STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A STEM-FOCUSED UNIVERSITY

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the association between student involvement and self-authorship among African American undergraduate students enrolled at a medium-sized, North Texas STEM-focused university. Self-identified African American undergraduate students at the university completed an online, researcher-developed survey focused on co-curricular involvement activities, degree of involvement in those activities, and perceived self-authorship indicators. From the completed survey pool (N = 49), 10 females and 5 males participated in follow-up focus group sessions.

The survey data analysis was limited to descriptive statistics of student involvement and demographic data. Survey results showed that African American undergraduate students at the university were actively involved in co-curricular activities and generally satisfied with their involvement experiences. The focus groups provided a more in-depth picture of the involvement experiences showing that students believed that their commitment to co-curricular activities contributed significantly to their interpersonal and intrapersonal growth—characteristics of self-authorship. The survey and qualitative data combined suggested a positive association between the involvement of African American undergraduate students in co-curricular activities at the university and the development of self-authorship characteristics in those students. Findings from this study support the practice of intentional outreach to African American undergraduate students in order to promote their active involvement in campus activities and events.
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This dissertation is dedicated to Ms. Nickki ‘Muffin’ Johnson (1981-2013). You are greatly missed.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 2010, African Americans accounted for 37% of all undergraduate and graduate students in the United States (NCES, 2012). According to the 2012 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, of all first-time undergraduate students enrolled in college during the 2003-04 school year, 49% of these students completed a bachelor’s degree, associate’s degree, or vocational certificate by June 2009. Of that 49%, African American students accounted for only 17%, falling behind White students at 36% and Asian students at 46% (NCES, 2012). Even more troubling, of the African American students within the same 2003-04 cohort, 43% of these students had not completed their degree and/or were no longer enrolled at any higher education institution by 2009 (NCES, 2012).

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that the six-year graduation rate in the United States was estimated at 58%. However, for African American students this number was drastically lower at 39% in comparison to their White peers at 61% and Asian peers at 68% (NCES, 2012). As all of these numbers suggest, African American students’ college success and degree completion remain critical issues in higher education today.

In the same report; looking specifically at science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] degree completion; NCES stated that STEM bachelor degrees awarded amounted to a trivial 25% of all degrees awarded nationally. Of that 25%, Asian students made up 36%, while African American students represented only 21% of STEM bachelor degrees completed in the US in 2010 (NCES, 2012). Given the statistics, the success of African American students in the STEM education has become an important discussion across the broad from

Student Involvement

Both scholars and practitioners have expressed their interest in the African American college student experience through over 40 years of research (Harvey-Smith, 2002). There are several subsets of research trends on African American students, including a key emphasis on the student involvement of these students mostly based on Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) student development theories. This set of researchers has presented data showing that involvement in campus activities and institutional support was critical to the success of African American college students (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004).

As defined by the current research, student involvement refers to “the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience” (Seidman, 2005, p. 11). Within current research, the range of discussion goes from the broad effects of college life to the direct factors for academic success (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004). These studies have also demonstrated how race and ethnicity are factors in how students adjust to college life, react to campus culture, and maintain social networks (Baker, 2008; Fischer, 2007).

Self-Authorship

Although the Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975) theories of student development are significant for both higher education researchers and practitioners, it is important not to limit
the student development research to these theories. Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001) is a newer theory of student development with an emphasis on mean-making across the human lifespan. However, much of the current research on self-authorship is longitudinal work with a focus on cognitive development, classroom experiences and student leadership (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros, 2010; King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, & Lindsay, 2009; Magolda, 1998; Pizzolato, 2007; Pizzolato, 2005; Pizzolato, 2008; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

As the achievement gap in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education among African American students continues to widen, it is necessary to expand to the current research efforts beyond data gathering, policy making, and national discussions. There are several facets of success for African American college students in STEM education to be explored and expounded upon, including involvement in co-curricular activities at STEM-focused universities (Anderson Dongkim, 2006; Bayer Corporation, 2010; Eagan, Herrera, Garibay, Hurtado, & Chang, 2011; Kitchen, n.d.; Lundy-Wagner, Vultaggio, & Gasman, 2013; Shehab et al., 2007).

Much of the research about Baxter Magolda’s (2001) self-authorship theory is limited to specific components and dimensions of the theory itself. Many researchers have focused solely on the cognitive development aspect of this theory as it relates to college student development. However, Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory outlines a multidimensional, holistic approach to student development and it is critical to not ignore the other elements of this theory with new research endeavors (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda, Creamer, &
Much of the current research on African American college student involvement is concentrated on how these students adjust to the college environment through their involvement in student organizations, campus events, and peer interaction. Although the current literature speaks to the importance of involvement related to the success of African American students, it does not address the students’ motivation behind the involvement or what types of involvement have the greatest impact on student success (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the self-authoring process of African American college students at a STEM-focused university as it relates to their involvement in co-curricular activities. I hope to uncover influential factors of co-curricular involvement and how these factors may relate to the self-authorship development among this particular population of students. Specifically, I want to identify the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities within an African American college student sample at a STEM-focused university. I want to determine if there is a connection between the degree of involvement and development of characteristics of self-authorship among the sample population. Lastly, I will attempt to use qualitative methodology to help explain the link between the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities and development of characteristics of self-authorship within an African American college student sample at a single, STEM-focused university.
Through survey inquiry, this study presented informational data about the African American college student experience, including demographic information, involvement activities, and commitment levels to involvement. The focus group interviews provided an in-depth examination of student involvement and development. This study expanded on the current research related to the African American college student experience, self-authorship, and student involvement (Baker, 2008; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Berger & Milem, 1999; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004)

Research Questions

The present study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities within an African American undergraduate student sample at a STEM-focused university?

