Factors Affecting Black Male Students’ Persistence to Earning a Baccalaureate Degree at Predominantly White Institutions in Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA)

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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level and impact of social, academic, and individual support Black male students receive relative to the challenges they face while attending a predominantly White four-year college or university in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Research shows that support in these areas is crucial to the success of first-year Black males as they attempt to navigate their initial year of study in higher education. This population of students, in particular, suffer from considerably low persistence rates of undergraduate degree completion. Many of whom drop out in their initial year of study at PWIs. In 2015, roughly 34% of Black males in the United States completed their undergraduate degree compared to nearly double that of their White counterparts. A growing body of research exists indicating the need to further investigate the scope and level of support structures currently present for Black male undergraduate students attending PWIs. Using Ladson-Billings & Tate’s (1995) model on Critical Race Theory in an educational context, this qualitative case study focused on a targeted population of first-year Black male students at three PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania to gather data about their experiences. The findings of this study provided students with a stronger voice to advocate for change, and significantly helped bring awareness to this issue for the purposes of empowering students and higher education officials toward meaningful solutions to this phenomenon.

Keywords: Northeastern Pennsylvania, mentorship, Critical Race Theory, persistence, diversity, minority.

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I come as one, but I stand as 10,000.

--Maya Angelou

Y. S. L.

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# CHAPTER I

# THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

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 suggests 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 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). Many Black males make their first attempt into higher education by enrolling at local community colleges. “The community colleges’ open-access mission embraces nearly every individual with the intent to pursue postsecondary education” (Wood, 2012, p. 304). Community colleges are often perceived as beneficial due to their open-door policy (i.e., open enrollment), which is not based on grade point average (GPA) or standardized test scores (e.g., SAT or ACT) as a condition of admission. Many of these types of tests have been shown to be inherently biased from a cultural standpoint, often comprising measures based on knowledge that many students of color have had limited exposure or experience encountering.

However, the persistence rates of Black males within the community college space illustrates that although community colleges provide less restrictive access to higher education, enhanced access does not equate to better persistence (Wood, 2012). While the majority of Black males enter higher education through 2-year colleges (Wood & Turner, 2011 as cited in Wood, 2012) only a narrow margin of these males persist to graduation or transition to a 4-year institution to obtain their baccalaureate degree (Wood, 2012). Many reasons exist that account for this disparity. Robertson & Chaney (2017) contend that “lack of financial resources, inadequate socialization, lack of substantial participation in campus activities, and academic under-preparedness for college” are key examples of impediments to success for Black male students especially during their first year of college (p. 261).

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 dissertation studies and analyzes 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.

The percentage of Black male students who graduate from PWIs with a 4-year degree are at record lows across the United States (Palmer et al, 2012). An overarching question remains—how are the support structures at PWIs meeting the social, academic, and individual needs of Black male students toward helping them persist beyond their first year to degree completion? The current body of literature focuses primarily on the disconnect between Black males and their lack of preparation for the rigors of college life. However, the literature does not adequately pose solutions to this dilemma, nor does the literature offer much insight into what PWIs are doing to be more proactive in their engagement and retention of the vast majority of Black males who attend their universities (Strayhorn, 2015). The current body of research fails to adequately highlight the growing number of Black male students who have effectively navigated their way to success.

Current research strongly indicates that there is a lack of proactive effort on the part of PWIs to provide holistic support structures that meet the specific needs of Black males from a cultural as well as academic standpoint. Studies focus primarily on the gaps that exist between Black males and their preparedness for the rigors of university life, rather than potential systemic solutions that may help remedy this epidemic. Moreover, existing literature contains gaps that have not been addressed with regard to the root causes of the dismal number of Black males who persist to bachelor degree completion at PWIs across the country (Strayhorn et al., 2013). These works perpetuate the stereotypes that have been shown, through research, to hinder the academic performance and self-efficacy of Black males, as well as “institutional programming and policy strategies” (Kim & Hargrove, 2013, p. 300).

For many Black males, establishing relationships and maintaining engagement on PWI campuses continues to be challenging, and compared to their White peers, Black males are more likely to develop perceptions of a racially hostile environment on campus (DuBois-Barber, 2012). These perceptions can present a great deal of difficulty for Black males as they attempt to navigate their undergraduate years in school. The U.S. Department of Education (2012) made the case that although the data shows Black males hold high aspirations to attend college, attainment (degree completion) rates continue to fall short based on the number of Black males who enroll in colleges across the country.

Sociologist, historian and activist, W.E.B. DuBois, coined as the term “double consciousness,” referring to the two-ness of African Americans—being both an American and an African American. DuBois describes this phenomenon as one attributed specifically to African Americans, primarily stemming from the effects of slavery and segregation (Brannon, Taylor, & Markus, 2015). Double consciousness, for many African Americans, continues to be fueled by contemporary racial disparities, as well as a continuing legacy of prejudice, discrimination, and inequality (Brannon et al., 2015, p. 586) fully present at many PWIs, often represented in curriculum, policies, and overall attitudes toward these students. As a result, many Black male students, in particular, exhibit characteristics of double consciousness (i.e., lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem, and inconsistent levels of achievement), which could also be a contributing factor to their persistence rates overall (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). This study highlights the challenges that not only Black males face, but those of PWIs in their efforts to address the support needs for these students in the hopes of providing proactive solutions to this important issue.

Recently, much of the research has focused on Black male students and PWIs in terms of the challenges these students face when they enter college, such as disengagement with college courses, feelings of isolation, and a sense of not belonging within the campus community. Little research has been done about the impact of present institutional support structures at PWIs, and what PWIs are doing to be more proactive in supporting Black male students particularly during their first year (Strayhorn, 2015)**.** Scholars have failed to establish how Black male students feel about the support they receive while attending PWIs, and do not reveal the salient reasons why the current support systems are not helping to close the gaps that exist for Black male persistence to graduation from PWIs (Brooks, 2012). To address these dilemmas, this study explored the issues surrounding support structures at three baccalaureate degree granting PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania for first-year Black male students and examined their impact on this population specifically.

## Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) guided this research study. This theory combines progressive political struggles for racial justice with critiques of the conventional legal and scholarly norms which are themselves viewed as part of the illegitimate hierarchies that need to be changed (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). Scholars, most of whom are themselves persons of color, challenge the ways that race and racial power are constructed by law and culture. One key focus of critical race theorists is a regime of white supremacy and privilege maintained despite the rule of law and the constitutional guarantee of equal protection of the law. Critical race scholars identify inadequacies of conventional civil rights litigation, in the process agreeing with critical race theorists that the law itself is not a neutral tool, but instead, part of the problem. Critical race theorists nonetheless fault critical legal scholars as failing to develop much to attract people of color and for neglecting the transformative potential of rights discourse in social movements, regardless of the internal incoherence or indeterminacy of rights themselves (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical Race Theory has been specifically applied to the issue of Black male student achievement in higher education at PWIs, because the amount of resources and facilities historically present in many communities of color, with regard to access to quality education, has been subpar (Harper, 2013). These factors have in large part, created a cycle of poorly educated students with minimal opportunities for success. Consequently, many of these young men often see college as being out of their league, and the Black men who do apply to college often drop out or have negative experiences due to lack of knowledge of how institutions can support them in relevant ways (Strayhorn, 2013).

Critical Race Theory (see Figure 1 below) is fundamental to understanding this study, due to its focus on many of the issues that concern people of color in the fields of social science, and equity in education. In the case of this current work, CRT addresses the inequity of public education in the United States with respect to people of color. For instance, in academic tracking, poor and minority students are likely to be placed at the lowest levels of the school’s scoring system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), ultimately putting these students at a disadvantage from the outset. Furthermore, some researchers posit that poor children, regardless of their race do worse in school, and stereotypes exist which claim that a high proportion of African-American poor contributes to their own dismal school performance. However, Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) argue that the causes surrounding the high percentage of poor African American students in conjunction with the substandard conditions of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism, and poor student outcomes should be attributed to the root causes and not placed solely on these students (p. 55). One study (Aguirre, 2010 as cited in Robertson & Chaney, 2017) highlighted the use of CRT as “one innovative feature to use the narratives or counter stories to give voice to minority persons (p. 264). In addition to introducing their lived experiences into discourses about social processes and institutional practices, minority persons challenge the “dominant social reality; that is the stock story the dominant group uses to justify its alter ego” (Robertson & Chaney, 2017, p. 265).

Components of CRT maintain that it is the very structure of the education system in America that impedes progress toward supports that encourage and enhance the success of Black male students specifically as a group in higher education. “Thus, as Critical Race Theory scholars we unabashedly reject a paradigm that attempts to be everything to everyone and consequently becomes nothing to anyone, allowing the status quo to prevail” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62).

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*Figure 1 CRT Theoretical Framework* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)

Extending CRT beyond law to advocate for a paradigm shift in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in their path-breaking research, posit that the absence of quality educational supports for students of color (Black males in particular) in America’s schools has created a cycle of disparity and inequality among this population of students for decades. Student persistence and degree attainment in college have been topics of increasing importance over the past few years (Wood, 2012). “In particular, much criticism has centered on the dismal success rates of minority male students, particularly Black male students, who view college as a mechanism for upward social and economic mobility despite outcomes which suggest the opposite” (Wood, 2012, p. 2). Some have even criticized many institutions for providing Black males with an access point, but failing to offer adequate support for their success (Wood, 2012). As a result, the tenets of CRT call for programs and interventions that focus on supporting Black male students based on their specific needs, rather than from a one-size-fits-all (aka multiculturalism) perspective (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of current support structures for Black male students at three PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The support structures investigated were defined as academic, social and individual supports implemented for these students to buttress their efforts toward persistence in earning a 4-year degree.

