

“IT’S ABOUT JUST STAYING FOCUSED”:
HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN
PERSIST AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,
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“IT’S ABOUT JUST STAYING FOCUSED”:
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PERSIST AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION

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Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Chapter One - Introduction and Literature Review.....	1
Chapter Two – Method.....	27
Chapter Three – Results.....	34
Chapter Four – Discussion.....	50
References.....	57
Appendix A – Informed Consent.....	63
Appendix B – Script Read Prior to Each Interview.....	65
Appendix C – Demographic Questionnaire.....	66
Appendix D – Interview Protocol.....	68
Appendix E – Domain and Category Table.....	69
Appendix F – Vita.....	70

Chapter One

Literature review

Many students leave colleges and universities prior to finishing their degrees each year. A number of scholars have constructed models explaining student attrition, or its converse, student persistence.

Tinto's theory of college student departure

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure is a widely recognized and often referenced explanation for college student attrition. Many studies testing the validity of this model exist in journals of higher education and student affairs (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Because of its wide influence, understanding the basic tenets of this theory is crucial to any examination of retention. At its core, Tinto's (1993) model asserts that students' departure from college is a function of the interplay of personal attributes and skills, previous life and educational experiences, dispositions, and the social and academic systems of the institution of higher learning. The theory purports that the interaction of these elements over time determines whether students will become integrated into the social and academic systems of the institution, which in turn predicts retention.

Tinto's interactionist model of student departure is based on the sociological theories of Durkheim (1951) and Van Gennep (1960). The underlying premise of the model suggests that colleges are institutions composed of systems – both academic and social, and formal and informal. Therefore, in order for students to succeed they must become sufficiently integrated into the academic or social system, if not both. The means of integration can be (and most often are) formal, informal, or both, but integration is an

essential component of retention. The achievement of As, Bs, and Cs and having positive interactions with college faculty and staff are examples of formal and informal institutional interactions that lead to successful academic integration. Having a cadre of supportive classmates-as-friends or being heavily involved in extracurricular activities would be examples of informal and formal social interactions that promote successful social integration. According to the theory, the social and academic systems of college are intertwined, and events in one system can affect events in the other over time. In short, “the lower the degree of one’s social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure” (Tinto, 1993, p. 116).

The theory holds that a number of factors affect students’ integration into the systems of higher education, including students’ dispositions, expectations, and motivations. According to the theory, students’ expectations and motivations are best measured by their goals/intentions and their commitments. Students’ goals indicate what their activities and behaviors are directed towards, while their motivations are exemplified by their willingness to work towards those goals. Tinto’s theory asserts that differences between students’ motivations and goals help explain the difference between students who are less integrated choose to leave college, while others persist until graduation. Negative experiences with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the university serve to weaken intentions and commitments; positive interactions serve to enhance intentions and commitments. Tinto notes specifically that positive interactions with faculty and staff result in students believing that the institution is highly committed to student welfare, which decreases student departure.

Family and community backgrounds and individual personality characteristics also affect students' abilities to become integrated into the social and academic systems, according to the theory. Personal attributes such as race, sex, and ability status as well as socioeconomic status, skill level, and previous educational background affect students' goals and intentions, which also affects departure. Similarly, depending on the degree of students' participation in external communities outside of the college, their ability to integrate into the social and academic systems of college may be compromised. Relationships and events in these external communities may influence departure by exerting pressure on students away from the direction of college systems. The theory asserts that the interdependence and reciprocity of all these systems and attributes converge to affect student integration and subsequently student departure.

In the 1993 revision of his theory, Tinto discussed nuances that may affect departure among students of color at predominately white educational institutions (PWIs). Social integration is tethered to students' membership or affiliation with the campus community as a whole and with smaller communities on the campus. A diversity of communities or niches may exist at larger institutions; however, some communities are closer to the larger, mainstream campus community while others exist more toward the periphery. As such, membership in mainstream or peripheral communities may have different effects on student departure. "Generally speaking, the closer one's community is to the center of the system, the stronger the forces which bind the individual to the institution generally" (Tinto, 1993, p. 123). This would suggest that students who are more assimilated into the larger dominant campus community are less likely to leave

college prior to graduation. However, the theory also asserts that smaller communities, both formal and informal, may provide stability for first year students of color at PWIs.

Astin's theory of student involvement

Using his Input-Environment-Output theory of college student development as a framework, Astin (1996) posited that the greater the level of involvement among undergraduate students, the more likely they are to learn and be successful in college. Involvement is defined as “the amount of time and physical and psychological energy that the student invests in the learning process” (p. 588). According to the theory, the three most influential types of involvement are academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with peers. This theory further asserts that involvement with peer groups, as well as the specific characteristics of those peer groups, has a huge impact on student success. Astin found that student-faculty involvement was positively associated with every academic attainment outcome, including college GPA, degree attainment, and graduating with honors. Astin also found that students' relationship with peers is positively correlated with interpersonal skills, critical thinking and analytical skills, cultural awareness, growth in leadership abilities, and satisfaction with college. Student-student relationships were also found to be negatively associated with feeling depressed (Astin, 1993). Thus, the more students interact with positive, supportive peers and faculty, the more likely they are to become involved and enjoy their college experience, which ultimately increases the likelihood of retention (Astin, 1996).

A psychological model of student persistence

Similar to Tinto, Bean and Eaton (2000, 2001) posited a model of student retention that asserts students' backgrounds affect the way they view and interact with

institutions of higher learning, which in turn affects their retention or departure. This model uses the connection between four psychological theories to explain student departure. The relationships between the four theories are analogous to Tinto's understanding of integration as the interplay between the student and the environmental systems. Bean and Eaton cite Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) attitude-behavior theory that links beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. "Over time, beliefs lead to attitudes, which lead to intentions, which lead to behavior" (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 50). Feedback loops based on that behavior serve to reinforce and change beliefs, and those four factors in tandem influence future behavior. Testing this hypothesis related to student retention, the authors found that intention to leave college was the best predictor of actual departure. As such, a fundamental aspect of this model is students' attitudes towards leaving college prior to graduation.

The second psychological theory underpinning this model is the idea of coping behavioral theory. Bean and Eaton (2000) define coping as "the collection of behaviors an individual uses in order to adapt" (p. 51). Students adapt to the stressors of being in a new environment through a number of ways, and the students who successfully cope with those difficulties are more likely to have reduced stress and positive outcomes. Those students will thus acquire an attitude of successful adjustment and are therefore most likely to graduate. Students who use *approach* behaviors of coping focus on and aggressively respond to stressors, while those who use *avoidance* behaviors of coping passively attempt to avert the stressor. Not surprisingly, the theory asserts that academic and social approach behaviors are more likely to promote integration into the academic and social integration into the institution of higher learning.

The authors use Bandura's (1986, 1997) self-efficacy theory as the third psychological theory upon which their theory of retention is based. Self-efficacy can be defined as individuals' belief in their ability to manage a particular situation based on past experience and observation. Related to students, the authors discuss academic and social self-efficacy as helping inform our understanding of students' confidence and motivation to persist in college. "As the individual recognizes his/her competence and gains in self-confidence, that individual will demonstrate higher aspirations for persistence, task achievement, and personal goals" (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 52). Thus a strong sense of self-efficacy is necessary for student persistence and retention.

Weiner's model of attribution related to locus of control is the fourth theory Bean and Eaton cite as a basis for their psychological explanation of student retention. According to Weiner, those who believe in an internal locus of control attribute outcomes to personal, internal attributes such as aptitude or skill; individuals with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to factors outside of their control such as fate or luck. Related to student retention and integration specifically, the authors argue that students with an internal locus of control are more likely to exert the effort to perform well academically and find a supportive social community since they see both those outcomes as being under their control.

Using this theory to examine student retention, Bean and Eaton (2000) assert that students' individual characteristics related to these four theories serve as the basis for their experience. When students enter college and face the associated stressors, they will react based partially on their past experiences. Students will select strategies to deal those stressors, and depending on the outcome of those strategies, they will develop an

approach to dealing with academic and social situations in college. Those students who ultimately persist will have gained a sense of positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increase efficacy, and an internal locus of motivation. These internal processes reinforce themselves through continual feedback, and academic and social integration results, leading to the by-product of retention and persistence. In this way, “retention rates are the collective result of individual decisions” of students based on their individual view of the world (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 73).

Expanding further on his research, Bean (2005) identified nine themes that help predict student retention. Related to student attitudes and intentions, three themes emerged: 1) students’ intentions, 2) institutional fit and loyalty, and 3) psychological processes and key attitudes. The key attitudes and psychological processes comprise the basis of the psychological model of student persistence. Bean identified six other themes related to students’ interactions with the educational institution and their external environment: 1) academics refers academic acumen as well as social and emotional intelligence, 2) social factors, including support from family and student peers, 3) bureaucratic factors relating to students’ experiences dealing with institutional offices, 4) the external environment, 5) students’ background, including demographic descriptors, and 6) money and finances. According to Bean (2005), institutions that act on these themes may significantly alter their retention and persistence rates.

