their past communities to that of the college environment can vary. “The stress and sense of loss and bewilderment, if not desolation, that sometimes accompanies the transition to college can pose serious problems for the individual attempting to persist in college” (Tinto, 1988, p. 444). It is important to note that the scope of the transition is also dependent on whether the student began the process prior to entering college. However, transitioning into the collegial environment is something that all college students must endure and is influenced by their individual goals (Tinto, 1987). However, if undeclared, their goals may not be clear and may be more at risk (Cuseo, 2013; John et al., 2011; Leppel, 2001). Thus, students with well-considered intentions, such as a declared major, may more easily move through transition.

The last stage of the theory is incorporation; this occurs when students decide if they are prepared for integration into the campus community (Tinto, 1987, 1988). The

incorporation process is described as a time where the old and new patterns of behavior intersect, but it precedes fully adopting a new set of patterns and behaviors (Milem & Berger, 2006). Students go about becoming socially and academically incorporated into the institutional culture by beginning to develop relationships with other students, faculty and staff, and the community. These relationships are further enhanced as students become involved in student organizations, Greek fraternities or sororities, student unions, athletics, and intramural sports, or as they begin to establish patterns of “normative” behavior (Tinto, 1987). Because of the difficulty associated with progressing through the stages of separation and transition, some students are unable to socially and intellectually connect with the campus environment (Tinto, 1987). When students are unable to establish a level of comfort at their institution, they are more likely to leave the institution.

Overtime, Tinto recognized that minorities, specifically African Americans, face challenges different than their White counterparts when adjusting to the collegiate environment (Guiffrida, 2003). For example, minority students from “disadvantaged” backgrounds may find it difficult to separate themselves from past communities because of cultural ties (Tinto, 1988). Additionally, their past may hinder their transition from home to post secondary education. Upon entering college, students from less affluent backgrounds may lack the social and intellectual skills necessary to be successful in the collegiate environment (Tinto, 1987). The immediate transition from family, high school, and neighborhood communities may leave students unable to develop meaningful relationships in their new environment, which can have significant consequences. For

example, Guiffrida (2003) found if African American students did not establish communities within their new environment, they were more likely to depart.

Tinto's (1987, 1988, 1993) theory is the "most studied, tested, revised, and critiqued;" he holds the dominant position despite concerns, when discussing student departure (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005, p. 66). Yet, there are many scholars who challenged its legitimacy, including Tinto himself (e.g., Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Milem & Burger, 1997; Tinto, 1993). One of the flaws that scholars address is that Tinto places the entire onus of retention on the student without taking into account the role organizational characteristics play in social integration (Milem & Berger, 1997). And, like the campus climate literature reports (Hurtado et al., 1998), it is important to measure the interactive behaviors between the students and the campus environment. Moreover, Tinto's framework is flawed because it ignores the cultural oppression and discrimination faced by students of color (Tierney, 1999). The framework also relies heavily on quantitative data and to fully understand student departure (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005), more qualitative research, such as my study, is needed.

Tinto (1993) recognized that theories must be tested and revised, leading to several iterations of his theory over time. For the study, I recognize the problems associated with Tinto's theory of student departure, and will heed caution as I interpret findings. However, because of the longevity of his theory, I believe it provides a meaningful lens for my study. By coupling, Tinto's theory with theories of masculinities, I hope to have a richer understanding of the experiences of Black male students at PWIs and the role that gender and race plays in their matriculation or departure from college.

## **Construction of Masculinities**

As with all master narratives, “men in the United States are subject to a confining set of expectations and gender scripts that do not allow for the full expression of their humanity” (Wagner, 2011, p. 212). Masculinity proffers a privileged way of thinking about men and what constitutes failure and success. However, this masculine privilege is still located in a White racial frame that does not always extend to Black males (Wagner, 2011).

Because gender is socially constructed, there are various masculinities that form intersectional realities for men. Masculinity is further nuanced by sociocultural experiences such as those of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other constructs (Kimmel, 2001; Mutua, 2006). Masculinity maintains hegemonic patriarchal norms and controls, which deems one group as the model (i.e., those who comply with norms) and renders the other as one dimensional and ignorant (Gipson, in progress; Sanci 2013; Wagner, 2011). While there is some argument about whether there is a male crisis, in many ways, the Black male is in crisis because of the battle to define the acceptable Black male and who defines the norms of acceptability (Wagner, 2011).

Mutua (2006) defines patriarchy as “the structure of men’s social power that privileges and benefits men over woman but that does not privilege all men equally” (p. 16). Some scholars argue that patriarchy is inevitably typed to power and agencies (APIIDV, 2014; Pluck, 2014). In other words, patriarchy operates as a system and can manifest as domination, oppression, and even violence. It also can deny male personhood of certain groups, such as Black males (hooks, 2004). The Black male can be a participant in patriarchy and all the symptoms thereof; yet, he also is “left to constantly

struggle and fight for an identity, for power, for respect, and for understanding of who he is versus what he is projected” (Nedhari, 2009, p. 1).

**Black masculinities.** Black masculinity is influenced by the intersection of race, class, gender, and culture (Chandler, 2011). Black males must continuously define and redefine themselves in society. While performing masculinity, they must deny the negative stereotypes associated with Black males, and then reconstruct their images of how and who they are and how they desire to be perceived (Alexander, 2006). It is important to understand that Black males negotiate performances of gender in unique and diverse ways. Their gender performances are highly influenced by “social location, societal norms, and socializations and culture” (Chandler, 2011, p. 56). For example, when entering a predominately White classroom, Black males may change the way they talk or act to assimilate into the office setting. This interaction may be very different than how they act when around same raced peers. Many Black males operate in survival mode in order to defend against assaults of their manhood, not only from White America but from other Black men and Black women.

Yet, there is a level of Black male privilege that resonates within the Black community. Black male privilege is rooted in the Black church and family, which provide a form of hegemonic masculinity. Collins (2006) refers to hegemonic masculinity as:

the dominant form of masculinity in an given society, as well as marginalized and subordinated masculinities that characterize the experiences of men whose race, class, religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality, or citizenship category placed them within subordinated groups. (p. 78)

In order to maintain control of the authenticity of their masculinity, Black males often reject feminine or gay behavior. This rejection creates greater challenges for Black gay males who are forced to choose between their racial or sexual identities (Hill, 2006).

Bell-Jordan (2011) defines three prominent hegemonic representations of Black masculinity: “to signify Black masculinity as violent and angry, aggressive and threatening, or oversexed and criminal; to be hypermasculine; and to emphasize excess and materialism” (Bell-Jordan, 2011, p. 135). These hegemonic representations allow society to look at Black males as a monolithic group (Chandler, 2011). Because of these dominant narratives relating to Black masculinity, there are limited “acceptable” ways for Black males to express themselves. When they operate outside of the pre-established norms, they are demonized (Chandler, 2011). For example, pursuing higher education is valorized on campus, but within the Black community, it is often vilified.

Black masculinity developed out of a resistance to White institutional practices (Alexander, 2006). However, Black male identities have become constrained by a binary where good has become bad, and bad has become good. Alexander explains this notion of how the “good” man is described as educated, intelligent, polite, and a gentleman. However, in relation to Black masculinity, these characteristics are interpreted as “bad” and described as odd, strange, or queer (Alexander, 2006). For Black males at PWIs, they are forced to balance these identities as a student at a PWI and within the Black community.

Further, the construction of Black masculinity creates additional challenges for Black males to successfully navigate our higher education system. If they are at PWIs that do not value the authenticity of their identity, to be successful they must learn to

balance multiple identities in various settings. If they do not do this “correctly,” there can be consequences. For example, to be “good” academically may challenge expectations of Black masculinity. Thus, Black males must negotiate competing constructions of their identity and be able to shift from their campus persona to that in the community, which is taxing because neither construction will fully appease everyone’s expectations (Alexander, 2006).

Because race and gender are socially constructed and impact how people in society are treated, Black males must operate in a double (or perhaps quadruple) conscious manner to succeed. Chandler (2011) takes an excerpt from W.E.B. Dubois (1903) about double consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at ones self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. Over ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 60)

The negative rhetoric surrounding Black males in our society creates expectations for them to operate in a hypermasculine manner, as well as fulfill expectations about what it means to be “Black.” Dominant society has already labeled Black males as “lazy, irresponsible, and inferior” (Chandler, 2011, p. 67); this image is consistently reinforced, leading Black males to operate as such. This, in turn, manifests itself into a dismal future of incarceration, death, or being economically disadvantaged, reinforcing the school to prison pipeline (Chandler, 2011). However, assimilation to the norms of dominant

society creates a juggling act that forces them to either become less Black or less male. Chandler (2011) defines this as “organized schizophrenia,” where males have to devise separate personalities depending upon the context of the situation they are in. The end result is a struggle for Black males to be their organic selves or to withhold certain aspects of themselves.

**Progressive Black Masculinity.** Progressive Black Masculinity (PBM) is one approach to theorizing about Black males and college success that intersects both progressive Blackness and masculinities (Mutua, 2006). PBM seeks to stand against domination of social structures and validate, value, and empower Black humanity in all aspects (Mutua, 2006). It recognizes that White supremacy is a structural system, and PBM operates on the binary of being both “pro black and antiracist as well as profeminist and antisexist” (p. 7).

Mutua (2006) defines progressive Blackness as the ethical and active participation in antiracist struggles. Black identity is socially constructed, multidimensional, and multilayered (Mutua, 2006). Gendered racism has been thought to prohibit Black men from fully benefiting from the privileges of masculinity because of their race (Mutua, 2006). This is manifested through stereotypes, accounts of racism, and unjust practices geared toward Black men because of their race and gender.

Masculinity can be organized into a three-tiered system of: (a) those closest to hegemonic masculinity, (b) those situated below, and (c) those who occupy the bottom (Collins, 2006). Black men are often placed in a difficult space because they are unable to achieve masculinity within the standards set forth by White men, and then are resisting those forms of Black masculinity that the same dominant group has created. There are

several forms of Black masculinity that exists: conformist, ritualistic, innovative, retreatist, and rebellious. They range in variation from those who accept the mainstream prescriptions of heterosexual masculinity to those who reject its dominating precepts.

Mutua (2006) defines the following forms of masculinity as:

- *Conformist* Black masculinity, which continues to accept mainstream society's prescriptions and proscriptions for heterosexual males;
- *Ritualistic* Black masculinity, which recognizes blocked opportunities but continues to play the game without believing or really questioning it;
- *Innovative* Black masculinity, which exaggerates one aspect of traditional masculinity which can be achieved in order to receive desired responses;
- *Retreatist* Black masculinity, which has grown weary of participating in a system that denies the means for achieving common goals and as such, has opted out through such things as drugs, homelessness, welfare dependency;
- *Rebellious* masculinity, which rejects the dominating precepts of American ideal masculinity (p. 20).

The PBM model was conceived as a way to intersect the practice of both progressive Blackness and progressive masculine ideologies. Mutua (2006) states that in PBM:

1. Black men are taught to create their own identity;
2. Black men are allowed to embrace their individuality instead of having to defend it (Abu-Jamal & Hill, 2012); and
3. Black men dispute the idea that Black men have to fit into this "supposed mold" of White masculinity.

These tenets of PBM suggest a counter narrative to hegemonic Black masculinity that will serve to frame my study.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the relevant literature for the current study. This literature review addressed undeclared students, the master narratives of the Black male in education, and counter narratives. Additionally, this chapter addressed the frameworks used in the study. Next, Chapter Three will introduce the methodology and methods of the study.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methods**

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, predominately White institution in the Midwest. I will again present the research questions, and introduce the case study method use in this research. Next, I will describe the context of the study and data collection procedures. Lastly, I will discuss the data analysis plan, my positionality as a researcher, and techniques used to establish trustworthiness.

#### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study are:

- How do Black male undergraduates who enter college as undeclared majors, and have matriculated to their third or fourth year, describe their college experience at one predominately White institution in the Midwest?
- What factors contributed to their persistence through college?

#### **Context of Study**

The University of Missouri (MU or Mizzou) is the first public university west of the Mississippi River. It is a land grant, research university with very high scholarly productivity and is the flagship of the university system within the state. Mizzou has 19 colleges and schools with over 300 degree programs and is one of five universities throughout the country that offers law, medicine, veterinary medicine, and a nuclear research reactor (University of Missouri-Columbia Division of Enrollment Management, 2014).