Central Question:

How are support structures offered at predominately White institutions (PWIs) meeting the needs of Black male students toward persistence in earning a Baccalaureate degree?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do Black male students feel about inclusion practices for them at PWIs?
2. How are current supports for Black male students at PWIs impacting their success in the first year of college?
3. What are the major challenges that PWIs face in providing academic, individual and social support for Black males?
4. How have the support structures at the university impacted the college experience in terms of overall personal and social development?
5. How has the support received from faculty, staff, and peers contributed to overall academic development?
6. 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?

1. How has the overall perception of the support received by a first-year student influenced initiative to continue their studies?

## Conceptual Framework

*Figure 2 Factors Impacting Black Male Student Persistence* (Lucas, 2018)

The impetus for this study was to identify the major challenges faced by Black male students attending PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and the goal of this study is to provide solutions that address those challenges and offer suggestions to PWIs on how to effectively implement the necessary changes. The researcher’s intention is to provide Black males as a group with the opportunity to have their voices heard and highlighted. Therefore, the researcher drew on Critical Race Theory, because it has the potential to put this important issue into a better comprehensive context for the benefit of this student group and the higher education institutions that serve them. Delgado and Stefancic (1995) posit that the stories of people of color are contextualized by the racism experienced as part of their lives.

Racism frames various social relationships including interactions with all institutions of society. Racism creates a perspective so fundamentally different from life experienced by the majority culture that minority stories often appear unimaginable to those in the majority (Blackmon, Coyle, & Davenport, 2015). Through the lens of CRT, the history and evolution of higher education in America has consistently posed a problem for Black males, as many institutions remain places where Black male students feel unwelcomed (Solorzana, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

## Conceptual and Operational Definitions

Throughout this study, I utilize several terms consistently. It is important to understand them in the context of this research.

Predominantly White Institution (PWI) – Institution of higher learning where at least 50% of the total student population is White (Harper, 2013). Usually this type of institution has a total population of less than 4,000 students and there are very few people of color on campus.

Black Male Student *–* An individual who self-identifies as having African or African American

ancestry (Strayhorn, 2014). This can also be a college student who self-identifies as African American or Black. In addition, this could be someone who is perceived (based on physical characteristics) as being male and Black.

Persistence *–* Overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of an important or long-term goal (Duckworth, 2014). In the case of this study, persistence is considered the action of a student who works hard; he/she has a goal and is resourceful in achieving this goal (e.g., college degree).

Earning a Baccalaureate Degree *–* Evidenced by completing the requirements from a 4-year degree granting institution of higher education (Harper, 2013). In addition, for a student, this would be an individual who succeeds in all of the college requirements and ultimately graduates with a 4-year degree.

Meeting the Needs *–* Evidenced by the perception from students and the outcome of their academic, social, and individual achievement (Palmer et al., 2014). In another context, this concept pertains to the level of support students feel they receive during their college experience and the effect it has on their level of achievement.

Impact *–* The effect of the level of influence on an outcome (Strayhorn, 2013). Impact, in the context of this study refers to fostering encouragement and engagement in students, which contributes to positive outcomes for them.

Inclusion Practices *–* Referring to institutional policies, regulations, interactions, and efforts that encourage diversity acceptance, reflection and understanding of self and others (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Another way to view this concept is through the lens of diversity initiatives on campus; faculty and staff development; platforms for student voice; signage and other visuals posed on campus identifying the position the college/university takes on including everyone.

Success *–* Evidenced by one’s achievement as well as perception and contentment with said achievement (Duckworth, 2014). Also, this would include students graduating with the skills needed to chart their lives effectively.

Challenges *–* To make or present a challenge (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*,*1999)

Considered to be obstacles (i.e., physical, emotional, and structural) faced by a person or group/organization, including day-to-day difficult encounters, for example, microaggressions.

Support Structures *–* Foundations that provide incremental steps for help toward overall success (Harper, 2013). In a college setting this could be services for Black male students, such as tutoring, mentoring, presence of diverse faculty and staff, and positive peer-to-peer interactions.

Academic Support *–* General and specific support for students to help with their overall success in academic subjects (e.g., Math, English) (Harper, 2013). In a college setting this could take the form of remedial courses, mentoring, tutoring, or extended time for assignment.

Social Support *–* Support for overall social success (i.e., social settings, workplace, classroom) (Palmer et al., 2014). Also, implementation of diverse campus-wide networks, dispelling stereotypes, and maintaining family connections are all forms of social support that students benefit from.

Individual Support *–* Support overall success for holistic, individual growth (i.e., self-esteem, mindset, self-advocacy) (Harper, 2013). At the college level, student support at the individual level can be achieved through ongoing 1-to-1 time between students and faculty/staff members, and maintain family support especially throughout their first year.

Perception *–* Refers to the personal interpretation of a situation, circumstance, or experience (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 1999). In the context of this study, perception addresses how Black male students feel about their experience while attending PWIs during their first year of study.

Personal Development *–* Inner growth and understanding due to an intervention and/or experience (Tough, 2011). As an example, this is considered to be the change or evolving on an individual level due to an intervention, which causes the individual to become more resourceful, understanding, reflective, and empathetic toward others.

## Researcher Subjectivity

As a Black male student in America, I come to this study with a familiar understanding of the challenges many Black males contend with in higher education. I come from a single-parent household, where my mother worked a great deal to support two children. I was fortunate to have her guidance and encouragement throughout my life, which is (I strongly believe) why I have always had the stamina to persevere in school. I attended K-12 public schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where my education was at times of good quality and other times substandard. Growing up in a demographic where the rating of your school’s academic standing was often based on the percentage of students who received free and/or reduced lunch created a sense of disenfranchisement in myself and my peers, as well as those who viewed us. When this mindset is carried over to college, reinforced by media images, ignorance, and a less than earnest attempt to understand and address the issues these students face, the cycle of poorly educated students and ineffective measures to support them persist. On another level, when I began this study I understood that the challenges Black males faced in academia were not the same across the board. For instance, all Black males in the United States did not grow up under poor socioeconomic circumstances, and a sizable percentage attended schools where they received a quality education.

Nonetheless, there is one factor that all Black males share—their perception in mainstream America based on their skin color alone. This viewpoint is often initially considered in lieu of academic and social ability and can take the form of racial and discriminatory undertones when they walk on to PWI campuses across America. Throughout my entire college career, I have attended PWIs, and on many levels I have encountered discriminatory people, polices and situations which have given me pause. It is my belief that in many of these situations the color of my skin played a major factor in the outcome of those interactions. As a result, being objective during this study has been difficult. However, several of the interviews I conducted provided a consistent amount of evidence that within the institutions selected for this study, there are various individuals attempting to make changes to support their Black male student population in meaningful ways, and this information gives me hope for the future.

## Delimitations

This case study was conducted using Black male end-of-first-year and/or beginning semester sophomore students attending PWIs who completed at least one full academic year at one of the three selected study institutions. According to the research, engaging and supporting Black male students in their first year dramatically increases persistence and graduation rates (Palmer et al., 2014). Marywood University, King’s College, and The Pennsylvania State University, Scranton Campus were the schools selected for this study, because they represent PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania, an area of the State with a sizable number of PWIs.

Two of the three schools are Catholic affiliated, and all three are liberal arts institutions with a small (5,000 or less) total student population. These schools were chosen because they are PWIs and have a small, yet sizable Black male student population (approximately 10%). There are a limited number of Black communities in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and even more limited in the communities surrounding the three schools chosen for the study. According to the 2017 Census results in the greater Scranton area, the total percentage of Black or African American inhabitants is less than 20% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In addition, as smaller institutions, they tend to be in a unique position to provide quality, individualistic support to their students due to their size and lower numbers (Harper, 2013)**.**

## Limitations

Generalizability of data was a limitation of this study. Historically, the intent of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize beyond the individuals, sites, or places outside the context of the study (Creswell, 2014). However, according to Yin (2009 as cited in Creswell, 2014) when a researcher studies several cases, generalizability may be applied when results are supported by an established theory. Generalizability was not the intent of this study. Instead, the researcher’s intent was to conduct the study to offer potential solutions and comprehensive knowledge of the phenomenon at issue for the targeted student group and schools in the Northeastern, Pennsylvania. The researcher maintained significant documentation (i.e., memos and field notes) of qualitative procedures pertaining to the interview protocol surrounding the problem along with thorough details of developments throughout the study (Creswell, 2014).

## Assumptions

At the outset of the investigation, the researcher noted that the results of this study could potentially indicate that PWIs are providing quality and relevant supports for Black male students in their first year of college. However, based on the current research and interview testimony from participants (students and university staff) this is not the case. Participants were asked to answer a series of questions pertaining to their view of the impact of support structures on persistence rates for Black males specifically. Responses indicated that:

* Participants in this study provided candid responses to questions relating to their overall experience as students and employees at PWIs. Responses revealed that the PWIs selected were not providing academic, individual or social supports for first-year Black male students in meaningful ways. This point is necessary to mention due to the subjective nature of individual responses, motivation behind responses, and the notion that one’s perspective may be (in this context) more or less severe from another individual responding to the same question.
* Participants (students and university personnel) understood the interview questions. The study questions were presented in English and pertained to concepts and terms that all participants were familiar with based on their affiliation and prior experience with the American education system.
* Black male students reported varying degrees of unfavorable experiences with regard to the challenges they faced as first-year students at PWIs. Based on the current research and participant responses, this assumption is accurate. Black males face similar challenges from a racial context at PWIs, but other factors, such as financial resources, academic preparedness, and social agility vary among Black males, due largely in part to the different backgrounds of the individual students. For instance, Black males as a group share one crucial characteristic that connects all of them—their skin color. However, not all Black males grew up in the same environments. Some arrived at college with more educational and financial resources, and others did not, but the one challenge they all face is the perception of them by the dominant culture at first sight. This factor is almost always the factor that dictates how these students are initially judged, evaluated, and treated on campus.