The role of social support in retention among African American students at PWIs

A large body of research suggests that most African American students experience difficulties while attending PWIs. The most serious of these problems include isolation, alienation, and lack of support (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Kulkken,

Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004; Himelhoch, Nichols, Ball, & Black, 1997). Studies of social integration at large, state universities that educate the majority of these students may help elucidate the issues many African American students face at PWIs. Examining the social integration of students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Morley (2003) identified six racial dynamics that hindered African American and other students of color attending a PWI in their quest for social integration. The role of family life, the presumption of greater social comfort with students of the same racial/ethnic group, assumptions of monolithic racial characteristics, the pervasiveness of White culture, the campus' pursuit of a color-blind society, and the overrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos among weaker students all served to weaken these students' social adjustment and integration into the university community. The role of family life presented a challenge for these students as they experienced more tension maintaining connections to both the campus community and their families of origin than did White students. Assumptions that phenotypic racial attributes translated into greater comfort with students who looked like them was also another challenge these students of color faced. This was most prevalent for African American, Asian American, and Latino students who were reared in predominately white communities. The assumption that they would feel more comfortable around their same race peers was problematic and undermined their sense of belonging in the predominately White and racial/ethnic student communities. In fact, the results indicated that these students of color did not receive substantial support from their same race peers, in part due to racial/ethnic essentialism, or the belief in a monolithic racial or ethnic experience (Harris, 1990). The assumptions that African American and Latino students were less qualified to attend the university were

tangible in how their professors and peers interacted with them. Their White peers often behaved in ways that betrayed an assumption of competition for resources, which led African American and Latino students to feel even less accepted. These negative factors were identified as detrimental to academic and social integration for African American and other students of color, and were counterproductive to their work towards persisting at a PWI.

A study of African American college seniors' experiences of university life at a large, public research university uncovered five interrelated themes that characterized students' interactions with the PWI campus community. In the voice of their participants, Davis et al. (2004) described the essence of the challenges these students faced as racial minorities at a PWI:

Unfairness, sabotage, and condescension are everyday occurrences in the white world in which I live at the university. In order to connect with students, faculty, administrators, and others on and around campus, I must be the one to initiate interaction, and I must also prove I am worthy as a student or friend. I am continuously made aware of how different I am, especially when I am the only black student in class. Life is full of opposites: I feel as if I am seen as the same as other blacks by many whites, yet I often feel different from other black students. Perhaps the most common experience I have is one of extremes: Either I am invisible or I am the opposite—I am supervisible [sic] (p. 436).

In addition, these students experienced blatant and subtle incidents of racial discrimination, the constant onus of initiating connection with peers and professional

staff alike, feelings of isolation, and stereotype threat (Davis et al., 2004). While all these students ultimately persisted and graduated from the institution, the challenges they faced often made that accomplishment seem like an unobtainable goal.

Social support has been found to be a strong predictor of persistence among African American students. Same-race peers are also important for African American students feeling comfortable at PWIs, as their family members may not fully understand their experiences of students in higher education (Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999). Peer support is but one form of social support that can occur on college campuses. Supportive relationships with faculty have been shown to positively effect students (Tinto, 1993). Students who perceived faculty as encouraging have been shown to have higher academic self-concept and academic motivation than those with negative perceptions of faculty encouragement (Cokley, 2000). Feeling supported by peers, faculty, and staff positively affects African Americans attending PWIs. Peer social support has also been hypothesized as helping African American and Latino students feel more comfortable at PWIs (Constantine et al., 2002).

Social support has been linked to retention and persistence as well as academic success among African American male and female students in numerous studies. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that interactions with peers and faculty play independent and positive roles in student persistence and educational attainment. In a comparative study of African American and Caucasian students at a PWI, Mallinckrodt (1988) found that social support was important in the retention of both groups, but that for African American students social support from the campus community appeared to be

crucial to their persistence. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman, Fischer (2007) found that for African Americans and other students of color, having greater involvement in formal social activities such as student organizations and clubs was positively associated with GPA. Not surprisingly, having more formal and informal social ties to the campus positively affected students' level of satisfaction with college. African American and Latino students with more ties to professors tended to have more positive ratings of college satisfaction. Based on the results of a comparative study of African American students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and PWIs and Caucasians students at PWIs, Watson and Kuh (1996) found that African American students perceived less support and encouragement from the faculty and staff than did their counterparts at HBCUs. A campus climate perceived as supportive also appears to be key to African American student persistence. Fischer (2007) found that African Americans had the most negative perceptions of campus racial climate by far when compared to their peers of other races/ethnicities, and that students with more negative perceptions of the college racial environment were more likely to leave. Thus, creating a campus that supports and nurtures student development and diversity is important to increasing the numbers of African American graduates.

Involvement in student organizations appears to play a special role in the persistence of African American college students. African American students tended to be more involved in campus organizations than their peers of all races and ethnicities (Fischer, 2007; Watson & Kuh, 1996). Fischer (2007) also found that African Americans students tend to associate with same-race peers more than all other demographic groups. Thus, the presence of other African Americans at PWIs appears to be a major source of

support for these students. In a study of African American students at a PWI, 90% of the sample felt strongly that there was a need for a black community on campus that provided programs supportive of their academic, cultural, and social interests (Person & Christensen, 1996). The study also found that African American-oriented student organizations played a critical role in the lives of African American students. For African American students, greater involvement in extracurricular activities decreased the likelihood of leaving college by more than 83% (Fischer, 2007).

In a study of African American students attending a PWI, Guiffrida (2003) found that African American student organizations facilitated cultural connections and social integration into the university community. Specifically, these student organizations helped African American students establish professional and out-of-class relationships with African American faculty, provided them with an organized outlet for service to the African American community, and provided them comfort through the opportunity to interact with their same-race peers. This study further expanded on the unique ways that student organizations assisted in making African American students feel safer on the campus of a PWI. A frequent component of African American student organizations is community service. Giving back to the community helped facilitate meaningful connections with other African American students, and thus assisted in facilitating social integration into the PWI. Further, African American student organizations provide comfort to African American students by allowing them to connect with others with similar interests, providing a space for students to let their guards down and be themselves, affording students an outlet to express their frustrations related to attending a PWI, socialize in familiar ways, and to not have to alter their behavior in order to avoid

stereotyping. Also, African American student organizations help some African American students from predominately white hometowns to learn to relate comfortably with their peers of the same race (Guiffrida, 2003). The aforementioned research substantiates Ford-Edwards' (2004) findings that getting involved within the campus, developing and maintaining in and out-of-classroom relationships with faculty and staff, and the presence of other successful Black students are the most influential in promoting African American student retention.

African American men in college

Recent statistics suggest that male participation in higher education is declining, especially among African American men. According to the U.S. Department of Education, men accounted for only 35.7% of all African American undergraduate students and 29% of African American graduate students in 2004 (the latest year for which statistics are available) (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). In fact, the difference between female and male undergraduate enrollments was larger among African Americans than any other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Only 26.5% of all 18- to 24-year-old African American men were enrolled in institutions of higher learning versus 36.6% of all African American women the same age. Degree attainment figures are similar, as only 33% of all bachelor's degrees conferred to African Americans during that year were awarded men while the remaining 67% were awarded to African American women (KewalRamani et al., 2007). These figures suggest African American men attempt and attain bachelor's degrees at much lower levels than their female counterparts.

According to Cuyjet (1997), “Whatever the reasons for their relatively low numbers, those black men who do arrive on the campus may need some special nurturing to help them adjust and adapt to the collegiate community” (p. 7). Given the disparity between African American men and women, as well as between African American men and men of other racial/ethnic identities, it would appear that African American male students face unique challenges to degree attainment. Cuyjet (1997) cites research that appears to substantiate this assertion. Responses from a study of college students indicate that African American men may come to college with less well-developed study skills, and may be less likely to confer with classmates about course content. Further, fewer African American men reported financial support from parents or others than any other demographic group. Davis (1999) found that “Black males in general—regardless of the type of college they attend—have unique needs for social support...” (p. 146). Cultural congruity may be a specific challenge facing African American male students attending a PWI. Davis (1999) asserted that African American male students at PWIs may be more likely to face adjustment issues than African American males attending HBCUs. The aforementioned Cuyjet (1997) study revealed that African American males sought more support from friends dealing with challenges than African American females. The difficulties African American male students face appear to negatively affect persistence and ultimately may make degree completion extremely difficult.

The problem of African American male student achievement is well documented. Some researchers have sought to uncover institutional and individual factors to mitigate the aforementioned challenges in order to increase persistence among African American men. However, surprisingly little empirical research exists about African American male

student persistence in college. Some evidence shows that college-wide interventions have had significant positive effects on the retention and persistence of African American male college students. A study of African American male retention at community colleges in Texas revealed that “the strategies that differentiate institutions in the top quartile from institutions in the bottom quartile include freshman-only advising, orientation courses for credit, required tutorial programs and meetings with advisors for certain at-risk students, monitoring of at-risk student attendance, and targeting minority groups with specific retention plans” (Glenn, 2003, p. 190). The same study revealed that a helpful, understanding faculty, counseling services that are advertised and utilized, and a friendly, inclusive student body all positively influence African American male student retention (Glenn, 2003). Student engagement is also often cited as positively affecting persistence and retention. Bowie (2006) found that African American males who persist at PWIs are more likely to be engaged in the campus community (including organizations, peers, and campus professionals) and with the learning process. Having access to information, be that library and research resources or campus support services, is an important factor in African American males’ persistence at a PWI (Bowie, 2006). These findings suggest that PWIs can implement a variety of strategies to help African American male students attenuate the challenges they face in persisting.

