THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN THE PERSISTENCE OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN MEN IN COLLEGE

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Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2011

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This qualitative study addressed the experiences of African American males attending a predominantly White university as undergirded by the social integration aspects of Tinto’s model of academic and social integration. The methodology was case study. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were held with currently enrolled seniors to capture the lived experiences of their reasons for attending college as well as major influences that contributed to their persistence decisions. The results revealed emerging themes of positive and negative family influence, religious beliefs, and a sense of self-efficacy as instrumental factors for the students’ persistence. The level of social integration tended to differ by the age classification (traditional college-going versus non-traditional college student) and by the level of parental education. The components of the social integration model, as developed by Tinto contributed little to the sample’s persistence decisions when compared to the themes presented during the interviews. Three observations emerged from the data: (1) The experiences of the non-traditional aged participants were different from the traditional aged college student experiences; (2) Although the participants experienced varying levels of social integration, for most of the 16 students, their persistence decisions were influenced more by their positive and negative relationships with family, religious beliefs, and sense of self-efficacy than by their interactions with peers and faculty and involvement in extracurricular activities; (3) the responses of the participants enriched and broadened the scope of Tinto’s model as well as the current literature pertaining to persistence.
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by

Jacqueline Garrett-Spencer
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ for allowing me the opportunity to achieve the culmination of a lifelong dream and goal. I am grateful to my parents and first teachers, Mae Berta Garrett and the late Vernon Garrett, Sr., who were instrumental in my quest for knowledge. Their love, support, and encouragement provided me with strength and perseverance throughout the doctoral degree process. To my children, Richmond and Jaliyah, for their love, patience, and hugs, I am truly appreciative. To my husband, Ralph, for his support and encouragement, I am thankful. To my sisters and brothers for being my cheerleaders and baby-sitters throughout this 10-year journey, I thank you.

The dedication and guidance of my committee, especially my chair, provided the inspiration needed to finalize this dissertation. Dr. Judith Adkison’s support and commitment to see me through the dissertation process has been truly a blessing. I also appreciate the assistance provided by my other committee members, Dr. V. Barbara Bush and Dr. Richard Fossey.

To the 16 African American men who shared numerous experiences and made a significant contribution to the future of higher education, I thank you all and wish each of you success in all of your future endeavors. I would also like to thank my coach and mentor, Dr. Cody Arvidson, for her support and insight throughout this process. Her listening ears and words of encouragement have been invaluable.

“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, unto Him be glory…” (Ephesians, 3:20-21a).
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This study examined the college experiences of a group of African American men who had completed three years of college and were enrolled as seniors at a predominantly White institution (PWI) campus. The goal was to identify their own explanations for their persistence to graduation. Tinto’s (1987, 1993) social integration model guided the development of the research questions. The first chapter introduces the study by providing data on the educational status of African American men relative to Whites and to African American women in the United States. It then provides the purpose of the study, research problem, and research questions.

Since the late 1980s, the relative decline in social, economic, and educational statuses of young African American males has been among the most actively discussed and sometimes vigorously debated issues (Garibaldi, 1992). However, finding consistently presented data organized by racial/ethnic groups and gender is difficult. No organization provides this information in tables that allow consistent longitudinal comparison. The best source of data comparing college participation rates by race/ethnicity and gender is published by the American Council on Education (ACE). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is the best source for college graduation rates for African American and White men and women. ACE annually reports data on the status of minorities in higher education. The annual ACE reports include enrollment information and degrees awarded by ethnicity and gender over time but do not provide graduation rates.
African American men tend to trail Whites of both genders and African American women on all educational attainment measures, beginning with graduation from high school. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of high school graduates in the 18- to 24-year-old population of African American men has changed little since 1985, when 72.3% graduated. While the percentage of African American male graduates increased only slightly over the next 20 years, the completion rates of other groups increased at a higher rate. By 2005, 73.5% of African American men in the target population had graduated from high school, but rates for African American women increased from 78.4% to 84.4% (ACE, 2007). The percentages of high school graduates of Whites of both genders increased from 83.6% to 87.8%. The racial/ethnic composition is not equivalent for both years, as the African American category did not include individuals of Hispanic origin in 1985 but did in 2005.

Between 1985 and 2005, African Americans who graduated from high school enrolled in college at a lower rate than White students overall. In 1985, 27.7% of African American men who completed high school were enrolled in college compared to 35.8% of White men and 33% of White women. Both groups increased their college-going rates, but the gap between African American men (38% in 2005) and Whites (48.7% in 2005) increased, as shown in Table 1. African American women, who enrolled in college at a lower rate than African American men in 1985, surpassed them by 2005 with a college enrollment rate of 44%. A similar pattern held for White women who were enrolled in college at a lower rate than White men in 1985 and a higher rate 20 years later.
The percentage of Hispanic men and women among 18- to 24-year-olds who had completed high school was the lowest of all groups compared. This may reflect the immigration of young people who had not attended secondary school in their native country.

Table 1

*High School Completion Rates and College Participation Rates of 18- to 24-Year-Olds, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender for 1985-2005*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>High School Completion Rates (%)</th>
<th>Percent Enrolled in College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All Races/Ethnicities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>87.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>90.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The American Council on Education (2008) compared the college persistence, i.e., the percentage of students still enrolled or having attained a degree three years after enrolling, for 1995 and 2003 cohorts. Among the ethnic/racial groups examined, African Americans had the lowest persistence rates for both years. African Americans were the only racial/ethnic group whose persistence rates between the 1995 and 2003 cohorts did not decline (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 23). Table 2 shows the persistence rates for the four groups of cohorts by race and ethnic group. While African Americans participated in higher education at a higher rate than Hispanics (Table 2), those enrolled persist at a lower rate.

Table 2

Persistence Percentages for 1995 and 2003 Cohorts of Beginning Postsecondary Students Three Years after First Enrollment Who Are Still Enrolled or Have Attained a Degree/Certificate Anywhere by Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Beginning Enrollment at Four-Year Institutions</th>
<th>Beginning Enrollment at Two-Year Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>75.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Data derived from American Council on Education (2008).*

The best comparative data by race and gender for college graduation rates is provided by the NCAA; however, this data is reported only for African American and
White students. Table 3 shows comparative graduation rates for African American and
White students enrolled in NCAA Division I institutions (NCAA, 2010). African American
men had a lower graduation rate (44%) than African American women (48%), White
Men (63%), or White women (68%).

Table 3

Comparison of Graduation Rates in Division I Institutions in 2003 Entering Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students by Race/Ethnicity &amp; Gender</th>
<th>Student Body Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Males</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Males</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Females</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Females</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Table adapted from Trends in Graduation Success Rates and Federal Graduation Rates at NCAA

Institutions vary in their success in retaining African American students to
graduation, with more prestigious schools tending to retain the highest percentage of
African American students (as well as those of other groups). In 2006, the 21
institutions with the highest African American student graduation rate graduated from
86% to 95% of African American students. Harvard, with a African American graduation
rate of 95%, was the most successful (no author, 2006, p. 59). However not all high-
ranking schools are that successful in retaining African American students to graduation (no author, 2006). And, while the African American graduation rate exceeds the rate of White students at some institutions, White students tend to have a higher graduation rate at the most selective colleges (no author, 2005, p. 61).

The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2006) used NCAA data to rank the states by the 2006 college graduation rate for African American students at the state’s flagship public university. The average graduation rates for African American students for the flagship institutions was 43%, with a range of 8% at the University of District of Columbia, a historically Black university to 87% at the University of Virginia (no author, 2006, p. 64).

Even among historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), the graduation rates of African American students in 2006 ranged from 8% at the University of the District of Columbia to 77% at Spelman College. Out of 49 HBCUs reported, only eight had a graduation rate greater than 50% (no author, 2006, p. 65). HBCUs showed differences in gains and losses between 1998 and 2006, with 21 of 37 institutions showing improvement in graduation rates and 11 showing decline (p. 66).

While the success of African American women is positive, even this accomplishment has become suspect. The relative discrepancy between African American men and African American women has been cited as a potential social problem. African American students are under-represented in higher education, and among those enrolled, African American women outnumber African American men by almost 2:1 nationwide and by more than 3:1 at some schools (Cuyjet, 2006). These numbers reflect a shift in college attendance and graduation of African American
women since the ending of the 19th century. Prior to the Civil War, only about 40 African American people in the United States had earned college degrees and probably no more than two or three were women (Cross & Slater, 2000). But 20th-century African American women have gradually come to pursue degrees in higher education in higher rates than their male counterparts. Slater (1994) argued that the growing number of African American women enrolled in college indicates an inevitable crisis for the African American family and its community with the following statement:

Upon close examination of the statistics, one finds a serious crisis appears to lie ahead . . . . The consequences of these trends for the long-term outlook for the black community in the United States could be very serious. Without a steady improvement in the educational attainment levels of black men, further reductions in the economic gap between the races seem highly unlikely. Without educational gains by black males in line with those of black women, a growing schism between the genders is not only likely to erode the relative earning power of black men but will also undermine their status in the black family and further hasten the disintegration of the traditional black family with all the social and economic consequences which that implies. (pp. 52-53)

Cohen and Nee (2000) suggested that work must be done to change the educational experiences of African American men to increase their levels of enrollment, persistence, and graduation. But educators must, at the same time, ensure the continued success of African American women in higher education. There is no question that retention of minority students is an important issue, because without retention, graduation is impossible (Kemp, 1990). Although African Americans are
enrolling in colleges and universities in record numbers, more than 60% of those who enter as freshmen do not persist until graduation (ACE, 2008). A downward college enrollment trend has persisted for African American college students over the past 14 years, and, if it were to continue unabated into the future, by the year 2070, African American men would disappear altogether from the halls of higher education (Cross & Slater, 2000).

The statistics cited above show that African American men graduate from college at a low rate. Therefore, a study of African American men who were near graduation was proposed. The problem statement, purpose, research questions, study significance, limitations and delimitations, and the definitions of the terms used in the study follow in the remaining sections of this chapter.

Purpose of the Study

Given the low graduation rates of African American male students (Cuyjet, 2006; ACE, 2008; Harper, 2009) and limited availability of research on the applicability of student retention models to African American students and their persistence beyond the first year of college, a need to examine how certain components of student retention models influence the persistence decisions made by African American male students transpired. Existing research substantiated the need for appreciating the experiences of African American men to understand what academic and social programs could ease the transition from high school to college and to redress academic deficiencies and diffuse unrealistic expectations held by many African American students (Freeman, 2005; Pitre 2006).
Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model of social integration was selected as an organizing framework for the study. The model is described in Chapter 2. The purpose of the study was to examine the role social integration plays in the persistence of African American male students who have attained senior status (i.e., earned cumulative credit hours of 90 or more) attending a PWI. Additionally, as part of the study’s purpose, I sought to determine if, or in what ways, Tinto’s model of academic and social integration is applicable to African American male college students.

