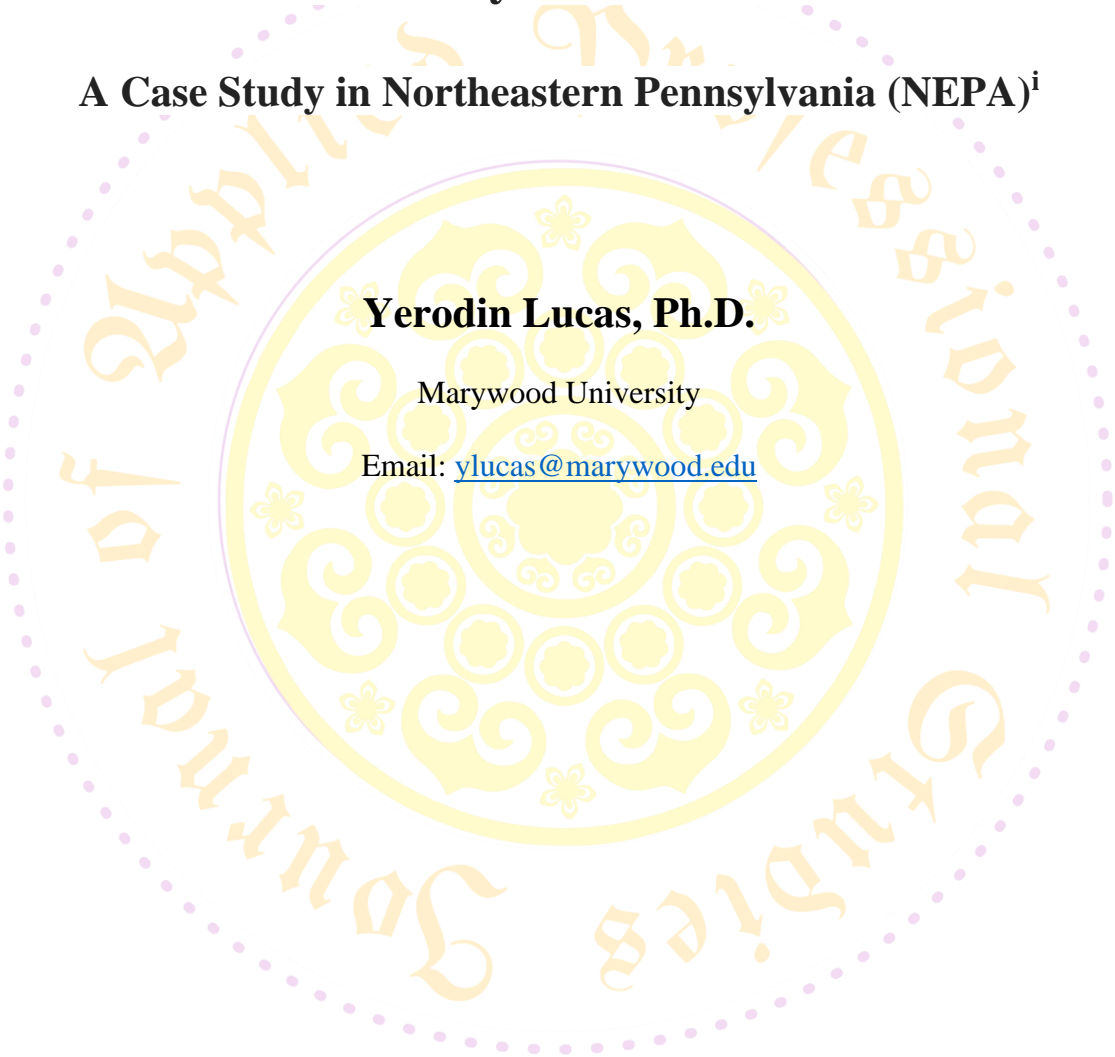# Factors Affecting African American Male Students at Predominantly White Institutions

A Case Study in Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA)[i]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the level and impact of social, academic, and individual support first-year Black male students received relative to the challenges they faced while attending predominantly White four-year institutions (PWIs) in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Black males suffer from considerably lower persistence rates compared to their White counterparts. Using Critical Race Theory, this qualitative study investigated students' experiences at three PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania, revealing that the majority of students felt unsupported across all three levels. This study highlighted the present issues, identified potential solutions, and framed ways to bring meaningful change to this phenomenon.

Keywords: Black male; persistence; mentorship; diversity; equity.
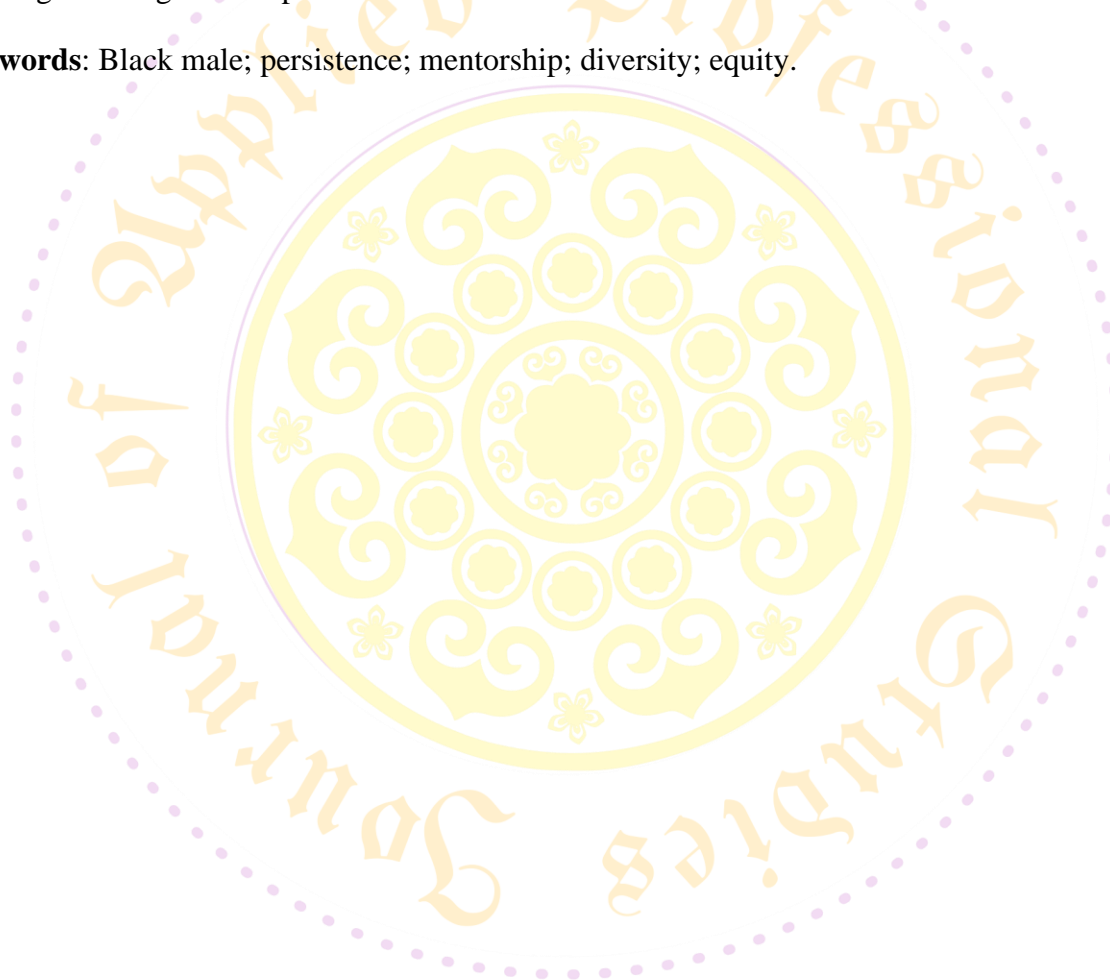
Introduction

Over the past two decades the rate of Black males who graduate from college has steadily declined. African Americans in general represent approximately 12% of all college students in the United States (Strayhorn, 2014 as cited in Robertson & Chaney, 2017) and of that percentage, roughly 85 percent of these students attend predominantly White colleges and universities (Houston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010; Strayhorn, 2014 as cited in Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Compared to Black males, Black female students achieve initial 4-year degree success at nearly double the rate of Black males, which the research indicates is due in large part to internalized negative mainstream social perceptions of Black males, female gender perceptions, and better support networks for female students in general (Allen, McLewis, Jones, & Harris, 2018).