Quality mentoring programs have also achieved success in increasing African American male persistence and improving graduation rates. According to LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs (1997),

Application of mentoring proves to be an effective tool in providing the support necessary to overcome the barriers that prevent many African

American men from successfully completing college. Mentoring is vital in contributing to the survival and empowering of African American men, and it also enhances their ability to make plausible gains in the higher education milieu (p. 52).

Harris (2007) studied the effects of mentorship on African American male undergraduate students in their junior and senior years at a PWI. The respondents indicated believing that mentors were beneficial in helping African American male students persist towards graduation. Additionally, these men also indicated that they persisted and were able to navigate at a PWI due to their successful academic and social integration, specifically, through developing relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and joining student organizations. In addition, these African American males used their mentor relationship to overcome many academic and social challenges that arose at a PWI. Institutions appear to have some agency in increasing the numbers of African American male students who persist and continue to pursue their education through until graduation.

A number of studies have also examined personal characteristics that lead to retention and persistence among African American male students. Demographic markers appear to have effects of the persistence of African American male students. A study of African American males in community colleges found that being younger and a full-time student increased the likelihood of persistence. Similarly, the study found that level of parental education and high school GPA were significant predictors of persistence among African American male students (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001). The support of peers is another factor that positively affects persistence among African American male students. In a study by Hood (1992) of academic and non-cognitive factors that

influence African American male retention at a PWI, African American male undergraduate students reported that contact with other African American male students provided their primary support network and connection to the university. African American male undergraduate students reported that along with their own self-motivation, the encouragement and support of family members was instrumental in their persistence (Harris, 2007).

Several internal attributes, including the perception of social support, have been found to positively affect persistence among African American male undergraduates. Reviewing the literature related to African American male undergraduate student achievement, Monk (1998) found that numerous factors were associated with their academic success. The majority of these are personal, non-cognitive factors, including: high levels of educational aspirations, self-confidence, being in control of academic outcomes, academic self-concept, self-esteem, self-concept of ability, and low levels of alienation, reliance on family and institutions to solve social and academic problems. African American male undergraduates who received encouragement from family and other role models were also more likely to achieve academic success. Additionally, satisfaction with the campus environment and institutional support were found to be the institutional variables associated with academic success. Endecavage (2000) found that African American male college graduates highly endorsed items related to self-esteem and personal empowerment, and experienced a great amount of social support from parents, mentors, and others. Conversely, when asked about the high rate of academic dismissal of their same-race and gender peers, these men cited allowing situations (e.g., being the only African American person in a class) to “get to them”, not taking college

seriously until too late, and not getting help such as counseling and/or tutoring when needed as the reasons why many other African American male students do not succeed in college (Hood, 1992). Having instrumental support from college faculty and staff was also a major correlate of satisfaction with college for African American men in particular (Brown, 2000). These findings suggest that perceptions of social support and other personal, non-cognitive variables play a key factor in African American male student persistence.

Psychosocial issues of African American men who have sex with men

Because we live in a society that is often hostile towards homosexuality, individuals who identify as non-heterosexual often face issues of discrimination, internalized homophobia, and shame throughout their lives (Allen & Oleson, 1999). This issue is exacerbated for African American men who have sex with men (AAMSM) who experience racism as well as heterosexism and homonegativity (Peterson, 1992). Throughout the past three decades, research on the psychosocial issues AAMSM face has been sporadic, with the bulk of that research examining these men's sexual behaviors rather their social and emotional experiences. AAMSM typically experience internal conflict between internalized cultural expectations of masculinity rejecting same-sex sexual activities, in addition to racism and homonegativity (Williams, Wyatt, Resell, Peterson, & Asuan-O'Brien, 2004). In one of the first empirical studies examining this population, AAMSM who primarily identified with the African American community and whose sexual orientation was common knowledge to others were found to experience or anticipate experiencing partial rejection by other African Americans (Johnson, 1982).

Further, non-heterosexual African American men often experience ambivalent support from the white gay community due to racism (Greene, 1994).

Many factors within the African American community typically pose additional challenges for non-heterosexual African American men and women. African Americans “are substantially more religious than whites, more likely to be fundamentalist Protestants, and more likely to believe in a God who sends misfortunes as punishments” (Lewis, 2003, p. 66). For years, African American ministers have delivered the message that HIV and AIDS were a punishment for homosexuality (Washington & Wall, 2006). More generally, findings consistently document that religiosity and conservative religious views are associated with negative views towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people (Schulte & Battle, 2004). “Traditional religions such as Islam or Christianity have a major influence in the Black community, even if the individual members do not participate or practice” (Washington & Wall, 2006, p. 182). Involvement in church often provides AAMSM with a healthy racial self-concept, while also triggering internal conflicts about their moral and racial behavior (Green, 2007). Regardless of their personal religiosity or whether they grew up in all-black communities, it is nearly impossible for AAMSM to escape the rules, mores, and attitudes of those communities. Religious condemnation of homosexuality in the community is apart of that legacy, and typically makes indelible marks on AAMSM (Harris, 2003).

Religion is but one of the many reasons AAMSM may perceive the African American community as hostile towards homosexuality. Non-heterosexual African Americans generally view the African American community as extremely homophobic (Greene, 1994). Research indicates that after controlling for education, income, and

religion, African Americans remain more likely to condemn homosexuality than whites (Lewis, 2003).

Strongly defined gender roles within the African American community also present problems for African American lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals. Certain behaviors, mannerisms, and gestures are rigidly associated with a particular gender and, if exhibited by the other gender, are ridiculed (Jones & Hill, 1996, p. 553).

African American gay and gender non-conforming males are subject to ridicule, marginalization, and abuse by their classmates in urban high schools (McCready, 2004). AAMSM frequently experience conflict between the masculinity norms prevalent with the African American community that are in stark opposition to their same-sex sexual activities (Williams et al., 2004). The dominant dialogue about this subject suggests that being a gay or bisexual man is incongruent with being African American. For example, noted African American psychologist Daudi Azibo (1989) and psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing (1991) suggested that AAMSM are “culturally misoriented” and their sexuality is a result of overreliance on European ideologies. Similarly, Marlon Riggs’s (1995) film *Black Is, Black Ain’t...* elucidates some of these cultural issues with Molefi Asante (the founding theorist of Afrocentricity) proclaiming that to be homosexual is not to be authentically African. Despite these negative factors, research indicates that being connected to African American communities is paramount for AAMSM in order to best cope with the omnipresent racism in American society (Crawford et al., 2002; Icard, 1986; Loiciano, 1989).

In addition to the homonegative views of the black community, many AAMSM also encounter difficulty navigating the largely white gay community. “For many black gays, the gay community is a foreign world, a world that reflects the values and customs of that segment of the larger white society” (Icard, 1986, p. 90). African American gay and bisexual men often experience ambivalent support from the white gay community (Greene, 1994). A study of urban gay youth found that non-heterosexuals of African descent were involved in fewer gay-related social and recreational activities, possibly due to racism (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Often AAMSM seek support and safety from discrimination in gay communities, but find safety elusive. In a study of AAMSM in urban environments, Green (2007) found that for AAMSM, “the promise of urban gay communities was often compromised in the face of racism, Eurocentric aesthetic standards, and ultimately, new forms of marginality. For those minority men, racial difference posed a formidable obstacle to self-repair and social integration” (p. 764). AAMSMs’ experiences in predominately white, gay social spaces often lead to further feelings of marginalization (Boykin, 1996).

The result of the psychosocial stressors AAMSM face often leads to deleterious consequences. Scholars frequently argue that experiences of homophobia and heterosexism within the African American community and racism within the gay community lead to a diminished sense of self worth among non-heterosexual African Americans (Icard, 1986; Jones & Hill, 1996), as well as feelings of guilt and shame and the tendency to engage in self-destructive behaviors (McLean, 2003; Washington & Wall, 2006).

Homophobia projected by the black church directly damages black gay men through an impact that might best be understood as spiritual genocide. It takes much inner strength, self-esteem, psychic vigilance and social support to...resist the overwhelming tide of a culture that continually surrounds the gay male with the subtle message that he is not a man, and thereby not even a person (Ward, 2005, p. 500).

Icard (1986) argues that historically non-heterosexual African Americans have received harsher treatment from society than their white peers. "To a certain extent, all gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals deal with internalized oppression, but it is particularly for African Americans. It inhibits a person's ability to combat a frequently hostile, homophobic, and racist environment" (Jones & Hill, 1996, p. 550).

In order to protect themselves from further marginalization and isolation, many AAMSM attempt to find a place in which they can feel comfortable to freely express themselves. Being rooted in both LGB and African American communities promotes optimal emotional health for AAMSM (Crawford et al., 2002). AAMSM create safe spaces with others who share the same racial and sexual identities by bringing together groups of men to provide emotional support (Edwards, 1996; Wilson & Miller, 2002). In many cases, these groups become surrogate families that provide the emotional support that biological family members were unwilling or unable to provide. AAMSM often find having a separate space for themselves affords an opportunity to receive empathy and support in unique ways (Wilson & Miller, 2002).