## Significance of Study

Research into the need for PWIs to be more proactive in their diversity efforts should be continued and expanded upon. Studies have shown that students are better engaged and retained when they feel connected and represented in their college communities. Black male students, in particular, have been shown to respond well (academically and socially) when they see culturally diverse faculty, staff, and peers on campus and in the classroom. According to Johnson-Bailey et al. (2008) Blacks are underrepresented as students, as faculty, and as administrators in the higher education space across the country, and this “underrepresentation is particularly evident at elite research institutions” (Bowen & Bok, 1998 as cited in Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008).

Furthermore, Adair (2001 as cited in Johnson-Bailey et al, 2008) proclaimed that Black students are virtually invisible “against the backdrop of an American education system where education can be a path to upward mobility and higher salaries. Nearly a decade later, scholars have found that Blacks continue to be within the minority in higher education. For example, according to the 2016 National Center for Educational Statistics report, only 4.9 percent of full-time, tenure track faculty are African American, and that number is even less for African American male faculty (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). All in all, having Black male faculty encompasses not only benefits for Black males, but for the campus community as a whole. Black professors can serve as valuable mentors “who aid in retention and graduation rates for students in general, and for Black males specifically” (Harper, 2009; Robertson et al., 2016 as cited in Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Taking these measures into account, research that promotes action-orientated solutions to the challenges these students face will go a long way in bolstering the success of Black males in higher education.

Subsequently, 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. Uncovering the challenges of this issue will benefit not only Black males who attend PWIs, but other students of color, university communities and their diversity efforts, as well as higher education prospects in general. Methods of analysis included reflection on data gathered by investigation of the lived experiences of Black male students in the context of this study. Lastly, the results from this study provide a sound basis for the investigation on Black male students at PWIs, and gives them a stronger voice to help shape the outcome of their college experience. The results will also have far-reaching effects on recruitment and retention efforts, persistence rates to degree completion and policies for students and the institutions they attend. For example, PWIs could adapt their curriculum so that it is inclusive of content material that speaks to the lived experiences and achievements (historical and contemporary) of people of color. In addition, Black males have been shown to respond favorably academically and socially when a network consisting of mentors, same-race peers, and faculty relationships are present and made part of their overall experience.

Interventions that include a comprehensive integration of faculty and staff professional development centered on presenting knowledge of the specific needs of Black males, as well as methods of inclusion that work to support these students is paramount for PWIs, ultimately giving stakeholders a framework or model to begin utilizing for future planning that is consistent with higher education diversity efforts in the 21st century.

The need for PWIs to address the issues brought forth in this study has never been greater, and doing so has the potential to significantly elevate the experience of Black male students on a national level. Highlighting this issue benefits not only Black males who attend PWIs, but other students of color, university communities (e.g., faculty and staff) and their equity and inclusion efforts as well as higher education institutions (i.e., recruitment, curriculum enrichment, and campus-wide inclusivity) directly.

# CHAPTER II

# 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 (APM Reports, 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.

The term *structural amnesia,* first coined by sociologist J.A. Barnes which denotes the disregarding of elements of the past that have lost any relationship to the present can be aptly applied to deliberate exclusion of African American history in NEPA (Johns, 2015). Structural amnesia, in this context can be seen as especially insidious as it demonstrates the “willful destruction of commemorative documents and monuments, destruction of inscriptions, and rewriting of history” (Schacter, 1997 as cited in Johns, 2015). To date, a small series of documents, photos, and artifacts have surfaced through investigation that accurately proclaim how African Americans in NEPA not only contributed physically but also culturally to this region.

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 many 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

There are several factors to consider when identifying the economic impact of the current state of Black males 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).

Equally important, in their study on increasing participation and persistence of African American males in higher education, 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. There are multiple benefits to a baccalaureate education, which include enhanced career mobility and security, social networks, marketable skills, and personal and professional aptitudes (Nevarez and Wood, 2010, as cited in Palmer et al., 2014).

A college education is not a guarantee to a great life, but studies show that those who have a college education are often in a better positon to obtain the type of life that broadens their economic prospects. For that reason, it is essential for PWIs to help the Black males on their campuses in every way possible, so that they have the encouragement to persist to completion. Indeed, many Black males deal with the brunt of these factors, and at the college level, they can often develop a mindset which is counterproductive to their success in academia. Socially, feelings of isolation and financial stress can cause a myriad of issues for these young men. Providing a network of support can help these students feel less isolated and more in control of their outcomes. Anecdotal data from Black male students indicate their desire for better relations from peers, faculty and staff at PWIs, and their willingness to persist when they feel valued and heard (Palmer et al., 2014).

Student persistence and degree attainment in college have been topics of increasing importance over the past few years (Wood, 2012). In 2009, President Barack Obama pledged plans to increase the number of community college graduates by five million students by the year 2020 (Wood, 2012). This has served to raise national attention to not only the community college’s role, but the role of colleges and universities in general, in educating graduates needed for the U.S. to compete in a global market economy (Wood, 2012, p. 1). “In particular, much criticism has centered on the dismal success rates of minority male students, particularly Black male students, who view college as a mechanism for upward social and economic mobility despite outcomes which suggest the opposite” (Wood, 2012, p. 2). Some have even criticized many of these institutions for providing Black males with an access point, but failing to offer adequate support for their success (Wood, 2012). Findings suggest that a student’s interpretation of, and reaction to, the stressors associated with an institutional setting determined the level of success (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

## Academic & Social Challenges

The 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 unwelcome (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 (Brooks et al., 2012). 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 at the successfully regardless of their aptitude for grit.

Further research strongly suggests 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 peer clubs 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).

## The State of Black Males in Higher Education Abroad

When the scope and scale of the issues facing Black males in academia are broadened beyond the United States, the research reveals parallels existing in other countries where the demographic and population of students of color is similar to America. Looking at the state of Black men in higher education globally provides context for just how pervasive the challenges are for this student group. Doing so can also offer best practices and potential solutions from other institutions and the students themselves. The United Kingdom and Canada’s Black male student population for example, experience what appear to be mirror images to those in the U.S. Hampton (2010) explains how the in many schools in the province of Ontario (comprising the cities of Toronto and Ottawa among others), concerns about racism and inequities in the education of Black learners have led institutions such as the University of Toronto to adopt research projects to examine the experience of Black youth in Canadian schools. These projects worked in tandem with research being conducted by the African Canadian Working Group, along with recommendations relating to the implementation of Afrocentric schools.

Since the early 1980s reports of Black students’ feelings of being alienated and having lack of support, were met with attitudes of indifference or denial from teachers, many of whom failed to recognize any problems in the educational system (Hampton, 2010). Instead, many teachers “identified factors in the students’ characters, the characters of the students’ families or the students’ earlier educational experience” prior to college as the problem (Hampton, 2010, p. 105). In 1990, the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) was formed to address the struggles of Blacks in Toronto, Nova Scotia and other major regions in the country. Since its establishment, this organization has sought to bring meaningful change to Canadian schools for students of color (Hampton, 2010).

Similarly, in the UK (as in the U.S. where Blacks were enslaved and transported from Africa via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade) conditions of institutional racism, racism, discrimination, and injustice overshadow daily life for many Blacks (Andrews, 2018). Despite that, many in Britain’s Black communities have created organizations to support Black students. In the early 1960s (in response to the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.) residents of Birmingham, England founded the Black Supplementary School Movement (BSSM). The aim of this organization has been to provide Blacks (and other students of color) with supplementary academic materials depicting Blacks and other people of color and their major contributions to society. In doing so, BSSM provides students with a knowledge base centered on seeing people like themselves accurately and positively represented throughout history (Andrews, 2015). BSSM also specifically addresses the condition of Black males in high school and college by creating partnerships with area schools and matching students with mentors to guide them in their various stages of development. Consequently, Black male students in the U.S. and the UK have the lowest rate of initial college degree completion of any student group, which necessitates the need for intervention groups like the BSSM.

Since the establishment of the BSSM, Black scholars at institutions in Britain have advocated for a change in the standard education system to include more programming that focuses on the Black experience in the UK and globally, while also providing interventions that help to foster understanding, acceptance, equity and inclusion among students and educators. From these efforts, Black Studies has now become an academic field of study. For example, as the second-most populous city in the UK, Birmingham has the second-highest population of people of color outside London. Several local and regional colleges and universities have developed courses and certificate programs centered on Black Studies.

Birmingham City University (BCU) was the first higher education institution in Britain to pioneer a full scale Black Studies degree program. Over the past five years, the program has garnered much interest from students of color and Whites because of its innovative approach to addressing the multilayered challenges of students spanning the Black diaspora worldwide. Andrews & Palmer (2013) express that a strength of the interdisciplinary nature of Black Studies is that it exposes us to a range of ideas and discussions that can forge unexpected connections that can be built on the future. As a progressive initiative, BCU’s Black Studies program has created a space where Black students have the academic support and curricular context necessary to have their challenges brought to the forefront and a platform to have their stories told through their own voices.