According to the *Fall 2014 Enrollment Summary*, there are 35,441 students enrolled at Mizzou, 27,654 of whom were undergraduates. Of the undergraduate enrollment, 2,268 students are listed as Black/African American, and 885 students are Black men. The institution has seen a steady increase in enrollment amongst undergraduate students for several years. Further, the past 20 years, the university has seen a dramatic increase in the number of Black/African American undergraduate students enrolled on the campus. In 1993, 643 undergraduate students were enrolled who identified as Black/African American. That number increased to 1,139 by 2003, and 2,268 by 2014 (University of Missouri-Columbia Division of Enrollment Management, 2014).

In the fall of 2014, the first time undergraduate average ACT score was 25.9 and the retention rate from first to sophomore year was 86.2%. Black/African American students were retained at a rate of 80.6%, which is slightly less than the 2004 retention rate of 81.2%. The retention rate of African Americans falls below that of international students (91.6%) and White students (87.3%). The lowest ethnic retention rate is among American Indian (53.8%) (University of Missouri-Columbia Division of Enrollment Management, 2014). However, in 2013, Black/African American students have the lowest 6 year and 5 year graduation rates among all ethnicities and races at Mizzou. Their 6 year graduation rate was 57.3%.

Mizzou also divides students into four advising groups based on their admissions data that include test scores, high school grade point average, and rigor of coursework in high school. It is important to note that students are not explicitly told which advising group they are placed in, this is information only known by the appropriate university

personnel. Those in Advising Group 1 are students who are projected to have the highest retention rates and grade point averages based upon admissions data. Those in Advising Group 4 are predicted to be the most at risk for departure. The 2013 retention rate for Advising Group 1 was 93.3%, compared to 71.3% for Advising Group 4 (Whitney, 2013). The majority of students in Advising Group 4 are Black/African American (Whitney, 2013). When compared with other ethnic groups, only 20% of White students and approximately 27% of Hispanic students were placed in advising group 4.

In addition, almost 50% of Black/African American students are placed in Advising Group 4, compared to 5% in Advising Group 1. Moreover, Black/African Americans have the largest disparity of students out of all ethnic groups of students placed in Advising Groups 1 and 4. In addition, the majority of Black/African American men entering Mizzou are placed in Advising Group 4 (Whitney, 2013).

In 2013, Mizzou published a report identifying specific reasons why students chose not to continue their education and provided an analysis of the retention rates of undergraduate students based upon their advising group. The study found that male students at Mizzou are 0.42 times more likely to leave than female students. Black/African American students were 0.77 times more likely to leave than White students. Students from Advising Group 4 were 4.43 times more likely to leave than students in Advising Group 1. Lastly, Black men on the campus were 1.01 times more likely to leave than White men, and were .67 times more likely to leave than Black women. The study also reported exit survey data. Non-returning students cited financial costs and lack of fit at the institution as the primary reasons for leaving the university. It is unfortunately, the exit survey data were not disaggregated by gender/race.

Further, data available on the retention of undeclared students are scarce. Data from the *Enrollment Summary Report 2014* showed that first year retention rates for undeclared students ranged for, 78.10% in the College of Education to 100% in the College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources. The report did not include specific information about undeclared students by gender, race, ethnicity, or other demographic characteristics.

### **Case Study Method**

Yin (2009) described case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). It is in depth and analyzes a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). There are three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). An intrinsic case study is conducted when the researcher wants to gain a better understanding of a particular case. The instrumental case study seeks to provide insight about an issue or attempt to redraw a generalization. Lastly, a collective case study investigates several individual cases to understand a phenomenon. One of the major strengths of case study research is that it results in a “rich and holistic account of a phenomenon”, which is one reason why I chose a case study for this research (Merriam, 2009, p. 51).

Creswell (2007) describes the procedure for conducting case study research. Researchers must first identify if case study is the appropriate methodology for their study. Once that is established, researchers must identify a case or cases. Data collection for case study research is extensive because multiple sources of information must be

drawn upon to build the case. Further, the analysis of case study must be done through a holistic or embedded analysis. Lastly, researchers must report what they have learned from the study of the case (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009).

More specifically, for this study, I will use an embedded, single case study design to illustrate the experiences of the participants in the study. The case study design will use multiple sources of data that will examine the context and case. The context of the study is the large, public, predominately White institution (PWI) in the Midwest (i.e., Mizzou); the embedded cases are the Black male undergraduate students who enter college as undeclared majors and have matriculated to their third and fourth year, and the units of analysis are the interviews with participants and relevant documents. The emphasis of the study will be descriptive in an effort to produce a rich understanding of the data collected (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Below I describe the data collection and analysis for this collective case study.

### **Participant Selection**

To identify participants for this study, I used purposeful sampling. The logic behind purposeful sampling is to select “information rich cases” for the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). This is also known as criterion-based sampling, where a specific criterion is determined that becomes essential in choosing the participants. For this study, I included between five to seven participants. To be considered for the study, they were third or fourth-year Black male undergraduate students at Mizzou who entered as undeclared majors.

According to Merriam (2009), there is no correct answer to the number of participants needed for qualitative studies. However, she states there an accurate number

is necessary to answer the research questions and provide variation among the cases being studied (Merriam, 2009). For this study, data saturation is more important than first determining number of the participants. If saturation of the data is not achieved with the initial set of participants, then I will recruit more participants for the study. I plan to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds (e.g., major, hometown, student organization involvement) in order to diversify the pool of participants. Using this set of criteria to recruit students will satisfy the line of inquiry and help to fulfill the purpose of the study.

Participants were recruited through my own networks and with the help of gatekeepers, such as faculty or staff who are likely to have relationships with students who identify with the purpose of the study. I developed a list of 10-15 potential participants for the study. Once the names of potential participants were determined, I emailed each person individually to solicit their participation in the study. Based upon the responses, I chose 5-7 participants who best fit the purpose of the study. The recruitment script (Appendix A) informed potential participants about the research study, what their involvement requires, and that participation is voluntary.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Yin (2009) offers six types of sources of evidence for case study. For this study, I used a combination of interviews and documents as data sources. Using multiple sources of data strengthened the quality of the study because they provided additional evidence to support findings that a single source cannot (Yin, 2009).

## **Interviews**

Interviews are guided conversations, instead of structured queries, that require the interviewer to ask the necessary questions in order to meet the needs of the study (Yin, 2009). Additionally, interviewers must operate on two levels in an effort to provide a friendly, non-threatening environment, but also to satisfy their line of inquiry (Yin, 2009).

To collect data, I conducted three in depth interviews with each participant. By doing so, I asked participants questions related to the context of the study. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour. The interviews were recorded in their entirety with the permission of the participants and transcribed. I used Seidman's (1998) three interview series for the study. The first interview focused on the life history of the participants by asking them to provide as much information about themselves (Seidman, 1998). The second interview detailed the experiences of the participants in relation to the topic. The final interview reflected on the meaning of the participants' experiences (Seidman, 1998). (See Appendix B for semi-structured protocols)

## **Documents**

Documents can come in many forms, including letters, memoranda, formal studies, agendas, minutes of meetings, archival records as public use files, and service records (Yin, 2009). Although, these documents are not always accurate, they can be useful for case study research to provide additional information. Documentation as data facilitates checking the accuracy of spelling and titles and provides additional information that may have been mentioned in interviews. Documents should be used carefully and not literally, as each document was written for specific purpose (Yin, 2009).

I used documents such as the annual enrollment summaries provided by the institution. These data allowed me to access information about campus enrollment and demographics of the institution, review data on retention and persistence, and examine enrollment history. I also used other internal reports to access information that may enhance the purpose of the study. The documents were primarily used to provide additional context of the case.

Additionally, I used journaling as another form of data collection (Creswell, 2007). Journaling, or memoing, acts as a means to reflect on the study for the both the researcher and participants (Jones et al., 2014). After each interview, I wrote a reflective journal detailing my current experiences with the study, including identifying any themes that seem to be emerging. Participants also wrote a reflective journal after each interview to reflect on their experiences in the interview, the questions asked, and any additional thoughts that came up since the interview. The interviews were be used as an additional form of data, which lead to the development of codes and themes.

### **Methods of Analysis**

The process of analyzing case study data is still being developed (Yin, 2009). However, there are analytic procedures that will be essential to my study. The purpose of data analysis is to use the data collected in an effort to create a narrative that explains the cultural behavior of the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). According to Stake (1995), there is no distinct point where data analysis begins. Qualitative data analysis requires organizing data, using coding procedures to develop themes, all in an effort to gain a better understanding of the case being studied (Creswell, 2007). Seidman (1998) notes that in the process of collecting data and analyzing it, it is difficult to keep them separate

because the mind is actively working during the entire process. Thus, it is important to not allow one participant's interview to impose meaning onto another. I accomplished this by journaling after each set of interviews as additional data to assist with analysis and trustworthiness. Jones et al. (2014) view journaling as a means of researcher reflexivity.

### **Coding**

Prior to coding the data, information gathered through the interviews and documents was stored in a case study database, which allowed the data to be located during the analysis, as well as maintain a chain of evidence to increase the dependability (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Coding is a process to sort the text, similar ideas, and data collected during the study (Creswell, 2007). Coding is done to group similar ideas together to eventually develop related themes from the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Additionally, the intention of coding is to reflect the interests of the researcher and the intended audience (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Richards (2005) sums up the purpose of qualitative coding; it is to use all the material gathered in the case in an effort to find patterns amongst the data sources.

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggests the following stages: (1) read through the original text and sort it by pulling the text that is relevant to the study in an effort to minimize the amount of text being reviewed; (2) look for repeated texts or ideas amongst the participants to assist in the coding. This information eventually lead to the development of themes. I followed Auerbach and Silverstein's suggested approach. In addition, I coded the interviews line by line and will let codes develop naturally from the text.

**Themes.** Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) define themes as “an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas” (p. 38). The purpose of developing themes is for the researcher to search for connecting patterns and threads throughout the coded data (Seidman, 1998). For case study research, the development of themes assists in the conceptualization of the detailed description concerning the case (Creswell, 2007). However, just as with coding, the themes should develop naturally and should not be thought out prior to coding the data (Seidman, 1998). I followed Simons’s (2009) three-stage process. First, I identified and confirm categories. The following step involved looking at the relationship between the categories. During the last step, I generated overarching themes that will help tell the story of the participants.

As previously mentioned, I created a case study database to organize all the data collected. The interviews were reviewed as individual cases to gather as much detail. Once this was completed, each embedded case was compared in an effort to build a general explanation about the cases within the study (Merriam, 2009). All data was analyzed inductively, rather than deductively, in an effort to approach the data with an open attitude and without any preconceived hypothesis (Seidman, 1998).

### **Positionality**

Racial and cultural awareness and positionality are important when conducting education research (Milner, 2007). In the United States, the beliefs and experiences of White people are typically viewed as the norm (Milner, 2007). As such, understanding the experiences of people of color can be challenging for education researchers. Milner (2007) offers a framework for researcher racial and cultural positionality: (a) researching the self, (b) researching the self in relation to others, and (c) engaged reflection and

representation. Researching the self requires critiquing current situations that can lead to changing and transforming the world. Additionally, researchers must reflect on the actual case they are studying and the communities involved. They must acknowledge the multiple roles and identities that both the participants and researcher bring to the study. Lastly, researchers must engage in reflection and representation collectively to understand what is happening in the community that is being studied.

Researcher identities can influence the community they are studying (Kersetter, 2012). Researchers may be insiders, outsiders, or in the space between. Outsider doctrine considers the value of researchers who are not from the community being studied, they are able to view the study from a more neutral place. Whereas, the insider doctrine positions researchers to understand the uniqueness of the area being studied because they have experienced the culture (Kersetter, 2012). However, because the human condition is messy and fluid, insider/outsider status is a false dichotomy. The space between posits that all researchers fall somewhere between being an insider and outsider to the participants being studied (Kersetter, 2012). Below, I reflect on my position in the space between.

I am a first generation, African American man from the city of Richmond, VA. I grew up in a family that, although they had not been to college, stressed the importance of furthering my education. Throughout my childhood, I always excelled in school and my parents would often call me a genius. I grew up wanting to be a doctor, then a lawyer. Because I did not have many resources to assist me educationally, I learned how to excel in school through working very hard and seeking out the appropriate help when needed. My high school guidance counselor was very influential in making sure that I

was aware of colleges and attended college admission visits when they were scheduled at my high school. I worked extra hours at my part time job during my senior year to be able to afford the application fees for the colleges I applied to. I filled out my applications, got the necessary tax information from my parents to fill out financial aid forms, and waited patiently to hear back. Once I received my acceptance letters, I recall telling my parents I had gotten into college, had enough money to pay for it, and would be leaving on a certain date. They were very proud of me because I was independent enough to propel myself to the next educational level in college without their assistance.