Statement of the Problem

The research problem of this study was to determine what formal and informal social interactions and relationships African American men in their senior year perceive to be important contributors to their persistence in a predominantly White institution.

Research Questions

The following research question was addressed in the study:

To what extent does the social integration component of Tinto’s model of academic and social integration reflect the persistence and experiences of African American men in a PWI?

- How do African American men perceive the influence of peer-group interactions in their decisions to persist in a predominantly White institution?
- How do African American men perceive the influence of relations with faculty in their decision to persist in a PWI?
- Do African American men perceive the influence of participation in extracurricular activities in their decision to persist in a PWI?
Significance of the Study

Designing effective programs to attract and retain African American students continues to be a challenge for many institutions of higher learning. The problem manifests from administrators’ lack of knowledge and understanding of African American males. Cuyjet (2006) stated that the condition of African American men in higher education has received less attention than some other less important topics. Cuyjet also opined that among those programs designed for African American men entering the college environment, more attention seems to be directed toward institutional factors than toward undergraduate students’ factors. To this end, higher education personnel and researchers are at a disadvantage when developing programs and policies to increase the effectiveness of current modes of operation in student services and practices with a lack of empirically sound research on all student populations.

This study’s findings might influence educational administrators from the pre-kindergarten through baccalaureate levels (i.e., p. 16) to align educational efforts and curricula to meet the needs of and influence the challenges that confront African American males with the goal to graduate from college or university. This case study made a contribution to the knowledge of college persistence among African American male students attending PWIs and shed deeper insight on the role of social integration in the retention of minority students. Based on the findings, novel programmatic remedies can emerge to strengthen the resolve of African American males to persist in and ultimately graduate from college, particularly from PWIs.
Limitations and Delimitations

This study was restricted to African American males in their senior year of study at a PWI. The African American males participating in this study were able to overcome barriers and successfully complete a program of study while attending a PWI. The role social integration plays in the persistence decisions of African American males found in this study may not apply to women or other types of institutions or students of other ethnic backgrounds.

A delimitation of this study was the data being confined to the experiences of African American male students enrolled at one PWI in the 2009-2010 academic year. The experiences, perceptions, and programs that pertain to the undergraduate experience can vary dramatically among gender, ethnic groups, and institutions. This study cannot account for the reactions and responses of all groups about the factors that promote college persistence leading to graduation.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were operationally defined as indicated below.

*Academic integration.* (Structural) integration entails meeting the explicit standards of the college or university, and (normative) integration pertains to an individual’s identification with the normative structure of the academic system (Tinto, 1975).

*Non-traditional student.* The National Center for Education Statistics (Horn & Carroll, 1996) defined a non-traditional college student as one with any of the following characteristics: Does not enter college the same calendar year that he or she finishes
high school; attends part time for at least part of the academic year; works full time (35 hours or more per week); is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma. “Nontraditional" is defined on a continuum based on the number of these characteristics present. A minimally non-traditional student was defined as one having one of the above characteristics; a moderately non-traditional student was defined as having two or three characteristics; and a highly non-traditional student is defined as one having four or more of the characteristics.

Persistence. The ability of a student to remain enrolled in an institution until the completion of a degree.

Retention. The ability of an institution to keep students in school until the completion of a degree.

Social integration. The students' participation in the social systems of the institution. It is measured by the number and quality of peer relations, participation in extracurricular activities and student clubs, participation in student government, and satisfaction with social life.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A shift in the student retention research has occurred from focusing on factors that contribute to student attrition toward looking at ways universities can contribute to the retention of their students. Reflecting this trend toward retention, the resultant purpose of the study was to examine the role social integration plays in the persistence of African American male students who have attained senior status at a predominantly White institution (PWI). This chapter examines Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model of academic and social integration, research on the influences of interpersonal contacts and involvement in extracurricular activities on the persistence decisions of African American males, and comparisons of the persistence of African American students attending historically African American institutions (HBIs) those attending PWIs.

Several resources were used to identify existing research in the literature. ProQuest Online, Professional Development Collection, Academic Search Complete and Electronic Theses and Dissertations yielded several hits with various interchangeable terms such as African American (Black), higher education (college), and retention (persistence). Several combinations of terms were used to access the most specific and applicable resources available.

Finding accurate data on college graduation rates organized by racial/ethnic groups and gender is difficult. No organization provides this information in tables that allow consistent comparison at a longitudinal level. The best two sources of data for comparing college persistence by ethnicity have been produced by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).
ACE reports annually on the status of minorities in higher education. The annual ACE reports include enrollment information and degrees awarded by ethnicity and gender but offer relatively little information on persistence rates. One comparative table compares the percentage of students still enrolled or having attained a degree three years after enrolling for 1995 and 2003. ACE (2008) reported that African Americans had the lowest persistence rates of all racial and ethnic groups at 73% who began at four-year institutions in 2003 and at 47% percent for those who started at two-year institutions in 2003. Interestingly, African Americans were the only racial and ethnic group, as seen in Table 1, whose persistence rates from the 1995 and the 2003 cohorts did not decline (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 23). Table 4 shows the persistence rates for the four groups of cohorts by race and ethnic group.

Table 4

*Persistence Percentages for 1995 and 2003 Cohorts of Beginning Postsecondary Students 3 Years After First Enrollment Who Are Still Enrolled or Have Attained a Degree/Certificate Anywhere by Race/Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
<th>Beginning Enrollment at 4-Year Institutions</th>
<th>Beginning Enrollment at 2-Year Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>75.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-American / Pacific Islander</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best source of comparative data for ethnic and gender groups on student persistence to graduation is the NCAA, as the Federal Government requires higher education institutions to collect and report this information to compare athletes and non-athletes. The NCAA’s 2010 report for Division I institutions showed the graduation rate for all groups in the entering cohort or class of 2003 was 63%, while the graduation rate for White students was 66%, and for African-American students, it was 44%. The graduation rate for African-American men was 38%, and for African-American women, it was 48%. The NCAA did not report graduation rates for other racial and ethnic groups. According to Harper (2009), if educators and administrators undertook the task of fostering the conditions that enable engagement for African American males with the same deliberation and intensity as coaches and athletic departments do in their recruitment activities, it could very likely end up being the case that African American males would suddenly become the most engaged ethnic group among the population of college students.

In 2007, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* used NCAA Division I data to compare the college graduation rates for African American men and African American women between the years of 1990 and 2006. The graduation rate for African American men increased from 28% in 1990 to 36% in 2006, representing a total increase of 12%. However, the graduation rate for African American women increased from 34% to 47%, representing a similar increase at 13% (no author, 2007).

African American Men

The African American male exists in a larger social context, and factors affecting them outside college also may affect them in college. The vicious cycle of racism,
poverty, and underachievement continues to haunt many African American students even though they enter postsecondary education following high school graduation (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). The social and cultural challenges of being an African male are daunting. African American males represent disproportionately higher rates of imprisonment, unemployment, poverty, and suicide (Akpadock, 2003). African American males are disproportionately less educated, making it apparent that such disproportions are a correlation to the various forms of racism and/or societal oppression (Austin, 1996). The experiences of African American students in higher education are often filled with challenges not experienced by other students (Cuyjet, 2006).

According to Moore (2001), African American students are distinguished from their Caucasian counterparts by the added burdens of racism, discrimination, and negative stereotypes. Students decide to leave their universities due to several individual and institutional factors (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Based on their experiences with social integration, students resolve to continue their education at their current institution, to transfer to another institution, or to leave higher education altogether (Tinto, 1987). Unfortunately, a growing number of African American males enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities choose to leave higher education altogether (Cross & Slater, 2000).

Generally, research relating to the condition of African American males in American society spans multiple disciplines and schools of thought. Cuyjet (2006) acknowledged that many individuals have addressed various aspects of this broad topic, from African American males’ general social conditions to specific instances that have special impact on their opportunities. Cuyjet also recognized the impact of
elementary education, high school education, employment, the criminal justice system, 
interracial social interactions, and intraracial social interactions on African American 
males’ opportunities for education and success. The literature is replete with evidence 
of the following: (1) African Americans’ unequal access to and facilities for formal 
education, (2) the poor quality of schooling made available to large numbers of African 
American students, (3) the cultural differences between most of these students and 
their teachers, (4) the inadequate home and family support they receive for academic 
learning, their poor academic socialization, (5) the high African American school dropout 
rates, (6) declining college and graduate school attendance, (7) the disparities in 
rewards for educational achievement between African Americans and other groups, and 
(8) the low expectations of academic productivity held for African American males 
(Gordon, 1994). Of particular concern is the need to counter the often negative 
stereotypes about African American men perpetrated by both the dominant culture and 
member of the African American culture (Cuyjet, 2006). These negative stereotypes can 
only truly be dispelled by ensuring the population has the opportunity to experience 
African American men’s positive traits through face-to-face interactions (Cuyjet, 2006).

The effect of campus environments on the educational experiences of college 
students is a consistent thread throughout research on African Americans in higher 
education (Davis, 1994). Despite social, cultural and economic challenges, African 
Americans can persist to college graduation and make positive contributions to society. 
The focus of this study was to explore how exchanges of social discourse and 
involve through mechanisms of social integration such as peer and faculty 
relationships and associations in extracurricular activities have contributed to student
persistence to graduation. Since social relationships play a vital role in the decision of many African American male students to persist, a sense of stability and security is strengthened with close knit ties with family, peers, and mentors. Research has shown that institutional fit and culture also contribute to a student’s decision to remain, transfer, or leave college altogether (Fleming, 1984; Tinto, 1993; Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Therefore, colleges and universities with programs providing opportunities for African American students to have positive academic and social experiences on campus will also positively impact the educational persistence of these students (Fleming, 1984).

Theoretical Framework: Tinto’s Model of Academic and Social Integration

The most frequently cited model of student retention was developed by Tinto (1975). Tinto’s model of student integration was built upon academic and social factors that have been found to foster or impede persistence decisions by students. Based on Durkheim’s (1951) suicide theory, Tinto suggested that, like suicide victims who were totally removed from the social fabric of society, students who are likewise removed from the social fabric of the college community are less likely to persist. Tinto posited that during the longitudinal journey through higher education, academic performance and intellectual development influenced students’ levels of academic integration, while interaction outside the classroom with peers, faculty and extracurricular involvement promoted social integration. Integration of both kinds serves to strengthen the students’ commitment to their educational goals and their institution (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto (1993) theorized that student departure is a direct outcome of student’s lack of integration into the academic and social communities of the college or university. An institution plays a role in the retention of its students by facilitating or impeding their
academic and social integration. Tinto further stated that greater social and academic integration lead to greater commitment to educational goals of the institution which leads to lower attrition. Although Tinto’s model has been applied to Latino, disabled, and commuter students, it has not been explicitly applied to African American students in general or to African American male students in particular. Utilizing the social integration component of Tinto’s model as a theoretical framework, in this study, I sought to examine the contribution of social integration to the success of African American males persisting toward completion of the baccalaureate degree.