Research contends that Black males, in particular, are failing to meet the rigors (academic, individual and social) of college life at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Harper (2013) reported that only 34.1% of Black males in the United States completed their Bachelor's degree compared to more than 60% for White males. A PWI is defined as an institution of higher learning where White students make up at least 50% of the total student population (Harper, 2013). Recent studies have shown that many PWIs are not prepared to support these students' needs (e.g., financial, cultural, academic, and social) due to a lack of understanding of their specific needs (e.g., college and career readiness, social agility, and individual support networks) and effective resources for their personal and academic growth and success (Bir, 2015). Expanded access to higher education for Blacks began in the years following the American Civil War. Because of continued challenges and racist discrimination prohibiting Blacks from attending White institutions in many southern states in the early nineteenth century, Historically Black Colleges and Universities were established to educate many of the recently freed slaves and their descendants (Allen, 1992). Through advancements from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans have attended PWIs since the early 1970s (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Nettles, 1988 as cited in Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero and Bowles, 2008), and just as in the south, many Blacks who attended PWIs were also unwelcomed in these colleges and universities outside the south (Allen, 1992). To date, many of these students routinely struggle with lack of support and unwelcoming environments (e.g., isolation, loneliness, discrimination, indifference, and insensitivity) (Allen, 1985; Cokley, 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Nettles, 1988; Smith, 1980; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald & Bylsma, 2003 as cited in Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008).

Support structures include academic assistance, such as peer-to-peer tutoring, providing faculty and staff professional development on cultural sensitivity, recruitment and retention of a culturally diverse faculty and staff, additional remedial student support in math and literacy, minority student campus and community networking resources, and purposeful student-to-student social opportunities (Harper, 2013). Many Black males often dropout of college during their first year because of a lack of such supports (Wood, 2012). First-year experiences have demonstrated a strong connection to persistence and degree attainment: therefore, it is critical to examine issues related to transitional experiences of Black male students attending PWIs. (DuBois-Barber, 2012). Case in point, Harper (2009 as cited in Robertson & Chaney, 2017) argues that Black males at PWIs often "endure a process of dehumanization called niggerization" (p. 261), which involves a process of perpetual reinforcement of racist stereotypes depicting Black males as "dumb jocks,

criminals who do not belong on campus, affirmative action beneficiaries who are undeserving of admission, and at-risk students who all emerge from low-income families and urban ghettos" (p. 261). Therefore, this study analyzed the impact of present support structures on Black male students to gain a better understanding of how these supports influence Black male student persistence to graduation. Specifically, this study has documented significant themes developed from collected data focusing on factors that impact the persistence rates of Black males to graduation at 4-year PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA). Face-to-face interview data was collected to illustrate how the level of support (social, individual, and academic) these students received at their respective institutions influenced their overall experience on a social, academic and individual level. Moreover, this descriptive body of data produced major themes that were analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in order to interrogate findings that give voice to the experiences of Black males at PWIs in NEPA and beyond this region. Also, these findings will assist PWIs as institutions serving this student population with the necessary understanding to offer better resources to Black males for their overall success in higher education.

Critical Race Theory

The use of Critical Race Theory provided a framework for deeper exploration of the data to gain a richer understanding that led to the development of findings critical to underscoring the issues and revealing potential solutions. Critical Race Theory is designed powerfully to utilize, examine, and then posit solutions and action steps to address inadequacies and inequities of the system under study (Delgado & Stefanic, 1995 as cited in Davenport, 2015). According to Ladson-Billings (1999) our notions of race (and its use) are so complex that we "continue to employ and deploy it even when it fails to make sense" (p. 9). Critical race theorists view racism as one of the most fundamental components of life in the United States, existing as a dominant force found deep within all social systems (Bell, 1980; Lawrence, 1987 as cited in Davenport, 2015). Racism is central to all social systems—and all lives—in this country, and historically legal and educational practices systematically have restricted and continue to restrict the access of people from minoritized groups to such a degree that simply being White provides privilege (Bell, 1987 as cited in Davenport, 2015). "The creation of these conceptual categories is not designed to reify a binary but rather to suggest how, in a racialized society where whiteness is positioned as normative everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to these points of opposition" (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

This study investigated the current support structures that exist at three PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania and examined their impact on helping Black males to achieve social, individual and academic success while attending the selected institutions. Therefore, participant responses to the following questions were at the core of this study: (a) How are support structures offered at PWIs meeting the needs of Black male students toward persistence in earning a Baccalaureate degree? (b) How do Black male students feel about inclusion practices for them at PWIs? (c) How are current supports for Black male students at PWIs impacting their success in the first year of college? As the research shows, reaching this population of students specifically in the first year has an enormously positive impact on persistence to graduation. (d) What are the major challenges PWIs face in providing support to these students? (e) How has support received from faculty, staff, and peers contributed to overall academic development? (f) How has the support and connection to family and other caregivers contributed to the overall adjustment to college life in the first year

of study? (g) How has the overall perception of the support received by first-year Black male students influenced initiative to continue their studies? (h) How have support structures at the institution impacted the college experience in terms of overall personal growth and development? Obtaining responses from the study participants to these questions provided a comprehensive account of student experiences and some of the major challenges PWIs face with supporting them in meaningful ways. Both the literature and testimony from participants in this study show that Black students' satisfaction with higher education institutions was largely dependent on how supportive and friendly the campus environments were toward them, and that PWIs still struggle with providing adequate support (Chen, Ingram & Davis, 2014).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Black Experience in Higher Education in the United States

Contextualizing the challenges facing Black males at PWIs requires a look into the history of access to higher education in America for Blacks, in terms of how Americans of African descent have been regarded by the those in the very systems of education that were enacted to supposedly provide a quality education for all citizens. The time period following the American Civil War saw the formation and expansion of many colleges and universities in the United States. Black Americans who had recently been emancipated from slavery, were not considered among the citizens afforded the opportunity of achieving an education within these institutions (Herren & Edwards, 2002). The Morrill Act of 1862, introduced land-grant colleges (i.e., land set aside for the purposes of establishing an institution of higher learning subsidized by the U.S. government) to meet the needs of "common men and women" in society (Herren & Edwards, 2002) by providing opportunities to educate the general public, and offer pathways of upward mobility (Herren & Edwards, 2002).

Spearheaded by Vermont Senator, Justin Smith Morrill, the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 granted state governments large plots of land (roughly 30,000 acres) to build colleges and universities within their territories. Many of the southern states, that continued to be segregated after the collapse of Reconstruction did not extend these benefits to the newly freed Black slaves (Herren & Edwards, 2002), while many Northern institutions continued discriminatory practices towards Black applicants. The lack of advancement prompted the drafting and enactment of the Morrill Act of 1890, which "forbade racial discrimination in the admission to colleges receiving government funds" (Herren & Edwards, p. 94). However, Kerr (1987, as cited in Herren & Edwards, 2002) noted that there was a provision in the law, which allowed states to disallow admission based on race if the state provided funds to establish separate institutions in a "just and equitable, but not necessarily equal manner" (Kerr, 1987, p. 9, as cited in Herren & Edwards, 2002), reflecting on Jim Crow segregation laws on the local level. One byproduct of this continued discrimination was the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Even from the outset, the systemic discrimination of African Americans in the education space was written into law. "Despite the clear benefits of higher education, the U.S. legal and judicial system has systematically limited African American attendance at public institutions" (Harper, Patton, and Wooden as cited in Allen, McLewis, Jones, & Harris, 2018, p. 44).

According to Johnson-Bailey et al. (2008), Blacks have had a long and troubled record with American higher education, segregation, and poorly planned and executed efforts toward real integration and full inclusion. Nonetheless, the HBCUs that were established under the Morrill Land-Grant Act, gave Black students the opportunity to attend college when historically White institutions (HWIs) denied them entry (Allen et al., 2018), firmly giving HBCUs the power to serve as a strong bridge between being educated and uneducated for African Americans. As a result, as of 2015, although HBCUs are approximately 3 percent of the higher education landscape, they award 20 to 25 percent of baccalaureate degrees to Black students (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018 as cited in Allen et al., 2018, p. 44).

HBCUs began as schools to train African American teachers to educate African American children in the South, but became "separate but equal" colleges and universities that "legally" segregated Black students from southern public institutions viewed as the province of Whites (Allen et al., 2018, p. 66). Even as schools designated for African Americans only, these institutions were not controlled by Blacks. Northern, White missionaries and philanthropists and southern government officials worked to promote their own interests in the creation of HBCUs, and "through a curriculum rooted in whiteness, emphasizing manual training and attempting to imbue appropriate—that is, White, middle class American—values of dress, speech and activity," (Allen & Jewell, 2002 as cited in Allen et al., 2018, p. 67) HBCUs were in effect set-up to produce skilled rather than educated graduates intended to staff the labor market for the benefit of White industrialists (Allen et al., 2018). These efforts were designed to exclude African Americans from White institutions and simultaneously limit African Americans' control over their own institutions (Allen et al., 2018) Consequently, Allen et al. (2018) asserts that systemic racism "runs deep in the DNA of higher education" (p. 67). However, for African Americans, HBCUs served and continue to serve as environments that instill a sense of pride and empowerment where Blacks are encouraged and supported (Allen, 1992; Allen, 2018). For generations, these institutions have provided some of the best and only representations of faculty and staff of color many Black students in academia have ever encountered, and the research identifies this factor as a crucial one to the overall success for all students of color.