RQ2. What is the connection between the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities and development of characteristics of self-authorship within an African American college student sample at a STEM-focused university?

RQ3. How does involvement activity explain the characteristics of self-authorship among these African American undergraduate students?

Definition of Terms

_African American_ refers to Americans of African descent. African American is also interchangeable with Black. African Americans students at the research site have self-identified as such with the university.

_Co-curricular activities_ were inclusive of the student’s on or off-campus involvement in student affinity organizations such as Greek-letter organizations, student volunteerism events, non-profit organizations, and faith-based entities.
College students are defined as currently enrolled, undergraduate students at the research site for the purpose of this study. This does not include post-baccalaureate students or students who are auditing undergraduate level courses.

Degree of involvement is termed to define the student’s level of participation with specified co-curricular activities.

Involvement is a general term used to describe the student’s participation with and commitment to co-curricular activities on-and off-campus.

Off-campus activities include, but are not limited to, professional organization membership, completion of regular community services hours, and involvement with faith-based entities.

On-campus activities include student organization membership, employment on campus, and attendance at social events, distinguished lectures or informational seminars.

Self-authorship as defined by Baxter Magolda (2001) is defined as an individual’s capacity to make meaning of one’s life decisions, experiences and outcomes.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the expansion of knowledge in several fields of study. Broadly speaking, this is an opportunity to expound upon on the current research on the African American college student experience, benefits of involvement, and self-authorship. From the current literature on African American students in STEM education, the statistical data illustrated considerable disparities in enrollment, persistency, and graduation across the board. National reports and independent studies highlight the successes of specialized STEM education programs targeted toward African American students and other underrepresented
minority students. However, there is limited research that concentrates on the experience of African American college students at STEM-focused universities and specific factors for student success (Anderson & Dongkim, 2006; Bayer Corporation, 2010; Eagan, Herrera, Garibay, Hurtado, & Chang, 2011; Kitchen, n.d.; Lundy-Wagner, Vultaggio, & Gasman, 2013; Shehab et al., 2007).

In its current form, this present study adds to recent literature on student involvement, ethnic culture identity, and involvement in specific co-curricular activities. Neither Astin (1984) nor Tinto (1975) in their original theory development considered ethnic culture identity as a critical factor of involvement trends or integration commitments. In addition, neither of the earlier theories took into account the effects of different types of interaction and involvement on persistence or student success (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975). The current research study focused specifically on the African American college student experience and these students’ involvement in selected out-of-classroom activities.

This current study also adds to the most recent scholarly efforts focused on self-authorship, or the meaning-making process. It is important to mention that much of the available literature on self-authorship is concentrated on the cognitive dimension of the theory (Baxter Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros 2010). Several studies have been conducted to explore self-authorship from a leadership development and learning enhancement perspective (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Cohen et al., 2013; Eriksen, 2009; Pizzolato, 2008; Pizzolato, 2008). This study attempted to delve in to both the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of self-authorship through a qualitative analysis.
Lastly, in the following chapters, more details about previously-used methodologies will be reviewed and critiqued in support of using a modified qualitative approach that includes the use of survey research. As stated before, the survey results will establish the benchmark for the subsequent focus group interviews. However, the results from the survey combined with the results of the focus group discussions will provide an in-depth illustration of the African American college student experience, involvement activity trends among this population, and the connection between self-authorship and involvement.

Limitations, Delimitations, Assumptions

Limitations

For the present study, student participation was completely voluntary, and all responses were self-reported. Although students were encouraged to be honest and to complete the assessment fully, there was always a possibility that students would fail to do either or both. These statements were the expected limitations to this study.

Delimitations

The student participation pool was limited to undergraduate African American college students from a single, four-year, STEM-focused university in the North Texas area. For the survey report, student participants were given a researcher-designed survey. The researcher-designed instrument included questions to quantify the students’ interest, knowledge, and participation in co-curricular activities. Each of these elements represents delimitations for this study.

Assumptions

For this inquiry, I assumed African American college students were actively involved in
co-curricular activities and programs both on-and off-campus. I assumed the student participants were willing to disclose information about their college experience and development.