Tinto (1987) theorized that students committed to their institutions and reasonably satisfied with the learning environment maintain consistent goals for degree completion and are more likely to persist and graduate from their respective institutions. Tinto further stated that students’ perceptions of social support facilitate their increased level of commitment to their institutions and serve to help African American students feel that their goals and interests are congruent with their universities’ academic missions. Credle and Dean (1991) suggested that institutions committed to the persistence and retention of African American students should incorporate the following steps: (a) examinations of the institution’s philosophy and mission; (b) assessments of the institution’s ability to work with these students; (c) assessments of these students’ academic and social readiness; (d) scheduling of early visits to institutions for these prospective students; (e) establishment of a rapport between institutional representatives and these students; (f) facilitation of African American students’ ability to work within the organizational structure; (g) development of ongoing mentoring program; (h) programs to facilitate the career explorations by these students; and (i)
preparation programs designed to ease these students entrance into the world of work (p. 160). Although widely cited, Tinto’s model is not without criticism. Tierney (1992) suggested Tinto’s model relied on information only about traditional aged students. Tierney also suggested that by not individualizing results from institutional specific data, Tinto’s generalizability of findings may not be plausible. Tierney also suggested that Tinto’s theory is too broad in its treatment of social integration and does not address specific examples that could be related to non-traditional elements within higher education. Nora (1990) reported that most studies on student persistence neglected to investigate the importance of including financial aid as an influence on student persistence at the two-year college level. Similarly, Porter (1991) found that student aid had a positive effect on persistence and ultimately, degree completion. Bers and Smith (1991) also supported Porter’s findings. They called for continued research of the influences on academic and social integration and financial aid on persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discussed the exclusion from research on persistence of the two-year college experience in their book How College Affects Students. They suggested research should also focus on non-residential colleges to ascertain those factors that influence degree attainment and persistence at two-year colleges. Further investigation with interviews represented one avenue to determine if PWIs offer programs designed to ensure the academic success and persistence of African American men.

Peer-Group Interactions

Along with academic pursuits, students need to develop and maintain social relationships to be successful in college. Student adeptness at managing social
relationships is the most salient contributor to their higher education experiences (Watson et. al, 2002). Meaders (1998) suggested that it is important for institutions to provide a variety of opportunities in and out of classrooms where interactions with diverse individuals and discussions about racial and ethnic issues can occur. According to Harris (1996), the achievement of interpersonal relationships with same-sex peers is a significant determinant of individual interpersonal competencies. Quinnan (1997) supported discourse between students for enhancing learning through discussion, exploration, and positive interactions with others as an aspect of social and emotional peer support. However, African American students who attend PWIs often experience feelings of isolation and alienation in the classroom and institutional environment (Allen, 1992). Recognizing what keeps African American male graduates engaged in college gains greater significance given their typical experiences.

In a study with African American male graduates from an urban, commuter baccalaureate-granting institution, Spradley (2001) found peer support on campus through study groups and classroom interactions to be important facilitators to student success. Spradley noted that the adult African American males’ study group involvement included working together, sharing notes, discussing study techniques, and arriving at a collective solution to the problems they faced. Additionally, study groups offer forums for peer socialization, supportive friendships, positive social interactions, and friendly intellectual competition with fellow students. Thus, student development personnel have been called by these authors to recognize the importance of peer relationships and provide opportunities for students to form relationships and networks of support within the African American culture as well as with other cultures.
In reality, African American students attending PWIs experience a high degree of isolation, alienation, and hostility (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Jones, 2001). At campuses with low numbers of African American students, African American students feel even more isolated, which results in little or no involvement in campus organizations or activities (Brown, 2006). Astin (1977) found that students who become heavily involved in student government interact more frequently with peers than students who do not become similarly involved.

Thus, such interaction, according to Astin (1977), appears to enhance the changes students experience in their attitudes and behaviors impacting their perceptions of the college experience. In a study addressing the impact of campus activities on African American men, Jones (2001) found that certain activities, facilities, programs, and relationships are critical to the success of African American males as they persisted. The five areas Jones identified as influential include intramural athletics and recreation, student government associations, student unions, mentoring programs, and peer relationships. In a quantitative study examining the effect of social integration on academic performance among Mexican American, African American, and Native American students in a large, public Southwestern university, Mayo et al. (1995) found formal social integration to have a much greater impact on academic performance (e.g., cumulative grade point average) than informal social integration. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested that active involvement in out-of-class activities and the nature and quality of students’ social interaction with peers, faculty, staff, and administrators positively influence persistence, educational aspiration, completion of the undergraduate degree, and subsequent enrollment in graduate school. Pascarella and
Terenzini’s recommendation may gain even greater weight than it already holds with revelations about the experiences of African American male seniors regarding their rationales for persisting to graduation.

Student-Faculty Relations

Astin (1993) acknowledged that, second to the peer group, faculty-student interactions represent the most significant aspect of a student’s undergraduate development and institutional commitment. Tinto (1987, 1993) and Mayo et al. (1995) differentiated between formal and informal social integration. Formal social integration involves contact with formal representatives and organizations within the university, specific contacts with faculty and staff, and membership in officially recognized student organizations. Faculty members generally interact with undergraduate students outside of class as an extension of their university teaching and academic advising roles but rarely for the sole purpose of socializing (Mayo et al., 1995).

Students’ relationships with their faculty members play a role in their self-concept development (Stikes, 1984). Davis (1994) believed the isolation African American male students often experience results from their unwillingness to interact with faculty or classmates outside of the classroom. Their feelings of isolation are typically based on perceived stereotypical and discriminatory experiences as well as negative experiences in-class and out-of-class (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Jones, 2001). Fries-Britt and Turner (2001), in a qualitative study of African American students attending a PWI, found that 100% of the participants perceived they were required to undergo a process of proving themselves in classroom settings, essentially to validate their intellectual competence. By inference, African American men should benefit from these interactions, as all other
students do, despite the special efforts that may be required to ensure that it happens (Bonner & Bailey, 2006).

Extracurricular Activities

Tinto’s theory takes into account the most commonly measured precollege factors, including family socioeconomic status, admissions test scores, and high school GPA, but gives greater significance to the importance of the levels of integration after coming to college (McClure, 2006). Post-entrance factors affect academic and social integration. These include participation in extracurricular activities and predict African American students’ success more accurately than are traditional precollege measurements (Murguia et al., 1991).

Brown (2006) studied 25 African American males enrolled in a PWI in the South. The participants were students who lived on campus and were involved in several organizations and activities including athletics and fraternities. Brown concluded that their involvement in nonacademic organizations such as Student Government Association, intramural athletics and recreation, the student union, mentoring, and peer relationships influenced their decisions to persist. Additionally, participants felt culturally and socially isolated when they did not have contact with African American faculty, staff, and administrators, and peer relations play an integral role in the participants’ survival at a PWI (Brown, 2006).

Campus climate, particularly outside of the classroom, is one of the major reasons behind institutions struggling to keep African American male students enrolled (Brown, 2006). Brown contended that campuses with low numbers of African American students and a lack of African American university personnel with whom the students
can relate increases the likelihood that these students will feel isolated and choose little or no involvement in campus organizations and activities.

HBIs, PWIs, and Persistence

Allen (1992) believed that comparisons between African American student populations on African American and White campuses require recognition of the “special mission” of African American colleges, because PWIs have no such special mission to reach out to and improve the lives of African American students. Further, to a large extent, African American colleges enroll students who otherwise might not be able to attend college because of social, financial, or academic barriers (Allen, 1992). Paradoxically, when comparing African American students who attend HBIs with those who attend PWIs, Davis (1994) found that the students who attended HBIs had higher GPAs than those who attended PWIs.

African American male students attending PWIs struggle with their institutional commitment to college when faced daily with issues of racism, discrimination and stereotypes (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Jones, 2001). Gloria et al. (1999) found that social support, university comfort, and positive self-beliefs are highly associated with African American students’ persistence at PWIs. Gloria et al. also indicated for the three constructs examined, university comfort and social support were the strongest predictors of decisions to persist.

At the end of a study examining academic achievement, social involvement, and occupational aspirations of African American students at PWIs and HBIs, Allen (1992) concluded that African American students enrolled at HBIs have advantages over African American students enrolled at PWIs, in many respects. Allen further stated that
African Americans at HBIs display more characteristics of positive psychological adjustment, more significant academic gains, and greater cultural awareness and commitment than African American students enrolled at PWIs. HBIs graduate a higher percentage of their African American students and graduates of HBIs account for employment in a disproportionate percentage of African American professions compared to graduates of PWIs (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Presumably, HBIs provide African American students something that PWIs do not that strongly aids in the retention process (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Rodgers and Summers (2008) further recommended testing existing retention models’ applicability to the persistence of African American students attending PWIs. Wilson (2007), however, found that the graduation rates at HBIs tend to be much lower than the graduation rates for African American students at the nation’s highest-ranked institutions. Although HBIs have seen an improvement in their graduation rates between 1998 and 2005, for a significant number of the nation’s HBIs, two thirds or more of all entering African American students do not earn a baccalaureate degree (Wilson, 2007).

Research has shown that social support networks have influenced the decision of many students to persist when they would have otherwise chosen to leave altogether (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Davis (1991) defined social support as the degree to which a person’s basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others. Davis conducted a study to determine the nature of any relationship between social support networks and the GPAs of African Americans attending HBIs and PWIs. Davis found that only participation in extracurricular activities of student organizations and relations
with faculty showed statistically significant relationships with African American students’ GPAs.

Summary

The literature suggested that interpersonal contacts and involvement in extracurricular activities play critical roles in the retention of African American male college students. Additionally, retention models, which have been traditionally utilized in empirical research, revealed overlapping similarities in the importance of students’ decisions to persist between each other which include integration, involvement, intentions, behaviors, and background characteristics (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Guiffrida (2003) explored undergraduate student membership in predominantly African American student organizations. Guiffrida’s data revealed that involvement in African American student involvement facilitated students’ social integration, although student involvement in predominantly White student organizations was excluded from the study. African American Greek organizations historically have served to channel African American males’ efforts to bond with each other as well as cope and survive in their college environments, particularly at PWIs. As it relates specifically to connecting fraternity members to the university, the fraternity clearly offers a mechanism for successful social integration (McClure, 2006). Since social integration of African American males in PWIs has not been addressed, interviewing African American male students attending a PWI about their involvement in social organizations and student activities may shed light in their rationales for persisting to graduation.