African American men who have sex with men on predominately white campuses

Understanding the issues AAMSM face at PWIs is important in understanding the

experience of AAMSM in higher education, since three-fourths of all African Americans are educated at large, public PWIs (“Black student,” 2007). Being an AAMSM on the campus of a PWI would seem to be a difficult proposition. For many students, college is a time wrought with angst associated with transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Adding the complexities of being multiple minorities likely compounds AAMSM’s experience of psychological duress during this critical life stage. AAMSM, like most college students, often have little scholarly information about sexual orientation, and thus are plagued with misinformation. This lack of knowledge can often lead to low self-esteem and identity confusion (Washington & Wall, 2006). Additionally, feelings of marginalization are also frequently associated with being a minority student at a PWI. This may have particular salience for AAMSM attending PWIs. Mobley (2000) articulates this phenomenon, stating AAMSM

...may recognize that they possess cultural identities (that) are devalued by many students, staff, and faculty in the predominantly white academy. Indeed, many university and college campuses promote and reflect a strong hegemonic, white male, majority heterosexual orientation in the life and heart of the institutions, both inside and outside the classroom (p. 180).

As such, these students may feel a particular sense of “otherness” due to their multiple minority statuses. Additionally, pervasive stereotypes about the intellectual abilities of African American males may also contribute to these students’ feelings of marginalization within PWIs (Mobley, 2000). Identifying other AAMSM at a PWI is

often difficult, so these students are prone to feelings of intense loneliness and isolation (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996).

Though commonly perceived to be liberal environments, most college and university campuses are unfriendly towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (Connolly, 2000). Campuses as a whole and classroom environments in specific can be particularly unwelcoming for AAMSM. As Connolly (2000) notes:

Despite a long-held and pervasive belief that the traditional college classroom is an equal opportunity environment, it excludes members of social target groups, such as women, persons of color, people with disabilities, and lesbians and gays, and privileges members of dominant social groups (for example, Whites, men, able-bodied persons, heterosexuals) whose background and prior schooling may be most similar to established norms (p. 112).

AAMSM at PWIs, in addition to being a sexual minority, also face the challenge of racism. As noted by Harris (2003), unlike white non-heterosexual men, AAMSM do not have white privilege to protect them.

In the U.S., education is frequently viewed as Eurocentric and biased against many groups, including people of color, people with disabilities, and sexual minorities, and thus may lead members of those groups to see themselves as less desirable (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). Social class may be another identity factor that contributes to AAMSM feeling different on the campus of PWIs (Washington & Wall, 2006). PWIs may highlight their attention to multiculturalism, but AAMSM may not experience the campuses as diverse. Washington and Wall (2006) note that for

AAMSM, navigating a campus climate where the experience of race and sexual orientation politics are not aligned is often very challenging. As such, these students may feel a particular sense of “otherness” due to their multiple minority statuses. All of these issues are often complicated by the lack of programming to address the issues of AAMSM at PWIs (Harris, 2003).

Building relationships with same-race peers can also be challenging for AAMSM attending at PWI. In a study of AAMSM attending a PWI, many of these students reported frequently having to leave black student functions because of the homophobic behavior of other African American male students as well as the negative messages about non-heterosexuals that are present in rap music (Harris, 2003). Beyond connecting with the campus African American community in general, AAMSM may experience difficulty identifying and connecting with other AAMSM on campus. Popular notions of “men on the DL (down low)” also make it difficult for AAMSM on college campus to identify as non-heterosexual, as the DL man is often cited as the culprit in spreading HIV and AIDS to African American women (Washington & Wall, 2006). The “down low” or “DL” phenomenon is particularly damaging to AAMSM at PWIs since it inhibits their ability to build community among AAMSM on campus. This may be exacerbated by a paucity of visible, self-identified AAMSM professors and administrators on campus, which may be interpreted as meaning that being open about one’s sexuality is unacceptable for professionals (Washington & Wall, 2006). Research is inconclusive about whether AAMSM being secretive about their same-sex sexual positively affects their ability to bond with heterosexual men of color. However, it is certain that being on the DL does not promote bonding among AAMSM on campus, and thus diminishes students’ ability

to support each other (Harris, 2003). Class issues are also relevant to AAMSM on campuses, as AAMSM from poor and working-class backgrounds are more likely to be connected to an African American non-heterosexual community than those from middle-class urban or rural areas (Washington & Wall, 2006). Thus, it appears those students who are not connected a community of AAMSM in their home towns may have difficulty connecting with AAMSM on the campus of a PWI, and also may face challenges being involved with the campus African American community.

Purpose

In sum, African American men graduate from institutions of higher learning at rates far less than their white male and black female counterparts. AAMSM may also experience an inordinate amount of stress related to racism, homophobia and heterosexism, and lack of social supports while attending PWIs. Given the difficulties they may face at PWIs, their ways of finding social support, approaching difficulties, and ultimately persisting until graduation provide an example of resiliency and coping. Understanding their experiences and decision-making is critical for increasing the likelihood of persistence among other AAMSM, other sexual minority students and students of color. Thus, this study focused on AAMSM who were in their final year of undergraduate study, who participated in an earlier study examining the challenges AAMSM face because of their multiple minority statuses at a PWI, or both. Specifically, this study examined students' perceptions of how race and sexual orientation influenced their experiences at a PWI, as well as the effects of student involvement and university provided resources on persistence.

Chapter Two

Method

The aim of this study is to examine the behavioral factors of AAMSM that influence persistence at a PWI. In order to fully understand this phenomenon and these students' experiences, the researcher employed consensual qualitative research (CQR) as the method of inquiry. CQR employs multiple researchers working to arrive a consensus about their understanding of a particular phenomenon (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The essential components of CQR include the use of: (1) open-ended interview questions; (2) several data analysts to foster multiple perspectives; (3) consensus in making meaning of the data; (4) at least one data auditor to increase the accuracy and validity of the analysis; and (5) domains, core ideas, and cross-analyses in the data analysis (Hill et al., 2005).

Participants

Interviewees. This study is focused on African American male juniors and seniors enrolled in a public, Midwestern PWI enrolling approximately 21,000 undergraduate students. Just over 500 non-Hispanic black male undergraduates attend the university. Interviewees were not required to identify themselves as gay or bisexual, but rather only as having engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors. Only participants who identified as African American, black or biracial were invited to participate. The students ranged in age from 20 to 22, with seven interviewees being seniors and one a junior. Five of the eight men described their sexual orientation as "gay," two described their sexual orientation as "bisexual," and one labeled himself as "homosexual."

The number of gay men and lesbians has been estimated by various sources as ranging between 1 and 13 percent of the U.S. population (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000). Given those prevalence rates, the total population of non-Hispanic black undergraduate male students at this institution was estimated to range between 5 and 68 students.

Research team. The primary researcher for this study is a self-identified same-gender-loving African American male doctoral candidate in counseling psychology. The primary researcher interviewed all the informants in the study. Two counseling psychology doctoral students, one African American female and one Caucasian male, both in long-term heterosexual relationships, served with the author as judges for the data coding tasks. A fourth researcher, a married woman of African descent and licensed counseling psychologist, served as data auditor.

Researcher biases and expectations

Understanding researcher expectations and biases is important in evaluating qualitative research since their personal perspectives may influence the collection and interpretation of the data (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The primary researcher in this study is an African American same-gender-loving male who attended PWIs for his undergraduate and graduate work. As such, he experienced being a member of the group currently being studied, which informs and potentially influences his perspective of the phenomenon. His undergraduate degree in sociology and African American studies and his master's and doctoral training in counseling psychology have also shaped the ways he experiences being a member of the two intersecting marginalized groups being examined. Additionally, the primary researcher has worked in student affairs-related positions

during his graduate training, and plans to pursue a career in that field. Hence, his approach may have been informed by the desire to identify factors that promote resilience among AAMSM and create interventions to assist marginalized groups persist and graduate from PWIs. The other two data coders' biases and prior experiences were explored extensively during the initial CQR methodology training prior to analyzing the data. The coders' expectations of the respondents' experiences were also used to facilitate discussion when the research team generated its start list for analysis.

The primary researcher endorses Relational-Cultural theory (RCT), which asserts that feelings of isolation are the source of suffering for most people and that absence of feeling heard by others makes people vulnerable to depression and self-destructive behaviors (Jordan, 2001). According to Comstock and Qin (2005), membership in oppressed and marginalized groups creates obstacles for people to create the honest and authentic relationships that RCT posits are necessary for growth and development. As such, the primary researcher believes that establishing effective relationships is the primary means that AAMSM may protect themselves from the psychological damage that often stems from being discriminated against. The primary researcher also expects that nearly all the informants who persisted ("persisters") at PWIs will have employed approach coping strategies for managing stressors. This may include becoming actively involved in campus career-related, professional, and social activities as well as pursuing extra academic support when needed. The primary researcher also expects that most of the persisters will have fairly high self-efficacy related to their ability to succeed academically and socially at a PWI, and that persisters are likely to endorse beliefs that attribute success to internal attributes over external attributes. These attributes are

hypothesized to aid persisters in building relationships with individuals and institutional organizations that protect them and enable them to feel sufficiently integrated into the academic and social environment at a PWI.

Procedures

Participants

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) is recommended for sample populations of 8-15 participants (Hill et al., 1997; 2005). As mentioned earlier, this study is an extension of previous research about AAMSM attending a PWI. Thus, the primary researcher attempted to contact the four participants from the original study who were juniors or seniors in order to solicit their participation in this study. Of the four students who had not yet graduated, two were still on campus and agreed to participate.