I learned many of life's biggest lessons during my undergraduate career at George Mason University. I started as an undeclared major, then declared Government and International Politics, and eventually changed and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Administration of Justice. The assistance of the student affairs professionals who believed in me allowed me to succeed as a student leader and to eventually graduate. During my undergraduate experience, I was involved in many student organizations. My involvement helped me to understand the intersectionality of my identities.

Growing up, I always struggled with what it meant to be an African American man because the imagery displayed within the media did not reflect who I always was. I recognized the advantages my physical features gave me in comparison to other Black males by my skin complexion and physical build. Having both a lighter skinned complexion and a small frame gave me a non-threatening demeanor that allowed me to enter into circles that not everyone could, but also challenged how "Black" I was. To add an additional layer, I was academically successful, which contradicted the dominant narrative of what it meant to be a Black man in society.

Most of my life, my friends were primarily girls and women. I believe my internal issues surrounding my own sexuality added another layer that complicated figuring out who I was. In college, when I decided to join a predominately Black fraternity, my life changed completely. Suddenly, a door opened where I had a plethora of Black male friends, which eventually forced me to seriously consider the intersectionality of my race, gender, and sexuality.

Between the time of graduation and prior to enrolling in my doctoral program, I went through many experiences that have also helped to shape the person I have become. In the midst of it all, I received my Master's in Education from Ohio University (OU) and had the opportunity to work to advance my knowledge and practical experience in areas of multicultural education, academic retention, and admission practices. My experiences at OU further solidified that working to enhance the college experiences of underrepresented groups was significant to my professional career.

Pursuing a PhD and working as the Director of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center has changed my entire outlook on how I view life. Had someone asked me if this was my career trajectory 10 years ago, I would have laughed. However, the positive undergraduate experience I had propelled me to want to enter into the field of higher education and student affairs. Running a Black Culture Center has provided me the opportunity to become increasingly secure in my racial and sexual identities. It has allowed me to step outside my comfort zone in an effort to influence the students with whom I work.

In my job, I work with the Mizzou Black Men's Initiative program, which has opened my eyes to the challenges that Black men face in higher education in general, and

specifically at PWIs. Contrary to prevailing notions about Black men, my experience has been that out of all the students I work with, they are attached to me, in need of care, and dependent on my assistance and support. Being engaged in their college journeys has allowed me to sympathize with their needs and to be someone they can depend on. My greatest joys are to see them enjoy their college experience and to be able to help them through their challenges. Because of the assistance of student affairs professionals throughout my own journey, I feel it is my responsibility and gift to give back to this next generation. Not only does this happen in my professional role, but my research serves as another vehicle to give back. Through my dissertation, I hope to conduct research that will inform how university administrators interact and work with Black men on college campuses in an effort to enhance their experience.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness can be achieved in qualitative research through credibility, dependability, and transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). For this case study, I will use prolonged engagement, member checks, reflexivity, a chain of evidence, and triangulating data from multiple sources to increase the trustworthiness.

Using the three interview approach, I will have prolonged engagement with the participants in the study. By doing so, I will gain a better understanding of the experience of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, predominately White institution in the Midwest.

Throughout the data collection process, I will conduct several member checks with the participants to ensure that their story is being captured accurately. Member

checks allow the participants to determine whether the researcher's interpretation of the interview is correct (Merriam, 2009). I will complete them after each set of interviews by having them review their transcripts. The experience of the participants should be recognizable within the interpretation of the interview, and if it is not, member checking allows them the opportunity to provide feedback, which I will use as I further analyze the data.

The triangulation of data increases the credibility of the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). It involves using multiple sources of evidence to provide deeper context into the behavioral and historical issues of the study, as well as using methods to increase the trustworthiness of the researcher and the study. By using multiple sources of evidence, I can compare and cross check the collection of data (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). The multiple sources of evidence used in the study will be interviews and documents.

Additionally, the use of a case study database and maintaining a chain evidence increases the credibility and dependability of the study. By using a case study database, I am able to organize and document the data collected throughout the study. Maintaining a chain evidence allows an external observer to follow the study from the initial research question to the conclusions of the case study (Yin, 2009).

### **Limitations**

There are several advantages and disadvantages to using interviews and documentation for data collection in case study research (Yin, 2009). Interviews are important sources of data collection for case studies. They strengthen the data collection because they are directly focused on the case study topic. They are also insightful because they help to explain inferences. Interview weaknesses include perceived bias as

a result of poorly asked questions, the participant poorly recalling the information, and issues surrounding reflexivity. An additional limitation could be my role as a professional at the institution. Because I serve in a capacity where I advise several large Black student organizations, the likelihood of me having a relationship or knowing the individuals prior to the study is high. This relationship may lead to participants sharing what they think I want to hear to garner my approval. However, participants could also be more candid because of a preestablished sense of trust.

According to Yin (2009), documentation offers stability by allowing researchers to view them repeatedly. They also allow for unobtrusive information to be obtained that is not a result of the case study and for information containing details of a past event collected closer to the time the event took place. However, the use of documents presents several weaknesses that could impede upon the line of inquiry. For example, the documents access could be deliberately withheld and the biases of the documents' authors may not be transparent (Yin, 2009). Given the sensitivity of some documents, I may have difficulty gaining access to particular documents, and it is likely I will know little about the documents' authors and their biases and assumptions. Additionally, participants may disclose personal information during the journaling process, which I will determine the appropriateness to use for the purposes of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the methods I will use in this study. I reviewed the research questions, presented the context of the study, as well as the case study method, and participant selection. Additionally, this chapter addressed the data

collection methods, methods of analysis, positionality of the researcher, trustworthiness, and limitations of the study. Chapter Four will present the findings of the study.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

This study was designed to focus on the experiences of Black male undergraduates who enter college as undeclared majors, and have matriculated to their third or fourth year at one predominately White institution in the Midwest, Mizzou. This chapter will provide a brief overview of the participant profiles, and include results from the three interviews with seven Black males, and their reflective journals.

### **Participants Profile Characteristics**

Seven African American males enrolled at Mizzou participated in this study. Each participant chose a pseudonym to protect their identity. Each of the participants was a traditional, college-aged student, ranging in age from 20 – 23 years old. All participants had been enrolled at Mizzou for over 2 years. Four of the participants entered Mizzou as first year students and three transferred after enrolling at another institution. Among the three transfer students, one transferred from a community college, another from a large state school similar to Mizzou, and the last from an HBCU in the south. Each of the participants were raised in the Midwestern region of the country and came from a variety of educational backgrounds; some were first generation college students, while others had one or both parents obtain a bachelor's and/or a master's degree. Participants represented the following colleges: Engineering, Business, Education, Health Professions, and Arts & Sciences. Each of the participants were involved in some form of extracurricular activity including: Greek life, Black Student Government, dance team, major related organizations, visitor relations, and the alumni association. All participants were involved in at least one race/ethnicity based organization on campus. In an effort to protect the identity of the participants, the

following table (Table 1) below provides very brief and broad information about each participant (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Participants	Class Standing	Enrolled As	Undergraduate Involvement
Shaun	Senior	Transfer	Honor Society, Major related, African Students Association, NAACP, Dance Team
Jason	Junior	First Year	Greek Life, Major related, Visitor Relations, MBMI, Alumni Association
Jerome	Senior	Transfer	Black Student Government, Major related, Honor Society, Intramural Athletics
Javon	Senior	Transfer	Greek Life, Programming Committee, BlackOUT Magazine, MUTV
Christopher	Junior	First Year	Religious organizations, Programming Committee, SPEAK Community Theatre, Target HOPE
Andre	Junior	First Year	Target HOPE, Major related, Student Radio
Robert	Senior	First Year	Greek Life, Black Student Government, MBMI

### Shaun

Shaun is a fourth year student who transferred to Mizzou after attending community college for a year. His father is a registered nurse and his mother is a freelance photographer. He has an older sister who graduated from Mizzou and another sister who graduated from Lincoln University, an HBCU. His motivation to attend college came from seeing the success of his older siblings. He chose to attend Mizzou after touring the institution and immediately fell in love with it. Upon high school graduation, he determined that it was fiscally responsible for him to attend community college for one year then transfer to a 4 year institution. Mizzou is different than his

home community where he predominately interacts with Black people, but enjoys the diversity Mizzou has to offer because it adds to his approachable personality. He is involved in a variety of organizations (see Table 1). Reflecting on his college experience, he said he would not change anything. He has enjoyed his experience and met a lot of great people. Additionally, college has allowed him to develop and learn about his identity through his involvement and interactions with various cultures. After college, he plans to work with sustainable technologies through green infrastructure.

### **Jason**

Jason is a third year student who comes from a very affluent background. His mother holds the highest degree in his family, a master's in business administration. His motivation to attend college came from working as a busboy at Texas Roadhouse in high school. He realized that he did not want that to be his life permanently and wanted options to create a better life for himself. His dad reinforced this sentiment stating that obtaining a college degree would not necessarily make his life easier, but it would provide him more options for success. Growing up, he was surrounded by predominately Hispanic populations in his high school and in his neighborhood. Coming to Mizzou was the first time he had been surrounded by a large population of Black people outside of his family, and White students, faculty, and staff. During his first year, he was involved with the Mizzou Black Men's Initiative Program (MBMI), which exposed him to both first year and upper class Black males at the institution. During his college experience, he wished he had studied abroad more often, took more classes that he enjoyed, and explored a different major.

Prior to enrolling in college, his mom explained that he would have to work twice as hard to obtain half of what his White peers had. His experience at Mizzou brought the words of his mother to fruition. Post graduation, he plans to start his own business and live in a warmer part of the country. Reflecting on his time at Mizzou, Jason stated, “I’ve grown a lot in the 3 years I’ve been a student here, and still have a lot more growing to do.” He has a lot that he plans to accomplish within his last year at Mizzou and intends on leaving his mark.

### **Jerome**

Jerome is a fourth year, transfer student from an HBCU. His father holds a master’s degree, his mother did not attend college, and he currently has a younger sister in her first year at a 4 year institution in Illinois. He transferred from an HBCU in the south, attended community college, and then arrived at Mizzou. He originally attended Tuskegee University because he was able to play both football and baseball, which many institutions prohibit. He left Tuskegee, and he spent a year at a community college. He, then, decided to enroll at Mizzou because he felt that he could be successful there. His motivation to attend college came from wanting to be successful. Originally, he dreamed of becoming a professional athlete, but after his first year in college he let go of those dreams and decided to transfer and refocus his life on academics. He describes Columbia as being the perfect college town that has everything a student needs to be successful. However, Mizzou and Columbia are different than where he was raised, which was a community that was predominately Black with very few White people. When looking back on his college experience, he wished he had focused more on his academics early on. By not doing so, he believes he missed out on extra curricular opportunities and

enrolling in his desired major. His HBCU experience taught him a lot about the *dos and don'ts* of college and he used it as a learning experience for his success at Mizzou.

### **Javon**

Javon is a fourth year student who transferred to Mizzou after enrolling for 4 semesters at the University of Kentucky. He was raised in an affluent suburb where both of his parents completed college and has primarily been around successful African Americans his entire life. Although he entertained the idea of enrolling in the military, it was instilled in him that attending college was an expectation. He views his hometown as being more culturally diverse than Mizzou. In high school, he had a variety of friends who were Black, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Asian American. Like others, when he reflected on his college experience, he wished that he had focused more on his academics. As he approaches graduation, he is contemplating advancing his education, but wonders if he is academically strong enough to be admitted into a graduate program. He is happy with his decision to attend Mizzou because it has allowed him to be around a large number of Black people. Reflecting on the interview experience, Javon stated that being able to discuss the challenges he has faced while an undergraduate allowed him to realize how much he has grown.

### **Christopher**

Christopher is a first generation college student in his third year. Although both of his parents did not finish college, his older sister graduated 3 years ago from a 4 year institution. He was raised to believe that college was something he had to do, and has come to an understanding that in order to have a “decent career,” a college degree is necessary. This motivated him to stay enrolled and to try and do his best. When

deciding which college to attend, he did not have a preference, but ultimately followed a friend to Mizzou. He liked that the institution assisted him with the application process. It also had a social network set up for him, which allowed him to meet other incoming first year students prior to starting classes. Christopher describes the college environment as different from his home, in that he is always surrounded by his peers in college. Growing up, he only saw Black people, and had very little interaction with White people. At Mizzou, he sees people on a daily basis from a variety of cultures who coexist in the same environment. He wished he would not have moved off campus his sophomore year because it negatively affected his academics. In regard to his personal life, he wished he had told his friends about his bisexuality sooner because it would have allowed them to build closer relationships. Academically, Christopher skipped many classes and now realized that not attending class was wasting the money he was paying for his college education. Ultimately, he wished he would have studied more and tried harder, rather than being lazy. When reflecting on the overall interview experience, Christopher stated that it was validating because it allowed him to open up about his personal life.