Faculty and staff of color are underrepresented on most U.S. college campuses, especially African American faculty (Baumhardt and Julin, 2018). Even at larger state schools in a region adjacent to Northeastern Pennsylvania such as Binghamton University in upstate New York, fewer than four percent of professors are Black, and despite promises from PWIs around the country, "fewer than seven percent of tenure-track professors at college campuses nationwide are African American" (p. 2). Several reasons exist to account for this. Firstly, when Black professors begin teaching at PWIs, many often combat long-standing stereotypes and prejudices held by members of the dominant campus community, and many Whites, and other groups alike, continue to view Blacks stereotypically (Allison, 2008). Even when Blacks fail to conform stereotypically, "Whites often view them negatively nonetheless" (p. 642). When Whites interact with a member of an outgroup (i.e., Blacks) who conforms to general stereotypes attributed to that group, they have a more favorable evaluation. However, when the outgroup member's behavior is atypical (e.g., highly educated), Whites have a less than favorable evaluation of that person (Allison, 2008). This concept suggests that some Whites would prefer to interact with what Finkenstaedt (1994 as cited in Allison, 2008) described as the uneducated "comic" Negro," than a highly intellectual Black colleague.

In addition, many Black professors contend with feelings of isolation, marginalization, and having their integrity and academic abilities challenged by students and their peers. According to Allison (2008), Black faculty are often the only people of color in their respective departments, and when they do voice concerns, their voices are often "muted" because they lack the numbers necessary to make a meaningful impact. Lastly, another major hurdle for Black faculty is achieving tenure. Black professors are concentrated among the lowest ranks in academia, especially Black female professors (p. 643). These factors limit the prospects of Black professionals as they attempt to find and maintain their standing as educators. Lack of Black faculty and staff negatively impacts students (of color or otherwise) even more, as the absence or marginalization of these individuals prevents students of color from receiving instruction and guidance in different contexts than those of their White professors who may or may not fully relate to and/or understand their specific challenges. Black faculty and staff also offer unique perspectives, solutions, and mentorship to all students based on their experiences as minorities in America. Scholars contend that historical, institutional racism and discrimination has a direct impact on the current state of education for Black males and other students of color, in terms of how these students view themselves and their abilities, and how they are viewed in the same vein by non-race peers and educators at their respective higher education institutions (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). These structures perpetuate a history of institutional racism and discrimination in America which has produced decades of failed education policies, achievement gaps along racial lines, inequitable access to resources, and a debilitating sense of self for many Black males who attempt to maintain access to our higher education system.

Allen (1992) explains that higher education's complacency on these issues can be held indirectly accountable for the outbreak of racially motivated incidences ranging in severity from distribution to racist literature, to name-calling, to physical attacks on U.S. college campuses, such as the Citadel, the University of Michigan, Princeton University, the University of Texas, and the University of California at Los Angeles (p. 27). In 2017, the racially charged protest between members of the Black Lives Matter Movement and White supremacists groups on the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville is yet another example of the antagonistic view of Blacks held by many in America. In the aftermath of this incident a police officers and some protesters were injured, and vicious threats and demonstrations were touted from both groups. Bridges (2011) describes how "America and its' relationship with African American males have been acrimonious, to say the least" (p. 152). Black males, in the past and presently, suffer from the chronic stress of living in a racist and oppressive society, a condition that dates back to historical roots of enslavement and deportation from the African continent (Bridges, 2011).

The Black Experience in Northeastern Pennsylvania

Since the latter part of the eighteenth century, Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) has had a sizeable number of Blacks living in the communities that comprise the region. Johns' (2015) study of the Black experience in Scranton and other communities in NEPA offers a unique perspective into the challenges, contributions and legacy of escaped and ex-slaves who migrated to this area in search of freedom, a place to plant roots, and also as a stopover on route to their final destination in Canada. In 1780, Pennsylvania became one of the first states to gradually abolish slavery. As Scranton grew as an industrial center in the mid-nineteenth century, it became a haven of sorts for those seeking job prospects including Blacks as well as others from Europe (Johns, 2015).

However, the African American presence in the area is not well documented, and what is in print illustrates that African Americans in NEPA were treated with much of the discrimination, alienation, and systemic racism that they faced nationwide. For instance, from the outset, Black migrants in Scranton were viewed as different from Europeans.

Kashuba (2009) writes "Whatever moved them to leave their homeland, they came seeking employment. But the [White] immigrants who came here (to NEPA) came to do more than just work. They came of live, and with them, they brought the elements that made a rich and diverse social and cultural climate" (p. 2). On the other hand, Blacks were described as "dissimilar" to all other immigrant groups, and their contributions were viewed almost entirely in the form of labor. This viewpoint dehumanized Blacks and created stereotypes which distanced them economically and socially from the general community (Johns, 2015). Relegating African Americans to the level of cheap laborers with no viable standing in society perpetuated the notion that Blacks were not worthy of any facet of positive notoriety inside or outside of the communities in which they lived. As a result, their history in the region was deemed not worthy of documenting. Johns (2015) notes that "Unlike many states, in Pennsylvania, free Black men had been able to vote until 1838" (p. 15), which is an important point to consider when highlighting the contributions made by Blacks in NEPA. One account from a newspaper article in the late 1800s features a Scranton resident named Henry Stark a Black man who worked for members of a prominent Scranton family. Stark was merchant who would later become one of the wealthiest men in the region through selling and trading goods with the "Fathers of the Village" (Hitchcock, 1914 as cited in Johns, 2015). In addition, Stark would go on to found and financially support Black churches and other organizations in the Black community throughout Scranton and NEPA. The earliest documented Black church in NEPA dates back to 1854, and was located within a small Black enclave known as "Colored Hill" in Waverly Pennsylvania about ten miles north of Scranton. The organization of the church for many Blacks in NEPA, served various business, social, educational, and financial functions in their communities.

Consequently, not only were African Americans in NEPA restricted from working in the coal mines, the industry considered to be the backbone of the economy in the region, but Blacks were also forced to live in areas segregated from Whites and white ethics (Johns, 2015). It is no coincidence that "Colored Hill" was an area designated only for Blacks. Such designations along with terms like "alleys" or "courts" were attached to the communities where Blacks lived in and around Scranton in order to separate them from White areas. Places such as, Raymond Court, Forest Court, and Lee Court were named as such to establish them as Black only apartment communities generations ago, and many would remain so even well into the 1970s (Johns, 2015, p. 31). These "courts" or "alleys" were undesirable, unsanitary, unsafe, and aesthetically unpleasant places to live, and many were associated with crime, violence, and generally derelict conditions. As a result, African Americans as a group suffered social, economic and racial discrimination on a massive scale, as well as de facto segregation, much of which continues in NEPA to the present day. Given the experiences of African Americans in NEPA since the abolition of slavery, there are undoubtedly many deep-seated judgments, beliefs, and implicit biases on both sides (White and Black) that need to be addressed before any real progress can be made. Looking at this from the lens of higher education, it is boldly apparent that students of color, Black males in particular, still contend with much of the same discrimination and injustices faced by their predecessors. For instance, much of the past and present literature (i.e., books, media images, and

research) depict African American males as the "personification of urban decline" (Jones, 2014, p. 275). Popular culture, educators and administrators, and other outlets (e.g., mainstream media) describe Black males as "in crisis" and "endangered" (p. 275), further promoting the notion that Black males are worthy of our sympathy to their demise rather than our support for their success. Subsequently, much of the testimony received from participants in this study indicated that, as college students, Black males in NEPA feel a sense of hopelessness with regard to how their campus communities perceive them. Many of them have vivid memories of feeling anxious, uncertain, and acutely insecure as they attempted to navigate their first year at their respective PWI. Likewise, the university staff members interviewed for the study revealed feelings of uncertainty with how to adequately support these students beyond what their schools currently offered, which four staff members indicated was not sufficient.

Factors Affecting Black Male Students in Higher Education

According to Harper (2013), much of the previous research has framed this population of young men in a perpetually negative light, often focusing on their lack of achievement in lieu of the academic and social gains many Black males have made despite the hurdles they have had to overcome at PWIs. The majority of studies often depict Black male students as underprepared to meet the rigors of college life (Harper, 2013). From an economic standpoint, this deficit model of depiction has served to create a view of Black males as all having the same issues relative to their skill level, available resources, and background when they arrive on PWI campuses. Research shows that although a large number of Black males may share similar hurdles, the scope and degree of those challenges are not always the same (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013).

Through the accessibility of federal grants and student loans, many Black males are able to overcome the financial burden of college at least from the outset. The problem surfaces when these students do not finish college due to the myriad of social and academic (e.g., isolation, lack of mentorship, poor peer and faculty/staff relations) challenges (Strayhorn, 2015). Although, better access to loans serve to level racial and economic inequality, the results have not produced intended outcomes. Jackson & Reynolds (2013) assert that student loans were (in part) designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged racial groups with fewer resources than their White counterparts. However, results have shown that despite these efforts, Black students' (particularly Black males) persistence rates have not increased as significantly as hoped over the past two decades. After many of these students drop out, they often find themselves in debt for exorbitant amounts of money, without a college degree, and their job and career prospects extremely limited. In addition to taking out student loans, many Black males need to work to supplement their college related living expenses, which researchers indicate has a negative effect on their persistence rates (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). The ability to pay for college is a major factor influencing the success of Black men. The increasing cost of college is forcing students of color to rely more heavily on loans, and odd jobs. While the loans help, they do not cover the total costs associated. Working, in and of itself is not the problem, rather it is the substantial number of hours these students need to work, in addition to full time studies that hinders their success (Palmer et al., 2014).