Interviewees were recruited through personal contact by the primary researcher. Because of the primary researcher's previous work on campus and specifically within the AAMSM community, four of the interviewees were personal acquaintances of the primary researcher. The remaining interviewees were recruited via personal contact from the primary researcher. After each interview, the primary researcher solicited names of additional students who might be willing to be interviewed. In this way, the remaining two interviewees were recruited. The seven seniors interviewed represented all but one of the "known" AAMSM in that class, and the sole junior had participated in the previous study two years prior. Participants were each assigned a pseudonym and all identifying information was altered in the interview transcripts to protect their identities.

Informed consent

Participants were provided written informed consent at the beginning of each interview (see Appendix A). The form verified that the participants were at least 18 years of age and informed them of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, the measures the researchers took to ensure anonymity, and how information collected during the study would be used.

Interview format

The primary researcher conducted individual interviews that began with a brief introduction about the global purpose of the study and assuring them of confidentiality (see Appendix B), and participants then completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C). This introduction was followed by a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D). The purpose of the interviews was to explore respondents' perceptions of how their race and sexual orientation influenced their experience at a PWI, any assistance they believed helped them persist, as well as the organizations in which there had been involved during their enrollment at the university. Each interview was conducted by the primary researcher at a private meeting space on campus, and was audio-recorded for transcription. Interviews were audio recorded while the interviewer simultaneously took notes. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were not compensated.

Training the research team

The primary researcher conducted training with the other data analysts during the first research team meeting. Prior to the first meeting, team members were given copies of Hill et al.'s (1997, 2005) articles about the CQR method. The team was also given the

dissertation proposal, including the interview protocol, prior to that meeting. During the first meeting, team members shared their expectations as well as their experiences with AAMSM that may inform their perspectives. Prior to analyzing the first transcript, the primary researcher provided each team member with a notebook in which they were encouraged to journal their emotional and cognitive responses to the transcripts, their opinions, expectations, and potential biases. The data analysts practiced coding portions of transcripts from the first interview to facilitate training and demonstrate the consensual nature of the process. Since the primary researcher and data analysts were all doctoral students in the counseling psychology program, team cohesion occurred rapidly.

Data analysis

Four essential steps comprise the data analysis process in CQR. These include identifying the domains or topics used to group data, summarizing the data into core ideas that capture the essence of what was said, auditing those core ideas, and using a cross-analysis to construct common themes across participants (Hill et al., 1997).

During the preliminary analysis, the research team generated a start list of initial domains they expected to find in the transcripts based on their knowledge of the subject matter. Next, data analysts read each transcript and identified the core ideas of each response. Afterwards, the three analysts met to discuss the core ideas they identified, and come to consensus about the essence of each response. A total of 49 core ideas were identified among the eight cases. Each analyst then generated a summary for each individual transcript, highlighting the specific core ideas contained therein as well as the domains in which those ideas were clustered. The transcripts, list of core ideas, and summaries were then audited. The auditor found that the core ideas had not been

sufficiently delineated, and thus recommended the analysts re-code each transcript and re-argue to consensus each core idea. The analysts re-analyzed each transcript individually and again argued them to consensus. The team then created a group of nine domains under which the core ideas from each transcript could be organized. This second analysis was audited again. The auditor largely agreed with the domains created by the analysts, and made suggestions about the assignment of some core ideas to their domains. Upon receipt of this second audit the research team addressed the auditor's suggestions and began the cross analysis process.

The core ideas within the nine domains were further examined and divided into categories. These categories of core ideas described the experiences of the eight participants more specifically than the domains. During the discovery of these categories, the research team condensed the nine domains into seven. Within the seven domains, a total of 31 categories were identified. As recommended by Hill et al. (1997), categories that are general (meaning that seven or eight of the participants' statements were contained therein), typical (containing responses of five or six participants), or variant (containing responses of two to four participants) were retained. Of the 31 categories, 11 were general, 11 were typical, and nine were variant. These categories remained after the final audit and are listed in Appendix E. The 22 general and typical categories are discussed in the results section.

Chapter Three

Results

Participants' responses were grouped into seven domains, and the 22 general and typical categories within those domains are reported here. The domains are: the decision to attend the university, identity development, environmental characteristics, experiences of prejudice, additional factors that challenge persistence, attitudinal factors that influence persistence, and the role of community and university resources on persistence.

The decision to attend the university

To fully understand why AAMSM persisted at a PWI, it is critical to have an understanding of the reasons they initially chose to attend the institution. Participants reported various reasons for attending, but overwhelmingly the men noted the academic reputation of the school, the programs in their particular majors, or both as the primary reason for their decision to attend the university. All but one of the participants' responses indicated choosing the institution based on their perceptions of the school's academic reputation and believing its reputation would aid them in future. Michael's (21) response was typical of the respondents, "Being a (university) student is one of the best things that I could have done in my life. I feel like it's going to open up so many doors for me." Valuing the education and associated career networking opportunities provided by the PWI was key to the decision to attend, and would seem to be closely related to the decision to stay at the institution.

Identity development

For many of the AAMSM in the study, the PWI campus provided the backdrop for their sexual identity development. A majority of the respondents indicated some

comfort acknowledging themselves as AAMSM on campus, if only to select others.

Indeed, some of the respondents described the campus as their first opportunity to explore their same-sex attractions and build relationships based on that developing identity. Both Derrick (21) and Joshua (21) describe experiences on campus as beneficial to their identity development:

I knew that I had had those feelings before, but I had never really acted on them before...so when I got here, my parents weren't here, I had my own dorm room, so I could kind of do essentially what I wanted... here there was a little bit more people on the field, and so I just, I started to navigate, get a little peek into what that world was like...and then I started to accept it more (Derrick).

I've become more free with it being here just cause I've been able to come up with a lot of friends that are bisexual or homosexual (Joshua).

That these students were able to explore and accept their sexual orientation while attending a PWI suggests that their decision to remain at the institution was related in part to feeling some degree of safety.

Environmental characteristics

How these men perceived the PWI environment seems to be related to their decision to remain enrolled at the university. Students reported feeling comfortable on campus for the most part, effectively creating another home on the campus. The combination of coursework and large campus environment was satisfying, and many of the students reported the PWI was sufficiently welcoming to African American students. Many of the respondents reported initially disliking the institution, but eventually finding

a comfortable space, as exemplified by this response of Anthony (20), “After a year or so I felt a lot more comfortable here, and it feels like my second home. Or sometimes it really feels like my primary home.” The majority of the respondents echoed similar sentiments in their description of the campus environment.

Participants were less favorable in their descriptions of the AAMSM community on campus. The men almost unanimously described the AAMSM community small and segregated from the white gay community. As such, socializing within the group created some unique problems. Because of the small number of men in the community, their relationships among each other created an entangled web of sexual and emotional relationships. The men reported that gossiping, backbiting, and drama were rampant, which resulted in their perception of the AAMSM community as harsh and unsupportive. Derrick discussed his perceptions of lack of positivity among AAMSM, “Instead of us coming together for a positive outcome, like we come together for bad. People get into each other’s business.”

Many of the respondents also perceived a shift among younger members of the campus AAMSM community. These respondents perceived an increase in the number of AAMSM on campus, and these younger students seemed less secretive about their sexual orientation than they had been. Joshua spoke of his impressions of the underclass AAMSM on campus, stating, “We were more closed off to ourselves, not wanting to express our sexuality. I feel like now they’re more like, they don’t care.” Whether or not the population of AAMSM on campus increased, it is likely that the community of underclassmen AAMSM appears to be larger due to the participants perceiving them as

more open about their sexual orientation. In either case, the participants did not report perceiving the AAMSM community on campus as being particularly supportive.

In addition to neutral or negative impressions of the AAMSM community, the majority of participants reported encountering situations that reminded them of their racial minority status at the PWI. The men frequently spoke of being one of few, if not the only, African American student in classes and other settings on campus. Joshua spoke about the need to adjust to being a minority at a PWI, “(University) is something you have to get used to just being a predominantly white school and there not being very many African Americans on campus. It is kind of different being the only African American in most of your classes.”

Given these experiences, it is not surprising that many of these students reported experiencing their racial identity as more salient than their sexual orientation on campus. The respondents dealt with their minority status in various ways, with some choosing to find safety in same-race peer relationships while others resisted being defined solely on the basis of their race. In either case, the respondents all spoke about perceiving themselves as minorities at a PWI.

Experiences of prejudice

In their efforts to persist, participants reported experiencing and coping with racism, and to a lesser extent, homophobia and heterosexism. Nearly all participants reported experiencing and coping with racism on the campus of a PWI, while slightly fewer reported dealing with prejudice based on sexual orientation. The most common form of racial prejudice these students experienced was being stereotyped because of their race and gender. More specifically, these AAMSM told of experiences with white

peers and faculty alike assuming they were student-athletes, had incorrectly enrolled in honors classes, or enjoyed primarily hip hop music. They also reported experiences of both invisibility and hypervisibility, whereby they were sometimes ignored in certain settings on campus or alternately asked to be a spokesperson for all African Americans. Most of the participants reported some discomfort related to their experiences of racism, but most did not believe their experiences to be unique to their location at a PWI. Joe (22) articulated this sentiment saying, “Race and racism is something that you can’t run from, and that’s something you can experience anywhere.”

How these students coped with this omnipresent racism in the context of a PWI is crucial to understanding their persistence. The participants’ responses to their experiences of racism varied, though all involved trying to make the best out of their experiences. In the face of blatant discrimination and prejudice, some respondents attempted to educate others in order to decrease the possibility for future stereotyping. Others tried leveraging being one of a few African Americans in particular settings to their advantage, as indicated by Derrick’s response: “I’ve always used my race to my advantage. I milk the fact that I’m the only black male. I use that to market myself to get jobs.” Regardless of the situation, the AAMSM in this study developed responses to racist or discriminatory situations that assisted and sometimes enhanced their ability to persist at a PWI.