On another level, many scholars make the case that Black students in the West have similar challenges (discrimination, poverty, lack of resources, etc.) as Black students in many sub-Saharan African countries, but studies show that African male students are more engaged in school, educated, and have a better work ethic than Black males who are African American, British or Canadian-born. Anderson & Connor (2018) maintain that recently (over the past 25 years) immigrants from African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to the U.S. and Europe are more likely to persist to initial 4-year degree completion and obtain employment than Blacks born in those western countries. For instance, immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa ages 25 and older in the U.S. not only stand out from U.S. born Blacks, but they are also more likely to have at least some form of college experience when they arrive (p. 7).

While research does show that there is a notable difference between African male and Black male students in the West with regard to engagement, degree attainment, and resourcefulness in school, the importance of the fact that these students do not live in environments and attend schools where they are the minority cannot be overstated. Social cohesion, shared identity, knowledge of one’s true history, and kinship play an important role in the lives of African students. In many African schools, students see peers and learn from and are mentored by staff and faculty who represent the communities in which they live both visually and culturally on a daily basis (Andrews, 2018).

In the West, African American males are marginalized in political, economic, and social arenas (Bridges, 2011) and have had their history relegated to a hodgepodge of interpretations. Overwhelming data reveals that access alone is not enough to ensure equal opportunity for Black male students at PWIs in America, Britain, or Canada, and the consequences of slavery and its legacy in the mindset of Black males in the West is one crucial component that the vast majority of sub-Saharan African males do not contend with as a part of their psyche (Andrews, 2018; Hill, 2016; Bridges, 2011; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; and Allen, 1992). Without doubt, the research clearly shows that the status of Black males in higher education needs to be addressed at all levels. There has been no time in our academic history where the achievements (known or disregarded) of Blacks males have been viewed by mainstream society as equal to their non-race peers on any front, and society’s blatant disregard for such things stifles not only their potential, but it continues to support a huge barrier to the untold benefits Black males could bestow on humanity.

# CHAPTER III

# METHODOLOGY

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. Merriam (1988 as cited in Creswell, 2014) defines a qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 27). Case studies provide researchers with an understanding of complex social phenomena while preserving the holistic and meaningful characteristics of everyday events (Yin, 2003 as cited in Creswell, 2014). Case studies are a valuable tool for understanding human behavior in depth (Stake, 1995 as cited in Creswell, 2014). According to Yin (2003 as cited in Creswell, 2014) case study research design links the data to be collected and conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of the study – it provides a conceptual framework and an action plan for getting from questions to a set of conclusions.

Creswell & Poth (2018) further 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.

## 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: Marywood University, King’s College, and The Pennsylvania State University, Scranton Campus. 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.

## Pilot Study

For the purposes of gathering preliminary data on the topic, a pilot study was conducted at a PWI in NEPA with a Black male first-year student named “John” and two university staff members. John’s name was provided by one of the university staff members to the researcher as a potential student who fit the criteria of the study. The researcher contacted all participants via email and obtained permission to conduct the in-person interviews. All interviews took approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission. The researcher used field notes as the primary form of data collection to elicit the participant’s perceptions of reality.

Creswell (2007) states that “Gathering the types of information typically needed in a case study involves going to the research site, respecting the daily lives of individuals at the site, and collecting a wide variety of materials” (p. 71-72). For the pilot study, an ongoing and selective review of the literature was conducted to inform the study. The focus of the review was to gain a better understanding of what support structures were present at PWIs to meet the needs of their first-year Black male student population, what is the perception of these students about the supports in place for them, and what is the overall impact (i.e., academic, social, and individual) of the institutional supports at present.

## Collection of Data

The nineteen participants (fourteen students, five PWI staff members) in this dissertation study were asked to respond to the questions drafted specifically by the researcher. These questions were designed to elicit responses to the central research question: 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. All interviews were audio recorded with prior permission of the study participants. The researcher also took detailed hand-written notes during the interviews. Electronic data is stored on a password protected computer. The researcher, will be the only individual with access to the stored data. The data will be kept for a period of three years and then be destroyed by wiping the hard drive clean.

All hand-written notes and memos will be stored in a lockbox and the researcher will be the only individual with access to the lockbox, and data will be kept for a period of three years and then destroyed by shredding the written documents. All audio recordings will be kept on a password protected audio device, and the researcher will be the only individual with access to the audio device. All audio recordings will be kept for a period of three years and then destroyed by deleting all audio recordings. The researcher successfully obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study on April 20, 2018.

## Phase I—Individual In-Person Interview

After proper permission was granted, participants were contacted through their school affiliated email address. The initial email provided a description of the study and requested their participation. Of those who agreed to participate, a follow-up email was sent scheduling the individual, in-person interview. The initial in-person interview was selected as the primary method of data collection for this study. The questions from the in-person interview attempted to gather information from the perspective of the participants, such as (a) How do Black male students feel about inclusion practices for them at PWIs? (b) How are current supports for Black male students at PWIs impacting their success in the first year of college? (c) What are the major challenges that PWIs face in providing academic, individual and social support for Black males? (d) How have the support structures at the university impacted the college experience in terms of overall personal and social development? (e) How has the 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 a first-year student influenced initiative to continue their studies?

An advantage to in-person interview methodology is that it is a relatively minimal risk, and has the potential to provide a rich, thick description of the phenomenon, which is the focus of this study, and easily administered, and managed (Creswell, 2014).

## Phase II— Student Group Interviews

The group interview method was selected as the secondary method of data collection for this research. This group interview method is believed to be useful in case studies due to the potential to elicit even more rich, thick descriptions from participants’ views and opinions about their lived and experienced situations. When participants are in a group discussing the same phenomenon, the opportunity for them to discover shared experiences can help to add to their development, networking connections, provide a deeper understanding of the issues, and brainstorm potential solutions. In addition, it gives the researcher an opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information (Creswell, 2014). The researcher conducted one focus group interview and invited prior student participants from all three study schools to attend. Five students in total attended representing only two of the three schools.

Nonetheless, the group interview allowed these Black males to connect and offer their experiences to each other. The researcher verbally communicated to the group interview participants that any information presented in the session should not be repeated outside the room. However, unlike the individual interviews, the researcher could not guarantee the confidentially of other participants in the group session. Each student verbally agreed to keep all information from the group session confidential. In addition, the researcher made sure no student gave their last name or the names of any other students or university officials at their respective institutions. General terms like “a professor” or “a friend of mine” were used to describe personal anecdotes.

## Ethical Considerations

Creswell & Poth (2018) put forth that an important step in the data collection process is to “find people or places to study and to gain access to and establish a rapport with participants so that they will provide good data” (p. 148). Purposeful sampling allows researchers to build and maintain rapport with study participants with fidelity. It is a purposeful sample that will intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to maintain this form of integrity, in addition to sending a general email to sample student participants, the researcher worked closely with relevant members of faculty and staff at each study school to identify students who had the potential to inform the study in meaningful ways based on their experiences.

Another consideration in data collection involved ethical considerations. “A qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 150-151). Typically, researchers contend with ethical issues surrounding respect for persons (i.e., privacy and consent), concern for welfare (i.e., minimize harm and augment reciprocity), and justice (i.e., equitable treatment and enhance inclusivity) (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Throughout the study, the researcher made every effort to be aware of and uphold these ethical considerations. For example, all interviews (individual and focus group) were conducted in a private location agreed to and confirmed by the participants (e.g., empty conference room, personal office, student center room, etc.). The researcher has mentioned some potential personal biases that exist with this topic. For example, the researcher was born and raised in a similar demographic as several of the student participants. As such, the researcher had certain assumptions about the participants and their responses to the study research protocol.

As a result, there may be some implicit and explicit biases held by the researcher. Every effort was made to diminish these biases during the interview process, as the researcher wanted to remain fair and impartial so that any themes that developed could be recognized for what they are, and not influenced by the researcher’s assumptions and/or opinions. In addition, the researcher kept a reflection journal throughout the study to write down any feelings or observations in order to get them out, but kept them separate from the study data. The reflection journal will not become part of the final study results, and will be shredded along with the collected study data after three years, which is consistent with IRB regulations.

# CHAPTER IV

# DATA ANALYSIS

In this study I have 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. I openly acknowledge my connection to the phenomenon at issue in this study, as Black male student at a PWI in Northeastern Pennsylvania. I am familiar with the geography and demographics of the institutions in NEPA. My experience in NEPA began three years ago when I was accepted into a Ph.D. program at Marywood University. From the outset, I can remember feeling a sense of uneasiness in my first semester when I discovered I was the only person of color in my cohort, only to find out later that I was the only person of color (male or female) in the entire Ph.D. program. This was exacerbated after I realized none of my professors were persons of color.

I remember I told myself to keep an open mind, but I nonetheless felt out of place at times, especially when some of our class discussions focused on race, economics and politics. Many of my classmates had profoundly opposing views from mine, and I recall shutting down at times and not contributing to conversations as I normally would have. Ultimately, I would find my voice as time when on, and engage in hearty debate, but I felt out of place many times. Some of my classmates would ask me about life in the “inner city,” assuming that because I come from Philadelphia that I must be from an impoverished area of the city or that my background was somehow different from their own. After analyzing the participant interviews, I discovered that I did share similar experiences to a number of the students I interviewed. For example, I come from a single-parent household where my dad was absent for most of my life. I went to public schools where school materials and academic support were less than adequate. Summertime during my formative years (roughly ages 5-13) were spent learning how to navigate the ebb and flow of living in an urban environment statistically categorized as low-socioeconomic. Like many of the young men I interviewed, I learned how to be resilient, patient, determined, and resourceful. These are skills Black males bring with them to college, and these are the skills PWIs must begin to maximize when working with these students.