A growing number of scholars have called for the government to enact systemic interventions that would help students who cannot afford college by reauthorizing the Higher Education Act. For

instance, policies that stabilize tuition and address the lack of adjustments to need-based aid will go a long way in helping Black males tackle the financial cost of higher education (Palmer et al., 2010). Furthermore, if the United States is to maintain and build upon its positon in the global economy, devising ways to promote access and success for Black males must be a top priority (Palmer et al., 2010). Ultimately, student debt is an issue that affects a vast majority of students, but Black students are particularly vulnerable often due to the lack of support they receive in college. Statistics show that over 80% of Black students (nearly double that of Black males versus Black females) graduate with debt compared to just over 60% of White students (Shapiro, Meschede & Osoro, 2013).

Palmer et al. (2010) illustrate the impact that dismal rates of college completion of this population has on the U.S. and global economy. Their research focused on the lack of representation of Black males in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic (STEM) fields, citing the failure of the U.S. education system to meet the needs of Black males academically and socially particularly in high school and in their first year of college. "Research has shown that the U.S. has historically been less responsive and supportive to the needs of African Americans in many social institutions, particularly education" (Harvey & Harvey, 2005; Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007; Moore & Owens, as cited in Palmer et al., 2010). On a positive note, studies have shown that improving educational experiences and the quality of education that Black males receive will boost our economy domestically, as well as increase our economic position on a global scale (Palmer, et al., 2010).

Improving the educational outcomes of Black males and supporting their access to an educational experience that meets their specific needs is a matter of equity. In like manner, scholars have determined that educational attainment is one of the greatest indicators of economic success. McElroy & Andrews (2000) surmise that with higher levels of education, one has greater access to jobs with increased pay, benefits, and security. Not to mention, the economic impact of degree completion for Black males, noting that there is a higher percentage of Black males who complete high school than those who finish college, so the push seems even greater for PWIs to create ways to support these students to their full potential. In their analysis of the economic benefits of closing the educational achievement gap, Lynch & Oakford (2014) posit that the gains would not only increase the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but also tax revenues. For example, closing the racial educational achievement gap would shift Social Security tax contributions by more than $800 billion by the year 2050. In addition, it could provide much needed support for national healthcare (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

Turner (2016) argues for the move to more racial equity in education, where one's race is no longer a factor in the distribution of opportunity and support, would remove many of the economic barriers that exist, allowing marginalized groups (e.g., Black males) to achieve at their full potential and productivity. This increase in opportunity and support would not only benefit these students, but communities and the economy as a whole. Educational attainment has been shown to be linked with better job prospects for minorities in general. Currently, people of color are earning approximately 30% less than non-Hispanic Whites (Turner, 2016). From another perspective, if the average incomes of minorities were raised to the average incomes of Whites, total U.S. earnings would increase by 12%, which is nearly $1 trillion USD (Turner, 2016, p. 12). This research makes a strong case for improvement of support structures at the institutional level

for PWIs, in particular for Black males, who are at the bottom tier with regard to persistence rates at the college level. Lynch & Oakford (2014) proclaim that over the past decade, that rising income and wealth inequality has had a detrimental impact on communities of color, particularly low-income Blacks with a decrease of nearly 50% in household wealth. These gaps made longstanding inequalities in education even worse. Having knowledge is power and being aware of the economic condition of many Black male students puts PWIs in a position to be proactive about how to help these young men succeed in their schools. Providing a more viable financial system (e.g., scholarships, better access to subsidized tuition) for these students in particular helps create solid pathways to their achievement. Turner (2016) states that the social and economic forces that influence opportunities for achievement are interconnected and reinforcing. Not surprisingly, people who are better educated tend to live healthier lives, earn more income, and have an overall better quality of life.

Academic & Social Challenges

This research highlights the claim that Black males who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) academically and socially outgain their same-race peers attending PWIs whom often experience race-based microaggressions, which are added obstacles usually not present at HBCUs (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). "Success in higher education is vital because education is the most effective way to span the socioeconomic divide between 'haves' and have-nots' in the U.S." (Atwell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2007; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, as cited in Davenport, 2015, p. 3). By emphasizing these issues PWI higher education administrators, and faculty can have a point of reference with regard to the quality and impact of the education they provide to Black males. Many HBCUs have encountered large-scale setbacks (i.e., financial and institutional) over the last two decades, forcing some of these pillars in the Black community to close their doors. Nonetheless, there are still many HBCUs that exist, and perhaps a look at the resources used to support Black males at these schools can offer insight into a successful model for PWIs. According to Museus (2011) of those who enroll in a 4-year college or university roughly 59% of White students earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years, while less than 40% of Black students achieve their undergraduate degree in the same time. From a leadership standpoint, some key reasons exist that contribute to the challenges Black males face when they enter college at a PWI, particularly in their first year, as well as the challenges many of these institutions face with providing the support these students need to progress in higher education. A large body of evidence supports the notion that many students of color (in particular, Black males) face challenges connecting to the culture of PWIs, which often results in them feeling alienated, marginalized, and unwelcomed (Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Park, 2009, as cited in Museus, 2011).

Museus & Quaye (2010 as cited in Museus, 2011) analyzed the research from 30 students of color at a PWI and found those students who grew up in cultures that were different from those on their campuses, experienced cultural dissonance, which can be summed up as tension or stress developed as a result of the difference between the student's home and campus culture. In and of itself, cultural dissonance, sets in motion specific challenges for Black males that often impedes their progress from the outset. These challenges are especially difficult for any first-year college student to contend with while also trying to navigate the ebb and flow of college life, only to add another layer of cultural norms and expectations to overcome. Moreover, other scholars have

conducted studies over the past decade into the issue of Black male student success in higher education. According to one study, a large percentage of Black males have faced challenges across different fields of study such as the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) domains. Strayhorn, Long, Kitchen, Williams & Stentz (2013) assert that historically underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities (i.e., African Americans) have experienced barriers to their success in STEM related fields. African Americans, in particular, have lower degree attainment rates, switch to non-STEM majors more frequently, and experience unique social challenges when compared to their White and Asian/Pacific Islander counterparts. Those students who aspire to a future in STEM must first master courses involving a great deal of math and science, which historically, due to a lack of prior educational experience and access in these areas, has been a deficit for many Black male students. "The lack of access is, of course, compounded by retention problems that are primarily the result of Black students experiencing undue stress during their schooling compared to their White counterparts" (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008, p. 365). STEM related careers are in high demand, due in large part, to their potential for growth and advancement of our quality of life on a global scale.

Additionally, Strayhorn (2015) provides persuasive evidence that hostility toward Black males on many college campuses continues to be an important issue that effects perceptions of a chilly climate and unwelcoming campus environments. In fact, Strayhorn et al. (2013) maintains the lack of Black male student success has been attributed to academic and cultural isolation, lack of peer support, and poor student-faculty relationships. Brooks, et al. (2012) note that the research on African Americans who attend PWIs concluded that university administrators, faculty and staff fail to identify problems affecting African Americans on campus. On the other hand, according to Bridge (2010 as cited in Kim & Hargrove, 2013) some Black males practice what is known as psychological distancing to "combat discriminatory campus practices known to impede success (p. 302). In effect, these young men resisted the unwelcoming environment on campus, became self-motivating and relied on other same-race peers for support. The research goes on to strongly suggest that studying and evaluating factors affecting African American's (Black males in particular) success at PWIs would help college and university retention staffs better understand the unique obstacles facing many of these students and consequently improve their overall experience. Support structures such as mentoring programs for Black male students, ongoing faculty and staff professional development, curriculum development, creating and fostering a sense of cultural awareness and community on campus can go a long way in helping Black males adjust and succeed at college life (Strayhorn et al., 2013). Mentorship, which is viewed as paramount to overall success, was also supported in the literature as being essential to supporting Black males. In one study, more than half of the Black male students who participated identified a mentor as somebody who helped them at a critical point in their journey toward obtaining their degree (Warde, 2008).

On another level, Brooks et al. (2012) indicated that many Black male students who enroll at PWIs experienced lower academic achievement because they had lower academic aspirations and, therefore, were doubtful about their choice to complete a degree program Another factor pertains to the often poor relationships between faculty and Black male students who attend PWIs. Wood (2012) identified that frequent and meaningful interactions between Black males and their professors had a significant impact on their rate of persistence. However, the research also indicated that Black males are far less likely to initially engage faculty about academic matters when compared to their White counterparts. For those Black male students who experienced

positive in-class interactions, there was more likelihood of greater academic commitment (Wood, 2012). Brooks et al. (2012) concluded their research with the notion that university administrators, faculty, and staff continually fail to identify the problems that affect Black males on campus, which serves as an indicator to many of these students that there is little to no focus on addressing their particular needs. Moreover, stereotypes and media images often depict Black males in a negative way (e.g., aggressive, poorly educated, and prone to violence), and the adverse impact from many of these images are often detrimental to the overall experience of Black males attending many PWIs (Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). Researchers note that terms such as endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous are often used to describe Black males (Palmer et al., 2010). Many of these issues, if identified and mitigated through effective (i.e., ongoing faculty and staff training and student engagement) leadership, could be addressed and appropriately managed to the benefit of this student population.