### **Andre**

Andre comes from a very close family and he is the first to attend college. He is a third year and, although both of his parents did not attend college, education was a priority growing up. He grew up seeing his parents, grandparents, and family members struggle financially and decided that going to college was the way to change that for his future.

Originally, he did not want to attend Mizzou because he was looking at institutions further away from home. However, during a high school fair he came across

an admissions representative who gave him information about the institution, informed him that the application fee would be waived, and that the school had a strong journalism program. He ended up applying, was admitted, and decided to attend that fall. He described home as segregated between Black and White populations. He states the Mizzou community is more diverse because people from various backgrounds intermingle, but the campus community, like his home, is segregated. Looking back over his college career, Andre wished he had joined more student organizations his first year because he would have been able to meet more people who could have become mentors and positively influenced his study habits. Instead he worked 20-25 hours in the dining hall and spent the rest of his time attempting to study or partying. Looking back on the interview process, Andre stated that it allowed him to realize that he has accomplished a lot during his time at Mizzou, but also acknowledged that he struggled.

### **Robert**

Robert is a fourth year student. His father did not attend college and is an electrician. His mother started college, but dropped out and opened a daycare. She later went back to school to finish her bachelor's degree and obtained two master's degrees. His older sister also graduated from college and is currently enrolled in a master's program. His mother has served as a source of inspiration for his interest in teaching and giving back to the community. He chose to attend Mizzou because they offered him the most money. He describes Mizzou as different than his home community, which is predominately Black; Mizzou includes more diverse cultures. Robert has few regrets from his college experience. However, one big regret was being in a relationship his first year, but he now looks at it as a learning lesson. Overall, he is satisfied with his

involvement on campus and would not have chosen to join any other organizations.

Robert stated that the interview experience allowed him to see how much he has grown as an individual. He stated, “Through this process I have gotten to further acknowledge who I am, who I was, and the things that I want to do.”

### **Cross Cutting Themes**

While each participant had a unique college experience, there were four, broad themes that emerged from the cross case analysis: (1) peer pressure, external influences, and institutional support; (2) finding an academic path; (3) Black Mizzou; and (4) establishing identity. Each theme is broken into several subthemes that describe its nuances.

#### **Peer pressure, External Influences, and Institutional Support**

Participants shared their stories through interviews and journal reflections. While the majority of themes were drawn heavily from interviews, the journals became an opportunity for participants to be self reflective and reinforced what they shared in interviews. These experiences are presented sequentially, reflecting on various salient transition points: their precollege experiences, adjusting to college, and college persistence. Three corresponding subthemes collectively shape the undeclared student experience: (a) “Yeah, you’re going to college,” (b) adjusting to college, and (c) counting on others.

**“Yeah, you’re going to college.”** Each of the participants described precollege influences that motivated them to attend college. All discussed the important role their families played in the making this major life decision, as well as emphasizing the long-term benefits having a bachelor’s degree would have on their quality of life. Additionally,

several of the participants discussed high school jobs that reinforced the importance of college in order to avoid similar jobs long into their futures.

Robert described how, at an early age, his parents instilled in him the importance of college. He stated in his journal, “My parents and family definitely motivated me to go to college.” Later in his interview, he explained:

Honestly, like it was told for me or to me like way before I even got into high school that yeah, you're going to college. My dad always told me that he didn't want me to have to do what he did, which is, you know, hard, physical labor.

Similarly, Christopher described in order to have a better quality of life, college was a necessity. Although he was raised that college was the next step after graduating from high school, life experiences served as a source of motivation and persistence. He stated:

I had always just planned to go to college, but now seeing that you basically have to go to college to have like a decent career, that's what's motivated me to like stay and do my best so I can actually like make a decent living when I get out of college.

Andre mentioned his motivation to go to college was to serve as an example and role model for his younger siblings. He also shared that he saw the struggles his family endured as a result of the lack of furthering their education, which prompted his application to college. He explained:

I guess the fact that I wanted more for myself and more for my family. I really didn't have an option not to go college. My father was always pushing me to go to college and making an example for my younger brothers. So for the most part, like seeing my struggles, seeing my parents struggle, my grandma, and I sort of wanted to change that and they instilled that getting a college degree and going to a good school would be the way to change that.

Participants' reasons for attending Mizzou varied more than what motivated them to attend college in general. Their reasons varied based on whether they were transfer students, enrolled as first year students, came specifically for a major, or were just trying to get away from home.

Shaun, a transfer student reflected on why he decided to attend Mizzou. Shaun detailed:

I knew Mizzou would be the best choice, especially doing like the campus visit, the engineering tour that they had, I just fell in love with the people as well as the school. So community college first and then the 4 year institution was the cheapest and most efficient move for me coming out of high school.

Jason came from a long line of family members who attended Hampton University. Although he applied, he decided not to attend the institution because of the financial obligation and desire to have a more diverse group of friends. He reflected on why he chose to attend Mizzou and to be the first person in his family to attend a predominately White institution (PWI). Jason stated:

They [Mizzou] offered the most money and they were far enough away from home where I didn't think my parents were going to pop in. I was impressed with the facilities. I love the sports atmosphere. I love the rec center, the student center, the quad, the traditional versus modern part of campus.

Javon, a transfer student, shared how his intention was to attend Mizzou immediately following graduation but was denied admission because of his performance in high school. He attended the University of Kentucky and transferred after 2 years.

Javon stated:

I did want to attend Mizzou from the get-go but in high school, I was a troublemaker so I didn't have the grades so they denied me. So University of Kentucky, they gave me the most scholarship money. Some things happened at Kentucky where I didn't like so I decided to transfer after my sophomore year in college and I came to Mizzou.

Each of the participants had various internal and external experiences that influenced their decision to enroll in college and, more specifically, at Mizzou. Despite the differences in each of their journeys, adjusting to the new collegial environment proved to be a challenge for all participants.

**Adjusting to college.** The social and academic transition into the collegiate atmosphere varied for participants. Some came to Mizzou with friends from high school, others had to make friends within their residence halls, and some joined student organizations as an avenue to meet new people. In addition to establishing new relationships, adjusting to academics was not always a smooth transition. For many, college was very different than high school due to the level of studying needed to succeed academically. Also, the freedom of not having their parents nearby to remind them to do their work was different than what they were used to in high school.

Chicagoan Andre discussed his adjustment to Mizzou. Andre explained:

...and then socially, because a lot of people from my, my high school came here, it was kind of a smooth transition cause I pretty much had a good set, amount of people that I knew and then, from there, I was able to meet people from my floor in the College Ave. and from there, meet new friends. I think for the most part, it was a smooth transition although, it took some time, academically, for me to get adjusted but I was able to fully get there.

Unlike Andre, Jason struggled with his social transition to Mizzou because it was the first time he had been around a large population of Black students. However, his involvement in several organizations allowed him to meet new people on campus. Jason described:

MBMI (Mizzou Black Men's Initiative), before it is what it is today, was probably like my first interaction with the Black community, outside from like, you know, my family reunions and everything. And then just getting involved in organizations is where I kind of got the basis of my social life.

Similarly, Jerome described how his involvement in student organizations allowed him to meet people throughout campus and make friends. He noted:

My social integration was pretty good. I got involved on campus a lot, getting involved in student organizations, meeting new people, meeting new friends. So socially, it was real ... it was real fun.

Although challenging for some, all participants developed social networks relatively quickly. However, the adjustment to academic expectations proved to be more difficult for most. External influences on academics, such as working too many hours at a campus job, the lack of parental support that was available in high school, and the initial coursework upon entering college created some obstacles in participants' transition to college-level work. Andre described his academic transition to Mizzou and some of the challenges he endured. He illustrated:

Academically, it was a bit of a challenge because high school work is totally different from college work. You really have to apply yourself a little bit more and your parents aren't really on your back as they are in high school. Nobody reminding you to do your homework, you just do it yourself. You just go home and you can do whatever you want to do when you get home.

Likewise, Christopher faced a similar challenge. He elaborated on when he realized that he was not succeeding academically. Christopher explained:

Academically, it was really hard. I didn't really have to study in high school and then I came here and it was just ... I didn't notice I was doing bad until that first round of tests came and I realized how unprepared I was. I ... I tried to study. I didn't push myself as hard as I should have but I tried to study more. I talked to Marc Mayes [former graduate assistant for MBMI]. He had to sit me down and we went through my grades, which was really embarrassing 'cause I was failing like everything. But it really ... it really just gave me a reality check to do better next semester, which I did. But I really just tried to change my study habits.

Jerome reflected on how transferring from a small HBCU was academically different than a large, flagship, PWI. He also discussed how campus resources helped him become more academically successful. Jerome pointed out:

Like most students, the academic transfer, coming from a smaller school, can be a little rough. It was ... it was a little rough for me. I didn't get things together until second semester but, after the first semester, I did transfer. I remember (being) on academic probation but the next semester I came back and had a 3.3 GPA, just learning how to use the networks that was given to me at the student success center or things of that nature.

**Counting on others.** All seven participants mentioned using several types of support systems that helped them to successfully matriculate through college. Those support systems varied from social to institutional support. Jerome took advantage of several avenues of support in order to be a successful student at Mizzou. He stated:

My social support systems are very broad and I think that that's the reason that I use different social support systems for different things. I use my friends, you know, for more personal. My organizations, a lot of my organizations that I joined are more beneficial for like ... they like stepping stones and bridging for career wise but, at the same time, they (are) stress relievers because it's a lot of times they are ... they are diverse and you ... and as kids facing the same problems that you are facing because the organizations I'm involved in are like ... are like career, I mean, like, what's the word I'm looking for, major-related so it's a lot of kids experiencing the same things.

Andre shared similar thoughts about his system of support. He added:

I would definitely say, that sounds cliché but, like friends that are ... that share the same interests as me and those same struggles about like where we come from and things like that. That is a big part, as well as administration here is good with ... good with building that up for me. Oh, yes. Family is also. I talk to my mom and dad and granny a lot and tell them a lot that goes on.

He further elaborated on his support system by describing his relationship with key

campus administrators. Specifically, he referenced staff at the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center (GOBCC). Andre stated:

Just being so far from home and not having that ... that maternal nurturing person there when you're 6 hours away from home and just like filling that position somewhat is ... is how she has helped.

Shaun also mentioned staff at the GOBCC as one of few critical staff resources he used. This was important to his experience, as a Black man and in an isolating major.

He summarized:

BCC staff (are) kind of cool. Black Culture Center, and then I would revert, I mean, that's probably the main center on campus as far as like staff goes, yeah, definitely. But I feel like the support system, being it comes from the Black Culture Center and the organizations under this umbrella, I feel the love over here. But you know, if I step into Lafferre Hall, I don't feel that over there or, you know, EBW, the engineering building where I start, any other building on campus.

Robert described having a support system at Mizzou but not wanting to lean too much on other people because he wanted to be more independent. He specifically mentioned this when discussing his family back home. Robert explained:

Well, me personally, I try not to lean too much on others for ... for a lot of stuff but, when I do need, you know, to lean on somebody, you know, I can talk to you, Miss Velma [GOBCC Staff]. You know, I have brothers in my fraternity, two of my best friends, and a few other people but ... And I can always reach back to my family if I need to but I usually don't try and do that too much because they have a lot going on so I, you know, for the most part, I try and take care of everything that I can on my own, for the most part.

All participants in the study were involved in several student organizations on campus, which contributed to their persistence through college and as a means of support. These organizations ranged from experiences with race-based, major-related, and other activities. Participants spoke about how their involvement assisted in their matriculation

through college and ultimately had a positive impact on their college experience. Robert mentioned:

So I would say MBMI is like definitely a, kind of like the roots of me. Everything kind of stemmed, not everything but, most things kind of stemmed from MBMI. Just being able to work here [GOBCC]. And then, you know, later on, I became a member of a fraternity, and then, from there, you know, I got involved with LBC [Black Student Government] and, you know, it was kind of like a learning blocks and stepping stones so, you know, and me really just making the most out of every opportunity that I was presented within or, you know, or that, you know, that I've worked for.