Because research on African American students at HBIs and PWIs revealed conflicting findings on student persistence, the intellectual experiences of African
American students at PWIs remain in debate. In either case, African American students who persist develop interpersonal relationships and become involved in the social fabric of the institution. The importance of creating and fostering relationships between faculty and students should be central to the mission of every institution of higher learning (Watson et. al, 2002).
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The case study methodology was used to examine the college experiences of African American men who remained in college to the senior year. The purpose of this study was to apply Tinto’s model of academic and social integration to the African American male population attending a predominantly White institution (PWI), and thus, to determine if Tinto’s model was an effective tool in influencing persistence decisions among the African American population fell within the scope of this study. Utilizing Tinto’s (1987, 1993) framework, the role of social integration in the persistence decisions of African American males regarding their completion of the baccalaureate degree was examined. The methods were qualitative. This chapter contains the institutional setting for the case, selection of participants, and data collection and analysis.

Research Questions

The following research question was addressed in the study: To what extent does the social integration component of Tinto’s model of academic and social integration reflect the persistence and experiences of African American men in a PWI?

- How do African American men perceive the influence of peer-group interactions in their decisions to persist in a predominantly White institution?
- How do African American men perceive the influence of relations with faculty in their decision to persist in a PWI?
- Do African American men perceive the influence of participation in extracurricular activities in their decision to persist in a PWI?
Research Design

I sought to examine the degree to which social integration influences persistence among African American males attending a PWI through the use of in-depth interviews and a demographic questionnaire. Interviewing is necessary when a researcher cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them (Merriam, 1998). A qualitative approach for this study was selected to “explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). As an African American woman older than the traditional college senior’s age, I was not properly equipped to observe the behavior and feelings of African American male college seniors in their natural PWI settings with little disruption to their naturally occurring behaviors.

In qualitative research, the use of interviews and observations are commonplace (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Merriam, 1998). During the interviews, a researcher and participant establish a “human-to-human relation with…the desire to understand rather than to explain” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366). According to Merriam (1998), “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meanings people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6). The characteristics of qualitative research which applied to this study were capturing the perceptions of the students from their insider perspectives; being deeply attentive, empathetic, and understanding; suspending any preconceptions; reading additional materials to isolate themes provided by the informants; extracting the ways the interviewees’ understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations; and organizing terminology and themes for contrasts,
comparisons, analyses, and pattern identification and labeling (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The Setting

The study was conducted at a large, metropolitan research university classified as a PWI. This PWI was established in 1890 as a teacher training institution. The PWI is one of the fastest growing universities in its region with an enrollment of more than 36,000 students. The PWI offers 99 bachelor's degree programs, 104 master's degree programs, and 49 doctoral degree programs.

The Research Participants

The participants were expected to represent a variety of the PWI's undergraduate academic departments and campus organizations. At this university during the 2007-2008 academic year, African American male students comprised 0.05% \( (n = 1,364) \) of the total undergraduate enrollment \( (N = 27,242) \). The total population of undergraduate African American males enrolled during the fall of 2008 semester was 1,458. Of those African American males, seniors totaled 464, or 31.8%, of all African American males enrolled at the PWI.

The Research Instrument

The research instrument is an interview protocol with a set of questions asked during the semi-structured person-to-person interviews. By incorporating the flexibility to interact that could facilitate a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, the interview data were expected to be “more honest, morally sound, and reliable, because it treats the respondent as an equal, allows him or her to express personal feelings,”
and therefore to present a more realistic picture of the interviewees’ experiences
(Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 371). The research literature reviewed in Chapter 2 guided
the creation of the interview questions. Interview questions were developed utilizing
Tinto’s model as a conceptual framework. The interview protocol consisted of questions
designed to begin a discussion with the participants to identify their pre-entry attributes,
academic and social factors, and institutional factors that influenced their persistence.
The demographic data included basic information about the participants including age,
major, race, GPA, and participants’ parents’ educational attainment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred during the spring and summer semesters of 2010. Data
were collected with permission from the volunteer participants. I followed the guidelines
of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and obtained its approval to conduct the study.
Due to FERPA regulations, I was unable to access student data based solely on
ethnicity and gender. Therefore, volunteers were solicited through flyers to campus
organizations and through university representatives working in such offices as the
university’s Multicultural Center and TRIO Center for Student Development.

The interviewees were identified through purposeful sampling in order to target
the desired population for the study. Once qualified interviewees were identified, in-
depth interviews were conducted and audio recorded for approximately 30 minutes
each for each of the 16 participants. After the interviews, the audio recordings were
transcribed. After transcription, I provided copies of the participants’ respective
interviews to them for review and for the purpose of member checking. According to
Merriam (1998), member checks involve taking data and tentative interpretations back
to the people from whom they were derived and asking the interviewees if the resulting interpretations are plausible; member checks serve to enhance internal validity.

Once the participants reviewed the transcripts of their respective interviews, I coded and classified the data. Data were organized and coded by recurring themes stemming from participants' responses. The participants' transcribed responses were used to develop rich, descriptive data regarding the participants' experiences and perceptions. Summary statements were created as part of identifying all patterns that arose from interview responses. Findings were aggregated into themes and are discussed in the results chapter.

Qualitative Data from the Interviews

The formal interview began after the participant read and signed the consent form and completed the demographic survey. Each interview took between 30 – 60 minutes to complete. All interviews occurred within a 45 mile radius from the university. The participants provided rich and detailed accounts of their college experiences. Follow-up questions were asked as needed. In some cases, I restated questions and responses in order to ensure the accuracy of what the participants wanted to express in my notes and findings. I audio-recorded and transcribed each of the 16 interviews. Transcription began immediately (within 24 hours) following each interview or group of interviews in order to analyze more accurately the collected data and to identify the categories of responses. The remainder of this chapter represents the findings from the data gathered during the face to face interviews with each participant, occurring between March 2, 2010 and July 13, 2010.
CHAPTER 4
NARRATIVE OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to determine what formal and informal social interactions and relationships African American men in their senior year perceive to be important contributors to their persistence while enrolled in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Specifically, I investigated the role social integration played in the persistence decisions of African American male students in their senior year at a PWI. I sought to determine factors African American males identified as contributing to their success as students as they journeyed toward graduation and the extent to which their relationships with peers and faculty and their involvement in extracurricular activities contributed to their persistence. I explored their main reasons for attending college and examined the barriers they encountered and overcame while enrolled in a PWI.

Tinto (1993) hypothesized that within a university’s social system, students’ involvement in formal extracurricular activities and informal peer-group interactions lead to positive experiences and integration, while negative experiences lead to disconnection and subsequent departure. The students who develop and maintain social relationships increase their likelihood of remaining committed to the university and to degree completion. This perspective shaped the research question: To what extent does the social integration component of Tinto’s model of academic and social integration explain the persistence of African American men in a PWI?

• How do African American men perceive the influence of peer-group interactions in their decision to persist in a predominantly White institution?
• How do African American men perceive the influence of relations with faculty in their decision to persist in a PWI?

• Do African American men perceive the influence of participation in extracurricular activities in their decision to persist in a PWI?

The data from this study of successful African American male students were organized into the themes emerging from the interviews conducted with 16 study participants. This chapter includes the following sections as part of the narrative of the findings: (1) a brief biographical sketch of each participant and a summary of their demographic characteristics; (2) a classification based on the student’s age and parents education level; (3) themes developed from the interviews; (4) results of the research questions; and (5) summary of findings.

The Participants

The students selected for this study were African American men classified as seniors at a large NCAA Division I research university serving a major metropolitan area of the South. The 16 African American men who participated in the study represented varying stages of senior academic standing, meaning they had earned at least 90 credit hours toward graduation. Some were just beginning their senior year, others were about to start their last semester, and some were classified as seniors but would need to enroll for several more semesters of enrollment before graduating because of their work and family obligations. They also represented varying types of college students, including single men who entered college upon completion of high school, older students who had careers prior to entering college, students with family obligations, and students who had returned to college after dropping out. The group
included full-time and part-time students, and individuals from a range of family and economic backgrounds. The following paragraphs provide brief descriptions of the participants. Table 5 summarizes this information.

Biographical Sketches

Randolph, 21, was a second semester senior majoring in sports management when interviewed. Considered a traditional college student, he was enrolled full-time and had GPA of 2.3. He attended college on a football scholarship and lived off campus. He reported always having a close relationship with his parents, who were both college graduates, and expressed a desire to make them proud of him by finishing college.

Chauncy, 26, was a first generation college student and a second semester senior majoring in sociology when interviewed. He was enrolled full-time and had a GPA of 3.0. He received financial aid and funding through the GI Bill. He commuted to college from his hometown about 50 miles away from campus and wanted to finish college to be an example for his 2-year-old son.

Victor, 22, was a third semester senior majoring in applied arts and sciences when interviewed. He was enrolled full-time and had a GPA of 2.9. He was not involved in any extracurricular activities but enjoyed college and communicating with classmates. He considered himself to be a “people person.” Although both parents were deceased, he had a close relationship with his grandparents, and the greatest influences in his persistence decisions were a relationship with his kindergarten teacher and his religious beliefs.
Jacob, 24, was a second semester senior majoring in entrepreneurship and Marketing when interviewed. He attended a private high school and was enrolled full-time with a GPA of 3.7. Both parents were college graduates, and he was involved in the Hispanic Business Student Association and flag football. He had been most influenced by his mother to stay in college and credits being in a family where “college was just the next step” to his persistence success.

Dorian, 45, had been working on his undergraduate degree for the past 25 years. He would start college and had to periodically stop to work to support his family and help his parents. He also served in the military, which had been the primary source of financial aid, and had been deployed to Iraq on several occasions. He had been classified a senior for the past five years and is majoring in radio, film, and television. Currently married with five children, he was mostly influenced by his mother who decided to attend college after having 14 children. Although she didn’t finish college before she died, she was a great inspiration to him to pursue his academic goals. He was enrolled full-time and planned to graduate in the fall.

Larry, 36, was a third semester senior majoring in organizational development when interviewed. He was involved in the Student Government Association and TRIO. He was enrolled part-time, worked full-time on campus, and separated. His mentor of 10 years had been the greatest influence in his decision to persist.

Dante, 29, was a second semester senior majoring in applied arts and sciences when interviewed. He was not involved in any pre-college programs and was enrolled full-time as well as held a full-time job. A first generation college student, he attributed
his persistence success to his religious beliefs and motivated by negative family circumstances to break the cycle of poverty.

Tyrone, 21, was a second semester senior on a football scholarship and majoring in sociology when interviewed. Considered a traditional college student, he was a member of a fraternity but lived off campus. He planned to graduate in the fall of the current year. He took advanced placement courses in high school and had a college GPA of 2.3. The greatest influence in his persistence decision had been his relationship with his twin brother.

Elias, 25, was a first semester senior majoring in business when interviewed. He was involved in the university choir and bible study, and the university’s program council, a campus organization that plans educational, social, and cultural events for students. He was enrolled full-time and worked part-time on campus. Although he had a difficult time in high school making friends, he had better experiences in college. In fact, he attributed the relationships he had with his peers as instrumental in his persistence decisions.