**Conceptual Framework of Study**

This current study is guided by combination of landmark theories in college student development and behavioral social sciences. Like previous literature on African American college students and campus involvement, both Tinto’s (1975) and Astin’s (1984) theories provide foundational concepts for this study. Unlike previous research, this study’s theoretical framework is also shaped by Kegan’s orders of consciousness (1994) and Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001).

Tinto’s (1975) student integration model of attrition suggested a student’s choice to persist or to withdraw was dependent upon “by how well the student fits into the structure, social and academic life, and goals of the institution” (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009). This fit was determined by the student’s interaction with academic and social components within the college setting. Student interaction can be defined by classroom experiences, faculty contacts, organization commitments, and peer relations, to name a few ways. The more a student intentionally interfaces with institutional elements, the more likely a student is to continue at that institution of higher education. In short, Tinto’s theory (1975) proposed a direct, positive relationship between student persistency and campus integration.

Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement asserted the level of learning and development was a direct outcome of the quality and quantity of the student’s involvement with the institution. College students were inherently responsible for their involvement in both
academic and social facets of college life. They were in control of the degree of their involvement in and outside of classroom. Astin (1984) consequently assumed the greater the involvement, the greater the collegiate experience. As students became more involved in the classroom with peers and organizations, they were more likely to experience greater gain from their interactions (Astin, 1984; Hutley, 2010; Giuffrida, 2004).

Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory (1994) was a multi-stage, cognitive development theory based on the meaning-making process over a lifespan. As a constructive developmental theorist, Kegan (1994) proposed that development was an explicit product of how an individual interacts and reacts to their surrounding environment. These interactions and reactions were defined by how the individual interprets and understands the happenings within their environment. The process of the individual came to understand is what Kegan termed as the ‘meaning-making’. This theory presumed over the lifespan the individual’s capacity for meaning-making became more complex and more evolved (Kegan, 1994; Kegan, 2000).

Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2001) involved the interconnectedness of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development among college students and young adults. Like Kegan’s order of consciousness, this multidimensional, multi-process theory took holistic, lifespan approach to college student development. Through a series of pre-defined processes, individuals gained a greater sense of self from a variety of life experiences. The end result, as described by Baxter Magolda, was a self-authored life with the capacity to make meaning of one’s life decisions, experiences, and outcomes (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Kiteau, 2010). The purpose of this current study was to investigate the self-authoring process, as outlined by Baxter Magolda, among undergraduate African American students.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

This literature review is intended to provide an overview of previous scholarly research specifically focused on the campus involvement, academic achievement, and social success of African American college students. Over the last two decades, several studies have been conducted to investigate and document the experiences of African American college students. Much of research has focused on the relationship of involvement and various aspects of college life, such as academic success, adjustment to the campus culture and integration in to college life (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004). Although the researchers have used different theoretical approaches and methodologies, they have drawn similar conclusions on the relationship of involvement and African American college student success. For this review of literature, it was important to highlight both the commonalities and dissimilarities in purpose of the studies, research methods and suggestions for future research.

This first section is a summary and analysis of recorded inquiries of the relationship between involvement and academic success, involvement and adjustment to the campus culture, and involvement and integration in to college life among African American undergraduate students (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004). The latter part of this literature review presented a new theoretical perspective on the relationship between involvement and the African American college student experience.
Involvement of African American College Students

Involvement and Academic Success

In 2004, Flowers published his work on African American college student campus involvement and its effects on their academic and social development. Using Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement as theoretical framework, he hoped to illustrate a positive relationship between campus involvement and student development within this specific student population. The significance of Flowers’ work lies in his quest to address distinctive limitations of previous research. In Flowers’ opinion, existing research presented three major limitations in procedure and results, which were limited institution types, small sample size of African American college students and insufficient statistical data (2004). Therefore, the researcher designed his study to include a national sample of approximately 8,000 African American college students from almost 200 four-year public and private higher education institutions across the United States. Flowers used the national College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) data set from 1990 to 2000 for data analysis. The dual stage data analysis involved computation of mean scores and standard deviations for the CSEQ scales and least squares regression for estimates of effects of involvement experience on each CSEQ scale. According to Flowers, a quantitative analysis would increase the generalization, strength, and validity of the final results.

The knowledge gained from this study was more applicable to the broader higher education community. Consistent with Astin’s (1984) framework, Flowers reported that most African American college students expressed a positive relationship between campus involvement and academic and social development. Going beyond Astin’s theoretical
foundation, the study’s finding suggested African American college students benefited more from academic related experiences (i.e. library visits and academic support programs) than social involvement in student organizations and clubs. This brought awareness to varying beneficial values of specific involvement on campus among African American college students. With Flowers’s results, we now know that African American college students respond differently to specific types of campus experiences. However, in parting, Flowers recommended additional research should be conducted to better categorize which kinds of activities and experiences have the greatest influence on positive academic and social development for African American college students.