Jerome described how student organizations helped lower his stress level in college and were supports during tough times. He recognized:

They take the ... the stress out of college. They ... and keep you busy too, you know. I found that the more busy I am, the more successful that ... that my outcomes are because I know that I had to do things at a set time to meet deadlines. So it just taught me how to prioritize and time manage better.

Javon discussed the benefits of being involved for his career and how it has allowed him to realize what he wants to do professionally. He stated:

I feel like they've given me more connections on campus and more opportunity to meet people, just to ... to find out things or to be in the knowing of what's going on on Mizzou's campus. And, yeah. I feel like they've kind of shaped me in like my interest and kind of what I want to do in the future type situations. Cause I really do like this whole college atmosphere and it's something I kind of will really want to pursue, I guess, professionally.

**“...They make you want to be successful.”** Additionally, participants reflected specifically on what a support system looks like for Black males at Mizzou. All of the participants agreed that an important support systems were the Mizzou Black Men’s Initiative (MBMI) and the GOBCC. When the participants started at Mizzou, MBMI was a group for all Black male students on campus. The program has since been restructured

to solely focus on first year students. Other than these organizations, all agreed that the support for Black males was minimal. Javon reflected on the role of MBMI for Black males on campus. He believed:

Other than MBMI, I really don't see anything for real from the administration side. I mean, it's just kind of like you find your own way, I guess.

Jason also mentioned the role of MBMI, as well as the GOBCC, it plays for Black students, and Black males on campus. He noted:

The BCC, really. Like MBMI. So that'd be mine, for real. That was my first and I can only ... and I see what it is now and I can only imagine how great that is for people and, you know, and I get ... Really, it's like who you come into contact with when you do get involved. That was ... that was big. That's when you get introduced to some upperclassmen and you kind of get forced to have a conversation with other people though.

Jerome mentioned how, as a transfer student, he immediately heard about the GOBCC and it helped him get involved and meet other people. He stated:

The Black Culture Center was the very first thing that I heard of when I got to this campus. I met some very great people that I still keep in touch with, some that graduated, some that's still on campus that's in graduate programs. It's just like sometimes you need to see people like your color and doing positive things when you already know that you're the minority so that you can be successful cause they make you want to be successful. They bring things like uplifting things to your day. They be like oh man, you did that on campus, that's what's up, like I need to do something like you. So it's like a mentor/mentee thing.

Although different, the experiences of the participants all had significant similarities that focused on their precollege experiences, their adjustment to a new environment, and utilizing support systems to assist in their matriculation. The participants unanimously agreed on the challenges of being a Black male at a PWI and coping mechanisms they developed for survival.

## **Finding an Academic Path**

The second thematic category that emerged from the data was finding an academic path. All participants described why they entered Mizzou as an undeclared major and the process of declaring a major. Additionally, participants focused on factors contributing to their persistence through college. Although, persistence was not always easy, participants have continued to further their education.

**“You can’t just jump into the program.”** Each of the participants had reasons for why they entered Mizzou as an undeclared major. Responses ranged among participants from not having the required high school classes for their major, influences from their academic advisor, and not having the GPA needed to declare their desired major. Jerome explained:

I entered Mizzou as an undeclared major because I wanted to attend Sinclair School of Nursing but I wasn’t yet there. I came in with a 2.8, I believe, and you needed a 3.0 to even apply.

Shaun, an engineering major, shared the influence of his academic advisor.

Shaun stated:

You can't just jump into the program is what they [advisor] told me and you, you still may not know which way you wanted to go because originally, my goal was to do the electrical and computer engineering, double major like that. But I found that my passion was more towards the green, sustainable side, which would be more in electrical engineering and I had to switch it up so, you know. They [advisor] started me off in pre [students who do not meet the criteria to be directly admitted into the college must take 24 credit hours and maintain a 2.0 to be eligible to transfer into the college], already knowing that you would make up your mind after you take a few classes, you know, a few different topics of electrical and computer.

Participants described the process of declaring a major. Even after declaring, several shared that if they could start over, they would change their major. Andre

researched the profession he wished to enter by looking at the academic and career paths professionals took before him. Before declaring his major he went from pre-journalism, to pre-communication, then declared mass media communication. He acknowledged:

I knew I wanted to do radio. I looked up different radio personalities and seen what they majored in. A lot of them did the communication or the journalism route. So I sort of knew with that, I kind of wouldn't go wrong cause it's in the same field, broadcasting, working with the technology and still producing new media content.

Although Jerome's career goal was to become a nurse, he declared health sciences because he did not have the required GPA to enter the nursing school. He had to find an alternative route to achieve his career goal. He reflected on the experience by stating:

I found out that the health sciences route would probably actually be better for me because I can do an accelerated nursing program, which is a post baccalaureate nursing program and I can have less amount of time in school with the expedited course process. Like I feel like that if I would have came in and did what I have (had) to do and got established and got my grades up so that I could get into the nursing program, no, I wouldn't have went the health sciences route because I would have been done in 4 years and wouldn't have to worry about doing the accelerated program.

Robert described how he did not have the prerequisite from high school in order to declare the major he desired. He stated:

I was kind of forced [to be undeclared] to because I didn't have the required math before getting into Mizzou so, to like get into the college of engineering, you needed to like complete calculus or something like that with a B and I hadn't even taken college algebra yet so I didn't really have a choice.

Jason described how he declared his major. He went from international studies to political science, to finally declaring international business. He explained his thoughts on whether he would have chosen a different major. Jason described:

I knew I wanted to do something international, whether that'd be like something international with language requirements. Before like when I got into college, I wanted to be an FBI agent so that could have been any discipline. And I wasn't really leaning towards business so it was just kind of like up in the air as long as there's language in it. My dad was looking at my curriculum and he's just like where are ... where are your real classes, where like where's your stats versus econ. I didn't have any so he's like you should probably do something with business since you kind of know what's going on and so that kind of influenced that but, since being in business, I'm trying to make it my own now.

He continued:

I mean, I'm not crazy about my major but I love the opportunities that come with my major so, I don't know. It's a definite possibility but it wouldn't have been too far off. It would have still been international focus and it might not have been management. It could have been marketing or maybe a business minor and international studies major.

Although each of the participants initially enrolled as undeclared students, their declared majors were close to their initial aspirations. But, for some participants they had to take a different path to arrive at the desired end goal. What all of the participants had in common was that they did not give up in the process.

**“Failing, and then failing again.”** The participants reflected on the challenges they faced throughout their collegiate career, and the role it played in their persistence. Shaun mentioned how his academic challenges with his math classes almost caused him to change his major. He recalled:

Starting out because of those math classes I was taking here. I just ... I just didn't know if I was going to be able to deal with it and I failed Calc II like twice. Then I, after the second time, I just didn't know if ... I didn't know if engineering was my ... was my thing. So that's tough. You know, failing and then failing again. But, you know, at the ... after my third time taking it, you know, I had a lot of ... I had a lot of notes to look at so I really studied, you know, still got a tutor, and I really just cracked down and got it together.

Robert mentioned his second year being his roughest time in college. Despite

the challenges he faced, he will be graduating in one year, with degrees in political science and secondary education. Robert pointed out:

I would say sophomore year was a ... a rough semester for me. I lost my scholarship and then I had to ... My grades were terrible. I had like a 2.0 and then a 2.4. Had to appeal to get my scholarship back. And then what else? Hmm. Yeah, that. And then just, you know, trying to rebound but I did. You know, I did what I had to do to get back on track.

Unlike other participants, Javon mentioned a different set of challenges he faced as a transfer student. From his perspective, Mizzou was more academically demanding, which negatively impacted his matriculation through college. Javon stated:

I would have been graduated last year, last May. Probably would have been on dean's list. Probably would have graduated with like a 3.6, 3.7. But probably I would have been a double major in communications and strat comm. But ... but for me as an individual, I've learned so much about myself and what I kind of want to do with life since coming to Mizzou and I've been presented with a lot of opportunity that is not replaceable so I, I mean, I don't regret it, transferring at all. I feel like learning more about myself was more important than academics, I guess.

### **Black Mizzou**

Black Mizzou was the third thematic category that emerged from the data. All participants described the campus climate as being tense and racially divided. Each participant mentioned the culture of the institution, how they each handled racist incidents, and each of their methods to fight back and educate the masses.

**Unrealistic reality.** During the time when data were collected, several demonstrations took place at Mizzou focused on issues related to race relations throughout the United States. Activism brought to light many of the problems at Mizzou. Robert reflected on his 4 years at Mizzou and how the demonstrations on campus reflected the campus climate. He remarked:

I think a lot of stuff has been brought to light, you know, especially since Ferguson [August 2014 a young Black male was murdered in Ferguson, MO by a police officer which sparked protests and demonstrations all over the country and brought light to race relations in the United States] happened. A lot of things on Mizzou's campus has been brought to light, a lot of things that have been happening but they just haven't gotten the attention that they ... they deserved. And I think it ... People are more aware and people notice a lot of the stuff that they really didn't pay attention to, prior to this ... this year's, I mean, this past year specifically.

Javon discussed how the marketing for Mizzou and the image portrayed during campus visits are very different than reality. Javon stated:

It's very segregated. It's very ... It's very ... Mizzou gives you this perception, I guess, when you ... when you like are touring, and you're visiting but they can't tell you that or they ... they don't tell you like in a brochure and stuff it's like segregated in this way. I think it is all segregated in all populations because, you know, you see the Asians that hang together, the Blacks that hang together, the Whites that hang together. Yeah, they're like it's all kind of segregated by nationality a lot of times.

However, coming from an HBCU, Jerome reflected on wanting to transfer to a PWI because the HBCU experience presented an unrealistic view of life. He felt that being a Black male at a large PWI was a stronger reflection on the realities of the world.

Jerome said:

The campus climate is no different from the real world. That's why I didn't mind coming to a PWI. When you step out into the real world and you step out into corporate America, you ... you don't see as many Black people as you did at a HBCU and that was another reason why I decided to transfer. You know, I wanted to see how it is when you do have to compete against different races and it's for jobs ... and for jobs and ... and just for like student organization positions and stuff like that. It's more real. When I say real, I mean, like I said, you have more White people than Black people most of the time in corporate America.

Jason was initially involved in what students would describe as “mainstream” or “White organizations” on campus. Joining a historically Black fraternity on campus

further exposed him to the racial realities for many Black students on campus. He quickly learned from his fraternity brothers that within the Mizzou community, there is a subculture called “Black Mizzou” that is experienced by Black students on campus and alumni. The use of this term dates back many years and speaks to the climate, both positive and negative of the campus. Jason positively reflected on “Black Mizzou” stating:

You know, it's interesting. It says something about the community of Black people here at Mizzou. It's like we're kind of a force, like, you know, people or just when people refer to like, you know, Black twitter, you know, Black Mizzou, it's ... I don't know. It seems to be every like Black Mizzou thing seems to be in *The Maneater*, like in, you know, student newspaper. It's different because we don't participate in Homecoming the same way that, I guess like that an IFC/PHA but, it seems like, you know, Mizzou... So it's ... I don't have any direct thoughts. It's just something to note that there is a difference in how we kind of go about our ... or how our college experiences are.

Although not all of his experiences were positive, Jason later reflected in his journal on whether he would have chosen a different institution to attend than Mizzou. He stated:

One of my final questions that I kept thinking about was, would I have chosen to go somewhere else other than the University of Missouri. My answer remains to be no because I feel like I like who I'm becoming and the good experiences I've had here weigh out any of the negative ones.

Christopher also reflected on the “Black Mizzou” subculture. He stated:

It's definitely a division. I don't ... I wouldn't say like it has like ... I wouldn't make it like this big negative thing though but just because people gravitate around people that they are familiar with, you know. That's why we have Black Mizzou. So I just see Black Mizzou and then, you know, you have all these White people that go here, some that don't have anything to do with Black people, in my opinion, and some that's really interested in Black people. So some are really ... like I feel like cause they never like been that close to like Black people.

When asked if he thought it was problematic that there was a “Black Mizzou,” Robert felt that having a subculture within the primary culture of Mizzou was perfectly acceptable.

He stated:

No, I don't think that's problematic. We all come from different backgrounds, different cultures. No White man or woman can expect me to just blend into their culture, especially when they get their culture from people that look like me. So no, I don't think that it's wrong that we have a Black Mizzou. You know, that's ... that's who we are is, you know, we're Black people. We have our own, you know, identities within that but, as a collective, we're Black and we're different than White people in a sense of culture and who we are and our identity.