Nathan, 21, was a second semester senior majoring in accounting when interviewed. He was not involved in any pre-college programs in high school nor was he actively involved in any campus activities. Nathan was married with a young son, and was enrolled full-time as well as employed full-time. A first generation college student, he felt that his religious beliefs had been the greatest influence in his persistence decisions.

Tristan, 26, was a first semester senior majoring in radio, film, and television when interviewed. He began college at the PWI, then studied abroad in France for nine
months and decided to return to the United States to complete his degree. Seeing himself as somewhat a loner, Tristan described his initial response to attending college as “rough” and considered making friends as difficult:

I can say that I am much different now than I was when I first got here and a lot has to do with getting fed up with being alone and not having friends and spending every night at your house studying and I overcame that a lot in France because you have to….I can’t say that I can attest to being able to call up anybody and say let’s hang out which has probably affected my integration.

Tristan became involved in the Tango Club on campus and was enrolled full-time and worked part-time on campus. The greatest influence on his persistence decisions, after a moment of self-reflection, was self-internalized resilience.

Charlie, 21, was a first semester senior majoring in communication studies when interviewed. Charlie was a member of the National Communication Association. He was enrolled full-time and worked part-time on campus. The most influential factors in his persistence decisions were himself and his religious beliefs.

Tavion, 23, was a first semester senior majoring in kinesiology when interviewed. He was not involved in any pre-college programs in high school nor was he actively involved in extracurricular activities on campus. A first generation college student and new father, Tavion, was enrolled full-time and was also a full-time employee. His GPA was 2.5. The greatest influence on his persistence decisions had been his family and wanting to “change the culture of my family.”

Jonathan, 21, was a second semester senior majoring in hospitality management when interviewed. In high school, he took advanced placement classes and was
involved in Upward Bound. As a college student, he was active in the Progressive Black Student Organization (PBSO) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was a full-time student and worked part-time off campus. His GPA was 2.4. Both of his parents were college graduates and stressed the importance of a college education. The greatest influence in his persistence decisions was his father.

Freddy, 21, was a second semester senior majoring in English literature when interviewed. Considered a traditional college student, Freddy had received over $14,000 in scholarships and had been involved in the AVID program and advanced placement courses in high school. He was also very active in several campus organizations including a fraternity and athletics and held a 2.8 GPA. A very personable young man, Freddy chose this PWI because “of the diversity and I like how you meet people from so many different countries.” With both parents being college graduates, he received a lot of exposure to many different things and how to be a professional. He felt the greatest influence in his persistence decisions, however, was his friends. “They are my inspiration. I have lofty goals and my friends do also.”

Jimmy, 22, was a second semester senior majoring in entrepreneurship when interviewed. Although he was not involved in any pre-college programs in high school, he was active in a fraternity on campus. Jimmy was a full-time student and part-time employee. His GPA was 2.8. Going to college was something instilled in him at a very young age and was expected of all of his siblings:

My family is very competitive. If I were to be the only one not to finish college, then I’d be a loser. So it’s kinda a big deal. One of my brothers is getting his
doctorate, one has already finished and three of us are in school now about to graduate.

The greatest influence in Jimmy’s persistence decisions was “…my future. To have less of a chance to struggle more because not having a college education as an African American man doesn’t really help much so it is a source of insurance.”

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

The ages of the students who participated in this study ranged from 21 to 45 years of age. The participants’ descriptive characteristics and demographics are summarized in Table 5. Eleven, or 69%, of the study participants ranged from 21 to 25 years of age, and 5, or 31%, of the participants ranged between 26 to 45 years of age. Out of the 16 participants, 13 were single, 2 were married, and one was separated. The primary family income range for students who participated in this study was $12,000 to $200,000. Four (25%) of the 16 participants were first generation college students, meaning their parents had no previous college experience. Seven (43%) of the study participants had been involved in pre-college programs in high school such as advanced placement courses or Upward Bound. Specifically, five (31%) were in advanced placement courses, and two (13%) were in Upward Bound.

Twelve (75%) of the participants were employed while taking courses. Three (18%) worked full-time, while nine (56%) worked part-time. Ten (63%) of the participants worked off-campus, while two (12%) worked on-campus. Three (18%) of the participants did not receive any type of financial aid or assistance.
Table 5

Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Financial Aid</th>
<th>Pre-college Program</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Extracurricular Activities</th>
<th>Credit Hours Enrolled</th>
<th>Hours Worked per Week</th>
<th>Mother’s Education</th>
<th>Father’s Education</th>
<th>Gross Income (in Thousands)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Randolph</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Sports Mgt</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>$50-$60</td>
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<td>Chauncy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Sociology;Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>$24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>AAS</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25 (Off)</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial Marketing</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Hispanic Business Student Association</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>$60+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dorian</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>RTVF</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20 (Off)</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>JH</td>
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<td>Larry</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TRIO</td>
<td>Organizational Development</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Student Government Association</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>30 (Off)</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>AAS</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40 (Off)</td>
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<td>HS</td>
<td>$24</td>
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<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Sociology; Business</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Football; Fraternity</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>HS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elias</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Choir; UPC</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10 (On)</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>SC</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40 (Off)</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>$33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tristan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Radio, TV, &amp; Film</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Tango Club</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20 (On)</td>
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<td>Paul</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>NLA; National Communication Association</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24 (Off)</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tavion</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40 (Off)</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>$26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TRIO</td>
<td>Hospitality Mgt</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>PBSO; NAACP</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>30 (Off)</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freddy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AP English Literature</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>Damascus Bible Study; Poetic Justice; PBSO; NAACP; Omega Psi Phi; Intramural Sports</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20-32 (Off)</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>$200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>IFQ</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24-30 (Off)</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>$100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. For hours worked per week, “on” refers to on campus employment; “off” refers to off campus employment. For education: CG = college graduate; SC = some college; HS = high school; JH = junior high school; N/A = not available.*
Student Age and Family Characteristics

The research questions addressed whether the experiences of African American students who had persisted to their senior year reflected the social integration aspects of Tinto’s model. The participants were asked about their involvement with extracurricular activities, interactions with peers, and interaction with faculty. Analysis of the interview data and literature reviewed in Chapter 2 led to an organizing framework for classifying the students by age and parent level of education.

Students were grouped by their age and by their family background. In selecting a label for the age category, the definition of non-traditional student was reviewed. In a National Center for Education Statistics publication, Horn and Carroll (1996) defined a non-traditional student as one with any of the following characteristics: Does not enter college the same calendar year that he or she finishes high school; attends part time for at least some of the academic year; works 356 or more hours a week; is a single parent; and, does not have a high school diploma. Students could be classified on a continuum from minimally nontraditional, i.e., having only one of the characteristics, to “highly nontraditional,” i.e., having four or more of the characteristics. For ease of communication, “traditional college age” rather than “traditional student’ was selected as a label. The 18-to 25-year old students in this study would be classified as minimally or moderately non-traditional students on the Horn and Carroll (1996) continuum.

The parents’ college experience was the key family background element. There were three groups for this category; Neither parent attended college; at least one parent with some college experience; and, at least one parent was a college graduate. Using these categories, five groups of students emerged as shown in Table 6.
Table 6

**Student Age and Parental College Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Traditional Age</th>
<th>Non Traditional Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tavion (23): Single</td>
<td>Dante (29): Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Least One Parent College Graduate</td>
<td>Randolph (21): Both Parents CG, Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jonathan (21): Both Parents CG, Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freddy (21): Both Parents CG, Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jacob (24): Both Parents CG, Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jimmy (22): Mother CG, Father SC, Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul (21): Mother CG, Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. For education: CG = college graduate; SC = some college; HS = high school; JH = junior high school; N/A = not available.*

Over two-thirds (i.e., 11 or approximately 69%) of the participants fell within the traditional college going age group. These students began college soon after high school graduation and should finish by age 25, if they continue make steady progress toward completing their degrees. Of this group, over half had at least one parent who had attended college, while six (or 38%) had one parent who was a college graduate. In contrast, none of the five non-traditional age students had a parent who had graduated from college; three had a mother with some college, and two had parents who were high school graduates. The oldest student, Dorian, whose mother had attended some college, reported that his father’s highest level of educational attainment was junior high school. Of the 16 participants, only two participants were married, and one was separated.
The level of social integration tended to differ by the age classification (i.e., traditional college-going college student versus non-traditional college student) and by the level of parental education (i.e., neither parent attended college, at least one parent attended college, at least one parent graduated from college). Social integration was determined through the interviews and by the number of extracurricular activities the students identified. Of the traditional college age group of men whose parents had some college or had graduated, the fathers of all but one had attained at least some college credit hours, thus giving their sons a model of higher education participation for African American men. One of the men in this group, Jonathan, reported his father as the greatest influence in his persistence decisions. None of the non-traditional aged students had fathers who had attended college.

Traditional College Age

The group with the highest level of social integration consisted of the six students of traditional college-going age with at least one parent who had graduated from college. Freddy, the most engaged in activities, identified a wide variety of six different extracurricular activities, including an on-campus Bible Study, intramural sports (flag football), a fraternity, Progressive Black Student Organization (PBSO), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP campus-based chapter), and Poetic Justice. Freddy had been president of his fraternity and had been a member of the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA). He was selective in his activities, dropping membership in the latter organization when he did not “have a feeling of belonging.” He reported the benefits of playing intramural football in this way, “I had a chance to meet new people.” However, that team broke up because of injuries.
His varied extracurricular activities were impressive when noting that he reported working 20 to 32 hours a week off-campus and being enrolled in 12 credit hours per semester. As noted in the biographical sketch, Freddy was personable and attracted to the PWI because of its diversity and opportunity to meet people from many countries. He also reported the importance of peer influence, in his case the influence of a best friend from high school who had attended another university.

My friend Johnny Titus [pseudonym]. He was my best friend in high school and is about to graduate from Riverside University [pseudonym]. He has all kinds of majors but his education is covered. We’ve always had competitions about who had the highest GPA and other areas.

While active in on-campus organizations and close to friends, Freddy did not report especially good relationships with faculty. He noted:

I have good professors in my core classes but my English professors are very opinionated and when I try to give my interpretation of a story, if it’s not going along with their way of thinking about stuff, they sore of ignore it.

Influence of Peers

One component of Tinto’s social integration model is the effect on retention of relationships with other students. This research question asked how African American males perceived the influence of peer-group interactions in their decision to persist in a PWI. Most of the study participants stated that while their relationships with their friends both on and off campus were extremely important, these relationships were not the greatest influence in their persistence. Tinto’s (1993) definition of peers referred to college-level peers. The influence of peers, particularly for the non-traditional age
participants included those who were on-campus and off-campus and girlfriends and wives and/or significant others. Only two of the study participants felt as though their relationships with friends on campus were the greatest influences in their persistence decisions. Elias, 25, when asked who had the greatest influence in his persistence decisions, reflected, “It wasn’t one so I can’t say, but it was still my friends, ones I met in college my freshmen year. They are my friends now.” He referred to friends he met while going to bible study and choir rehearsal. He felt they motivated him and made the transition of leaving home and developing “his own life” easier.