On the other hand, I also discovered that there were important differences not only between the study participants and myself, but also between them as a collective group. I found that four of the student participants who went to elementary or secondary schools where the student population was majority White felt more socially accepted when they arrived to college. These students believed that their previous exposure to White classmates and friends better prepared them for college life at a PWI. Furthermore, in light of the fact that I am more than a decade older than the students I interviewed, I thought the nuances of our experiences as first-year students would be different. What the data revealed was that the vast majority of the experiences these young men encountered was almost a mirror image to mine as a first-year student, which is disheartening to say the least.

Moreover, this descriptive body of data produced major themes that I have analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in order to tease out findings that will 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 I choose to represent emerged from the data in various ways. Some themes overlap while others are more distinct. The overlapping themes described are consistent with rigorous, interpretivist, qualitative data analysis. The themes I illustrate and supporting evidence encompass 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. One crucial theme included ways that PWIs can engage with Black males accepted to their schools before these students arrive in the fall semester. Indeed, this method would help adequately prepare the students and help with acclimation to college, but also help the institution create a holistic support plan. Other themes call for the need for concerted awareness from institutions of specific needs of Black males instead of the historic view of them as “in crisis” or “endangered,” as these narrow evaluations create a universal dramatization of Black males and misses the mark with developing solutions to address the needs of individual Black male students who can often come from different backgrounds.

I summarize the outcomes and processes used to interpret the individual and focus group interviews conducted at the study sites. In addition, I provide the theoretical framework selected in the context of the educational and occupational experience (student and university employee) of the participants and their relationship with the PWIs used in this research, and the factors each group contributes to or detracts from the success of Black male students at PWIs. I chose Critical Race Theory as my framework because it aligns well with my theoretical perspective and past personal experience. CRT is the most appropriate framework to understand and mitigate the complex circumstances surrounding the epidemic of Black male students’ lack of persistence to college completion in America.

## Critical Race Theory

Drawing from the tenants of Critical Race Theory, I analyzed the themes that emerged from the data. I utilized this theoretical approach from applicable concepts contained within CRT. Doing so allowed me to delve deeper into the data collection to gain a richer understanding and 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 liberatory action steps to address inadequacies and inequities of the system under study (Delgado & Stefanic, 1995 as cited in Davenport, 2015).

According to Ladson-Billing (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). For example, a Black academic can be positioned to be conceptually closer to “White” then a Latino, Spanish-speaking gardener (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 9).

Critical race theorists propose that the majority population’s liberal views, namely the majority-held belief U.S. social systems are colorblind and neutral, serve to reinforce injustices perpetuated by design by social systems. These majority-benefiting systems are designed to allow only slow, incremental change, which in practice means no change at all (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Critical Race Theory exposes the damaging effects of the system of racism in the U.S. by proclaiming that it creates an environment that reinforces subtle actions (i.e., microaggressions), pervasive, stereotypical images and comments, and hostile day-to-day interactions for people of color.

As outlined in chapters I, II, and III of my study, my intent is to investigate the current support structures that exist at three PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania and examine 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 are 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). After looking more closely at the data, six central themes emerged, as well as a series of sub-themes.

## Themes & Sub-Themes

## 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 I 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 I asked students 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). When I met with 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 my 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).

Equally as problematic are stereotypes about Black male athletes at PWIs. This group in particular has faced discrimination on PWI campuses to such an extent that researchers have noted the level of academic neglect many of these students contend with. Cooper (2012) maintains that Black athletes have a long history of experiences with racial discrimination and social isolation at PWIs (Adler & Adler, 1991; Air, 1988, 1989; Anshel, 1990; Benson, 2000; Hawkins, 1999; Lawrence, 2005; Sailes, 1993; Singer, 2005 as cited in Cooper, 2012). Since the late nineteenth century, Black athletes have been marginalized at PWIs. The negative stereotypes Black males face at PWIs stem from the pervasiveness of the ‘dumb jock’ myth (Edwards, 1984; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Hawkins, 2010; Sailes, 2010, Smith, 2009 as cited in Cooper, 2012).

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 of my study participants are 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.

The research is rife with accounts of similar experiences from Black males who attend PWIs throughout the U.S. Although, some Black males encounter more welcoming environments, the vast majority do not. What is also troubling as Harper (2008) posits is that these and other stereotypes treat Black male collegians as a monolithic or homogenous groups, and unique variations within the race are often overlooked at the expense of comparing these students to their White counterparts (p. 1). My study data yielded results that indicated that eight of my student participants had similar backgrounds. Each of these young men grew up in inner cities, came from a household headed by a single mother, and were considered low socioeconomic. In contrast, the remaining six student participants came from two-parent households, attended middle and high schools that were predominantly White, and possessed more financial resources. Two of these six students experienced relatively welcoming environments at their respective institutions and the other four did not. My participants’ experiences were consistent with the research, which provides evidence that not only do Black males come to college with different backgrounds, abilities, and expectations, but that these differences are varied and should be explored, honored, and supported for the overall success of this student population at PWIs.

## 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 I 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, I met with an alumni staff member at the university where he is currently employed. 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). Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) are credited for introducing the term ‘identity conflict,’ a condition that develops in many Black males when they become at odds with their racial identity (sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception of shared-ness of heritage), in an environment they believe does not value them, which these scholars contend is largely responsible for a significant number of Black male college dropouts. Cross’ (1971) 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).

Strayhorn & DeVita (2009) define student engagement as “the time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities and the extent to which the institution gets students to participate in activities that lead to student success” (p. 88). Equally important is that student engagement involves students in meaningful activities (i.e., clubs, student government, and other leadership opportunities) and experiences that include in-class discussions, faculty-student collaborations, and peer interactions (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2009). As one university staff participant in my 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 my 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 my 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).

Initiatives such as summer preparation programs that help prepare qualified Black males for academic and social expectations before they arrive to college in the fall semester; better university-high school connections (especially viable in smaller regions like NEPA); and being paired with a faculty and peer mentors at the very beginning of the semester are among those that have proven to be successful at several PWIs (Wood, 2012). Having access to such resources would be beneficial for any student, but are even more advantageous for Black males as a means to help the vast majority of them overcome the inherent, systemic challenges they face at PWIs.

Several participants in my 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 of my study participants, 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 (2007) 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 my study 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 of my study participants, 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 of my 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 my 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 my 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)surveyedBlack 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 my interviews, several of the young men I spoke with 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 of my interview questions 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 music and R&B, 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

Studies show that 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 of my study participants, 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, (APM Reports, 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 receive 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.

# CHAPTER V

# FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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At the outset of this study, my goal was to investigate the level of academic, social, and individual support structures present at PWIs located in Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) for first-year Black males, and examine the impact these measures have on persistence rates to attainment of a baccalaureate degree for these students specifically. My purpose was to offer a series of best practices that PWIs could use to better engage, support, and retain current and future Black male students on their campuses. The research I discovered during this process provided great insight into many of the barriers to success Black males face when they attend PWIs, as well as the challenges these colleges and universities contend with when attempting to work with this student group. Therefore, my research questions sought to address how the Black males in my study felt about the level of inclusion on their campuses during their first year; how the current supports (or lack thereof) were impacting their overall success; major challenges PWIs have with regard to providing necessary supports; support structures and their impact on personal and social development for Black males; the impact of faculty, staff, peer, and family connections on achievement for first-year Black males; and Black male’s perception of how available supports influenced their desire to continue with college.

Through my interviews and candid conversations with participants, I learned a great deal about some of the expectations that Black males have before they attend college, and their feelings of inadequacy, fear, and frustration when they realize how their secondary and postsecondary institutions continue to fail them in systemic ways. However, I have also gained a better understanding of the impetus behind their resilience, resourcefulness, and determination to succeed with or without being provided opportunity and/or support. In conjunction, PWIs— institutions tasked with creating and offering a quality educational experience for all students— continue to lack the knowledge, developmental awareness, and at times, basic interest in meeting the needs of Black males. This phenomenon is not new, and it not specific to NEPA. Indeed, Black males encounter similar situations in higher education globally. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, my analysis uncovered and revealed a variety of feelings and perceptions from Black male students and college and university faculty/staff members on what the major issues are, their implications, roadmaps to viable solutions, and potential options for future research.

## Findings

In this section, I delineate the sub-themes of the six major themes detailed in Chapter IV that emerged from my research at three PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania. These findings represent persuasive and salient conclusions derived from my analysis of the data. These findings, I believe, are the best representation of the outcome of my study. My first notable discovery was the impact that stereotypes had on Black male student performance particularly in social and academic settings (i.e., classroom, parties, group work, etc.). Many of these stereotypes took the form of microaggressions from peers and institution employees (i.e., faculty/staff). The second finding came directly from the majority of participants and their belief that if Black males had meaningful relationships with their White peers and PWI faculty and staff members there would be a better mutual respect and understanding for cultural norms and other perceived differences. The next finding revealed the need for PWIs to be aware of and provide better resources specific to the needs of Black male students. Also, clear from these findings is the need for PWIs to be more proactively aware of the unique needs of Black males was prevalent throughout testimony from the interviews. Another outcome uncovered the negative self-schemas/self-concepts that Black male students develop as a result of their experiences as first-year students at PWIs. Lastly, all of the students I interviewed spoke of their belief that peer-to-peer and student-to-faculty/staff relatability and connectedness as an extremely desired attribute they enjoyed or would enjoy as students on PWI campuses.