It is important to note that the participants did not discuss the role racism played in the development of “Black Mizzou” because many come with an understanding from upperclass students or alumni that this is the norm at the institution. However, the history behind the survival and experience of Black students at Mizzou dates back many decades.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, very few of the participants could recall an overt act of racism directed toward them, but shared friends’ experiences. Also, each participant had various strategies to deal with acts of racism when they occur. Andre shared how living in the residence halls, he was met with racism by other students who lived on his floor. Andre stated:

I guess my freshman year when, which was kind of a culture struggle because I'm used to being in the predominately Black neighborhood, predominately Black high school, so when I was on ... in my ... on my dorm, College Ave, third floor, it was a lot of like intermingling and I guess they didn't really know how to, I guess, talk to a minority based upon what they seen on ... on TV. And the idea is I guess

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<sup>2</sup> Mizzou has a history of racism at the institution. The campus climate can be described as tense. In past years, cotton balls have been placed in front of the Black Culture Center, and “nigga” has been spray painted in front of a Residence Hall. The university has established initiatives related to diversity, but they were unsuccessful and are now working on effective tools to educate the campus.

they would talk to me like ... like in Ebonics, try to make up Ebonics and think that that was cool, that I only understood Ebonics. So I took offense to that but I sort of like played it off and like laughed at it at that time. But I definitely don't forget it.

Robert reflected on some common acts of racism that essentially left him numb to the experiences. He recalled:

I mean, you know, you get the, you know, typical stuff, somebody who be driving on campus and or, driving past campus, and they might see who you are and like yell out the N word at you and, you know, I'm just Black, okay?

He also mentioned not putting himself in situations where he would not feel welcome.

For example, Robert expanded on the earlier conversation in his journal stating:

I often think of Greek houses, and how I've never went to any of their houses or even in that area because I've heard stories about it. I wouldn't put myself in a situation to go through what my peers have gone through.

Christopher shared a similar experience of his close friends. He also described his interactions with White women on campus. He reflected:

But I remember my friend, it wasn't me personally but, my friends always brings up that time where they were like just walking down College Avenue or something and this car of White guys, they went ... they rode past them, called them some niggers. Yeah, they were upset. I've definitely sometimes felt like ... like with Caucasian females, sometimes I get like this vibe like they're nervous around me or something.

Jason also had a similar story from one of his fraternity brothers and other situations that he heard about throughout campus. He added:

Thanksgiving break time, one of my frat brothers was called the N word while he was filling up gas at a gas station and, you know, the car just drove off. And, you know, I hear not to go to Greek town at night, things of that nature because they'll ... you probably will get called something. So I just don't even know like how people still have the energy to be like that. It's ... it's one of those things that's a hot point for me though, like I haven't been called one directly but I know, if I have, I probably wouldn't handle it the best way but yeah, I guess that's my

thoughts. It's unfortunate and you'd think at a place of higher education, it wouldn't be as bad.

Racism was not limited to the residence halls and Greek town. Shaun reflected on his experiences with racism in the classroom and being one of few Black male engineers within his department. He stated:

I've noticed like two different, at times, that a group member would try to, you know, you're trying to do all the work cause he just automatically think that I'm not interested or I'm not going to do any of the work, that I'm not like smart enough to like actually put it together well, put a presentation.... They had already gotten together and figured out tasks and things like ya'll know if there's anything for you to do. Well, what do you mean there's not nothing for me to do? I mean, this is a group effort. I want to do something, you know what I'm saying. They'd already excluded me out and I didn't ... I didn't like that but I ended up switching it all up and I ended up presenting the whole presentation, you know, by the end of that.

When further thinking about racism and his personal experiences, Shaun stated in his journal:

You can generally find a lot of that [racism] out when you have to make groups in class and particular individuals will jump all over you and pick around you just to pick a person to be in their academic group because they may find them smarter or more capable to be a better group participant than yourself.

**Student activism.** The participants' thoughts varied on how they responded to racist acts on campus and whether they decided to participate in many of the demonstrations on campus that sought to bring to light the injustices occurring at the institution. Some of the participants did not feel that protesting on campus was beneficial to push the agenda for equality on campus. They felt that there were other avenues to achieve the same goal. Specifically, Javon reflected on being from a more affluent Black area in the suburbs of Chicago. He felt he could not relate to many of the injustices that many Black students were speaking about locally and nationally. He stated:

I'm Black and I get that and I get how like Black lives matter, but in these areas where these things are occurring, it's just like that's not where I'm from, you know. These are ... these are happening in cities and ... and just like in places of high ... high Black population. I mean, I'm from a predominately White area so I've never really faced, you know, discrimination in that way of like in cops. I was like, I mean, my dad told me like, you know, be careful around cops but like the worst thing a cop has done is ever give me a speeding ticket. So I've never really been fearful of that type of way of a cop.

Jason described different strategies he used to respond to injustices that were consistent with his identity. He explained:

I'm more of a quiet person, a reserved person so when I see leadership or when I see implementing change, I see that as okay, I'm going to class, okay, I'm doing well in class, okay, I'm getting involved in this, okay, I'm being some sort of a mentor like figure to someone else who has a question for me, I'm helping other people out. I'm more of the behind the scenes type of a person so I'm not necessarily out, you know, walking in the streets and that's ... that was kind of my take on it. I went to a few like the forums and stuff but I ... I didn't actually get out and protest with like MU for Mike Brown.

Jerome questioned the effectiveness of some of the campus activism. He pointed out:

I don't participate in demonstrations on campus because I feel that they do no justice and I ... I just don't think that protesting is an effective way to ... to eliminate an issue that happens in ... in these communities. It doesn't do anything but cause more of the problems. I think we have to attack the situations that happen in our communities in a different way. It's just like we need people who have like legislation power to handle situations like that.

However, several participants were active in the demonstrations and protests on campus. They felt that it was their duty to be on the front lines of the movement and make sure that the Black male presence was felt. When discussing why he participated in the demonstrations, Robert stated the following:

I did because I felt like there was a need to make people aware and there was a need for people like myself to ... to participate and ... and, you know, help lead

these movements and support them because that, I feel like that's a part of, you know, being a leader is. You know, you don't always have to be the one front and center but you should always be, you know, working to accomplish a common goal, whether it be, you know, making people aware, you know, passing policies within the school, you know, stuff like that. And it affects me so, why not. Like all this stuff on campus, it affects me and it's going to affect Black people that come to this school like after. So it's like why not help lay a foundation for future generations.

Andre participated in one of the major demonstrations on campus. He stated:

Yes. I participated in the ... in the die in, I think it was called, in the student center. And yes, that's the only thing that I participated in and I was ... I feel like that was very monumental. That, was a good ... a good thing that we all came together just for that one cause. Cause I felt like then, again, with, I don't want to say Black Mizzou, but it's like even Black Mizzou was segregated so it was just good that we all came together for that one cause. Because that issue was something that affects so many of my peers and I really wanted to help out in any way I could so I felt like I needed to be there. It was something that I felt strongly about. Yeah, I just really wanted to be there, just be a part of that ... of that movement cause there really was a movement. It was on *The Maneater*. A lot of people was talking about it. It was something significant.

Shaun, a native of St. Louis, spoke on why he felt it was important for him to participate in the demonstrations on campus. Shaun stated:

I participated when they ... speaking out in the ... in the student center. People pass through there, people just lollygagging in the student center and I thought it would be a great ... a great symbol or a great way for people to handle it in terms of exposure just by going to the ... speaking out about Mike Brown in the student center so I was definitely a part of that. Well, you know, being that that happened back home, it really ... it was really kind of impactful, you know, 'cause I had family ... family in that area so like I felt that the exposure on the issue, it needed to be addressed. I feel like people ... people ... people are really ignorant on the situation and, like I said, that happened back home so the health and safety of my own environment, it's important to me. So I feel like I knew it was necessary for me to be a part of that.

The experiences of the participants highlighted different ways they addressed racism in general and at Mizzou in particular. Each discussed their viewpoints on

modern day activism, indirect and direct experiences with racism, and their thoughts on the campus climate.

### **Establishing Identity**

The last thematic category that emerged from the data was the construction of racial identity and conceptions of Black manhood. It is important to note that all participants were always aware of their race. In addition, all participants described the journey and challenges of defining their race and masculinity.

**Construction of racial identity.** Throughout the study, participants discussed their racial identity. Many defined their race differently, whether using the term African American or Black. Two participants described themselves as African American, two used Black and African American interchangeably, and three preferred the term Black. Each of the participants elaborated in their interviews. Javon stated, “I think I’ve been given a better sense of Black pride and a better appreciation for my race, but also have grown detached from the White community on campus.”

Robert described his race as not homogenous, and having roots from countries throughout the world. He explained:

I define myself as being Black. I don’t really go by African American but that’s just me. Some people like to go by African American. I see myself as a Black man with roots that are from Africa but I also have other roots that are from Germany and the Philippines and various other places. So that’s why I just say Black and not just ... so I can encompass like every aspect of me and ... and not just one.

Shaun also preferred identifying as Black. He added:

I prefer the term Black primarily because I don't think that's [such a] thing as African American.

Jason shared how he used both African American and Black interchangeably and

recognized that there were stereotypes both positive and negative associated with each.

He stated:

Oh, African American and Black. I honestly use them interchangeably. I know like there's like, you know, stigmas to each one or like, you know, that to be, like there's no like real connection to Africa, I guess, except that, you know, that's just where our ancestors are from but it really doesn't matter to me.

**Conceptions of Black manhood.** While their racial identities were easy for participants to discuss, talking about their gender identity challenged them because for many, it was the first time they had been asked to talk about it. Although they all defined themselves as men, their reactions to questions about gender were inconsistent. When discussing his gender, Christopher discussed how his sexuality was connected to his gender. Christopher stated:

I am male. I define my gender on just on, you know, like biologically, you know, and then, that's really it. I'm a male 'cause that's just how I was born. Oh. Well, I am a bisexual male but that's really it. I describe myself as just male for, just based on biological reasons.

Jason also used sexuality to help define and describe his gender. He discussed aspects of masculinity and, although he is heterosexual, he does not conform to all aspects of stereotypical masculinity. Jason stated:

So I'm heterosexual but I don't think I'm the most masculine guy. Like I don't care about weight lifting, I don't, you know, I was blasting Beyonce's "Upgrade You" yesterday, without a problem, you know, humor. I don't care what people think at that point.

Likewise, Jerome considered masculinity to help describe his gender. He explained:

I define myself as a male. I wouldn't go hypermasculine. I feel like I'm pretty masculine but I'm not like all macho.

Each of the participants stated that the discussions about masculinity really caused them to process their own thoughts and definitions about the topic. Oftentimes, many of the participants were used to talking about their lives in regard to their racial identity, but never about how their life has been affected, positively or negatively, by their gender. Javon discussed not liking the term masculinity because he was unsure how he fit into the definition. He stated:

See, I really don't like the term masculinity because I feel like it can be expressed in different ways. So I don't ... I don't know if I necessarily fit the stereotypical of using masculinity, I guess.

Christopher described how he has never reflected on his gender or the term masculinity. He discussed his masculinity in his journal stating, "I haven't always felt the most masculine, but I believe I have my own style and demeanor that define my masculinity in a positive way." He pointed out:

I've never thought about this before, masculinity. Is it weird that I don't have a answer? When I think of masculinity, I only think about like ... like the social norm, you know, like just ... just like...Playing sports or something. But for ... I guess for me, masculinity is just knowing who you are, knowing that you're a man, and carrying yourself, representing yourself in such a way, you know. It doesn't have to be like associated with sports or like toughness. I think it's just taking care of yourself and taking care of your business, really. That's what I would say masculinity is.

Shaun detailed his personal response in defining masculinity and how he would describe himself to someone else. He stated:

I think I'm hypermasculine. I feel like I do the typical stuff that you would think. Like sports. You know, I like all women. I feel like it's a hypermasculine thing. A lot of things, working out, I don't know. But like really active as you would think, I guess, a hypermasculine male would be. Hmm. It's such an interesting

definition because I feel like, like I said, I feel like everybody could have their own ... own definition of it. It's crazy. And I never thought about it till you asked me.