In the same year as Flowers, Guiffrida (2004) provided another perspective of the relationship between African American college students’ campus involvement and their academic success. The author looked at how involvement in African American student groups (i.e. honors clubs, fraternities, sororities, and religious organizations) affected the overall academic success of African American college students. Here again like Flowers, a researcher has narrowed the scope of the study to a particular type of campus involvement for this unique student population. Unlike Flowers, Guiffrida chose to use Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory as the theoretical foundation for this study. In order to better understand the relationship between involvement and academic success among African American students, Guiffrida felt it was appropriate to utilize an inductive, qualitative approach, which included small group and individual interviews. Mentioned as critical limitation by Flowers, this study is based on eighty-four African American college student participants at a single predominately
white university. Selected from purposeful sampling, the study’s participants were both male and female students, ranged from freshmen to seniors with different academic backgrounds.

Guiffrida (2004) suggested involvement in African American student groups and organizations had a positive effect on the academic and personal success of African American college students. From her interviews responses, the researcher documented “the small group of uninvolved students who described lack of involvement as contributing to their poor academic achievement and thoughts of attrition” (p. 94). The researcher also recorded a trend of over involvement in African American student groups as a reoccurring theme among those students who experienced a negative effect on academic achievement. Guiffrida’s findings were two-fold, in essence. Though it was important to encourage African American undergraduates to get involved with student organizations, but it seemed just as important to teach these students how to balance between academic and social endeavors.

One critical recommendation from Guiffrida’s (2004) study included the need to explore individual “characteristics of students and their organizations that may influence whether involvement becomes an asset or a liability to academic achievement and persistence at PWIs” (p. 94). This single statement seemed to stress the need to conduct further inquiries to explore the possibility of predisposed factors attributing to the involvement of African American students in campus events, to examine the culture of different student organizations at various institution types, and to investigate these two themes’ influence on academic and personal development of African American college students.

Baker (2008) researched the effects of participation in six types of involvement experiences in athletics, fraternity and sorority life, student government, faith-based clubs, the
arts, and ethnicity-based groups on the academic achievement of African American and Latino/a college students. Unlike the two preceding studies, Baker’s research was framed within the context of both Ogbu’s theory of oppositional culture and Tinto’s theory of educational departure. With the results of the study, Baker hoped to assess the relevancy of Ogbu’s theory and expand Tinto’s theory with the analysis of influential factors from different involvement experiences on the academic performance Black and Latino/a college students at selective institutions.

Very similar to Flowers’s approach, Baker (2008) used a national data set to conduct her study. She chose to limit the data set to 27 selective colleges that participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen between fall of 1999 and spring of 2001. Within these institution types, the admissions acceptance rate ranged from 11% to 79%. It was assumed African American and Latino/a students enrolled at these colleges and universities had high academic standing prior to entering college and that they were academically successful up to the point of the study. With the same goal to produce highly generalizable and applicable findings, Baker’s total sample included approximately 1,900 African American and Latino/a college students. The six involvement experiences for this study included organizations and activities related to athletics, fraternity and sorority life, student government, faith-based clubs, the arts, and ethnicity-based groups. For statistical analysis, Baker applied the Ordinary Least Squares regression method in order to predict the grade-point average related to the pre-described involvement types for each ethnicity and gender groups.

Baker (2008) found that the campus involvement did have an effect on the academic status of the study’s participants. Baker’s analysis proposed involvement in political
organization types had the greatest positive influence on African American and Latino/a students’ academic achievement. Also, African American female college students were the only group in which “a strong identity positively affects academic performance” (p. 291). Like previously discussed literature of Flowers and Guiffrida, the findings from this study supported the idea that campus involvement of traditionally underrepresented minority college students does have significant academic benefits. For African American and Latino/a students, involvement on campus was a factor for retention. Different organization types produced varying level of influence on academic progress.

An interesting fact about Baker’s study was the identification of involvement in particular student organizations and its effects on the African American students’ academic achievement. This had not been achieved by previous scholars. Baker’s delimitations enhanced the study’s approach because it itemized the activities types. She was also able to analyze the ethnicity and gender separately. However, as suggested by Baker, there was still a missing piece in literature. By what means does involvement in certain organizations influence the academic performance of minority students? Can the improved academic performance of African American students be attributed to other factors, like off-campus commitments or self-perception? The statistical analysis of data as a standalone method provided valuable knowledge about the African American college student experience.

Involvement and Adjustment to Campus Culture

Fischer (2007) studied racial/ethnic differences in college adjustment and transition. She proposed there were three crucial factors among traditionally underrepresented college students that affect adjustment and college success: “minority status, socioeconomic
disadvantage, and being a first generation student” (p. 126). In accordance with Tinto’s work on student integration, Bean’s model of organizational turnover and Astin’s input-process-output model, Fischer proposed there was a direct, positive correlation between involvement, retention, and academic success (Fischer, 2007).