*Impact of Stereotypes*

A major impediment to success of the Black males in this study is attributed to the historical, current, and pervasive stereotypes that exist about them in all relevant facets of American life. At all three PWIs, mainstream beliefs about low academic ability, narrow perceptions of them as only having prowess as athletes, and negative views of them as violent, aggressive, poor, and prone to failure were the sub-themes espoused during their interviews. For many of my student participants, the way they believed their White peers and professors felt about them created an overwhelmingly pessimistic self-perception for these students**.** DeGruy (2005) posed the following to describe how stereotypes affect not only the psyche of Black males, but how the feelings rendered as a result are internalized, believed and often acted out:

If you’re Black and living in American, none of this may be news to you. Contemporary social scientists might offer an explanation as to why an African American boy might feel disrespected by a peer that simply looks at him. They may suggest that television, newspapers and magazines projecting negative images of Black males as pitiable, ignorant, violent and criminal have contributed to the overall poor self-images of Black boys. Black scholars might even point out that music videos and movies depicting masculine and feminine beauty neatly wrapped in fine White features and straight hair have further deteriorated the self-images of Black boys and girls, causing them to despise the reflection in the mirror. And they would be right. However, what is not often addressed is the role our history has played in producing [and perpetuating] these negative perceptions, images and behaviors. We rarely look to our history to understand how African Americans adapted their behavior over centuries in order to survive the stifling effects of chattel slavery, effects which are evident today (p. 13).

According toRobertson & Mason (2008)the high attrition rates of Black male students can be attributed to the negative stereotypesmany of them endure in White college settings. Deconstructing images of Black males as non-intelligent, thugs, and violent must become paramount if PWIs are to begin bridge many of the social gaps that exist on campus. Currently, many Black male students “enter the White university environment with a clear understanding that society expects negative outcomes from them. Therefore, it is imperative that campus administrators who are truly committed to the success of these students, provide programs [social and academic] for Black males to counteract failure syndrome” (p. 70). Kunjufu (1986) defines failure syndrome as a concept suggesting that Black male students often internalize the negative perceptions and attitudes held of them by school officials, teachers, and peers, and these negative perceptions ultimately become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Several of the males I met with in my study have attempted to dispel these stereotypes in various ways. For instance, some participants have used peer interactions as a way to present themselves as individuals and share their truth in an effort to provide a counter story to mainstream beliefs. As Keith, a study participant said: “There’s not just one story. Everyone has an individual story, and don’t base that off the color of someone’s skin” (Keith, personal communication, December, 2018). As historian and academic Henry Louis Gates Jr. once said:

There are 40 million Black people in this country and there are 40 million ways to be Black. When I gesture toward the myriad ways to be Black, to act Black, to feel Black, I do not mean to suggest that we are all of us in our own separate boxes that one Black life bears no relation to another. Of course not. We are not a monolith, but we are a community (Walker, 2012).

Both statements should serve as a call-to-action for PWIs as a way for them to effectively engage with Black males and find out what their individual stories are and build structures of support to meet those specific needs.

*Fostering Positive Peer/Institutional Relationships*

One desire that all the students interviewed in this study shared was the cultivation of better relationships with their White peers, professors, and other administrators. The data revealed that the lack of positive relationships for Black males with the overall campus community is most likely a byproduct of the first theme—stereotypes, and the perceptions held by many White students and employees at the study sites. Student participants in my study reported feeling isolated, pre-judged, and lost. Participants also noted that some of their peers accused them of having an unapproachable personality, made assumptions about their culture or background, and asked inappropriate questions pertaining to race and socioeconomic circumstances, such as a question that one participant overheard a White peer asking a Black student in class: “Have you ever seen anyone get shot before?” Later in the day the participant in my study found out that the question was asked by the White classmate after the Black classmate mentioned that he grew up in Brooklyn, New York. In this situation it seems the White student may have had a limited view of the diversity of cultures and neighborhoods existing within Brooklyn, and assumed because this student was Black that he would have most likely lived in an area prone to violent crime. Breaking down the underpinnings of negative racial stereotypes directed at Black males helps to build-up their social capital, and create a more cohesive relationship between them and their campus communities at PWIs. For Black males, campus involvement and social cohesion have a stronger positive effect on graduation rate than for White students and Black females, and contributes twice as much to degree completion than do measures of academic integration (Reid, 2013).

*Need-Specific Resources*

Among the themes revealed from my study, the need for institutions (secondary and postsecondary) to evaluate, overhaul, and extend the level of current supports for this student population was by far the most salient. The difference between my findings in this study and previous studies is that, the literature, to date, has not adequately addressed the need for PWIs to fundamentally understand and provide resources to counter and eradicate the unique challenges and barriers to success for Black male students in higher education. Resources exposed from the sub-themes would include recruiting and retaining more Black faculty and staff, mentorship, creating purposeful peer-to-peer engagement opportunities, more effective preparation for college prior to arriving on campus, and fostering established family networks in the student’s first year. The facilitation of these supports at an institutional level was clearly brought forth from the statements made by all of my study participants as tantamount to the growth and development of students in general, and Black male students specifically. As one staff member participant at (NEPA University) declared: “We need to have programs visible at the forefront to help Black males navigate challenges when they get here” [PWI campus] (James, staff member, personal communication, November, 2018).

The case for PWIs employing more Black faculty and staff is a compelling one. A study (Gershenson, 2016) from the United Kingdom determined that students from historically disadvantaged groups (e.g., Black males) were shown to perform better on tests and other academic predictors when they received instruction from same-race professors and teachers. Likewise, mentorship was also viewed as important to achievement by both the student and institutional employees in my study. As mentors, Black professors tend to engage with students more frequently than their colleagues, and as such, are often sought out by students, particularly students of color, more often for advising, support, and guidance (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). One key aspect of mentorship for faculty and staff is establishing initial rapport with Black males and then being proactive about maintaining that connection through check-ins, probing them for information about what methods of support work best for them. Eric, a staff employee at one of the schools in my study expressed that: “It helps to have a Black male or male role model to say to these young Black men…come on brother, that’s not how we do this or this is how you can go about getting things done. And actually hold their hand so to speak while teaching and guiding them” (Eric, personal communication, 8 November, 2018). Also challenging them to be more accountable for their success is crucial. One staff member in my study at [NEPA University] explained during our interview how she asks her Black male first-year students questions about their overall experience in education prior to college:

I meet with all of them [Black male students] during the first two weeks of the semester. I ask them probing questions from the start…like how was your high school experience? Did you have to study in high school? Do you have or know how to use a planner? If they don’t I give them one and go over how to use it. What are you worried about in college? What classes are you taking? These questions are important especially in the first few weeks to get a sense of where students are academically, and what basic skills they may have or need to have (staff member, personal communication, July, 2018).

Building interventions that seek to resolve the factors that both preclude and include Black male students in the academic environment is crucial to lessening their adverse experience (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Putts, and Boyd, 2009). However, as Gordon et al. (2009) points out, when students have a low identification with academics, they may be more likely to detach from academic tasks and perform poorly academically. Identification is especially important to Black males given that this student group disproportionately experiences assignments to low-ability groups, are socially and economically isolated from their classmates, and tend to be held in lower academic regard by their instructors (p. 278). Throughout the last decade, researchers have provided evidence that providing Black males with remedial support before they arrive to college has yielded worthwhile outcomes. For example, summer bridge programs have proven to be effective in narrowing the academic and social gaps for Black males before they arrive at PWIs. These programs are designed to assist students who come from environments where they did not receive the necessary training and preparation to equip them for postsecondary studies. Bridge programs usually take place for 6-8 weeks during the summer after high school prior to a student’s first semester in college. The overall aim is to elevate students’ academic and social abilities to meet the expectations of university life. Fountaine & Carter (2012) examined 233 sophomore students of color at an HBCU-sponsored summer bridge program on the east coast, and found that in the five years since the program’s implementation, participants reported significant positive gains in their academic and social skill capacity. For many students of color, and Black males in particular, such programs prove critical to their level or college readiness and persistence beyond their first year. Aside from the challenges many Black males face, one study (Palmer, Davis, and Maramba, 2010) discussed how university bridge programs provide academic and social services that increase the likelihood of success for these students. One participant in this study commented that his school’s bridge program made his freshman year better because it enabled him to be academically integrated into the university by connecting him with university personnel and peers, and when school started he felt more prepared (p. 92).

Moreover, financial challenges was another sub-theme expressed in my study data. The need for government and institutional support by way of more comprehensive financial funding is a major factor for Black males. Students in my study as well as another study (Palmer, et al., 2010) reported that many of the barriers they dealt with in college were directly related to lack of financial resources. Participants noted that pride often prevented them from seeking academic help, home and local community problems, and their inability to interconnect with academic success were indeed significant challenges to overcome, however, insufficient financial aid posed an even greater barrier to their success. One student reported that “if you don’t have your money by a certain date, the school tends to drop your schedule” (p. 91). Consequently, many of the resources (i.e., financial support, engagement, academic support, mentorship, social support, and presence of Black faculty/staff) necessary for the growth and development of Black males are not available in any meaningful capacity at the PWIs in my study, and as the research shows are lacking in a general sense at PWIs nationwide. This calls into question how aware are these institutions of the root causes of the issues surrounding the lack of Black male persistence, and how much time, energy, and dedication are they putting into finding out what they do not know in order to adequately address this phenomenon?

*Institutional Proactive Awareness*

Another sub-theme derived from the interviews pertained to the belief that the PWIs in my study do not make a concerted effort to investigate the specific needs of Black male students. Several of my student participants explained that they believe most of the White people on campus (peers, professors, and other staff) view them as being all the same. Jeff’s statement in this context was very revealing when he said: “They [White people on campus] don’t expect Black people to thrive at a PWI” (Jeff, personal communication, 6 December, 2018). Black males come for a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and ability levels. Understanding this fact is the first step for PWIs to meet them where they are and begin to support them effectively. Finding out the skills and abilities they bring with them will help educators customize their level and scope of intervention.