At the same time, Davies & Zarifa (2011) discussed the institutional inequalities that exist that impede many disadvantaged groups (e.g., Black males) from persisting to graduation in higher education. Their study found that disadvantaged groups, in general, are entering college in greater numbers than in past decades, however, due to inequalities in resources made available based on socioeconomic status (SES), the degree to which students have been applying and graduating college has not reduced the inequalities in attaining an undergraduate degree. At a basic level, the study found that the "dual process" of expansion and inequality happens at the individual and structural level, whereby a system for historically advantaged groups is in place characterized by better access to resources that support their learning and achievement (Davies Zarifa, 2011, p. 142). Two terms emerged from the research that provide a context for how many PWIs fail to adequately support students of color (e.g., Black males). "Maximally maintained" inequality and "effectively maintained" inequality describe the process of creating the tiers of access to educational resources which are provided accordingly based on socioeconomic status, and exist primarily in institutions of higher learning across the United States and Canada (Davies & Zarifa, 2011). Scholars explain maximally maintained inequality as the ability of advantaged groups to move up to more advanced levels of education at the expense of those in the lower tier (i.e., marginalized groups), who (resulting from educational disparities at the school level) receive subpar support at these institutions (Davies & Zarifa, 2011). In essence, this process of effectively maintained inequality has far-reaching effects on the outcomes of educational achievement, as well as the economic prospects (i.e., jobs, income level, and livelihood) of marginalized students.

Another important point of inquiry stemming from the research is the notion that some Black males, despite their challenges, are able to forge ahead successfully as a result of effective support from others and by adopting the concept of Grit and Growth Mindset. Duckworth (2014) summarize this theory as a person possessing character traits (e.g., self-motivation, determination, resourcefulness, and sustained discipline toward a long-term goal) that, if nurtured and encouraged can be applied to overcoming obstacles (i.e., new environments and challenges). Embedded within this concept is the notion of resilience. Several scholars including Yeager & Dweck (2012) discuss how challenges are "ubiquitous," and the need for educators to promote resilience as essential for student success in school. Students who believe (or are taught) that intellectual abilities are qualities that can be developed (as opposed to qualities that are fixed) tend to show higher achievement across challenging school transitions" and greater course completion rates in challenging courses in general. Duckworth (2014) posit that the "gritty" individual approaches

achievement as a marathon, having the advantage of stamina. As a result, studies show that when minority students (Black males, in particular) are able to be supported individually based on their needs persistence rates to degree completion increase (Warde, 2008). For many Black male students, a sense of self-motivation often stems from the foundational support they receive from their family and other networks. Not surprisingly, several studies revealed that family support during the first year was deemed especially crucial by many Black males. In fact, Ogbu's (1998 as cited in Kim & Hargrove, 2013) Cultural-Ecological Theory of Minority School Performance measurement (a system used to measure the level of adjustment of minority students at PWIs) indicated that first-year, Black male students with the lowest levels of engagement with faculty (and other institutional staff members) cited family support as being a "pivotal force" in their educational success and "instrumental" in sharing encouragement and resources (p. 303). Some results have indicated that many Black male students who enroll at PWIs experienced lower academic achievement because they had lower academic aspirations and, therefore, were doubtful about their choice to complete a degree program (Brooks et al., 2012). Several studies have shown that this belief among many Black males has also contributed to their low persistence rates. Likewise, contemporary discourse surrounding Black male student success has also highlighted the term "*Educational Resiliency*," which refers to one's ability to succeed academically despite difficult and challenging life circumstances, as well as risk factors that could prevent these students from succeeding (Kim & Hargrove, 2013, p. 300).

Similar to grit and growth mindset, developing a sense of educational resiliency has afforded many Black male students, who would have otherwise struggled in their first year of study, to leverage personal and professional networks (e.g., family, same-race and non-race peers, and college faculty and staff) in addition to their own resolve to achieve their goals (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). This has created a shift in the literature moving away from the usual "deficit-informed" focus on Black male collegians to highlighting the successes of these students (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Depicting Black males as self-advocates creating their own sense of agency to persist through and beyond the challenges they often face at PWIs, helps to send the message to current and future students that success is possible. The ideas about resiliency and grit in this context illustrate that some Black males can overcome many of the challenges they face, but one crucial question remains—what can PWIs do to provide better support so that these students are not forced to create additional and alternate pathways that other students do not? With better supports in place Black males across the board can access higher education successfully regardless of their aptitude for grit.

The primary goal of this study was to examine the level of support and the support structures that exist for Black male students in their first year of study at three predominantly White institutions (PWIs) of higher learning in Northeastern, Pennsylvania toward persistence in completion of their baccalaureate degree. To achieve this goal, a qualitative case study design was chosen. Creswell & Poth (2018) define case study research as a methodology: a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study as well as a product of the inquiry. Furthermore, case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. Lastly, the unit of analysis in the case study might be multiple cases (a multisite study) or a single case (a within-site study) (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 96-97).

Therefore, a qualitative case study was the most appropriate design to use in the evaluation of the level of support for this population of students. In this case study, three PWIs located in Northeastern Pennsylvania were the focus of the study. These institutions were investigated to determine if they were meeting the academic, social, and individual needs of the Black male students attending their schools. Moreover, the researcher has potential bias toward the topic being investigated, as the researcher himself is a Black male with a personal interest in the results of this study, and the impact they may have on the experience of Black males in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select the study's sample. To yield robust information about the phenomenon under study, a purposeful sampling is a method that is typical of case study methodology (Creswell, 2014). Three PWIs located in Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) were selected. These institutions were selected based on their first-year Black male student population in proportion to their overall student body of White and other non-White students. PWIs, tend to be in a unique position to provide quality support to their students due to their size and lower numbers (Harper, 2013), which could potentially be a benefit for Black males. The research was conducted using individual and group interviews (each interview was approximately 45 minutes) with student participants and individual interviews with university staff members (45 minutes) who were able to provide information and their opinions about the level of supports available at their respective institutions. Black male students who were end-of-first-year students or beginning sophomores (ages 18-25) were selected, because the research shows that when Black male students are adequately supported in their first year of study their persistence rates to graduation dramatically increase (Harper, 2013; Palmer et al., 2014). The administrators selected were interviewed to gauge their perception of the school's level of support in place for Black males, as well as their ongoing engagement efforts to provide resources to this population toward their overall success.

Collection of Data

The nineteen participants (fourteen students, five faculty/staff members) in this study were asked to respond to the questions drafted specifically by the researcher. These questions were designed to elicit responses to the central research questions: How are support structures offered at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) meeting the needs of Black male students toward persistence in earning a Baccalaureate degree? The interview questions encompassed inquiries into participants' level of self-motivation, background, goals, and opinions about the school community, efforts taken by their school to support Black male students, and if necessary, suggestions on ways their institutions could improve support. These open-ended questions allowed participants to respond offering their own opinions, judgements, suggestions, and potential solutions. Data collection consisted of the use of multiple methods and triangulation to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. This strategy added rigor, breadth, and depth to the study and provided corroborative evidence of the data obtained (Creswell, 2014). The researcher employed different data-collection methods including individual and group interviews.

Data Analysis

This study documented significant themes developed from collected data focusing on factors that impact the persistence rates of Black males to graduation at 4-year predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA). Data was collected to illustrate how the level of support (social, individual, and academic) these students received at their respective institutions influenced their overall experience on a social, academic and individual level. Moreover, this descriptive body of data produced major themes that were analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in order to interrogate the findings that give voice to the experiences of Black males at PWIs in NEPA and beyond this region. Also, these findings will assist PWIs as institutions serving this student population with the necessary understanding to offer better resources (i.e., social, individual, and academic) to Black males for their overall success in higher education. The themes represent data that emerged in various ways. Some themes overlap while others are more distinct. The overlapping themes described are consistent with rigorous, interpretivist, qualitative data analysis. These themes illustrate and support evidence that encompasses how Black males in this study feel about their experience and the changes they would like to see happen to increase overall satisfaction and success for themselves and future generations.

Impact of Stereotypes

Espenshade and Radford (2009) revealed that general socializing in campus life is the most common way that racially distinct groups interact on college campuses. For example, dorm assignments are a relatively straightforward way to foster cross-group interaction (p. 472). This form of socializing is used by each of the institutions selected in this study. Of the fourteen students interviewed, ten of them reside on campus, and nine of them were assigned to roommates who are White. Four students indicated that they had a fairly good relationship with their White roommates. However, others revealed that their initial interactions (e.g., during their first semester) were "awkward" often because of perceived lack of common interests or being "standoffish" due to limited communication with each other. Almost every interviewee mentioned that some sort of stereotype about each other was at the root of their tenuous relationship with their roommates. For instance, stereotypes, such as aggressive, scary, and prone to violence have been shown through research to be almost exclusively attributed to Black males.