The majority of respondents also described experiences of heterosexism and homophobia on campus, and their African American peers were most often seen as the perpetrators of this discrimination. Most respondents indicated believing that the African American community was more aversive to homosexuality than was the campus

community at large. Joe stated, “The black culture is less accepting than the white culture of sexuality. The black community is not accepting of that at all.” Derrick echoed a similar sentiment when discussing the challenges heterosexual African Americans perceive from attending at a PWI:

They are always so quick to say, being black at this school you gotta deal with this. Try being black and gay, cause not only do we face opposition from white people we fact opposition from our own because of the fact that we are gay.

Thus, it is no surprise that the majority of respondents reported that their sexual orientation influenced their experiences attending a PWI.

The coping strategy employed by all the men who experienced homophobia and heterosexism was to selectively disclose information about their sexual orientation. By confiding in select friends, avoiding contact with other men who were suspected to be gay, and changing their mannerisms, the respondents attempted to bring as little attention to their non-heterosexuality in a pre-emptive attempt to avert being discriminated against. Being less openly gay provided AAMSM more opportunities to find support and be accepted. Derrick described, “If you’re able to mask your gayness or your sexual identity in being black, you’re more versatile. You can ease in and out of different sectors.” Some respondents spoke of other ways of coping with homophobia and heterosexism such as educating their peers, but being selective about communicating their sexual orientation was most endorsed by these AAMSM.

Additional factors that make persistence difficult

Beyond discrimination based on race and sexual orientation, the AAMSM in this study spoke of other challenges they faced during their time at a PWI. Managing interpersonal relationships, whether romantic or platonic, posed some difficulties for these students. Given the age and developmental stage of the respondents, it is not surprising that most of them indicated experiencing hardships related to their romantic relationships. Dealing with the emotions associated with relationship breakups was a commonly reported experience among the men. Romantic relationships served as safe spaces in which they could find support and understanding. Naturally, the ending of such relationships caused heartache and difficulty for the men. Anthony discussed his difficult experiences with ending relationships:

I think that with anyone, if you have a relationship with someone and you kind of build a social, your support system and then, that support system is no longer there...I think the challenges of staying here just and having intimate relationships with someone, and then having to end it and not having that support I think is hard.

Managing non-romantic relationships within the context of a small AAMSM community on campus also served as a distraction for many of the men. Whether dealing with rumors about themselves or attempting to maintain clear friendship boundaries in the midst of a small, enmeshed AAMSM community, managing the dynamics within in the community was often difficult and sometimes made the participants consider leaving the university. Though ultimately none of the respondents did, many reported that navigating the campus AAMSM community was often a distraction from their academics. Rashad (21) spoke of his experience, stating, “When personal issues arise, at

times it can get a bit overwhelming and sometimes the academics can take a back seat.” Most of the AAMSM in this study reported that social and emotional difficulties had the potential to negatively affect their persistence.

A related challenge for many of the men was their difficulty finding adequate social support. Out-of-state students often spoke of the difficulty in being away from family and friends and its negative impact, while students from the suburbs sometimes spoke of feelings disconnected from their African American peers from more urban environments. As mentioned earlier, most of the respondents perceived the campus AAMSM community to be drama-laden and unsupportive, and several identified a need for a more nurturing campus AAMSM community. Shawn (21) postulated that the state of the AAMSM community affected whether students left the university prior to graduation:

I think the community plays a role. If there was a strong network of friends and a strong network of support here it might have been different.

There might have been that influence to stay.

The challenge of finding and creating supportive relationships appeared to make persistence more difficult for AAMSM at PWIs, according to the respondents.

Many respondents also named academic difficulties as factors that negatively affected their confidence and ability to persist at a PWI. For many of the men, difficult major course work in rigorous academic programs posed significant challenges to their persistence. Of the men who reported difficulty with their course work, all of them spoke of their challenging major coursework rather than problems with general education requirements. These academic challenges also affected these students’ confidence, as

illustrated by Rashad's comments: "After you get into your main core and major classes it's just like, oh my gosh, can I really do this?" Since many of these students chose to attend a PWI because of their perceptions of the academic strength of the institution, it is not surprising that many initially experienced problems meeting the academic rigor required of those same programs. Ultimately, these men found ways to successfully complete their academic requirements in order to successfully persist.

Attitudinal factors that influence persistence

Despite their descriptions of challenges, nearly all the respondents indicated that they experienced relatively little difficulty in their time at a PWI. Many noted the absence of blatant racial discrimination and long-term academic difficulties that would challenge their ability to be there. At first glance this may appear contradictory to the aforementioned issues these men described, but it suggests that these students who persisted viewed the issues they faced at a PWI as manageable. Even though these students highlighted several issues that made their time on campus difficult, most of them reported being satisfied with their decision to remain on campus. According to Joshua, the lack of overt discrimination and academic troubles made it easy to choose to stay: "I really don't have any challenges trying to remain at (university)." Whatever difficulties the respondents did face, they were able to look at them in the context of what they perceived as an overall positive experience.

A closely related attitudinal quality that emerged from the respondent interviews was the importance of being goal oriented. All the respondents relayed incidents in which they chose to focus on their academics in the face of a tumultuous social life or a challenging semester of coursework. Many of the respondents spoke of wanting to finish

their degrees on time and with good grades, and that motivated them persist during unpleasant times. Ethan (22) spoke of remaining at the university in spite of a challenging social climate solely for academics, “I don’t have a choice, that’s the thing. (Major). At the end of the day, why I came, why I stay, and why I put up with it.” These respondents seemed to remain mindful of what they wanted to get out of attending a PWI and continued to focus on that, even when situations were less than ideal.

Approaching difficult situations rather than avoiding them also emerged as an important quality in most of the respondents. These men reported seeking tutoring or counseling services when facing academic and emotional challenges, along with an orientation towards making lemonade out of proverbial lemons. Rashad, Joshua, and several other students spoke about the importance of persevering in the face of challenges: “It’s a challenge, but anything worth having is worth working for” (Rashad); “I think (university) is a really good place to go as far as school. I think you have to make the best of the situation” (Joshua). These sentiments speak to an attitude of facing challenges head on that appears to have to influential in the persistence of the majority of the respondents.

The desire and ability to manage academics and efficiently balance competing interests was also reported by the men to be important. Being able to maintain an active social life was made possible by employing effective academic self-management skills, and strong organizational and time-management skills in particular. More than half of the respondents identified the importance of balance in their academic success. In speaking about difficulties he faced, Joe alluded to the importance of balancing, stating, “It got challenging at times managing everything I had on my plate, so to speak, but

that's not been a big problem." Several of the other men spoke in similar ways about the role effective self-management skills played in their success at a PWI.

Role of community and university resources in persistence

According to the well-known aphorism, no man is an island, and the participants recognized the importance of having support from a variety of entities in their successful persistence. These men reported being on the giving and receiving end of support from individuals and collective entities during their time at a PWI. Broadly speaking, each participant reported receiving support from sources on and off campus. The participants saw being able to talk with African American peers as invaluable, as indicated by Derrick who said, "It was a great social experience, too. Just interacting with other black students who had the same courses as me." The participants described benefitting from African Americans students' close-knit network. These men received social affirmation, academic support, and acceptance through these relationships with their peers.

The reported having close bonds with many African American female and a few AAMSM peers, and those bonds served as their primary source of affirmation and support regarding their sexual orientation. More than half of the men reported that their sexual orientation influenced the people in their circle of friends. Their female and AAMSM peers served to provide safety and help them become more comfortable with their sexual orientation. Michael described associating almost exclusively with other AAMSM and female peers, "Socially the people I usually hang out with are women, and then if I hang out with any guys they are probably guys who are, who have the same orientation as I do." Whether as partners or friends, other AAMSM were important

figures in the lives of the respondents. Similarly, many participants identified family and friends off campus as key sources of social support as well.

All the participants spoke positively of their experiences with the many university-provided resources. Most of the men reported using university-provided tutoring services to help with difficult coursework. Their major programs often provided extra resources, including tutoring, connections to influential alumni, as well as supplemental learning opportunities in which these men participated. Rashad spoke of the abundance of assets available to students at the PWI, “(University) is amazing because of the fact that there’s like so many different academic resources on campus.”

Several students also reported favorable experiences with diversity-related resources on the campus of the PWI. Offices working with African American and LGBT students were cited as helpful and providing safe spaces for the participants. Joe described the impact of those resources, saying, “(University) has enough resources to where they can try to make any student feel comfortable here. And I feel like they do a good job with that.” Even those students who did not utilize those services reported believing just having diversity-related resources available to students was invaluable. Beyond the diversity-related resources, participants reported utilizing free counseling services and campus activities that were made available to them. The impact of university-provided resources was positive overall, and had a beneficial effect on these students’ persistence.

According to all the respondents, involvement in student organizations, and professional organizations in particular, was a positive influence on their persistence. The organizations served several roles in these students’ lives. Participating in

professional organizations provided the participants the opportunity meet friends with common interests, make professional connections, and come together for positive community action. All the students spoke of being an officer or member in African American student professional organizations on campus (collectively referred to as National Association for Black Professionals, or NABP). Derrick talked about the impact NABP had on his college career:

Socially, I get so much from the organization and professionally I get so much from it. It's like the perfect balance of what I feel like I need for my college career...It's been really good at providing both of the things that I need from a university, I find. And that helps me want to come back.