Mitigating social challenges was another sub-theme from the data. From an institutional perspective, providing ongoing training and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff on issues related to Black male student success initiatives, creating a visibly diverse and welcoming campus environment (e.g., website, employees, etc.), and staying abreast of trends in education fosters a sense of campus inclusion that is palpable for students of color, and Black male students in particular. In turn, taking these steps also dramatically decreases the likelihood of microaggressions on campus, which Sue et al. (2007) describes as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). In situations where such indignities are committed by an advisor for example, students will often feel inadequate about their academic progress and growth (Felder & Barker, 2013; Graham, 2013), causing them to question their overall fit at the institution, and in certain circumstances, their future in higher education. Furthermore, it helps to breakdown the negative images of Black males that currently plague our country. As a result, these racialized experiences have detrimental effects on students’ health and wellness, and negatively influence their sense of belonging on campus and their persistence (Harper & Palmer, 2016; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Truong & Museus, 2012). Burt, Williams & Smith (2018) contextualize the feelings of their Black male first-year student participants as “unsupported,” “isolated,” and “on the margins” within their social and academic communities (p. 7), exacerbating feelings of “otherness” and further rendering them to bouts of psychological stress (Burt, McKen, Burkhart, Hormell, & Knight, 2016).

At times during the individual and focus group interviews many of my student participants found it difficult to grapple with the treatment they received at their respective schools. They expressed how much they wanted things to be different, to change. Williams & Portman (2014) call for the need of PWIs to initiate ‘natural support’ systems, which can be leveraged by combining the resources inherent in students’ family and community environment to help them succeed in college. Although, the term natural support was not used in my study, many of my participants discussed how their family and home communities were a source of inspiration and motivation for them to attend college. Ultimately, the data shows that Black males desire more engagement from the institutions they choose to attend. Being more proactive about examining and addressing the individual as well as collective needs of these students would be a major step. In addition, creating environments that are visibly welcoming, intentional about breaking down racial stereotypes while simultaneously uplifting the image of these young men, and are socially/academically supportive of Black males serves to benefit all students without exception.

*Self-Schemas/Self-Concept*

The data from my study is well supported in terms of demonstrating how past and present images, stereotypes, and beliefs about Black males have been internalized in their psyche and acted out as character traits. The negative, mainstream notions of Black males as thugs, gangsters, and having high athletic skills and low cognitive abilities have been prevalent in American society for generations. What my study highlights in this context, is the degree to which many of these males have self-identified with these traits and formed a self-concept based on what they perceive others (i.e., Whites and other races) think about them. Several of my student participants reported feeling smart in high school, but having unexplained feelings of inadequacy in college classrooms where they were the only persons of color. Even when their White peers seemed unable to respond to a question, a few of these Black males would not raise their hand. Jesse expressed how he felt one time in a math class when he was almost sure he knew the answer: “My classmates were raising their hands and some people got stuff right and some didn’t, but I didn’t want to raise my hand and look dumb” (Jesse, personal communication, 9 October, 2018). Even in this instance when he thought he had the correct answer, when some of his White peers were responding incorrectly, Jesse still did not feel confident enough to try.

Smith & Allen (2007) posit that due to the effects of racial battle fatigue (i.e., consistent stressors causing the need to develop coping mechanisms), many students of color develop an increased sense of pride that is actually detrimental to their development in college. This sense of pride is often used by Black males to cope and protect them from being seen stereotypically, but in reality it is counterproductive to their social and academic learning. When students like Jesse remain quiet for fear of being seen as dumb, he and others like him miss opportunities to interact with peers and professors, as well as prove to themselves what their abilities really are. This statement does not relieve professors and university staffers from their responsibility to engage with Black males more effectively, in fact it demonstrates the need for them to be more vigilant by challenging and communicating with these students. As Harper (2006) asserts, social and academic reinforcement of racially oppressive assumptions eventually work their way into the mindset of African American males and negatively shapes the way the see themselves and others within their race. This phenomenon often rears itself in the behaviors Black males have developed to cope as a result of history, the media, and the lack of positive social capital afforded to them. Steele’s (2010) account of a young man coming to terms with his own place in White American society as a Black man is especially poignant:

I became an expert in the language of fear. Couples locked arms or reached for each other’s hand when they saw me. Some crossed to the other side of the street. People who were carrying on conversations went mute and stared straight ahead as though avoiding my eyes would save them. I’d been a fool walking the streets grinning good evening to people who were frightened to death of me. I did violence to them by just being. How had I missed this…I tried to be innocuous but didn’t know now…I began to avoid people, I turned out of my way into side streets to spare them the sense that they were being stalked…Out of nervousness I began to whistle and discovered I was good at it. My whistle was pure and sweet—and also in tune. On the street at night I whistled popular tunes from the Beatles and Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. The tension drained from people’s bodies when they heard me. A few even smiled as they passed me in the dark (p. 6).

Minorities of color are typically not able to choose an identity, but instead are “pressed to internalize one by societal signals due to experiences with, and perceptions about discrimination and prejudice (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992; Reid, 2013). For Black males, these discriminatory behaviors and attitudes from the larger society impose an identity that makes their race and gender internally salient (Reid, 2013, p. 78). The research provides evidence that an increasing number of Black males have grown to accept the negative images attributed to them and view them as par for the course when interacting with peers, faculty and staff. This internalized racism “erodes individual enthusiasm, makes certain attitudes and behaviors normative, and undermines collaborative action for racial uplift (Jones, 2000 as cited in Harper, 2006, p. 339). Given the potential impact that social and academic college experiences have over the course of one’s life, how Black males cope with the stressors of these environments warrants consideration (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2006). In order to empower Black males as a group to develop positive and self-affirming concepts of themselves—concepts that will propel them toward success—our educational institutions must dismantle the negative and destructive structures that currently exist in our classrooms, our campus environments, and in our thoughts about these young men. To do that requires PWIs to create and maintain relationships with them on a deeper level and connecting with them in ways (social and academic) that have not been achieved to date.

*Relatability & Connectedness*

African American males make up roughly 36 percent of all Blacks enrolled in higher education, and only four percent of total college enrollment. As such, many of these young men report the lack of connection to college faculty and staff and peers (i.e., engagement, verbal contact, feeling they are cared about) as a major impediment toward feeling welcomed and supported on PWI campuses (Reid, 2013). Studies show that frequent interactions with faculty and staff have “empirically” proven to specifically benefit Black male students, having a positive influence on academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2010 as cited in Reid, 2013). For instance, comparative studies have found that Black males perceive the level of faculty encouragement as a greater influence on achievement than racial composition at the institution (Allen, 1992; Reid, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn, 2015). In conjunction, Baker (2008) and Harper (2006) maintain that campus involvement and positive peer interactions have a stronger effect on graduation rates for Black males than for White males. Indeed, these relationships contribute twice as much to degree completion than do measures of academic integration (Reid, 2013).

Relatability (i.e., general understanding of similarities and differences each person brings with him/her) goes hand-in-hand with feeling connected to the campus community. When faculty, staff, and peers are able to relate to their Black male students, a connection is established that indicates to these students that they are a priority and their level of importance becomes internalized. One staff member from my study spoke about how difficult it can be for some faculty to relate to students of color: “When you are an upper-middle-class White professor, it’s hard to connect with a poor Black student” (Glen, personal communication, 9 October, 2018). What this statement indicates is the need for better support for Black males in higher education is as necessary now as it was more than four decades ago when students of color started attending PWIs in greater numbers. Our institutions are failing our students of color, and as the literature shows, they are failing Black males more so than any other student group.

## Implications

The most compelling implication from my research of the PWIs in this study is that these institutions must move forward with creating better pathways to academic and social success for Black male students, 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 benefits Black males, it benefits our society as a nation. 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 meaningful ways.

The data from my major findings and their sub-themes accurately paint a picture of the experiences of many Black male students attending PWIs in NEPA. An aspect worth mentioning here was my own experience working with some of the PWIs in this region while researching this topic. At the outset of my study I chose four PWIs in the Scranton/Wilke Barre area that I believed would be open and receptive to gaining insight on the perceptions of their Black male first-year students and how they could best support them. To my surprise and disappointment, two of the four institutions were very unreceptive, and even used measures that I came to view as stall tactics. For example, one such institution provided me with official written permission to conduct my study on campus, but was reluctant to provide me with the name of a university staff member to interview, and refused to allow me to come on campus to recruit participants during campus events where access to students would be optimal. Because of the nature and timely importance of this issue, I thought that gaining permission and access at these schools would be seen as a benefit to the institutional administrators. On the other hand, one other school in addition to my home institution were extremely receptive and assisted me at each stage of the data gathering process. In the end, I was able to find a third school who was eager and welcomed the merits of my study. Moreover, the subsequent literature included in this manuscript helps to firmly ground my data beyond Northeastern Pennsylvania. Perspectives concerning the quality of life for African American males have argued that education is a key component to improving the economic, personal, social, and cultural quality of life for them, whereby education is supposed to improve their development in these areas (Cureton, 2003), and if our institutions of higher learning do indeed stand behind this statement, then it must be made manifest for all students. For instance, 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. Black males have been consistently underrepresented among students pursuing and earning undergraduate degrees in science and engineering, especially when compared to White male and female students (Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003; Harper, 2016). 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. Moreover, having 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. In addition, 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. All in all, the implications for society at-large with regard to the success of this student group and the PWIs they choose to attend are profound. 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 and segregation, impediments that have unfortunately, become ingrained in the 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 build effective studies, public policies, and educational programs that support these students in the most effective ways possible (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Harper, 2006; Reid, 2013). The research shows that our educational institutions are failing Black males in myriad ways. This study focuses on higher education, but the failure has roots that go back much further. For example, the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* dictated that segregated public schools are unconstitutional. However, our schools today are some of the most segregated. This is a crucial factor to consider for many reasons. One major reason is that a recent report (Lombardo, 2019) shows that predominantly White elementary and secondary schools in America receive approximately $23 billion more funding dollars than school districts where the student population is made up of primarily students of color (i.e., Blacks and Hispanics). If we use Arizona’s 2017 results as an example, figures indicate that poor, primarily White school districts receive roughly $19,000 per student—while high-poverty non-White districts receive roughly $8000 per student, and among more affluent districts the per student allotment between them and poor students of color is even greater. As a result, by the time many Black males make it to college they have been operating from an academic disadvantage since the beginning of their school career. Coming to terms with addressing these factors may be daunting for higher education officials, but think of how seemingly insurmountable these obstacles appear to these young men.