Additionally, participants reflected on the influence peer pressure had on some of the decisions they have made in college. Many of their responses centered on feeling pressured to engage in sexual activities, which can be associated with hyper masculine behavior. Javon reflected on losing his virginity within the last year and how his friends influenced this decision. He recalled:

Well, I maybe, 'cause I lost my virginity in college, specifically transferring to Mizzou, maybe because of peer pressures in the back of my mind. Just for the ... the idea of I wasn't supposed to be a virgin, I guess. Honestly, at first I was going to tell myself I'll wait till marriage, I guess. Like 'cause ... Like that ... that whole thing about like having sex kind of scared me for the longest. I don't know why. Just like I felt like I wasn't mature ... mature enough for it. And then like, I was like I'll wait till love. But like I've never really ... I don't think I've ever been in love. And then like, you know, some people found out I was a virgin and then they kept like bringing it up and then ... yeah, like kind of ridiculing me. I wouldn't say it was ... I mean, it was just more like a mental like “oh, you're a virgin, oh why? You're a virgin, you need to get you some pussy” type situations.

Christopher also discussed the role peer pressure played in engaging in sexual activity. He stated:

I feel like that's a big peer pressure, being around your friends like your guy friends that you hear all of them talking about like different girls they have sex with but, most of the time, they're probably lying anyway. So people shouldn't be peer pressured into doing something they're not 100% sold on doing.

Andre also felt his male friends would often discuss females they were “hooking up” with, but he also understood that most of it wasn't true. However, sometimes he would give into the peer pressure depending on what group of friends he was around and if alcohol was involved. He described:

So that's what like guys do, sit around and talk about, you know, drinking and who you gonna, you know, get real...Who you're gonna hookup with so ... So yeah, it is pressure at the end of the day, but ... but half of the time, no one even does it. I think, no. Somewhat, we all are influenced by it in some way. Like some thoughts go to your head like man, what if I would have did this, or I should, you know, probably talk to her or leave her alone, things like that. So for me, it definitely has come into play, especially when liquor is involved so, yeah.

Jason discussed how there are many aspects of masculinity such as being tough, not crying, and not showing your feelings. However, his masculinity looks different than that. Jason pointed out:

My masculinity is not like that. I always show my emotions, whether I'm sad or happy. And you know, masculinity, I feel also is not being vulnerable and I'm vulnerable to people I love flat out and also, you know, not being sensitive and I think I'm pretty sensitive, you know, to an extent at least. You know, the music you listen to always goes into a roll like.

Becoming his authentic self, however, was not easy. He described:

It was hard for me to be myself like for a while like coming to Mizzou, like I thought I had to be cool, calm, collected, didn't say much, just kind of sat in the back and kept a straight face and acted cool. You know, its not like people wouldn't talk to me but I wouldn't really be myself at the jump. Still am not myself in some organizations I'm in. So that's probably how it's affected me the biggest is just not, you know, not feeling comfortable to be myself from the jump freshman yeah cause I was afraid I wasn't going to be cool, I guess.

### **Summary of Findings**

From the individual interviews, journal responses, and the analysis of the coded responses, several overarching themes emerged from the participants in the study. The cross case analysis represents the experiences of the participants. The themes from the study's data coalesced around: (1) peer pressure, external influences, and institutional support (2) finding an academic path (3) Black Mizzou, and (4) establishing identity.

Chapter Five will explore the findings in relation to the guiding theories of the study, discuss the implications, and limitations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION**

The previous chapter focused on the findings of the study. In this chapter, I answer the research questions based upon the themes presented in the previous chapter. In doing so, I consider them in relation to Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and theories of masculinities, particularly Progressive Black Masculinity (PBM). Implications for practice, while potentially transferrable to other universities, will focus on the host institution in relation to the experiences of Black males on the campus. Finally, I present the study's conclusion.

### **Addressing the Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, predominately White institution in the Midwest. This section revisits the questions that guided this study, the findings, and analyzes the responses in an effort to answer the questions.

### **Experiencing College as Undeclared Black Men**

The first research question asked "How do Black male undergraduates who enter college as undeclared majors, and have matriculated to their third or fourth year, describe their college experience at one predominately White institution in the Midwest?" For the participants, their experiences as undeclared students, persistence of racial inequality, and conceptions of Black manhood were important in shaping their experiences at Mizzou.

Throughout the study, participants described why they entered Mizzou as undeclared students and the process of declaring a major. Although the literature reported that students entering college as undeclared majors do so for various reasons (Cuseo, 2013), I found that the men in this study entered as undeclared because they

either did not have the GPA to declare their desired major, their academic advisor encouraged them not to choose a major initially, or they did not have the required high school classes to immediately declare. Each of the participants experienced a barrier to declaring their major. For some, this resulted in having to change their originally intended major, or having to complete a set of prerequisites before being allowed to declare. Despite the challenges, each participant used support systems and resources to navigate through the process by making the necessary connections with faculty and staff. The positive influence of the participants' support systems challenged master narratives that expect these Black men who were undeclared to fail. Rather than departing from college or remaining undeclared all, participants were able to declare a major by the beginning of their third year in college.

Students who enter college as undeclared majors are at risk of being retained (Gordon, 1984; 1994; Lewallen, 1995; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). However, the participants were unaware that being undeclared was a risk. This is important because the participants entered college at yet another deficit without knowing it. Participants did not engage in a conversation with their advisors about the importance of major declaration and the negative impact it could have on their ability to graduate if they delayed the process. Additionally, the challenges they faced academically led some of the participants to develop alternative paths to matriculate through college; however, they did not attribute it to entering college as undeclared. Instead, adjusting to the academic rigor and campus climate of Mizzou was a challenge for all participants. Due to their academic standing, some were forced to change their major, delay declaring a major, or retake classes until they received an acceptable grade.

Participants ultimately declared a major and persisted; however, their campus experience was not always easy. They faced significant challenges in their academic lives, in particular, an unwelcoming campus climate that included several serious racial incidents. Their views on the campus climate are consistent with the literature that Black males often perceive PWIs as “unsupportive, unsympathetic, and chilly” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 311). Racial discrimination influenced their college experiences both inside and outside the classroom and on and off campus. From having to prove their intelligence within the classroom, to navigating the sometimes unwelcoming places they visited on campus, and responding to racist incidents, these experiences stood out and defined their college experiences. Their racial identity superseded being undeclared because their daily activities consciously reinforced raciality, and rarely their masculinity, constantly reminding them that they were Black at Mizzou.

While these experiences might lead to student departure, these men persevered with a singular focus and understanding that obtaining their degree was their end goal. In doing so, they transcended the stereotypes of Black males in higher education and established a counternarrative. In fact, they contributed to a subculture of strength developed for Black students at Mizzou, i.e., Black Mizzou. “Black Mizzou” allowed students to create traditions for their community, establish their own culture, and advance their leadership at the institution. Additionally, programs geared directly for Black males at Mizzou allowed students to develop a support network to assist each other and encourage their matriculation at the institution. The role of extracurricular activities, and the influence of their peers are explored in more detail in response to the second research

question. These experiences have helped shape their reality of the real world and gave them tools to navigate the professional world post-graduation.

**Progressive Black Masculinity.** Black masculinity is influenced by the intersection of race, class, gender, and culture (Chandler, 2011). The participants in this study continuously denied negative stereotypes and by doing so, reconstructed the image of how they are perceived (Alexandar, 2006).

Through the PBM model, Mutua (2006) conceived a way to intersect the practice of both progressive Blackness and progressive masculine ideologies. As a reminder, there are three tenets of the PBM model: (1) Black men are taught to create their own identity, (2) Black men are allowed to embrace their individuality instead of having to defend it (Abu-Jamal & Hill, 2012), and (3) Black men dispute the idea that Black men have to fit into this “supposed mold” of White masculinity. The PBM model aligns with the experiences of the participants in this study and seeks to deconstruct the notion of White supremacy and how the construction of Black identity is multidimensional.

Specifically, participants discussed having to create their own identity both within and outside the classroom. In the classroom, participants reported that actively engaging in class discussion, volunteering during group assignments, and establishing rapport with their professors helped create their identities as successful Black men. Outside the classroom, involvement with various student organizations allowed them to showcase their leadership skills and establish themselves as student leaders on campus.

When looking at Mutua’s (2006) forms of masculinity presented in Chapter 2, the participants varied between ritualistic and innovative Black masculinity. They largely embraced their individuality by not conforming to the hegemonic patriarchal norms

established in our society which is demonstrative of innovative Black masculinity. The participants' understood that their lived experiences helped shape them into who they were and those identities, in most instances, did not conform to societal norms. One participant acknowledged that although he was heterosexual, he did not exude the stereotype of most men. Another participant mentioned that his sexuality did not make him any less masculine than the next person, despite stereotypes assigned to queer identities. The aforementioned participants displayed forms of ritualistic Black masculinity by acknowledging stereotypes associated with their behavior but continuing to navigate society without really questioning them. Some participants mentioned being influenced by their peers on issues relating to sex, but others were able to see past the hypermasculinity. Overall, each participant learned to embrace their individuality; it was done through how they defined their masculinity, embraced their sexuality, overcame peer pressure, and unapologetically lived as their authentic selves.

Recognizing that Black men are privileged by patriarchy, but oppressed by racism (Mutua, 2006), participants were able to reject the supposed mold of White masculinity. The participants in this study learned to balance multiple identities as a student at a PWI and within the Black community. Race was a very salient part of their identity, and discussing the role gender played in their lives was challenging. The lack of awareness may be related to privilege as men. However, throughout the study, participants developed an understanding of the role gender played in their lives. In doing so, they had to determine what were "acceptable" ways to express themselves as Black men in order to navigate the campus successfully and live their authentic selves.

The experiences of the participants were mostly consistent with PBM, but there is a need to dive further into the lack of conscious thought about gender. Throughout their college experience, participants learned to create their identity by debunking negative stereotypes about Black men and found strength in the culture of “Black Mizzou” at the institution. At the same time, the challenge these men had articulating the role gender played in their lives is not surprising, as the patriarchy still maintained a hold on their lives. This was demonstrated by a lack of comprehensive knowledge about the privilege they possessed. Further, when considering their identities as undeclared, many participants reinforced aspects of hegemonic masculinity by not asking for assistance, not wanting to be perceived as failures, and striving for independence.

### **Factors for Persistence**

The second research question asked, “What factors contributed to their persistence through college?” Using Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure, participants’ experiences largely mirrored the steps Tinto defined for college students. However, in order to navigate the new environment (and ultimately reinforce Tinto’s theory, they had to assimilate into the dominant culture. The initial enrollment into college began the separation process for all of the participants. Each participant was leaving their friends, family, and their sense of normalcy behind in order to embark on this new journey. However, for the three transfer participants, their experience differed because they previously attended college elsewhere. Upon transferring to Mizzou, each of the participants had already developed friendships with current students and had close friends from their home communities who were also enrolled, which appeared to help their transition. Their greatest challenges were adjusting to the culture of being at a PWI,

keeping up with the academic rigor of Mizzou, and managing the difference of a 4-year institution as compared to a two-year institution.

The participants' transition to the collegiate environment involved two separate, but related, experiences: their social and academic adjustment (Tinto, 1993). Facing a new level of academic rigor, many of the participants were unsuccessful first in order to realize success. Losing scholarships and receiving poor grades lit a fire for participants. In response, they changed their study habits, met with professors, and formed study groups with their peers. For many of the participants, they understood the need to "acquire the norms and patterns of behavior" of the college environment and to develop the necessary skills to succeed (Tinto, 1987, p. 1).

Participants mentioned using counter cultural spaces such as the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center, the Mizzou Black Men's Initiative, and predominately Black student organizations to reinforce their needs and to be their authentic selves. These spaces acted as counter cultural to the climate of Mizzou by allowing students an opportunity to be themselves among people who looked like them and had similar cultural backgrounds. This finding mirrors research by Patton (2006) who found Black Culture Centers can play a crucial role for the success of Black students at PWIs by facilitating identity development, improving the campus climate, and providing academic and social support (Patton, 2006).

The participants in this study may differ from those who may not have successfully continued their education because they had people who cared enough to tell them when they were wrong, supportive networks, and were actively involved. Whether seeking out extracurricular activities or other opportunities to get involved, the

participants reached out for help to develop relationships with professional staff and like-minded peers. Having those relationships also provided an outlet to help them strategize and implement a plan for success when things were not going positively. Additionally, many of the participants reflected back on the factors that motivated them to attend college and they served as reminders of their goals when they were not succeeding. These reminders included wanting a better life for themselves, honoring the sacrifices family members had made, and serving as a role model for younger siblings.

Participants also discussed their integration into the institution. In order to matriculate through college, participants had to adopt the academic and social patterns of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Merging aspects of their old and new behaviors was necessary to not only survive at Mizzou, but also in their home environments. The ability to thrive in both worlds was imperative because they had to adopt behaviors that allowed them to successfully navigate both spaces. By developing relationships with students, faculty, staff, and becoming involved on campus, it allowed the participants to become incorporated into the institutional culture. The participants' involvement in campus activities helped them better manage their time, expand their networks, and remain at the institution. Although many of the activities in which they were engaged were heavily influenced by race, it gave the participants a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) reinforced this by stating that Black males sense of belonging in college increases when they becoming involved with various social and academic aspects of campus.