Joe emphasized the connections to other students that being in student organizations brought him, "Just having a family within each of those organizations of people who you can help and get help from has helped me a lot." The choice to involve themselves in student professional organizations appears to be invaluable in the persistence of these men.

More than half of the respondents were involved in other types of student organizations beyond NABP. Many were involved in mainstream (non-African American) student organizations related to their majors. Additionally, a number of the participants were also involved in some service to the university; some were ambassadors for their major, while other served in residential life, student government, and working with school admissions to help recruit other students of color. Through these service roles, the participants learned about valuable resources on campus that assisted them in persistence. In many instances, these organizations provided the respondents

opportunities to participate in mentorship opportunities. Involvement in student organizations generally seems to have had a positive impact on the persistence on these AAMSM.

Involvement in student organizations provided opportunities for the majority of respondents to serve as mentors to students on the campus of the PWI as well as in the community in which the university is situated. Serving as volunteers and leaders in university-sponsored organizations provided these men the opportunity to positively influence younger and prospective students at the PWI. As ambassadors for their majors, the office of admissions, residential life, and minority affairs programs, many of the participants felt compelled to work with younger students to help them improve their experiences on campus. Anthony described his commitment to serving as a mentor to the African American students in his residence hall,

I feel like it's a responsibility to, if anything make sure they're getting through okay and make sure I'm providing support for them. Even more support I would say that, cause I know it's a little harder because there's another aspect of adjusting to having to deal with being surrounded by people that are not like you and not feel like it's a conducive environment because of your race.

Other students echoed his sentiments about the importance of helping other African American students on campus, and this appeared to provide many students with inspiration to persist.

Beyond the confines of the PWI, the respondents also found value in mentoring young people in the community. Whether through volunteer organizations or through

outside employment, the majority of respondents indicated that working in the community at large helped them gain a greater appreciation for their ability to attend college, and in turn made them want to help other students do so. Michael shared his perception that providing mentorship to teenagers in the local community enriched his collegiate experience, in part by helping him see how privileged he was:

“I would say that before I had this job I didn’t really know how others lived. And I’ve realized how good I’ve to it, and I want to be able to help other people so that they can get to the point where I’m at.”

Providing mentorship imbued most of the respondents with both a sense of responsibility to students attending the PWI and those in the community at large, as well as offering them a mentor’s perspective on the importance of graduating in order to help others do so.

Having mentors was important to persistence according to the responses of more than half of the men in the study. The respondents reported receiving mentorship from peers and faculty on campus. For Michael, the mentorship he received from a peer mentor assigned through the PWI’s department dealing with underrepresented students provided an example of perseverance that was encouraging:

I would say that meeting with her was also good for me because I was able to get a perspective from somebody else who had already taken the classes. And that was helpful for me just to see what other black people who are in college had been through.

For Joe, having an African American faculty member mentor provided similar encouragement:

Having an advisor there who is the only black (major) professor at this school letting me know from time to time, ‘Hey, you got this GPA, you can do better than that, you can do it, don’t be discouraged, look at me, I’m a PhD (professional), so you can do it’...really helped me out.

Generally speaking, being mentored by peers and faculty and staff they felt connected to and identified with was helpful to the respondents. This connection to people at the PWI, in turn, appears to have deepened the respondents’ commitment to the institution and to persistence.

Chapter Four

Discussion

Consistent with extant research, the AAMSM in this study experienced some prejudice based on their race and sexual orientation while attending a PWI. Despite that, these men possessed an approach orientation to coping and thus did not perceive their experiences of racism, homophobia, and heterosexism as insurmountable challenges to remaining enrolled. The participants set a goal of graduating from a PWI they perceived as academically prestigious and capable of preparing them for their chosen career. Bean (2005) lists an approach orientation, self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, along with the attitudes of confidence, competence, satisfaction, seeing occupational value in education, and perceiving school as non-stressful as the psychological processes and key attitudes that lead to student persistence. The responses of the men in this study seem to indicate they possess most, if not all, of the internal process the Bean and Eaton (2000) model suggest are crucial to successful persistence in college.

Beyond the model, the men successfully managed complex and dissonant relationships with their AAMSM peers, the campus African American community, and the PWI as a whole in order to successfully persist at the institution. Simultaneously being supported and shunned because of their race and sexual orientation, these men navigated difficult terrain in order to create relationships that would support them in an environment where they felt unable to fully express the totality of their identities. According to Edwards (1996) “Masking or passing may reduce more anxiety than it creates, especially if the gay individual feels adequate and experiences satisfaction in his self-presentation” (p. 350). AAMSM will often alter their actions, dress, and mannerisms

in environments perceived as hostile or unsupportive to non-heterosexuals in order to avoid the possibility of negative interactions with others. These behavioral adaptations may include behaving in stereotypically hypermasculine ways, actively concealing one's sexual orientation, and attempting to remain invisible to others who may judge them (Wilson & Miller, 2002). By selectively disclosing their sexual orientation to a few trusted friends, the AAMSM in this study were able to receive support from a campus African American community that they perceived as anti-gay.

The current study also highlights the effects of widespread marginalization and discrimination can have on a small, vulnerable community. The men in the study university lambasted the AAMSM community as unsupportive and toxic. In this author's view, the caustic milieu the AAMSM on campus create is largely related to their response to continual microaggressions based on their race and sexual orientation on the campus of a PWI and in American society in general. Microaggressions can create a hostile and invalidating hostile climate for people of color and assail the mental health of their recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). These experiences can also create hypervigilance and guardedness among recipients. It is likely along with a popular culture that elevates hypermasculinity as ideal and the inevitable conflicts that result from socializing in small cliques, the vituperative words and actions rampant in the campus AAMSM community is the function of misdirected defenses against possible microaggressions. According to the men in the study, this hostility posed a tangible challenge to finding support and thus persisting at a PWI.

Social support in various forms has been demonstrated to positively influence persistence, particularly among students of color. Astin (1996) specifically suggested

that the more involved students are, the more likely they are to be successful. All the men in the study reported extensive involvement with one or more student organizations on campus, and most were heavily involved with NABP. Additionally, many of the men served as student ambassadors, volunteers, and employees of various departments of the PWI. This service to the university seemed to afford the students connection to faculty and staff who could provide or refer them to valuable campus resources. Knowledge of those resources served them well as they managed occasional academic, social and emotional difficulties, and sought supplemental experiences to help enhance their education. The combination of an approach orientation, resilience, social and emotional intelligences, and the perception of adequate social support seemed to make the difference between the AAMSM who persisted and those who left the PWI prematurely.

Limitations

This study articulates the experiences of a select group of AAMSM attending a PWI. These men were recruited through personal contact with the primary researcher or through word of mouth from other participants, which is one limitation of the study. All of the respondents knew of each other and most socialized with other respondents at least on an occasional basis. These men were all largely connected to the African American community on campus, and identified themselves as non-heterosexual. Though they had unique experiences and interpreted those experiences differently, it is possible that these data may be influenced based on the idiosyncrasies of these eight men or that saturation was met prematurely. Thus, the current study may not accurately capture the experiences of AAMSM who associate primarily with non-African American students, identify themselves as heterosexual, or both.

Additionally, another AAMSM in his senior year was contacted by the primary researcher but declined to participate. Participants in this study were required to be contacted by the primary researcher and agree to participate in a face-to-face interview with someone they may have known little about. Given the conservative climate of the campus and the real consequences that may result from having one's sexual orientation disclosed, it is not surprising these he was unwilling to be interviewed in person. As such, more risk-averse men, like the student who declined, may have offered a completely different experience of being an AAMSM at a PWI that this study may not have captured.

Recommendations for further research

A significant gap in the empirical study and evaluation of mentorship programs designed for African American males exists. Further research may examine mentorship and academic bridge programs targeted toward Black males attending PWIs in order to develop empirically-tested and supported interventions to increase African American male persistence in general. Similarly, research in which researchers helped to create a psychoeducational support group for AAMSM attending PWIs and measured its effects on feeling supported and psychologically safe could provide more detailed information about the importance of support among members of the same demographic groups for this population.

AAMSM attending one PWI were the focus of the currently study, however, a similar qualitative study examining AAMSM persistence at multiple PWIs, HBCUs, or both would provide more depth of information about retention and persistence in this population. There may exist other internal and environmental factors that positively

affect persistence, and examining AAMSM at multiple institutions would likely yield a more detailed formula for helping AAMSM remain enrolled in college through graduation.

Because of the intimate nature of qualitative inquiry, participants had to be at least partially open to disclosing their sexual orientation. By exploring factors that affect AAMSM persistence at PWI via an anonymous quantitative questionnaire, researchers could potentially uncover further information from more diverse segments of this population. Through the use of online surveys, researchers could potentially research a great number of participants who could remain anonymous while providing information about their experiences at educational institutions throughout the country. Finally, similar studies of other students of color, both men and women, who are also sexual minorities could provide more information that might help in generalizing what this study revealed to other marginalized groups at PWIs.