When students were asked about their feelings on inclusion at their school during their first year, many responses were consistent with feelings of isolation, being misunderstood or prejudged: "When you don't see anyone who looks like you when you get to college, you wonder if they can relate to you or should you even be here" (Jay, personal communication, 12 July, 2018). Another student, Jeff, he alluded to feeling like his White classmates' initial view of him was their imagined stereotype image of Black guys: "They see us as a statistic, not a person. To them we represent what they see on TV and in the movies, like those thug, dysfunctional, drug dealer types" (Jeff, personal communication, 4 May, 2018). This view is consistent with prevalent mainstream accounts of the state of Black males in America as being in "crisis." In fact, the phrase 'the crisis of the Black male' has come to have great salience in the public imagination over the past two decades (Brown, 2011). Also, the perception of Black males (in large numbers) coming from single-parent (usually mothers) households with limited education, limited financial resources, and

socialized within a "street culture" is shown to lead to internalization or a maladaptive code of behavior and morality. (Brown, 2011, p. 2048). One participant in this study discussed how he felt insulted when he was asked by a White peer if he had listened to the latest CD by well-known gangster rap artist, Lil' Wayne? "It wasn't that he asked me that was insulting, it was the sarcasm in his voice and the laughs from others that he was looking for that let me know the question wasn't sincere" (Keith, personal communication, 5 December, 2018). He goes on to mention how it is "ironic" that at his school, White peers frequently ask him questions with assumptions about his upbringing. "They never ask you about anything academic, like about a report or something" (Keith, personal communication, 5 December, 2018).

While some Black males do come from impoverished backgrounds with limited resources, it is the proliferation of this pervasive stereotype that creates a mindset that all Black males are beset with a precarious and endangered existence. As Brown (2011) contends, these pronouncements have called national attention to the social and educational needs of Black males, however such discourses have helped to normalize and fasten in place an unchanging narrative for discussing and/or addressing the conditions of Black males especially in the education space (p. 2048). For example, instead of exploring different contexts that shape the experiences of African American males, these stereotypes serve as a universal story to make sense of all African American males, and they are easily found in news media, popular culture, policy reports, educational conferences, special education meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and everyday language (Brown, 2011, p. 2049).

At both the macro (U.S.) and micro (PWIs) level, Black males constitute a minority group. As minorities, Black males have experienced environments and social norms that are constructed for the dominant White culture (DuBois, 1996). Understanding the socio-historical experiences of Black males in the U.S. and the experience of Black male athletes at PWIs provides a more comprehensive examination of public issue and personal trouble of racial discrimination and social isolation. (Mills, 1959 as cited in Cooper, 2012). Five study participants were athletes (track & field, basketball, and soccer). Anecdotes from their interviews revealed different experiences. One participant felt welcomed by his teammates and his coach. He told me: "It felt like a family from day one, and that made things easier for me" (Devon, personal communication, November, 2018). He credits the team's coach for creating a family atmosphere where team members are accountable to each other, and encouraged to form strong peer-to-peer bonds. Two other study participants, Emmanuel and Dave had an opposite experience. For example, Dave said he felt like an outsider on his team. According to him, his coach was not supportive, and his teammates were "cold and distant." During his first year, Dave felt unwelcomed. He stated: "they [PWIs] expect us to go to an all-Black school and not want to leave our comfort zone in the 'hood' to go to a White school (Dave, personal communication, focus group, 10 December, 2018). Emmanuel's situation was very similar. "A lot of guys on my team would tell me: you look scary, and then I asked why they would say that, and the response was: a lot of Black guys look scary" (Emmanuel, personal communication, 4 June, 2018). Emmanuel continued to talk about an off-campus team party he attended in the second semester of his first year. At this gathering there were several other Black males present from other schools and sports teams. He recalled a White female student commenting: "I really feel uncomfortable with so many Black guys around me" (Emmanuel, personal communication, 4 June, 2018), at which point he and two of his other friends left the party.

Fostering Positive Peer/Institutional Relationships

The data from this study shows that the desire for better peer connections (same-race and otherwise) as well as connections within the institution (e.g., faculty, staff, clubs, and other organizations) were of great importance to Black males in their first year. One essential question posed here helps to determine how developing peer and institutional relationships serve to benefit both Black males and PWIs. Specifically, this study investigated how the support structures at the study sites impacted the college experience of their Black male student population in terms of overall social development? Although all of the students interviewed felt that cultivating and maintaining these relationships were paramount to creating an environment where they felt welcomed, several of them did not feel that these supports were visible or made known to them during their first year. At one PWI in the study, an alumni staff member at the university where he is currently employed was interviewed. In addition to discussing the present lack of programming and academic support for Black males, he conveyed how he felt as a first-year student:

> As a student at [NEPA University], at times, I felt lost. So, I had to seek out those I thought would be able to help me. As a Black student on this campus, it was difficult for me during that time." Now as a staff member he believes: "When students of color can find a member of the faculty or staff to relate to that allows them to open up more and that allows not only students to progress, but us as well—allowing us to do our jobs better (Jimmy, personal communication, 9 October, 2018).

Going to college is an eventful point in all students' lives, one that takes students into a culture that may be different from what they have known all their lives (Laden, 1999). For many Black males who are often first-generation college students from diverse cultural backgrounds, the transition from their known world to a PWI can be difficult and not always pleasant (p. 58). Fostering peer relationships and better institutional connections sets a pathway of success for Black males. The steps to creating this environment can take many forms. Studies show that when Black males become part of campus organizations, are provided leadership opportunities, and are encouraged to engage in various social initiatives they form relationships with the campus community that can resolve their feelings of isolation and 'otherness,' while also helping to strengthen retention and persistence for this student group. Currently, there is a retention crisis concerning African American males. Over two-thirds of these students start college, but never graduate (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Cross' (1971) seminal introduction to a model of Black identity development helps to contextualize how the intersections of race and gender influence the experiences of Black college men at PWIs, and is a major factor to their sense of purpose and belonging leading to achievement, however, has yet to be adequately examined in the research.

As a means to bridge these gaps, participation in leadership opportunities and student organizations has shown to be an effective way to cultivate positive peer relationships and institutional connectedness for Black males. Harper and Quaye (2007) found that regardless of the student organization or position held by the Black males in their study, each student leader articulated a commitment to upholding the mission and values of their respective university and uplifting the African American community on campus (p. 134). Additionally, each male devoted himself to dispelling stereotypes and breaking down barriers, as well as "opening new doors for other African American students on their campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2007, p. 135). In one case, a student noted:

> Recognizing the need for African American males to be on a level playing field with other races and for African American students [in general] to know about certain things that they otherwise wouldn't have been exposed to has prompted me to become active on campus (p. 135).

According to Hotchkins & Dancy (2015), the organizations Black males join, and choose to associate with play a critical role in determining how they persist. In conjunction, as leaders in PWI organizations, Black males are exposed to developmental challenges and circumstances that make them better leaders. (p. 38). Moreover, student engagement is equally crucial in the sense that it provides Black males with the notion that the institution really cares about their well-being and overall success in higher education. Accountability of student learning and efforts to retain Black males in college during their undergraduate years is the "call that PWIs must answer" (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2009, p. 88). As one university staff participant in the study surmised: "Students who get connected tend to stay" (staff member, personal communication, [NEPA University], 4 June, 2018). Building and maintaining these relationships are essential to closing the achievement gaps that exist between Black males and higher education. During an interview with another staff member in the study, he summed up his opinion about the power of relationships by saying: "Relationships will get students through not only hard times, but through college" (staff member, personal communication, [NEPA university], 26 November, 2018).

Need-Specific Resources

Overwhelmingly present from the data is the lack of preparedness that many participants felt when they arrived to college. Their need to feel better equipped socially, financially, and academically was palpable during both the individual and focus group interviews. Several studies have outlined that PWIs were not meeting these specific needs of their Black males (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn; 2015; Wood, 2012). These needs can include having access to better social engagement on campus, the presence of more Black faculty and staff of color in positions of influence on campus, financial aid, more incentivized leadership opportunities, and encouragement to maintain communication with their family networks especially during their first year. Scholarship in academic mentoring suggests that when university faculty mentor Black male students, integrate class discussions and assignment relevant to their history and experiences and make it a priority to recruit and hire Black faculty and administrators, Black males flourish (Feagin, 2014).

Several participants in the study spoke about how they had better relations with their peers and college faculty when they were a part of the campus environment. For example, Jay, an architecture student expressed how he felt about the support of his department: "In my program, sometimes our projects can cost $300-$400, and my professors really understand when I can't afford that and they help with alternatives and really work with me" (Jay, personal communication, 26 November, 2018). In terms of peer relationships, Jay mentioned that it is a "mixed bag" with regard to how they treat him. Architecture can be a demanding major in terms of workload, associated costs, and the level of dedication required to compete various projects. In his case, Jay mentioned how he is the only person of color in his cohort, and feels that in addition to the financial responsibility: "I always feel like I have to do twice as much just to make it noticeable that I am here" (Jay, personal communication, focus group, 10 December, 2018), his frustration stemming from stereotypes (e.g.,

low academic ability, prone to financial problems) he believes some of his peers have toward him and Black males in general. Robertson and Chaney (2017) posit that a significant determinant to Black male collegiate success is their financial situation. For example, Bush and Bush (2010) discussed that money is very important for low-income Black students who must pay out-of-pocket for courses, necessary supplies, and other unforeseen incidentals, including books, food, and housing. Furthermore, Black students in general, and Black males in particular are "disproportionately more likely than their White counterparts to hail from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which makes finances a real priority" (Robertson & Chaney, 2017, p. 263).