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 NEPA 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 my 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. Furthermore, collaboration between K-12 school districts, higher education institutions, and state governments on curriculum, funding disparities, and student expectations has been progressing in the United Kingdom, Finland, and other European countries (Sahlberg, 2011), and if it were adopted in the American school system many of our most marginalized students could begin to have better educational outcome. When collaboration takes place both internally and externally the traditional focal points of administrations are challenged, and that is when real change can begin (Genao, 2013).

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 help to 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, my goals for conducting this study were two-fold: to give a voice to Black males who currently represent the lowest achievement rates in higher education than 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 participants I interviewed I think those goals 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.

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# APPENDIX A

## Interview Protocol

Larger Research Demographic Questions - Student:

1. Why did you decide to apply to college?
2. Are there any obstacles that get in the way of achievement in higher education for Black males?
3. How would you describe your background?
4. What motivates or inspires you?
5. Why did you choose to attend a PWI?
6. How would your college experience be the same or different if you attended a HBCU?

Interview Guide - Student:

1. How do you feel about the methods of inclusion of Black males at your school?
2. How are Black males supported at your school (academically, individually & socially)?

* *Academically* (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, extended time, culturally relevant material/access)
* *Individually* (e.g., campus support networks, peer support, family, staff/faculty intervention)
* *Socially* (e.g., inclusion practices, cultural events, peer connections, campus social organizations)

1. What motivates you to succeed in your courses on a day-to-day basis?
2. Are there any specific challenges you face as a Black male attending a PWI? If yes, please explain.
3. How is your experience different or the same as your classmates of a different race/ethnicity (e.g., White, Asian, Latino)
4. What support(s) do you believe would be most beneficial to you in first year of college?
5. Are there any supports in place at your school that have helped you navigate university life in your first year?
6. How have those supports helped your specifically?
7. What supports would you like to see in place at your school specifically for Black males?
8. Is there anything else would like to share with me about support at your institution?

Institution Administrator Questions:

1. What are the major challenges that PWIs face in providing academic, individual, and social support for Black male students?
2. What steps has the institution taken to support Black males in their first year at your school?
3. How do your current programs help support Black males in their first year?
4. What percentage of your Black male population would you say takes advantage of the supports

offered at your institution?

1. What supports would you like to see established at your institution for which you think would be beneficial for Black male students specifically?
2. Is there anything else would like to share with me about support at your institution?

# APPENDIX B

## Informed Consent Form

**Study Title**

Support Structures: Challenges and Potential Solutions toward Persistence in Earning a Baccalaureate Degree for Black Male Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions

**Introduction**

You are invited to be in a research study about: ***The Impact of Support Structures (academic, individual, and social) in place for first-year Black Male Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)*.** You were chosen as a possible participant because, you meet the criteria as a first-year Black male student attending a PWI in Northeastern Pennsylvania who is 18 years of age or older, or you serve in the capacity as a staff member or other administrator who has knowledge of available resources at your school and a working relationship with this student population.Please read this form. Ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

This study is being conducted by Yerodin Lucas, a Ph.D. student at Marywood University.

**Purpose - What the Study is About**

The purpose of this case study will be to explore the impact of current support structures for Black male students at four PWIs in Northeastern Pennsylvania. At this stage in the research, current support structures will generally be defined as academic, social and individual supports implemented for these students to support their efforts toward persistence in earning a 4-year degree.

**Procedures - What You Will Be Asked to Do**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview lasting approximately 45 minutes and one group interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. During each of these interviews you will be asked to answer to a series of questions about your first year experience as a student at your university. The questions will inquire about your opinion of the support you have received at your school relating to your overall academic, social, and individual achievement and success. Each interview will be digitally audio-recorded, and take place on your campus in a private setting (e.g., library, study room, etc.) or at a location that is most convenient for you.

**Risks and Benefits**

The risk to you as a participant in this study may be no greater than the risks experienced in daily life or activities. The benefits in this study may be to increase the awareness and general knowledge of results of this study for the purposes of providing solutions (if necessary) to this issue for Black male students and their aspirations in higher education.

**Payment/Rewards**

Your name will be entered into a drawing for one $25 gift card for taking part in the study. At the end of the study the winner and non-winners will be notified by email.

**Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the researcher, Yerodin Lucas, will have access to the research records. Records will be kept in a locked file. Records will be kept for a minimum of three years. Then they will be destroyed by deleting any audio recordings and shredding any paper records.

**Taking Part is Voluntary**

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not participate will not affect your current or future relations with the investigator. It will not affect your relations with Marywood University or your home college or university. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. To withdraw contact the investigator by email at [ylucas@marywood.edu](mailto:ylucas@marywood.edu) or by mobile phone at 267-437-9006. If you withdraw, any collected data will be destroyed by deleting and/or shredding any records.

**Contacts and Questions**

The investigator conducting this study is: Yerodin Lucas.

You may ask questions now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher by email at [ylucas@marywood.edu](mailto:ylucas@marywood.edu) or by mobile phone at 267-437-9006. You may also contact the study advisor, Dr. Adam Shprintzen by email at [shprintzen@marywood.edu](mailto:shprintzen@marywood.edu).

If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact Ms. Courene M. Loftus, MPA, CIP, Marywood University’s Director of Human Participants Protection and Research Compliance, at (570) 961-4782 or [cloftus@marywood.edu](mailto:cloftus@marywood.edu). You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and   
have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ *\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

Signature of Participant  Date

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of (Authorized) Person Obtaining Informed Consent Date

# APPENDIX C

# MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL LETTER

MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Immaculata Hall, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509

DATE: April 20, 2018

TO: Yerodin Lucas, Masters

FROM: Marywood University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [1187533-2] *Support Structures: Challenges and Potential Solutions*

*toward Persistence in Earning a Baccalaureate Degree for Black Male Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions* MUIRB #: 2018-009 SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED APPROVAL DATE: April 20, 2018 EXPIRATION DATE: April 20, 2019 REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review EXPEDITED REVIEW TYPE: 45 CFR 46.110 (b)(1)(6 and 7)

**PLEASE READ THIS LETTER CAREFULLY IN ITS ENTIRETY.** IT CONTAINS IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS AN INVESTIGATOR. THE IRB IS REQUIRED BY FEDERAL LAW TO REPORT ALL SERIOUS OR CONTINUING NONCOMPLIANCE WITH THESE REQUIREMENTS TO FEDERAL AGENCIES.

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this research study. Marywood University's Institutional Review Board has **APPROVED** your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations. **Approval includes recruitment at Marywood University only. Recruitment permission letters from**

**Misericordia University, King's College, and the University of Scranton will need to be provided before approval may be granted for those locations. You may provide letters at a later date, along with a Revisions to IRB Approved Research Request form,via IRBNet.**

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and assurance of participant understanding, followed by a signed consent and/or assent form (unless a waiver was requested and granted). Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant to receive a copy of the signed consent document (unless waived).

**The IRB's approval stamp must appear on versions of the informed consent form which will be read and signed by participants. While we have applied the IRB's approval stamp to your email recruitment messages, we realize it may not be feasible to use the stamped versions online. Therefore, please ensure that the language in the transmitted versions is identical to the stamped versions.**

Please be aware that all research records must be retained by the researcher for a minimum of three years after IRB closure of the project.

Please also note that:

• Any revision to previously approved materials, however minor, must be submitted to, and approved by, the IRB prior to initiation.

• All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS and SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENTS must be reported to this office. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements must also be followed.

• All NON-COMPLIANCE issues, DEVIATIONS or VIOLATIONS from the approved protocol, or COMPLAINTS regarding this study must be reported to this office.

• **Researchers must submit a status report six months from the date of approval. Your first status report is due on or before October 20, 2018. If not closed by that time, a final status report is due on or before April 20, 2019, unless you are apply for renewal/continuing review.**

• Federal regulations require research to be reviewed no less than annually; therefore, research activities may not continue beyond the expiration date until a renewal application is submitted to, reviewed and approved by the IRB. Renewal applications should be submitted at least 60 days prior to your study's expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for the renewal of your study prior to the expiration date will require discontinuance of all research activities, including recruitment of participants, enrollment of new participants, data collection and data analysis. To renew, please submit a Continuing Review application along with all required materials via IRBNet.

The appropriate forms for any of the reports mentioned above may be found at http://www.marywood.edu/ irb/ or in the Forms and Reference Library on IRBNet.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB at 570-961-4782 or cloftus@marywood.edu.

Please include your study title and IRBNet ID number in all correspondence with this office.

Thank you and good luck with your research!