Some students experienced negative encounters with their peers on campus although these negative encounters were not deterrents in their persistence decisions. When asked to describe some of the negative experiences, some students did not recall any specific negative experiences while others did. Randolph reported the following incident:

Not clicking with some people in other races. I remember being with some of my teammates on Baker Street [pseudonym] and some of the members of an Anglo fraternity wouldn’t let us in one of the establishments. We just decided to leave. I couldn’t even believe that.

Relations with Faculty

This research question asked how African American males perceived the influence of relations with faculty in their decision to persist in a PWI. For Larry, a non-traditional student with a deceased mother and an estranged father, the PWI’s faculty and staff represented the most influential factor in his persistence decisions. Larry said:

The staff at the college has played the biggest part in my staying. My mother is
deceased and my father is in Las Vegas but we don’t have much contact but he
doesn’t really understand either. I’m a first generation college student so a lot of
what I get from my family is questions about when I am going to graduate.

Larry developed a strong social network with the students, faculty and staff that
motivated him to persist in spite of other challenges. Although most of the other
participants described their relationships with faculty as “good” or “fair,” their
relationships with faculty were not instrumental in their persistence decisions. Victor
identified characteristics of faculty that were helpful:

I’ve had some good professors, I don’t think I’ve had – all of them haven’t been
motivating professors because I think every now and then you get those
professors who put forth the extra effort to motivate you - maybe staying after
class to help you or even give you their number in case you need something
clarified – not every professor has done that but I’ve had some to do that. I do
think that some of the professors are not as approachable and I guess you feel
better when you can connect with a person or build a rapport with your instructor
so you can know what is expected.

A number of positive comments were made about faculty. Chauncy, classified as
a non-traditional age student, related, “The faculty….actually great the way you talk to
them after class and during breaks – very positive experiences with my professors and
faculty. I can remember about talking to one of my professors about graduate school.”
Secondly, Dorian reported, “Some of the staff has been encouraging and willing to help.
For the most part, the faculty has been helpful. It’s really up to you if you need help to
go ask them.” Thirdly, Tristan related some ambivalence in this statement: “All of my
experiences have been good. I can’t pinpoint why but I was very fortunate. I cannot recall one bad experience here.” Fourth, Paul mirrored the prior quote from Tristan with this statement: “I haven’t had a lot of good experiences, but I haven’t had any bad ones either. They look at you like you are another number. They teach, and I’m expected to learn…that’s it.” Fifth, Freddy reported,

I have good professors in my core classes but my English professors are very opinionated and when I try to give my interpretation of a story, if it’s not going along with their way of thinking about stuff, they sort of ignore it.

The last two participants put their experiences into contexts that represented learning opportunities of which they took advantage. Tyrone offered this eloquent story:

My experiences were kind of varied. I think it was a preconceived notion that just because I was an athlete, I wasn’t into academics. Hate to say that, but being a minority on campus you feel that you have to prove yourself and your worth when you really shouldn’t. When I was playing, I was coming up on my senior year, there was a professor who made things difficult for me, but it was a good experience as well because it made me realize that you will have people who don’t want you to excel and you have to push yourself. It was a culture shock coming to a predominantly White institution from a predominantly African American high school.

Finally, Tavion used a perspective that addressed the nature of discrimination for African American students attending PWIs:

Overall, it’s been pretty decent. I mean I really don’t interact with the faculty. I mean I come, listen to lecture, and go home. I have had a negative experience
where I felt I couldn’t be me. He had this strange rule where he didn’t allow us to wear ball caps. I can understand on test days, but you know at the time I was growing dread locks and my hair was all over the place and that was how I kept my hair looking decent. He would almost always talk down to me and other African Americans.

Generally speaking, influence of faculty ranged from mildly positive to neutral to negative. For some students, such as Larry and Victor, interactions such as talking after class or getting advice about graduate school were extremely influential. For other students who were socially integrated through peer relationships and extracurricular activities, such as Freddy, Jacob and Jimmy, interactions with faculty were not as influential in their persistence.

Extracurricular Activities

This research question asked how African American males perceived the influence of campus extracurricular activities in their decisions to persist in a PWI. None of the study participants attributed their persistence decisions to involvement in the campus’ extracurricular activities. For those who were involved, some were in programs for professional networking purposes, and others were involved in more social arenas and athletics. Freddy was involved in numerous campus organizations and even was president of his fraternity, but he attributed his persistence decisions to his relationship with his best friend, who was also a college student and childhood friend. Freddy said:

I used to be a member of NABA (National Association of Black Accountants) my first semester. I didn’t have a feeling of belonging so I didn’t stay. I also played flag football and that was positive in that I had a chance to meet new people and
it was negative when the team broke up because of a lot of injuries. But it was fun.

Dante offered the opposite perspective:

No extracurricular activities. I just don’t have the time. Full-time job, full-time school, it’s hard…plus a lot of other responsibilities. I used to play ball for Oklahoma but now just for recreation. You realize that when you are a freshman and wet behind the ears, that this is what it takes to be well-rounded and everyone has a vital role, seeing them on the sidelines encouraging you. I don’t feel like it’s competition. It’s how you look at it. It can raise your level of success or you can become disgruntled about it.

Nathan reported the effort to become involved as a challenge:

Now the negative experience was me trying to join an organization (fraternity). I took a shot at it but it was horrendous. You know I told them I was working and had a family and they said “come on down and we’ll do our best to accommodate you” but when I came it was a totally different story. They took my money…it just wasn’t good.

Finally, Paul offered a positive reason for involvement. Paul said, “The reason I’m in an organization is because it helps us with internships and get jobs. It’s been pretty cool, more so, for networking purposes.”

Tinto’s Model of Social Integration

The research question asked to what extent the social integration component of Tinto’s model of academic and social integration reflected the experiences of African American males in a PWI. Based on the accumulated narratives from the participants,
the social integration component of Tinto’s model of academic and social integration, three out of 16 participants described relationships with peers and faculty as instrumental factors in their persistence success. Larry credited the PWI’s staff as follows:

The staff at the college has played the biggest part in my staying. My mother is deceased and my father is in Las Vegas but we don’t have much contact but he doesn’t really understand either. I am a first generation college student so a lot of what I get from my family is questions about when I am going to graduate.

Elias and Freddy found that peers were a major influence. Elias said, “I have to say my friends have influenced me the most. Ones I met in college my freshman year. They are still my friends now.” Freddy reported on the friendly competition and support peers can offer. Freddy told the following story:

My friend, Johnny Tipps [pseudonym]; he was my best friend in high school and is about to graduate from Riverside University [pseudonym] in Austin. He has all kinds of majors but his education is covered. We’ve always had competitions about who had the highest GPA and other areas.

Emerging Themes

With Tinto’s theory in mind, I expected to find such themes as support emanating from the university and participation in activities to be influential factors in the participants’ persistence decisions. I thought they would confirm much of the current research on social integration, but instead I found some other themes emerged more clearly from the participant data. Four major themes emerged that explain college persistence: the generational college-going behavior of the family; positive and
negative relationships with their families; student religious beliefs; and student self-efficacy.

Generational College-Going Behavior of Family

Traditional college age students whose parents had attended college appeared more socially integrated at the university than those who were first generation college students. The younger, or traditional aged, participants (aged 21-25 years) experienced higher levels of social integration as determined by their level of involvement within the PWI than the older, or nontraditional aged, participants (aged 26-45 years) experienced. Older participants were more likely to have families and careers. Consequently, most of the older participants’ time on campus was used strictly for attending classes.

Also, most of the first generation participants’ (students whose parents had no college experience) levels of social integration were reported as less than participants whose parents had some college education or a college degree. Participants whose parents had been to college were more likely to be involved in sports, fraternities, and various other campus organizations while those participants whose parents had no college experience were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. Students whose parents attended college knew at an early age they would attend college in the future. For several first generation college students, the likelihood of going to college was not a reality until, at least middle or high school. For other first generation students, attending college was not a reality until after high school graduation or after enlisting in the armed forces.

Among the traditional college age students, the quality of their high school education played a part in the desire to socially integrate in college. Victor, Dante,
Tyrone, Nathan, and Tavion attended high schools in the metropolitan area’s largest independent school district and recalled they were not prepared in their high schools for the rigors of college (including academic preparation, developing study habits, and learning time management). They reported that they struggled to develop the necessary skills for devoting appropriate time toward their courses. This left less time for social involvement.

Positive Family Supports

Participants who were not first generation college students experienced positive family support and integrated into the fabric of college life without much difficulty. The participants who were first generation college students had more difficulty integrating into the college culture. Students whose parents had some college experience also had siblings who had either graduated from college or were currently enrolled at a college or university. These students were able to seek valid advice from their family members.

For Jimmy, going to college along with his siblings was competitive. Jimmy told his story as follows:

My family is very competitive. If I were to be the only one not to finish college, then I’d be a loser. So it’s kind of a big deal. One of my brothers is getting a doctorate, one has already finished, and three of us are in school now about to graduate.

Randolph knew in middle school that he would someday attend college. He stated that his main reason for attending college was:

the standards of my parents. My family had the greatest impact. It helps when they tell me how proud they are of me. Their encouragement means a great deal.
I come from a big family, and it motivated me to see my family going off to college and seeing their success.

Victor, whose parents died when he was very young, was raised by his grandparents. He talked about a cousin who earned an associate-level degree and said, “The family needs someone to look up to that gets a BA.” Victor also felt an obligation to his grandparents “for taking the responsibility for raising me. I know I can’t repay them, but I can do what I have to do to make their years good.”

Jacob, a very poised and confident young entrepreneurship major, attributed his college success to a close relationship with his mother. “I spent an incredible amount of time with her. She is the main influence in my life.” When he was a child, he understood, thanks to having college educated parents and grandparents, college to be a way of life. “Every [sic] since I was young, I never questioned if I was going to college, just where I was going. My granddad was the president of Hampton. My parents graduated from college. The focus has always been on learning.”

Dorian, 45, was studying to become a chaplain. He had been working on his undergraduate degree for 25 years, while serving in the military and raising a family. His greatest inspiration for attending college occurred when his mother decided to attend college after having 15 children. Dorian reported his story with poignant words:

My father only had an eighth grade education, and he was very supportive of her going to college. I watched this, as a young person in the fourth grade, and I remember the moment that I told my parents that I was going to college. My parents are deceased now, and I don’t think my mother obtained her degree but the effort…the effort in having all of us and to go to college was unbelievable. I
wanted to prove to my dad that what you poured into me you are going to get something out of it. I knew it was a matter of time, because they were up in age, but I’m still working on it.