Similarly, studies show that students' family dynamic can be a significant force in helping Black males navigate the educational process in the beginning of their college career (Hall & Rowan, 2001). Jeff, one study participant, when asked about what motivates him to succeed, indicated that: "Making my family proud is a big motivation" (Jeff, personal communication, 10 December, 2018). Warde (2008) suggests that family support is likely the most critical contributor to helping African American male students to successfully overcome some of the obstacles to academic success, such as cultural and social isolation and fears of academic success (p. 60). Likewise, the literature strongly shows that the presence of prominent Black faculty and staff can have a profound effect on the academic and social success of Black males. Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han (2009) and Harper (2013) proclaimed that increasing faculty of color in the academy would provide mentors, role models, and a sense of connection that Black males and other students of color and junior faculty of color often lack on PWI campuses (p. 539). Stanley (2006) found that Black males responded more favorably to their overall college experience when they had access to Black faculty (male or female) as advisors, professors, and mentors. Indeed, mentorship was described as essential to achievement, retention, and student satisfaction. One African American academic in the study noted, "Many of us in the academy have come to know and understand that mentoring can be a crucial strategy for [student] success" (Stanley, 2006, p. 713).

Additionally, cultural norms and expectations upon arrival to college are other aspects that several of the study where participants felt they were not prepared to handle. Gary who is now in his second semester as a first year student, reflected on his first few weeks at his university and how he frequently regretted that he did not choose to attend a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), where he believes: "I could be more like myself, and I wouldn't be the only Black person in a class of 40 students." He went on to mention how routine activities were difficult for him. "Even for something like getting a haircut can be challenging" (Gary, personal communication, 10 December 2018). These experiences converge for Black males leading to a condition psychologists have termed: racial battle fatigue, a concept that explains the social and psychological stress responses (e.g., self-selected isolation) from being an African American male on a historically White college campus (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Self-Schemas/Self-Concepts

Hall & Rowan (2001) contend that "African American males have historically failed in higher education due to encounters with racism and various other forms of oppression. The manifestations of racism are deeply rooted in the American psyche and are reflected in the practices and policies—however subtle—of higher education today" (p. 3). Terry & McGee (2012) assert that the civil rights of Black students and Black males in particular have been infringed upon in part due to the

"constant systematic assaults on their opportunities to learn, and as a result of well-documented disparities in classrooms (i.e., lack of qualified teachers, under-resourced schools, low expectations, and negative racial stereotypes) (Esmonde, 2009), most Black males in theses contexts are expected to fail (Harper, 2012; Terry & McGee, 2012).

Study after study shows that these compounded factors have created a hostile and unproductive social and academic environment for Black males, causing many of them to develop counter-productive, internalized thoughts and feelings about themselves that psychologists refer to as: self-schemas. Often, these students create these self-concepts based on previously substantiated default beliefs that others (in this case Whites) have of them. Black males internalize these notions of themselves as being 'out of their element' when attending PWIs, feeling 'dumb,' and upholding negative stereotypes, such as being aggressive, violent, and hyper-masculine (Harper, 2012). Jason, one study participant, who felt out of place at his PWI said: "In the beginning, I felt alone in my Blackness until I started meeting other Black and minority students" (Jason, personal communication, 8 October 2018). This type of statement was indicative of what several participants experienced. Having these sort of feelings caused them to operate in silos with the belief that something was wrong with them, and that somehow they were inadequate in one form or another, or worse—powerless to their circumstances.

Many Black males attempt to overcome these challenges by seeking to establish same-race peer relationships. For example, Black student clubs, foster a sense of solidarity and support in Black male students (Harper, 2006). Many of these young men will also seek out connections with faculty and staff (same-race or otherwise) that they believe to be understanding and supportive. In this study, the student participants were asked about the supports they received from faculty, staff and peers and the impact these supports had on their overall academic and social development, the responses varied. Three of the fourteen students indicated that they were adequately supported by their institutions in terms of faculty/staff (i.e., professors, coaches, academic advisors) initiated outreach and assistance, as well as positive peer connections. These three students were also involved in extracurricular activities on campus (e.g., student government). The remaining eleven students expressed that their respective institutions did not provide adequate support on all fronts. Their experiences ranged from unaddressed peer-related microaggressions in the classroom setting, which led Terrence to believe: "Sometimes it seems like they all [White peers] think we [Black guys] come from the 'hood' and smoke weed" (Terrence, personal communication, 10 December 2018), to what they perceived to be standoffish and unresponsive faculty and staff members. Harper (2009) surveyed 143 Black male participants across 30 PWIs and found a strong understanding and self-association with majoritarian views of Black males. To counter this, many of these students practiced a "prove-them-wrong" type of behavior (i.e., demonstrating resilience and other attributes of achievement) instead of "engaging in social distancing" as a means to oppose the discrimination they experienced on campus. All in all, Harper's (2009) students perceived situations similar to that of the participants in the study—a pervasive lack of connection to their PWI community.

Relatability & Connectedness

Current literature proclaims there is an increased benefit to Black male students when they feel connected and validated within their college environments. In addition, relatability (i.e., peer-to-

peer or student to faculty/staff acceptance, acknowledgement and understanding) to their specific and/or individual challenges is perceived by this student group in general as important to not only their sense of belonging, but to providing the initiative to continue their studies. Palmer & Gasman (2008) evaluated the perception of support from Black males who attended HBCUs in comparison to those who attended PWIs. They found that at HBCUs, Black male students exhibited positive psychosocial adjustments, cultural awareness, and increased confidence (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002 as cited in Palmer & Gasman, 2008) due to environments where they interacted with same-race peers and academics, as well as individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (Asian, Latino, and White) who took a vested interest in getting to know them. When Black male collegians experience more contact with faculty and staff they report greater satisfaction with their academic lives and exhibit higher career aspirations (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Students indicated that professors and administrators who were accessible and displayed a willingness to form supportive relationships with them provided a boost of confidence that they could succeed. These measures also directed and encouraged student participation in campus organizations, student support services (e.g., peer mentoring), and scholarship programs (Harper, 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2015; Williams & Smith, 2018). Other students noted that being able to rely on peers to sustain motivation, provided an outlet for informal connections, and academic/social networking were also important (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Williams & Smith, 2018).

Relatability between peers is a component that can be felt and evaluated on a social and individual level. Being able to relate does not necessarily mean all parties involved share similar experiences, but rather, that even when students do not they are still able to show genuine empathy and diversity of thought. For many Black male students, this sense of understanding goes a long way in making them feel "valued, challenged, supported, and nourished" (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, p. 58), which studies show are characteristic of the feelings noted by HBCU-attending Black males, but significantly lacking for those Black male students attending PWIs. Milem & Umbach (2003) surveyed Black students at a PWI on the east coast of the United States and reported that most of their friends on campus were Black and other people of color, indicating that these students felt the strongest connection with students in their own racial/ethnic group. During interviews, several of the young men discussed how they went out of their way to acknowledge the presence of another Black male on campus especially when they did not know each other. Dave, a study participant alluded to this sense of fraternity when he said: "I know all the 'brothas' on campus, because there are not a lot of us here" (Dave, focus group interview, 10 December 2018). One interview question asked students to imagine how their college experience might be the same or different if they had attended a HBCU. Some participants said they had not considered attending a historically Black institution, while others, such as Keith responded by saying:

> At a HBCU, I would be able to be more like myself. For example, I listen to Hip Hop and R&B music, and most of my White friends don't. I don't like always having to explain myself or the things I like" (Keith, personal communication, focus group, 10 December 2018). These social obstacles carry over into all areas of college life for Black males.

Moreover, from an academic standpoint, the research shows that a large percentage of Black males arrive to college with deficits in reading and math. However, when the research is further examined, there is a distinct advantage for Black males who attend HBCUs versus PWIs. HBCUs

have a history of admitting students of color who are underequipped for college level work, improving their academic deficiencies, and graduating them with the skills necessary to compete in society. In fact, HBCUs continue to provide value-added impact for Black students, much of which is not present at PWIs (Barber, 2012; Fleming, 1976; Kim & Conrad, 2006 as cited in Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Chaney, 2017). The data clearly indicates the need for PWIs to drastically enhance their level of connectedness to this student population, and the literature shows that many of the academic challenges Black males encounter can be resolved through purposeful connections with faculty and staff, social and academic engagement, and positive peer relations. It is not simply enough to recruit more Black males, PWIs must do more to meet them where they are and provide quality programming, incentives, and opportunities for them once they get to campus, which is necessary to increasing the trajectory of their persistence rates on a regional (NEPA) and national scale.