Fischer (2007), like Baker (2008), drew data from the 1999 National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen. The stratified random sample included 3,924 college students and included an equal number of ethnic representations from Black, Hispanic, Asian and White students. The researcher also used Ordinary Least Squares regression, in addition to logical regression, to separately estimate the grade point average and college satisfaction for each measure for each ethnic group. In short, Fischer’s findings suggested it was important for college students to get involved with formal campus activities, such as student organizations and living-learning communities. Like previously mentioned studies, her results suggested in order for minority students to feel integrated into the campus culture, involvement with formal activities through student life was essential and in turn, this involvement was beneficial to their academic development. Interestingly, Fischer found off-campus relationships had a negative effect on the academic progress of African American college students. If African American college students did not have any formal interaction with campus life and subsequently maintained strong ties to off-campus relationships, Fischer noted these students were more likely to stop out of college.

Involvement and Integration to College Life

Museus (2008) planned to examine the relationship of cultural adjustment and membership and involvement in ethnic-based student organizations among African American
and Asian American college students. Similar to Flowers (2004) and Guiffrida (2004), Museus agreed there were fundamental limitations in the existing literature. First, the researcher felt the current cultural research was limited to the Latino/a undergraduate college experience. Though there were common trends among minority students, each group has a unique experience, in particularly on a predominately white campus, which should be documented. Second, the researcher stated much of the previous research focused on the assimilation of traditionally underrepresented minority students into the institution’s culture, leaving out the importance of maintaining their culture identity.

Museus (2008), in his effort to discover new knowledge about the ethnic minority college student experience, took a different approach with his purpose, theoretical background, and methodology. Using Kuh and Love’s cultural perspective of student departure (2004) and Tierney’s concept of cultural integrity (2004) as the theoretical basis, Museus hoped to better understand how ethnic student organizations help minority students adjust to the culture of predominately White institutions through qualitative inquiry (2004). From purposeful sampling, Museus selected twelve African American and twelve Asian American college students from a single, large public research institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region. Different from any of the previous research mentioned in this literature review, the researcher employed a phenomenological design with in-person, individual semi-structured interviews to gain a better comprehension of ethnic minority college student experiences.

The findings of the Museus (2008) study were highly valuable to higher education researchers and practitioners. The students’ responses highlighted three significant benefits of involvement with ethnic-based student organizations. For African American and Asian American
college students, ethnic-based student organizations served as common cultural community, like a family away from family. As members of ethnic-based student organizations, African American and Asian American students found opportunities for cultural expression and support. Membership in and participation with ethnic-based student organization was a platform for “cultural validation” (p. 576). Broadly speaking, Museus was able to document how ethnic student organization and clubs have a principal role in the adjustment to campus culture for ethnic minority students. Overall, the ethnic minority students of this study seems to support the notion that involvement in these types groups was necessary for the development and maintenance of cultural identity.

Involvement Summary

The aforementioned studies were intended to illuminate the relationship between campus involvement and various facets of college life, such as academic success, student persistency, student transition, and overall development among African American college students. Several common threads were identified including the usage of comparable student development theories, equivalent data analysis methods, and similar findings from the reviewed articles. Though each study had its distinctive traits, the results were collaboratively supportive of campus involvement as a factor of success for African American college students. For certain, each study has shown campus activities and support were critical to the academic success and personal development of African American college students. Collectively, the research findings reiterated the overall significance of and necessity for African American college students’ involvement in on-campus activities and with student organizations (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004; Museus, 2008).
Each of the featured studies employed a single strategy methodology for their respective inquires. Three of the researchers chose to quantitatively analyze national data sets from either the College Student Experience Questionnaire or the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (Baker, 2008; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004). In doing so, these studies included sizable research samples of the targeted student population and produced large statistical data for inference. The remaining two studies exercised a qualitative approach through small group or individual interviews to address the given research topic. Both investigations provided new insight into the African American college student experience (Guiffrida, 2004; Museus, 2008).

Separately the qualitative and quantitative methods used yielded relevant and useful data. However, both techniques have their limitations, leaving many questions to be pursued and answered by new research efforts. The limitations and suggestions of the previous research offer new opportunities for further investigations to be achieved by others. A modified qualitative inquiry may it add more depth to the knowledge pool about the student involvement and the collegiate experience of African American students (Flowers, 2004; Baker, 2008).

Introduction of Theoretical Background

With this study, it was my hope to add greater depth to our understanding of the African American college student experience. Like researchers before me, I have planned to address specific limitations of previous work. I wanted to employ a different, yet relatable theoretical basis for how higher education researchers and practitioners view the relationship between campus involvement and student development. For this reason, I chose to employ the self-authorship theory to study the involvement trends of African American college students.
More detail about the theory of self-authorship and its significance will be explained in the following section.

After the review of literature, I proposed a qualitative approach, in combination with survey research, to provide useful statistical data and feedback from African American college students. It was intended that this combined methodology would help me uncover new knowledge about the collegiate experiences of African American college students. Chapter 3 outlines my complete methodology for this study.

Robert Kegan’s Order of Consciousness Theory

Because Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2010) has numerous similarities to Kegan’s order of consciousness, I have provided an overview of Kegan’s early work, theory structure and relevance to student development. Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory was developed from several years of research and clinical observations (Kegan, 1980). In 1982, Kegan’s *The Evolving Self* was published. This book introduced six stages of cognitive development concentrated on the meaning-making process through the human lifespan. Kegan’s (1994) second book, *In Over Our Heads* (1994), presented a revised theory with five orders of consciousness in the context of real-life experiences.