Although Tinto's (1993) theory appeared consistent with the participants' experiences in this study, it is important to consider any limitations of this theory that may serve to expand upon and extend it. The theory was applicable to participants

because to be successful they had to assimilate to the college environment; they had to learn to navigate college according to norms expected of the dominant culture (i.e., those identified by Tinto). They also wanted to maintain their cultural histories and experiences. Thus, they had to learn and perfect double consciousness. This raises the following question: how fair is it to Black males enrolled at PWIs to have to assimilate in order to be successful? The challenges faced such as not always belonging, declaring their majors, differences in academic rigor compared to their previous educational experiences, discrimination, and financial obligations created barriers for their success. In many cases, to assimilate, they created work arounds to succeed despite the challenges. For example, students chose related majors to those they wanted to pursue to graduate on time and with less expense. These work arounds suggest that institutions should either have mechanisms in place so that Black males, like those in this study, do not have to create alternative pathways, or by creating a *survival toolkit* to let students know of the challenges they may face so they can be better prepared without having to be unsuccessful first in order to ultimately succeed. Rather than requiring Black male students to adapt to the dominant culture, perhaps the institutions should change to better serve them.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to fill gaps in the research about the experiences of Black, male, third and fourth year undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted at a large, public, predominately White institution in the Midwest. Although this study has done that, there is room for additional research on

Black student departure, undeclared and transfer students, as well as the efficacy of resources in place to support this population.

Scholars have critiqued the inability of Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure to relate to students of color (e.g., Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Milem & Burger, 1997; Tinto, 1993). It has been noted that students of color experience college differently, and their challenges vary, especially at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2010). Participants in my study reinforced these findings, suggesting that new models and theories of student departure are needed to be more inclusive of the diversity of student experiences. However, despite these critiques, no widely accepted theories have emerged in response to Tinto's limitations. Given the vast amount of literature and research published on Black students in higher education, especially Black males, now is the time for a theory focusing on their departure to emerge. This theory should be inclusive of the role that masculinity plays for Black males in our educational system. The development of a theory could be beneficial, as institutions seek to increase college completion rates and further degree obtainment for Black students.

Additionally, in the literature review, I discussed the emergence of Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs and their ineffectiveness to increase the retention and graduation rate of Black males in higher education. Collectively, programs are fragmented and poorly organized, which equates to poor implementation (Harper, 2012). I also focused on the role Black Culture Centers have historically played in increasing Black students' sense of belonging at PWIs (Patton, 2006). To complement this research, additional investigation is needed on the resources provided specifically for Black males

and their effectiveness for this population. Also, more research needs to be conducted on the modern day role of Black Culture Centers at PWIs and defining their purpose on college campuses. Evaluating the effectiveness of the GOBCC and MBMI as it relates to identity development and persistence were beyond the scope of the study, but the participants reinforced in various ways the important roles they played in their identities as Black men and in supporting them to succeed.

Lastly, research needs to continue to focus on the experiences of undeclared students and their matriculation through college. The data can assist this population of students in understanding what it means to be undeclared and the importance of declaring a major for persistence. This study prompts more research in this area based on the lack of understanding by the participants on being undeclared. Also, three transfer students participated in this study. Their experiences were unique in many ways, such as adjusting to a more comprehensive academic rigor, learning a new campus climate, and finding ways to become involved. Additional research needs to continue to focus on their experiences and the challenges they face as transfer students. Moreover, research should focus on the specific sub populations of transfer students, such as Black men. Collectively, this research could continue to add to the literature on the experiences of undeclared, Black males at PWIs.

### **Implications for Practice**

The current study offers several implications for practice. The participants in this study were resilient, influencing their matriculation at Mizzou. These participants faced some issues in and out of the classroom, similar to many college students; however, unlike most students, they also had to navigate subtle and overt discrimination and

stereotypes based on race and gender. From this, the institution should facilitate ways to shift the culture to increase the sense of belonging for all students. For example, educating faculty members on how to create culturally inclusive classroom environments for Black male students can lessen the feeling of isolation. Also, the addition of a diversity course would, at minimum, create a space for students to engage in difficult dialogues and begin to learn about others different than themselves. Creating a required diversity course for incoming students, both for first time first year and transfer students, I believe can have a positive impact on the campus culture and begin to build bridges among different populations of people.

Participants in the study reflected heavily on the influence the GOBCC and MBMI had on their college experiences. After additional research on the efficacy of these resources, providing additional resources to these spaces can broaden the scope of influence these centers and programs have on Black male students. Many of the participants mentioned being a part of student organizations advised by GOBCC staff members and how their involvement led to additional leadership opportunities. They also mentioned feeling as though these staff members genuinely cared about their well being and acted as surrogate parents. As stated in the literature review, family involvement is viewed as one of the most important contributing factors to academic success (Leuchovius, 2006; Runnell, 2006; Usher & Kober, 2011). Because they are isolated from their family ties, this family-like support is crucial for their sense of belonging and success at Mizzou. Increasing the staffing of the center can allow for additional students to benefit from this type of interaction and enhance their experience at Mizzou.

Additionally, increasing the funding and staff structure for MBMI would allow for the program to expand beyond students' freshmen year and act as an opportunity for continued engagement and involvement. Several of the participants benefited from the MBMI program prior to its restructuring and it proved to be an important aspect of their well being. This continued interaction would allow further one-on-one time with upperclassmen and professional staff members, potentially create a greater sense of belonging throughout their collegiate career, allow the ability to engage in discussions around Black masculinity, as well as prolonged engagement with Black men to help them establish longer-term goals.

Based upon the pre-college experiences of the participants in this study, I recommend that the institution increase its work with area high school and summer transition programs to provide incoming students with a comprehensive description of what is entailed to be as successful as possible in college, specifically at Mizzou. The program should detail major requirements, differences in the academic demands in college compared to high school, as well resources on campus to increase student success. By doing so, students may be able to avoid the feeling of regret by not paying attention to their academics early on in their college career.

Academic advisors could direct more one-on-one time toward undeclared students. Some studies found that undeclared students are at a higher risk of not matriculating (Cuseo, 2013). Thus, academic advisors should have more conversations about the importance of major declaration, the individual college requirements, and alternative routes to entering their desired career field should they not be admitted into their desired college or major.

In addition, Mizzou has begun an early intervention program that is slowly being adopted in various parts of campus to increase student success. This early alert system helps support student matriculation by allowing instructors and advisors to refer students to support resources, raise concerns, and share instructor feedback with students. Over the next couple of years, this early intervention program should be institutionalized in an effort to increase student success and their retention and graduation rates. For undeclared students, this could assist them in either remaining in their intended major or presenting alternative related majors as legitimate pathways. Doing so could decrease the time for major exploration and graduation for undeclared students.

### **Conclusion**

Black males are often described using a deficit model; this study sought to present a counter narrative of persistence. I drew on the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation and Progressive Black Masculinity to understand how students have challenged the master narratives of departure and White male hegemony.

The findings of this study are important because they contribute to a more complete understanding about the success and achievement of all Black males in higher education, including under researched subpopulations like undeclared students. Collectively, their achievements created a counternarrative that challenged prevailing notions of who Black, male, undeclared students at PWIs are; this is a success story. At the same time, institutions can and should do better so that the counternarrative can become the master narrative. To do so, PWIs need to provide the appropriate resources for this population to not only be successfully admitted, but also to find a major and thrive at the institution.

Largely, I found that for the Black males in this study to succeed at a PWI, they conformed to White male hegemonic practices and behaviors. At the same time, they had to learn to navigate the institution while simultaneously overcoming hurdles such as experiencing an insensitive campus climate, declaring a major, and overcoming stereotypes. In an effort to not force Black males to conform to the dominant culture, university administrators need to educate themselves and ensure that they are not creating environments both inside and outside the classroom that lead this population to feel inferior and to have to work harder just to be on the same playing field as those in the majority. A culture needs to be created at the institution so that these students can succeed in their own way and so that there are people and places at Mizzou to support them. I hope that university administrators use this study to further assess the campus climate, determine ways to improve college completion, as well as improve resources directed to assist undeclared Black males at Mizzou.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email & Script

Hello,

I am hoping to talk with some current undergraduate Black male students about their experiences at a predominately White institution (PWI). Specifically, I hope to better understand the experiences of Black, male, undergraduate students who entered college without declaring a major and have persisted to their third or fourth year at the institution.

I will be conducting a series of interviews to better understand this phenomenon and invite you to participate. I hope to audio record these interviews so that I collect the most accurate data possible. The interviews will be set up on an individual basis that is conducive for the participants and the researcher. There will be a series of three interviews with each lasting approximately an hour in length. Respond to several journal prompts after each interview that will also be included as data for the study.

Participation is voluntary and participants can decide to no longer participate at anytime. Should the participant prefer to not be recorded or wants to stop recording at any time, they will be able to still participate in the study. If fewer than 7 respond affirmatively, all volunteers will be invited to participate. If more than 7 respond, the researchers will choose 5-7 participants to provide maximum variation among the participants (class year, majors).

If you are interested in participating in this study and meet the qualifications, please email Jonathan McElderry, [mcelderryj@missouri.edu](mailto:mcelderryj@missouri.edu) and I will respond to set up interviews.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the investigator, Jonathan McElderry at 813 Virginia Ave. (573) 882-2664, or [mcelderryj@missouri.edu](mailto:mcelderryj@missouri.edu) or my Dissertation Chair, Jeni Hart at 202 Hill Hall, (573) 882-4225, or [hartJL@missouri.edu](mailto:hartJL@missouri.edu). You may contact the Campus Institutional Review Board if you have questions about your rights, concerns, complaints or comments as a research participant. You can contact the Campus Institutional Review Board directly by telephone or email to voice or solicit any concerns, questions, input or complaints about the research study.

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I look forward to hearing from you soon!

## Appendix B

### Semi Structured Interview Protocol

#### Interview #1

- Tell me a little about yourself.
- Tell me about your family's educational background?
- What motivated you to go to college?
- How did you arrive at the decision to attend Mizzou?
- Is Mizzou different than your home community? If so, how?
- How do you define your race?
- How do you define/describe your gender?
- How are you paying to attend Mizzou? (scholarship, financial aid, loans, out of pocket, etc.)
- Why did you enter Mizzou as an undeclared major?
- How did you choose your current major? Have you changed your major?
- What are your career aspirations?

#### Interview #2

- Describe your transition to Mizzou (academically, socially, etc.)
- How has this transition changed from your first year until now?
- What is your assessment of the campus climate?
- How have you responded to racism on campus?
- Tell me about an experience dealing with racism.
- Did you participate in any demonstrations on campus? Why or why not?
- Before you defined your race as ... and your gender as ... how have your experiences at Mizzou influence these understandings of your identity?
- Have you had an experience with a course that has helped you establish your sense of gender? Race?
- Do you feel apart of the Mizzou community? If so, when did this occur? If not, why?
- What social support systems do you use at Mizzou? How are they different than home? (ex. friends, family, staff)
- What systems of institutional support have you used thus far to matriculate through college? (ex. tutoring, counseling)
- What does that system of support look like for Black males? What does that system of support look like for you?
- What student organizations, extracurricular activities or service projects have you been involved in?
- What role has these organizations or activities played in your college experience?
- How do you define masculinity? How would you explain your masculinity? (refer to page 40)

- How has the peer pressures of masculinity influenced some of the decisions you've made during your college career?
- What factors have contributed to your persistence through college thus far?
- What challenges have you faced during your college career? How did you overcome them?
- How would you describe your overall college experience thus far?

### Interview #3

- What would you have changed about your college experience thus far? Why?
- How has your identity as a Black male evolved throughout your collegiate career?
- Would you have chosen to attend a different institution other than Mizzou? Why?
- Would you have chosen a different major other than your current one? Why?
- Have your experiences at Mizzou been different than your initial perception of college?
- What do you think a Black male needs to be successful at Mizzou?
- Where do you see yourself post graduation?
- Is there anything else I haven't covered that you would like to share?

## VITA

Jonathan A. McElderry was born in Richmond, VA. He attended George Mason University where he completed a Bachelor of Science in Administration of Justice in 2006. He later earned a Masters of Education in College Student Personnel in 2011 at Ohio University. Currently, he serves as the Director of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center at the University of Missouri where he oversees the operation and function of the center.