Institutional Proactive Awareness

On many PWI campuses, we hear that men of color (in particular, Black males) are falling behind. We hear about lower GPAs, a lowered desire to persist, and with the exception of athletics, lower campus involvement (Harper & Harris, 2010). What is much less represented in the literature is evidence that PWIs are being more proactive in their approach to bridge these gaps. College-student populations are growing more diverse, yet achievement gaps persist among different racial groups. Still, the poor outcome of Black males in particular is glaring (Brown, 2019). In a general sense, Black students represent a significant percentage of the undergraduate and graduate student population than they did just two decades ago. However, Black students who started college in 2011 had a higher dropout rate and lower completion rate averaging roughly 46% at public institutions and 57% at private institutions (Brown, 2019, p. 2). Financial struggles also continue to pose often insurmountable obstacles for this student population. In 2018, Black undergraduates owed 15% more than other student groups after graduation. Nationwide, more than one-third of all Black students accumulated more than $40,000 in debt after graduation versus just 18% of other student groups overall (Brown, 2019). One study participant, Jeff expressed his frustration and sense of hopelessness about the financial struggles he encountered: "There is the cost of attendance that is a financial burden for me. With limited financial support from my family, it's hard to make it sometimes, and that is something I don't think my school really understands" (Jeff, focus group interview, 10 December, 2018).

Current research calls for the need for PWIs to recruit, support and maintain more Black faculty and staff at their institutions. According to (Stanley, 2006) "There seems to be a growing conspiracy of silence surrounding the experiences of faculty and staff of color teaching at predominantly White colleges and universities" (p. 701). For many faculty of color, who reside throughout the academic landscape, their silenced state is a "burdensome" cycle that is rarely broken (Stanley, 2006, p. 701). Studies show that many of the Black faculty and staff that are present in academia endure often hostile and indifferent work environments, where their scholarship is not respected and often challenged by White colleagues and students. Black male faculty, in particular experience barriers often not attributed to Black female faculty due to mainstream perceptions of Black males having less academic ability and being prone to violence (Harper, 2012). Warde (2008) found that Black male tenure-track professors are less likely than their White and Asian counterparts to be retained and/or recommended for tenure. In addition, of

the 282,429 tenured professors at institutions nationwide, only two and half percent (7,060) were Black men (p. 495). Allison (2008) posits that when Black professors begin teaching at PWIs they must often "combat long-standing stereotypes and prejudices held by members of the dominant community, as many Whites, and other groups alike, continue to view Blacks stereotypically (p. 642). More recently, (Baumhardt and Julin, 2018) revealed that fewer than seven percent of tenure-track professors at college campuses across the country are Black. That percentage is even more disheartening at small liberal arts colleges and universities (similar to the institutions in this study) at roughly just over four percent (Palmer, Wood, & Strayhorn, 2014).

For Black male students, these factors present impediments to success when they get to college. Consequently, research shows that many Black males arrive to college with academic deficits in reading and/or math often due to inadequate preparation at the secondary school level. The quality of education students received at the K-12 level, as well as a student's personal experiences usually determine how prepared he/she is for the rigors of college (Welton & Martinez, 2013). Even with this understanding, faculty, staff and their respective institutions are cautioned from forming universal opinions about the academic and social abilities of Black males. If we begin with the notion that some students lack "essential" qualities deemed necessary for academic success, how is it that schools can correct or compensate for those missing qualities (Ladson-Billings, 1999)? If this sort of mindset is used then educators are operating from the premise that some students (i.e., Black males) are inadequate from the outset. As a result, many Black students, Black males in particular, are deciding to drop out of college due to academic and social hindrances. The Center for American Progress (2016) found that of the Black male students who entered college in 2013, only a little more than one-fifth were still enrolled in the spring of 2016. Ultimately, these are conditions where PWIs must be more proactive, vigilant and knowledgeable about. Institutions that have faculty and staff who not are prepared to become sufficiently knowledgeable about the unique challenges of this student group and adequately support them will continue to fall short at meeting their needs.

DISCUSSION

The most compelling implication from this research study is that these institutions must move forward with creating better pathways to academic and social success for Black males, with a proactive focus on faculty and staff acquiring the necessary training and development to provide the comprehensive services these students deserve. Such efforts not only benefit Black males, they benefit our society at-large. The percentage of Black males who are not contributing to our economic, educational, and business industries, either by circumstance (i.e., imprisoned, unemployed, etc.) or due to other factors (i.e., systemic discrimination, negative stereotypes) has created a dramatic strain on available resources that would otherwise flourish if these young men were adequately supported in our educational system in meaningful ways.

Moreover, this study helps to firmly establish the importance of this issue beyond Northeastern Pennsylvania, and if our institutions of higher learning do indeed stand behind the notion of supporting our students, then it must be made manifest for all students. Better educated Black males would benefit and enhance many of the fields (e.g., STEM) important to our growth and development on a global scale. These young men, when given support and opportunity, can contribute to humanity in ways we have yet to discover. Unpacking stereotypes that denigrate these

students sends a clear message to non-race individuals that perpetuating discrimination will not be tolerated on campus, as well as indicating to Black males that their institutions care about their well-being and success. Likewise, creating alternate and sustainable means of financial stability will go a long way in assuring that the cost to attend college is less of a burden. In conjunction, the presence of Black faculty and staff in prominent positions on campus has been shown to significantly boost the morale, determination, and persistence of Black males. Fostering relationships between these students and their peers, faculty/staff and connecting them to extracurricular opportunities (i.e., social clubs, community programs, etc.) puts Black males on a level playing field alongside all others within the campus community. The call to action for PWIs has never been louder, and as institutions charged with providing a quality education for all students, PWIs have a duty and responsibility to answer that call and support Black males in ways that are comprehensive, sustainable, and purposeful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Black male students today are associated with a lower socioeconomic status inherited from the history of American slavery, segregation, and impediments that have unfortunately, become ingrained in our nation's social fiber and in its institutions (Kim & Hargrove, 2013, p. 306). Using this knowledge as a basis for understanding the plight of Black males allows educators, researchers, and policy makers to consider new alternative and theoretical approaches to create effective structures, public policies, and educational programs that support these students in the most effective ways possible (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Harper, 2006; Reid, 2013).

As the framework for this study, Critical Race Theory highlights the use of counter-storytelling, a method used to gain stories of first-hand accounts of the lived experiences of individuals in an effort to use their stories as a guide to offering specific support based on what the individual actually needs (Calderon, 2015). Counter-storytelling would be an effective way for PWIs to being engaging with Black males to find out their specific needs, and allow them to have a voice in their development. This study investigated the overarching question: How are support structure offered at PWIs meeting the needs of Black male students toward persistence in earning a baccalaureate degree? The data revealed that the PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania under study were lacking in varying degrees of providing adequate academic, social, and individual support to Black male first-year students. Specifically, establishing better connections between Black male students and the campus community, which has been shown to increase self-confidence, personal motivation, and educational goals (Cureton, 2003) was one of the most impactful factors for PWIs to increase. In addition, sustainable financial options, mentorship, civic engagement opportunities, and increased presence of prominent Black faculty and staff were resources of expressed desire by not only the Black males in this study, but from a dearth of data represented in studies conducted across the country. In terms of academics, the summer bridge programs established at many HBCUs serve a good model for PWIs to utilize and replicate.

Although the scope of this study was limited to PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania, its findings uncovered areas of potential future research. As mentioned, the circumstances surrounding the substandard education of many Black males in this country begins well before these students arrive to college. Future research should look at what level of education students of color receive at the elementary and secondary level, and how their levels of preparedness compare to other students at

the same level. The efficacy and relevance of standardized testing is another area that poses challenges to students of color and Black males in particular. Probing deeper into the experiences of Black faculty and staff at PWIs will give them a stronger voice and help these institutions enact meaningful change to eliminate the barriers of racial discrimination that exists within the academy. Ultimately, the objective for conducting this study was two-fold: to give a voice to Black males who currently represent the lowest achievement rates in higher education of any other student group—worldwide, and to offer potential solutions for better outcomes to the predominantly White institutions who are charged with educating these students. Through the candid testimonies of the fourteen student participants interviewed, the objectives have been realized. PWIs must become more proactive and solution-oriented in addressing the historical and systemic challenges facing Black males in academia, and provide them with the necessary resources of support for them to thrive in our society.

About the Author

Yerodin Lucas currently serves as the Director of Institutional Equity and Inclusion and Title IX Coordinator at Marywood University, located in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Yerodin holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations from Arcadia University, a Master's degree in Education from Temple University, and he recently earned his Ph.D. in Administration and Leadership from Marywood University. His research interests include: creating better pathways to educational access, educational ecology, and issues surrounding equity and inclusion for students of color attending predominantly White colleges and universities.

Yerodin is an up-and-coming scholar who has presented at several key conferences, as well as conducted workshops focused on Black male student persistence in higher education, and creating programs to establish an effective high school to college pipeline for marginalized student populations. He comes from a background in k-12 teaching, and he utilizes that experience to build connections and understanding of college expectations with many first-generation students and their families.

Yerodin is a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but currently resides in Scranton, PA. He has traveled and worked in Canada, Europe, and Asia.

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