*Theoretical Background*

The order of consciousness theory was influenced by the work of Jean Piaget (Kegan, 1982). Piaget’s cognitive development theory proposed cognitive development was a direct result of how an individual chose to respond to and understands their own environment. Though there are theoretical similarities between Piaget’s and Kegan’s work, Kegan sought to
evaluate the influential constructs of interpersonal and intrapersonal on cognitive development through the human lifespan (McCauley et al., 2006).

Introduction of Meaning Making/meaning Organization

Kegan’s (1980) order of consciousness is defined as a constructive development theory based on meaning-making and meaning systems with inclusive framework of both emotional and cognitive aspects. For the purpose of this study, meaning-making will be categorized as “an intrinsically cognitive activity, as well as, physical...a social...and survival activity...” (Kegan, 2000, p. 65) It is defined as a continuous, intentional act to adapt to the one’s changing environment. Therefore, it was assumed, the process of meaning construction held more significance than the end product of knowing. How an individual comes to understand, or know, has the greater value.

Kegan (1994) outlined three principles of meaning organization. Each principle has three domains—logical-cognitive, social-cognitive, and intrapersonal-affective. As the individual progresses through the domains of each principle of meaning organization, Kegan believed the individual will experience an increase in the competence for and complexity of meaning making. In essence, these principles have an interdependent existence based on the how an individual thinks, feels, and relates socially. At the root of each principle is a specific subject-object relationship.

Kegan maintained “meaning-making systems involve the developing person’s distinction between self and other or...between subject and object.” (Kegan, 1980, p. 374) The subject-object relationship within Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory is explained as follows:

Object refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize,
assimilate, or otherwise act upon... Subject” refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in. (Kegan, 1994, p. 32)

Object is an external element. This is means of how an individual makes sense of everything outside of self, including physical environments, other persons and specific happenings. “Object” can be experienced, or even facilitated, by self. It is possessed, or owned, by the individual. As one’s range for meaning construction increases, the terms of object become more complex and inclusive of elements of subject (Kegan, 1994).

“Subject” can be best described as the personality or characteristics of self. It is the very definition of self. Subject is the identity of self. It cannot be separated from self without causing internal dissonance. Though Kegan stated subject was absolute, it was also capable of evolution through new meaning construction and transformation (Kegan, 1994).

**Five Orders of Consciousness**

Kegan’s five orders of consciousness were inclusive of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal components. Within this theory, the individual was constantly seeking to understand, or make sense of, their environment, themselves, and others. Kegan described the orders as progressive and recognizable common patterns of meaning making. These orders were the individual’s composition of thoughts, emotions, and relation to other persons. Each order was more intricate than the preceding order because it now incorporated elements from its predecessor. Developmental movement was necessary for an individual to move into succeeding orders as they reach constructive limits of current order to continue to make sense of the environment, others, and self (McCauley et al., 2006). Movement through Kegan’s distinctive orders was non-regressive. The individual used reflective thought in the process of
meaning-making between orders as means of transformation. Movement through the five
orders of consciousness was also contingent on the support and challenge from one’s
surrounding environments (Berger, Hasegawa, Hammerman, & Kegan, 2007; Kegan, 2000).

Order 1

The impulsive self was best demonstrated in infancy (Kegan, 1982). Impulses and
environmental perceptions define the subject of self. The object is then the infant’s reflex
response and sensation control to the immediate interpretation of their surroundings. Within
Order 1, the “self...coordinates the reflexes through the perceptions and impulses...” (Kegan,
1999, p. 69) A general example of this type of behavior is seen in the infant’s response to
hunger. The infant first feels a hunger sensation. Then in an effort to control the hunger
sensation, the infant now has to produce a reflex response to get its needs met. An infant will
cry to get the attention of the caregiver. From this reflex the infant will find it is able to control
the impulse by means of the caregiver (Kegan, 1982).

Order 2

As infants mature into toddler ages and early childhood, the imperial self starts to
emerge. This is also known as the categorical self because the child’s developing ability to
organize and understand new things outside of self. In Order 2, the subject of self is
characterized by inner interests, needs, and wishes, while the object now becomes the
impulses and perceptions from Order 1. In other terms, the toddler’s interpretation of their
surroundings is now organized by self’s needs and interests instead of simple reflex responses.
There is a new sense of an individualistic perspective and an inner voice for the toddler. The
toddler is able to form more definite thoughts and feelings about things beyond self. This is

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often played out in a toddler’s expressions of likes, dislikes, wants and temporary attachments. However, at Order 2, the toddler does not recognize others’ needs, interests, or wants. For toddlers, relationship with others is based on the benefits from others (Kegan, 1982).