Lack of Family Support

For some participants, experiencing negative family influences served as motivation to attend and graduate from college. A pattern emerged from the interviews with first generation college students. The first generation students, whose parents had no prior college experience, typically experienced negative family influences. Chauncy reported that his family offered, in fact, negative comments about his persistence decisions. Chauncy related his challenges as follows:

I haven’t worked in 2 years. They ask why I am not working, but they criticize me, because they think I am not doing anything. I feel like I could focus on my studies full-time and have the rest of my life to work. The negativity is a motivation but in a way to prove everybody wrong.

Dante, who was raised by a single mother and spent a lot of time looking after his younger brothers, believed he could achieve an education, but did not know how to channel his intelligence into actually pursuing a college education. He received neither guidance nor support from his family. Dante reported this heart wrenching tale:

Though my family never pushed me to remain, I can look at some negative things that pushed me because of them. I found it hard to find jobs, and education wise [I] just don’t really know what’s going on in the world. And in some cases, just plain old ignorance. You know just because you speak with proper grammar, you gotta be called “White boy,” “Uncle Tom,” all kinds of
negative experiences, you’re gay, you’re this or that, and just because you are pursuing out the norm. You have to flip it, and let it drive you.

Elias echoed Dante’s thoughts. Elias succinctly related the equivalent to the business bottom line on his experience with college. Elias said, “I saw some of my family, and I wanted to find a way to get out of that area where my family was.”

Nathan wanted to go to college with a clear purpose of doing better than his family had. Nathan related his motivation in the following:

To be better than my parents and to make money and to provide for my family. Growing up in [a low income area], you know, expectations of African American men are not high, so fortunately at a young age, God gave me the wisdom to say, you know, I can do much better, and the only way to get it is through education. I look at my family, not to put them down, but I can do better.

Tavion, another first generation college student and father of a young daughter, wanted to attend college because of what he saw in his home neighborhood. Tavion saw the disparities in lifestyles at home versus what could be. Tavion wanted to:

change the culture of my family. I come from a very, very poverty-stricken family, and for the most part, I believe, almost all of my family is like welfare recipients, and it’s kind of difficult to go back home and be comfortable around that situation due to the fact that I’ve grown so much and I’ve established so much on my own, and when I go back home, it’s like, I love you, but I don’t smoke, I don’t drink, I don’t get with that lifestyle and things ya’ll do; so it’s pretty difficult and you end up turning to other family or other people who are a bit more like you.
Religious Beliefs

Traditional college age as well as non-traditional age students stated that the greatest influence on their persistence decisions was their religious beliefs. Elias, 25 years old, described his involvement in the Voices of Praise as a “safe haven.” Elias continued by telling the following story:

It actually got us through the semesters. Every Monday, we looked forward to going. I was actually the head musician and director the last 4 years. Starting off, it was the people, but as it progressed and you saw what they were about, it was the spiritual aspect. It really made me serious about Christ and made me get focused.

Dante specifically attributed his persistence to having a relationship with Christ. When asked what the main influence was in his decision to stay in college, Dante discussed the following motivation:

Wow…it’s going to sound really cheesy, but I think it’s the man above, God. I have a destiny to fulfill and part of achieving that destiny is to make sure I’m equipped educationally. I’ve had a lot of experiences to shape the person I’ve become and going to be, but definitely, the Man upstairs.

Nathan reflected on some of the conversations he had had at an early age with his father, who had experienced some personal challenges but always spoke very highly about getting an education. He expressed the nature of his father’s influence this way:

Even through his problem, he always said, “education is the way to get out of here because I wish I would have had someone to motivate me.” So, he was very
big on education. College has always been a factor in the back of my head. If I ever started to think that it wasn’t for me, God has always sent someone to help me.

When asked what or who was the main influence in his persistence decisions, Nathan responded, “It would be God, through all the people who’ve been in my life. Looking back, it’s been like already preplanned.”

Paul determined parsimoniously that the greatest influences on his persistence decisions were “me, God…my spiritual relationship has been there even before going to college.”

Self-Efficacy

Another theme emerged from both first generation students as well as those students whose parents had some formal education. This theme was developing and maintaining a sense of self-efficacy. Chauncy related his sense of confidence in this way:

I think it takes determination, you know, that no man is an island as they say but at the end of the day, you have to think, “if I don’t who will for the most part, it’s determination and will and push those other things aside.”

Jacob put self-efficacy in the context of a goal orientation in the following explanation:

Nothing ever made me consider dropping out, but I did experience some difficulties, but let’s see during my time at [this PWI], my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and she beat that, my parents are getting divorced right now. Stuff happens, nothing I can do about it but keep going. I want to learn to do what
I need to do to get out of school and get into sales and start my own business. It's all about the end goal. The focus has always been on learning.

Second, Dante put self-efficacy in the context of using college to build it in this statement:

My main reason for attending college happens to be just for the betterment of myself. It was always a goal of mine to be educated and be able to support myself as a man. Also I have a sense of being the first person in my family to finish college. I’ve been in and out but I never quit because I have those goals of mine and just because I love to learn.

Dante also expressed how self-efficacy came from inner strength and performance accomplishments:

I had to learn a lot of things on my own and had to teach my brothers. I overcame by looking at the options. Some semesters I couldn’t go full-time. I would take something, just to move a step closer. Discipline wise, just looking at the goals and trying to overcome helped out a lot and just the inner being of knowing who you are or where you are trying to get inspires me to become more disciplined.

Tyrone was determined to graduate, because “dropping out was not an option. I promised my parents that I would finish. I wanted to prove that I could be a student as well as an athlete.” Therefore, confidence was the only option for Tyrone.

Self-efficacy was also derived by the need to see the good outcomes of the future. Jimmy noted this motivation as follows:

I would say my future has given me the biggest influence. This is like small insurance. To have less of a chance to struggle more because not having a
college education as a Black man doesn’t really help much so it is a source of insurance.

For Tristan, self-efficacy derived from open-mindedness to new experiences and new people. Tristan reported this confidence-building curiosity in the following:

I think when I think back my main reason…I wanted more for myself…and the people that I ended up being surrounded by that I’ve always wanted to be surrounded by…their lives, what they are doing, who they are with, who they are, as men and women, expanding all cultures and colors and it really attracted me…it was really what I wanted.

The quote represents the true nature of self-efficacy and its role in academic success. Tristan offered in this statement:

I got to a point that I said certain things will influence me and others will not so I can do what I need to do and want to do. I’d like to be that influence and that comes from completion from within family and pass that on to my cousins and brothers and sisters. So yeah, I think it’s me that has had the greatest influence in my life.

Summary

This chapter presented the data collected from the interviews of 16 African American males of senior academic status at a PWI in Texas during the 2009-2010 school year. The students discussed the influences they believed contributed to their persistence decisions. Traditional students who entered college directly after high school and whose parents had at least some college tended to have higher levels of social integration by being involved in campus activities and establishing and
maintaining relationships with peers or faculty. Non-traditional students who entered college years after high school or service in the military tended to have lower levels of social integration but were just as dedicated in their persistence decisions as the traditional group of participants.

Students' own explanations for their persistence to graduation fit into four themes: (1) the generational college-going behavior of the family; (2) positive and negative relationships with their families; (3) religious beliefs; and (4) student self-efficacy.

Both traditional and non-traditional students reported having influences of self-efficacy and religious beliefs which contributed to persistence decisions. Positive family supports and a lack of family support were also themes that emerged. For traditional and non-traditional students who experienced positive family supports, they wanted to make their family proud by obtaining a baccalaureate degree. For students who lacked family support, they wanted to achieve a degree in spite of a lack of support and to have a better future for themselves and their offspring.

Chapter 5 summarizes this study and the findings, includes a discussion, the conclusions of this study, and recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the role social integration plays in the persistence decisions of African American males attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Tinto (1975, 1993) defined social integration as interactions with peers and faculty and involvement in extracurricular activities. I also explored the reasons African American men nearing graduation gave for choosing to attend college and the barriers and challenges these participants experienced and overcame while attending college. This study has added to the small but growing body of literature on persistence and retention of African American males in higher education.

Since retention of African American students in higher education has been a challenge for colleges and universities across the country for many years, new developments to increase access to and participation in college are warranted. As the nation becomes more diverse, educators and policymakers have the formidable task of not only attracting students of color to higher education but also ensuring their retention, matriculation, and learning successes (Zamini, 2000).

The use of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of academic and social integration allowed for discovering the extent to which social integration seemed to reflect the self-reported persistence decisions of African American males. The model provided a framework by which the research questions were developed and facilitated the organization of categorizing themes which emerged from the participants’ responses in the interviews. The group of traditional aged students whose parents had attended college did appear to be well integrated in terms of having friends and extracurricular involvement.
Accordingly, they fit Tinto’s model and would expect to be successful in developing friends and extracurricular involvement.

Interestingly, a large minority of this sample of seniors were different than expected. They were the non-traditional aged students whose parents had not attended college. They identified factors other than those highlighted by Tinto (1975, 1993) that promoted their success. These other, extra-theoretical and major factors influencing the persistence of the African American males interviewed for this study were positive and negative family influences, religious beliefs, sense of purpose, and self-efficacy. Thus, the non-traditional aged students did not fit Tinto’s model yet were able to be successful in their academic pursuit toward a college degree.

Conclusions

Three observations emerged from considering the findings of the study of persistence decisions of the 16 African American seniors attending a PWI. First, the experiences of the non-traditional aged participants were different from the traditional aged college student experiences. With more students working full-time, living off-campus, married with families, enlisted in the military while attending college, and starting college several years following high school graduation, colleges and universities face specific challenges to efforts designed to improve the retention and persistence rates of African American males.

Secondly, although the participants experienced varying levels of social integration, for most of the 16 students, their persistence decisions were influenced more by their positive and negative relationships with family, religious beliefs, and sense of self-efficacy than by their interactions with peers and faculty and involvement in
extracurricular activities. The components of the social integration model, as developed by Tinto (1987, 1993), contributed little to their persistence decisions when compared to the themes presented during the interviews. The first generation college student research participants experiences did not facilitate attending and graduating from college, but along the way, these men realized the value of obtaining a college degree. For students whose parents attended college, their experiences seemed to allow for a much smoother transition to college life in terms of academic preparation, adapting to rigors of course demands, knowing where to go for what, and being less likely to rely on financial aid to fund college expenses.

Third, the responses of the participants enriched and broadened the scope of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model as well as the current literature pertaining to persistence. The participants addressed relationships in their families, religious beliefs, and the sense of self-efficacy as influential to their persistence. Whereas previous researchers focused on traditional aged students, neglected non-traditional aged students, and did not examine these supports to student persistence, by focusing on number of credit hours earned as the criteria for participation, this study has produced a broader scope of understanding to the emerging literature regarding the college persistence of African American males.