Implications

The current study elaborates on existing literature about retention and persistence among African American college students in general, and gay and bisexual African American men in specific. Retention models from Tinto (1993), Bean (2005), Astin (1996), and others have extolled the importance of student engagement among all students, and this study articulates the specific, protective role of engagement among gay and bisexual African American men. Gay and bisexual African American male students highlighted connectedness with supportive campus and community organizations as crucial to their success. Similarly, social support and mentorship are frequently cited as positively influence the persistence of non-majority students on college campus.

According to the men in the study, they are indeed important. Thus, by highlighting what these men reported as helping them successfully persist, this study links theories about retention to explicit practices and policies that can be implemented to increase persistence among gay and bisexual African American men. Institutions may be able to generalize these results to inform their strategies to increase persistence among all students of color as well as LGB students. Though the sample itself is small, these men's experiences are rich with information institutions can use to help support marginalized populations at PWI campuses. Creating opportunities for students to provide and receive mentorship, encouraging students to get involved in campus and community organizations, recommending students partake in some sort of university service, assisting community building efforts to increase social support, and providing supportive multicultural student services are specific interventions the men in this study identified as invaluable in their successful persistence at a PWI. Institutions and individuals would do well to heed these students' words.

The current study also illuminates the areas where many institutions are doing less well in helping gay and bisexual African American men, and probably other marginalized segments of the college community, find support. These men specifically mentioned ubiquitously feeling like a minority. Existing diversity and multiculturalism training had not gone far enough to help these students create complete safety in the communities where they sought support. Thus, one clear recommendation is for institutions to provide training on diversity to *non-majority* communities as well as to the campus at large. Efforts to change the campus climate must not only be aimed at increasing the knowledge of the majority community, but also to populations thought of as minority as well. A

second, related recommendation is to improve the quality and quantity of such training in all communities, since even among White students racist stereotypes of African American men persisted. Campus climate cannot be changed by occasional lectures about diversity addressed to the student body as a whole. In order to create safety for students from marginalized populations, institutions must weave an appreciation and respect for multiculturalism in all aspects of its functioning.

Beyond systemic interventions, the current study makes clear that institutions must systematically work to help students adopt the positive and effective attitudes that will help them persist. The men in this study all approached difficulties rather than retreating from them. This element is key to persistence, and a factor that institutions may overlook in implementing retention programs. Beyond making the resources available, institutions must find ways to encourage and increase help-seeking behavior among its students. Two other men from the previous study of AAMSM would have been eligible to participate in this study, but unfortunately they left the university prior to the start of this research. From personal conversations with the primary researcher, it is clear possessing an approach orientation was a major difference between the two men who remained at the institution and the two others who left. Institutions must seek to increase self-efficacy and agency among its students, possibly through workshops in orientation along with ongoing messages reminding students of their power to positively influence their experience in college. Making students aware of their power is the first step in helping them choose actions that help them remain enrolled in college. This may be particularly useful when working with first generation college students as well as students of color and sexual minority students.

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Appendix A

Informed consent form.

Consent to Participate in Research

I consent to participate in a study documenting the experiences of African American gay and bisexual male students at the University of Missouri-Columbia. This research is directed by David Goode-Cross, MA, and sponsored by the Department of Education, School and Counseling Psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia under the direction of Dr. Glenn E. Good.

I consent to participate in this investigation. The purpose of this study is to decide the decision making of African American gay and bisexual men who choose to attend and remain at a predominately white university. I understand that an interview of about 30 minutes in length will be scheduled at a time convenient for me, and that the entire interview will be recorded for later transcription. I will be asked in-depth questions concerning my experiences. I understand that I will receive a copy of the interview protocol prior to the interview.

I understand that the following precautions have been taken for my protection: that my name will only be on the consent form and a master list held by the researcher and that my name will not be revealed or reported with the results if the research findings are published. Pseudonyms will be substituted for all names of persons and organizations.

I understand that the project staff will code the results of this research in a manner that my identity will not be attached physically to the information I contribute. The staff for this project is comprised of David Goode-Cross, MA, David Tager, MA and Rashanta Bledman, MEd, all of whom are doctoral students in the counseling psychology program at the University of Missouri. I further understand that no information about my sexual orientation, experiences, or any other information shared during the interview will be divulged with anyone outside the research team, and that great care will be taken to ensure my participation in this study will not be revealed to anyone. I acknowledge I will only have direct contact with the primary researcher in this study to ensure confidentiality. The key listing my identity and subject code and the consent forms will be kept separately from the rest of my information in a locked drawer accessible only to the primary researcher. Federal regulations require that research records be kept for a minimum of three years following the completion of the study. Audio recordings will be destroyed after three years. I understand that confidentiality will be maintained to the limits of the law and this information is subject to subpoena.

I understand that I will be asked to recall specific episodes, situations or events that I experienced. Due to the nature of this subject matter, I may experience mild discomfort. I only have to disclose what I feel comfortable in talking about. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can stop the interview at any time. I understand that if I discontinue participation, I can request that my information be destroyed.

If I have questions about the interview process or any of the procedures, I may contact David Goode-Cross by email at dtgr38@mizzou.edu. Also, I may direct any questions about this use of human subjects in research to the campus **IRB Compliance Office** at the University of Missouri-Columbia at 573 882-9585, fax 573 884-8371.

I have been given a copy of this form for my records and one copy to sign and return to David Goode-Cross.

Name: (print) _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Script read prior to each interview.

You are being asked to participate in a study of African American same-gender-loving/gay/bisexual male students at MU. The purpose of this study is to determine what factors influenced your decision to remain at the university. Your honest description of your experiences is important to this study, and I hope you will feel comfortable sharing them. As stated in the informed consent form, all of your responses are confidential, and no one other than the interviewer will know your identity.

Appendix C

Demographic questionnaire.

1. Name
2. Age
3. Sexual/affectional orientation
4. Year in school
5. Number of hours per week spent involved with campus organizations
6. List the type of campus and/or community based organization with which you are involved

Appendix D

Semi-structured interview protocol.

1. What factors influenced your choice to attend MU?
2. What factors influenced your decision to remain at MU?
3. How do you think your sexual orientation influenced your experience at MU?
4. How do you think your race influenced your experience at MU?
5. What have been some of the obstacles or challenges to your remaining at MU?
6. What social challenges did you face that may have caused you to want to leave MU?
 - a. How did you deal with those challenges?
7. What academic challenges did you face in your quest to remain at MU?
 - a. How did you deal with those challenges?
8. What other types of challenges did you face in seeking to remain at MU?
 - a. How did you manage those challenges?
9. What university-provided assistance did you find most helpful in dealing with the challenges you just mentioned?
10. What university-sponsored activity or organization was particularly helpful in facing those challenges?
11. What professional or social organizations, clubs, or groups are you involved in? (e.g., Greek-letter organizations, professional or major-related clubs, religious or spiritual groups)
 - a. How have they influenced your decision to remain at MU?
12. What academic supports do you participate in? (e.g., tutoring, peer mentoring)
 - a. How have they influenced your decision to remain at MU?

13. Is there anything else that I may have overlooked about this experience that you would like to share?

Appendix E

Category and domain table.

Domain	Category	Frequency
<i>Factors that influenced decision to attend MU</i>	Strength of academic program	General
	Location	Variant
	Financial reasons	Variant
	Other reasons	Variant
<i>Identity development</i>	Coming to understand sexual orientation	Typical
	Coming into young adulthood	Variant
<i>Environmental characteristics</i>	Description of AAMSM community	General
	Experience of campus community	General
	Experience of minority status	Typical
	Description of African American community	Variant
<i>Experience of racial and sexual orientation prejudice</i>	Coping w/racism	General
	Experiences of racism	General
	Experience of heterosexism/homophobia	Typical
	Coping w/sexual orientation prejudice	Typical
<i>Additional factors that make persistence difficult</i>	Social & emotional difficulties	General
	Academic difficulties	Typical
	Lack of social support	Typical
	Financial difficulties	Variant
	Desire for academic prestige	Variant
<i>Attitudinal factors that influence persistence</i>	Approach orientation	Typical
	Academic self-management	Typical
	Goal orientation	General
	Perception of few challenges	General
<i>Role of community and university resources on persistence</i>	Description of involvement in student orgs	Typical
	Positive experiences of university resources	General
	Negative experiences of university resources	Variant
	Positive experiences of student organization	General
	Negative experiences of student organizations	Variant
	Experiences providing mentorship	Typical
	Social support	General
	Experiences receiving mentorship	Typical

VITA

David Goode-Cross was born in Cleveland, Ohio. He attended public schools in Shaker Heights and graduated from Shaker Heights High School. David matriculated at the University of Virginia, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in African American Studies and Sociology. After working in human resources in the Washington, DC area, David returned to his hometown and began working for a child welfare agency. Soon after, he enrolled as a full-time student of community counseling at John Carroll University while continuing to work full time. In 2004, David was accepted into the doctoral program in counseling psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia and was named a George Washington Carver Fellow. He received his Master of Arts degree in Counseling Psychology in May 2006. After completing his APA-accredited internship at the Counseling and Consultation Service at The Ohio State University, David earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Missouri in August 2009. David accepted a joint faculty position in the APA-accredited counseling psychology doctoral program and the CACREP-accredited master's program in counseling at West Virginia University, beginning in August 2009.

David enjoys research, teaching, and clinical practice, and integrates each into his professional life. Outside of work, David enjoys reading, spending time with friends, playing fetch with his beloved cocker spaniel, Mickey, and being with his partner, Phill M. Branch, Jr.