Order 3

Kegan’s (1982) Order 3 is known as the interpersonal self. As a cross categorical self, the subject is based on interpersonal relationships and mutual reciprocity. The subject terms from Order 2 become the objects of self in Order 3. The relationship of self-intertwined with others governs the needs, interests, and wants as the objects of self. In short, “there is no self-independent of the context of “of other people” (p. 96). The self’s perception and understanding of the surrounding environment is constructed on the beliefs of the identified community at large. However, in Order 3 Kegan suggested the adolescent is developing in abstract thought and inner feelings. The best example of this contradictory behavior is often seen in adolescents. They have the comprehension to make decisions for themselves, seek out new interests, and define their community. Yet, for these adolescents, their realities are shaped by their relationships with others outside of self. Affiliation with and acceptance into a desired group is more important than self’s needs or wishes.

Order 4

Order 4 describes the institutional self as self’s identity controlling self’s relationships with the surrounding environment. At this level, relationships with others move from being the subject of self to the object of self. These relational aspects no longer serve as the defining elements of self’s subject, but are moderated by self. In essence, the self has matured and can be involved in a relationship without being characterized by it. Within Order 4, relationships are
structured based on the functions of self, while the independence of self-strengthens. This is evident in the college experience of many young adults. These young adults identify themselves as college students, or undergraduates, or simply undergrads. They generally operate within the normalcy of college life. Each semester, as a part of the prescribed degree plan, these students enroll in various courses, buy books, and cram for exams on a regular. Their decisions and perceptions as college students are generally supported their new self-identity allowing these students to be engulfed in their own reality of college life (Kegan, 1982).

Order 5

Kegan’s Order 5 description of the interindividua self in *The Evolving Self* is almost idealistic usually not achieved until mid-to-late adulthood. The interindividual self encompasses elements from preceding orders of consciousness. It is a new self with an expansive aptitude for meaning making through continued transformation. Self maintains ownership of and authority over its identity and ideology. Though self can act as an administrator of knowledge and truth, it now comprehends the importance of seeking out information from others to further its own understanding. Unlike prior constitutions of self, the interindividual self is capable of interdependence and intimacy with others outside of self without being defined by the interpersonal influences. Adults who reach this level of consciousness can identify with others and other identity systems. Community with others is just as significant to this new identity as maintenance of self-autonomy. Kegan’s Order 5 describes a multidimensional, versatile being with a concrete sense of self and critical connection to others (Kegan, 1982).
**Summary**

Kegan’s order of consciousness theory (1982, 1994) is descriptive of 5 orders that emphasize gradually maturity in capacity for meaning making through cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal development. Within this constructive development theory, the individual is portrayed as active element in the developmental movement from one order to the next order. Once individuals are met with challenges and limits within their current order of thought, they are then required to adjust the self-perspective in order to continue make meaning of oneself, their environment and others outside of self.

**Self-Authorship Theory**

**Overview**

Kegan’s order of consciousness theory (1982, 1994) is the primary foundational work for Baxter Magolda self-authorship theory (2010). Like Kegan, Baxter Magolda is a self-proclaimed neo-Piagetian. The self-authorship theory is also considered constructive development theory. Both Kegan and Baxter Magolda approached the study of mean-making development, or decision-making, from a holistic and lifespan perspective.

Baxter Magolda has termed self-authorship as “the internal capacity to define one’s belief system, identity, and relationships” (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69). The theory of self-authorship emerged from Baxter Magolda’s longitudinal study on epistemological development of young adults. The original study began in 1986 at the University of Miami with 101 first-year students. Over the last two decades, the author has continued her extensive qualitative research to further expand the theory of self-authorship through follow-up interviews with several of original participants to document segments of adulthood (Kiteau, 2010). Much like
Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory, this theory has several elements and units. The following review Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001) is intended to explore each component of this theory as it relates to the process of meaning-making and higher education. The self-authorship theory is built theoretical dimensions, formulas, and education principles.

![Diagram of self-authorship theoretical dimensions](image)

*Figure 1. Self-authorship theoretical dimensions.*

Theoretical Dimensions

Epistemological Domain

Figure 1 is an illustration of the developmental dimensions outlined by Baxter Magolda in the theory of self-authorship. As presented, the each domain is largely individual, yet interdependent (Kiteau, 2010). Though labeled differently these domains are equivalent to Kegan’s three principles of meaning organization (Kegan, 1994). Within the epistemological domain, the author discussed how students acknowledge, construct and perceive knowledge. At the novice point of cognitive development, students were primarily influenced by external entities, such as parents, professors, and peers (King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, &
Knowledge is considered absolute and non-negotiable. However, from life experience and growth in maturity it is assumed students eventually “learn to analyze knowledge claims critically and to generate their own ideas...” as well as, develop “an internal set of beliefs that guide decision making...” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Hayes, 2009) I have seen this type of behavior mainly from the first-time, first year students. They want concrete concepts from their lectures. They struggle with abstract ideas, like ambiguity on class assignments or seeking out help from student services. On occasion, I have had second-year students exhibited the same behavior, especially those who were less engaged in the classroom setting and extracurricular activities.