Implications for Practice

Characteristics of traditional aged students are changing. Previously, studies of African American and White ninth grade students’ aspirations for college attendance (e.g., Freeman, 1997) involved utilizing the predisposition stage of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model of college choice. The three stages of Hossler and
Gallagher’s (1987) Model of College Choice included the following: (a) predisposition, referring to when students decide if they wish to continue their education beyond high school; (b) search, addressing when students begin to investigate institutions; and (c) choice, occurring when students decide on attending a particular institution. Factors identified as influencing students’ predispositions included the students’ socioeconomic status, high school of attendance, family and peer attitudes toward education, academic ability, and understanding of costs including information regarding financial aid (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Pitre (2006), who utilized the predisposition stage of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, found that African American students’ aspirations for college attendance were generally similar to those of their White peers, even though African American students showed lower levels of academic achievement. Pitre also found that students who held negative perceptions of how well their high school was preparing them for college were less likely to aspire to college attendance. Students with these lower aspirations might enter the world of work for a time before realizing they need to attend college.

When considering whose responsibility it is to ensure the academic success of African American males, all stakeholders are responsible including the faculty and staff of the high schools and the colleges and the students (Cuyjet, 1997; Freeman, 1997; Harper, 2009; Tinto, 1993). High schools have a responsibility to ensure students undergo rigorous curricula (Freeman, 2005). Colleges and universities must ensure that campus climates include opportunities for students to be engaged (Harper, 2009) and to be academically and socially integrated (Tinto, 1993). Although African American male students enter predominantly White college settings with special needs
(Cuyjet, 1997), they must overcome institutional, academic, and personal barriers in order to obtain a college degree. Since the graduation rate for African American males is disparaging, all stakeholders must play a role in ensuring these young men’s academic successes.

The challenge faced by colleges and universities to create programs designed to foster the persistence decisions of African American males may not only remain on the forefront of enrollment managers’ minds but may also grow in intensity. Although many students do enter college directly after high school, live on campus, and experience high levels of integration, the population of non-traditional aged students is increasing. A significant percentage of African American students fall into the non-traditional aged student category, because more students work full-time, live off campus, are married with families, hold enlistments in the military, and enroll for the first time in college five or more years following high school graduation. Considering the dwindling graduation rates for these men, even if they more often represent students of non-traditional age, high schools must continue to make efforts to prepare African American males for the challenges they will face in college, should they choose to attend, at any point in life.

With the mandates of No Child Left Behind and high stakes testing, more than 25% of the participants explicated that they did not receive a quality high school education, specifically, in the large urban district they attended. High schools and colleges must communicate between each other about student needs and expectations as well as about colleges’ needs and expectations for the students they enroll from high schools, regardless of geography. Bridge programs clearly would benefit from enhancements and strengthening based on the themes that emerged from this study. If
consideration of family and religion were given as part of a bridge program, the facilitation of a seamless transition from high school to college with focus on time management, study skills, taking notes, and social skills would be more comprehensive and more likely to benefit students’ persistence. Programmatic remedies are needed at both the K-12 and college levels in order to address students’ academic deficiencies and promote their college readiness. The information provided by the participants of this study ought to influence the development of programs to assist African American males’ efforts to remain in college until graduation.

Recommendations for Further Research

The responses of the participants in the study revealed critical insights regarding the persistence of African American males in college. The students’ perceptions of their interactions with faculty and peers and of their involvement in extracurricular activities on campus are beneficial for current higher education practitioners and suggest topics to be considered for future research. The data provided information not only about the degree to which Tinto’s model of academic and social integration (1975, 1993) explained the participants’ persistence decisions but also about the importance of religious beliefs, relationships with family, self-efficacy and high school experiences in contributing to persistence of African American males. Therefore, future research considerations include the following:

1. An examination of parental and family influences of African American males from both positive and negative aspects.

2. An investigation to learn more about the roles religious beliefs play in the persistence decisions of African American males, since several participants
stated that their faith in God helped them to persevere and overcome obstacles in order to achieve the goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree.

3. A quantitative study, along with this qualitative research study to serve as a foundation, designed to survey a larger more geographically diverse group of African American males.

4. A comparative analysis of African American males at predominantly White institutions versus historically Black colleges with regard to social integration and persistence.

5. An investigation of the factors non-traditional aged college students consider to be motivating factors that affect their persistence toward graduation.

Summary

Although a plethora of information regarding the plight of African American males abounds, less information on factors contributing to their matriculation and subsequent graduation from American colleges and universities is available. With more African American males enrolling in college but failing to graduate, a need to identify those supports that can help them succeed has arisen. The evidence from the lived experiences of 16 African American students who are persisting to graduation at a large PWI offered insight into potential remedies and should be considered by policymakers and practitioners in the creation of programs to increase persistence rates for all students and to promote a more educated citizenry for future generations.
APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS OF RESEARCH SERVICES HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL LETTER
February 1, 2010

Dr. Judith Adkison  
Department of Educational Administration  
University of North Texas  

RE: Human Subjects Application No. 09-511  

Dear Dr. Adkison:

In accordance with 45 CFR Part 46 Section 46.101, your study titled “The Role of Social Integration in the Persistence of African American Males in College” has been determined to qualify for an exemption from further review by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Enclosed is the consent document with stamped IRB approval. Please copy and use this form only for your study subjects.

No changes may be made to your study’s procedures or forms without prior written approval from the UNT IRB. Please contact Jordan Smith, Research Compliance Analyst, ext. 3940, if you wish to make any such changes. Any changes to your procedures or forms after 3 years will require completion of a new IRB application.

We wish you success with your study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Patricia L. Karninski, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Chair, Institutional Review Board

PK: js
APPENDIX B

REQUEST FOR VOLUNTEERS
Jacqueline Garrett-Spencer, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Administration at [this PWI], needs volunteers for her dissertation research study that seeks to gain a better understanding of the factors that promote college persistence among African American male students. The rate of attrition is high for students of color in general and African American males in particular. There exists a substantial amount of literature that examines barriers that inhibit student persistence and academic progress; however, there is little research that investigates college persistence from the perspectives of African American students. Results of this study could be utilized by elementary, secondary and post-secondary institutions to promote and cultivate factors associated with attracting and retaining African American males as they journey toward and through the higher education experience.

Jacqueline is seeking African American males who are seniors enrolled either full-time or part-time at [this PWI] campus. The identity of student participants will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms during data collection and in the final report. Each participant will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire and to participate in an on-campus interview, which will take approximately one hour. **There will be five random drawings of participants who will receive gift cards for their participation in the study.**

If you are willing to participate in this study please contact Jacqueline via e-mail at [researcher’s email address] or by phone at [researcher’s cell phone number].
APPENDIX C

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Research ID #

2. Age

3. Hometown

4. Financial Aid

5. Were you involved in any pre-college programs in high school? If so, please check the ones which apply:
   _____Upward Bound   _____Gear-Up   _____Advanced Placement courses
   _____AVID   _____TRIO   _____I was not involved in any pre-college programs in high school

6. Major

7. How would you describe your marital status?
   _____Single, never married   _____Married   _____Separated
   _____Divorced   _____Widowed

8. What campus activities and organizations (athletics, fraternities, etc. are you participating in?

9. Describe your residency status while attending school:
   _____Residence hall   _____Off-campus housing in Denton
   _____Commute from my town

10. Are you enrolled full-time or part-time? How many hours are you enrolled in now?

11. How many hours a week do you work? On or off campus?

12. What was the highest level of education of your mother?
   _____Elementary   _____Junior high   _____High school
   _____Some college   _____College graduate
13. What was the highest level of education of your father?

_____ Elementary   _____ Junior high   _____ High school

_____ Some college   _____ College graduate

14. Estimated family gross income _______________________

15. Cumulative GPA ____________________
APPENDIX D

STUDENT SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW
Semi-structured Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your main reason for attending college.

2. What are your overall experiences/interactions with faculty? Please describe an incident that stands out in your memory of a positive faculty interaction/experience? A negative experience with a faculty member?

3. What are your experiences/interactions with other students on campus? Please describe an incident that stands out in your memory of a positive interaction/experience with other students? A negative experience with other students?

4. What extracurricular activities are you involved in? Please describe an incident that stands out in your mind of a positive interaction/experience within the organization? A negative experience within the organization?

5. What barriers have you encountered while enrolled as a student at [this PWI]? How did you overcome them?

6. What influence has your __________ had on your decision to remain in college? (family, friends, girlfriend, mentor)

7. Describe the deciding incident that occurred K-12 in your choice to go to college. Think back to middle school – did you plan to attend college at that time? Why? Why not?

8. Who in your life has encouraged you to attend college?
APPENDIX E

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM
University of North Texas Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: The Role of Social Integration in the Persistence of African American Males in College

Principal Investigator: Dr. Judith Adkison, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Educational Administration.

Purpose of the Study: You are being asked to participate in a research study which involves identifying and explaining the experiences, relationships and motivational factors that African American male college seniors perceive as contributing to their persistence toward completion of a baccalaureate degree. The research questions are: 1) How do African American males perceive the influence of peer-group, faculty and campus extracurricular interactions in their decision to persist in a predominantly White university and 2) To what extent does the social integration component of Tinto's Model of Academic and Social Integration reflect the experiences of African American males in a predominately white university (PWI)?

Study Procedures: You will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire and participate in an on-campus interview that will take about one hour of your time. You also may be asked to answer a few follow-up questions by telephone if clarification of a response is necessary.

Foreseeable Risks: No foreseeable risks are involved in this study.

Benefits to the Subjects or Others: We expect the project to benefit you by adding to the research on retention with emphasis on the experiences of African American male students and how academic institutions at all levels can assist in fostering the academic and social factors that lead to their success. It will also contribute to the development of student affairs programs that are beneficial and effective in the academic and social fabric of the minority undergraduate experience.

Compensation for Participants: Your name will be entered into one of five drawings for a $5.00 Starbucks gift cards as compensation for your participation upon completion of the study. If your name is selected as a winner, you will be notified via e-mail. You will have approximately a 1:4 chance of winning a gift card.

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records: Data and records of this research will be maintained in a secure file located in the College of Education at the University of North Texas. Tapes, interview transcripts, and names and identification numbers of participants will be stored in a locked file cabinet to ensure security. Records are subject to UNT document retention policy and will be destroyed per policy guidelines. To assure confidentiality, each interview participant will be assigned an identification number. The principal investigator and the doctoral student conducting the research are the only individuals with access to the taped interviews and transcripts. Interview data will be presented in a way to maintain confidentiality of your individual information in any publications or presentations from this study.
Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Dr. Judith Adkison at telephone number 940-365-2249, or e-mail: Adkison@unt.edu or Jacqueline Spencer, e-mail: jacspence@dallasind.org.

Review for the Protection of Participants: This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Research Participants’ Rights:

Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- Jacqueline Spencer has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You have been told the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You have been told you will receive a copy of this form.

__________________________
Printed Name of Participant

__________________________
Signature of Participant

__________________________
Date

For the Principal Investigator or Designee:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

__________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator or Designee

__________________________
Date

APPROVED BY THE UNT IRB

DATE 2-1-10

Office of Research Services
University of North Texas
Last Updated: August 9, 2007
REFERENCES