Intrapersonal Domain

In the intrapersonal domain, Baxter Magolda addressed social development. Initially, students’ self-identity and belief system are strongly affected by perceived social norms and group assimilation (King et al., 2009). Individual differences are rejected in order to seamlessly merge with peer groups without contention, or dissonance. Then again, conflict is inevitable and often necessary. From these experiences, Baxter Magolda believed students cultivate their sense of self and establish their own set of values (King et al., 2009). Students expand their capacity “to register disagreement and to argue for their perspectives” and “express themselves in socially constructing knowledge with others” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Hayes, 2009). In other words, as students became more in confident in their capabilities, they became more likely to explore different campus activities and programs that cater to their interests. Here is where students began to acknowledge other perspectives outside of their own as means to expand their knowledge base.
Interpersonal Domain

The final dimension of self-authorship is categorized as interpersonal. It is focused on the student’s transition from complete dependence on social affirmation and group norms to self-affirmation and healthy, mutual relationships with others (King et al., 2009). From the start, students’ functionality with their social groups and formation of relationships with like persons served as principal sources of influence on self-identity. But, Baxter Magolda suggested through continued interaction students gained a greater sense of understanding of social differences and in turn, apparent influence of different social systems became more evident for students. When this happened, students increased their “capacity to engage in mutually interdependent relationships to assess others’ expertise” while still “standing up for one’s beliefs...” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Hayes, 2009). From my experience, this kind behavior is more prevalent among the upperclassmen students. They demonstrate this in their commitment to a specific major, but by not limiting their time or effort to only major specific activities. The diversity in a student’s friendships and relationships also attest to their growth within this domain of self-authorship.

Theoretical Processes

Formulas

Beyond Baxter Magolda’s theoretical dimensions, this theory also consists of a four phase non-linear process. Similar Kegan’s order of consciousness theory, the process of self-authorship involves developmental movement through apparent phases. However, the development of self-authorship through the outlined phases can be seen as a more circular movement than Kegan’s orders. The author identified these phases as formulas, crossroads,
clarifying, and internal foundation (King et al., 2009; Kiteau, 2010; Meszaros, 2007; Pizzolato, 2007). Formulas, as its name suggest outlined the time period when students were “dependent on others for answers, values, and identity” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Hayes, 2009). Students looked to others for guidance and approval. Their decision-making skills were limited. They viewed others’ past experiences as learning examples. External factors, such as rewards and consequences, have sound influence on students’ knowledge construction and social behavior. From a higher education viewpoint, many first-year and second-year students find themselves in this phase. Often times, these students’ decisions and choices are governed by parental influence, university faculty and staff insight, and peer interaction.

Crossroads

As students began to recognize perspectives outside of their realm, the author proposed they have moved into the crossroad phase. This second phase is marked by the students change in attitude toward accepting things at face value. According to Baxter Magolda (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Hayes, 2009), this is where student began to “to question authority, form views, and develop identity”. This was an exploratory period for students. Students became more aware of self in relation to building a personal belief system, identifying their personal and career goals, and accepting responsibility for their actions. Though students sought to form their definition of self, external factors still had an influence (King et al., 2009). As a student affairs professional, I began to counsel more first-year students during their second semester about their true interests, possible student organizations and different types of campus resources as they have entered this crossroads phase. I have also witnessed this exploratory phase among graduating seniors in preparation for life after college.
Clarifying

Moving on, ideally, students now have a greater sense of self with some ability to assess different perspectives from their own point of view. This is known as the clarifying, or becoming the author of one’s life, phase. Within this theme, Baxter Magolda stated students are “forming own sense of values and views to guide relationships and decisions” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Hayes, 2009). Becoming the author of one’s life is completely internally motivated and focused on the development of inner self for students. They have become more focused on their actions related to personal decision-making, fulfillment of academic and personal needs, and respect for others’ perspective (King et al., 2009). Ideally, I would like to see each one of the students I work with reach this phase before they graduate, but realistically this does not happen for all students. For those who do mature in the clarifying phase, they seem to exude more confidence in themselves and their decision-making.

Internal Foundation

Baxter Magolda (1998) reported on their own, college students rarely achieve the final stage of this self-authorship process by the time of graduation. However, as a result of life experiences and social interaction, the author believed self-authored status is reached when people have the capacity to live by a consistent set of internal values (Hodge, Baxter Magolda & Hayes, 2009). Baxter Magolda advocated a self-authored life required both a strong identity and interdependent relationships with others. Repeatedly, self-authorship is defined as a person’s means of making sense of their life experiences (Baxter Magolda, 1998). More specifically, a self-authored life involved the ability to critically assess external information,
establish one’s own internal judgment, and work with others in partnership to make wise decisions (Hodge, Magolda, & Haynes, 2009).

*Educational Principles*

Baxter Magolda (2001) offered yet another perspective of her continued longitudinal research on self-authorship. This book highlighted the insights and experiences of thirty-nine of the original one hundred undergraduates from the 1980’s study. Now graduate students, husbands, wives, career men and women, these individuals provided a reflective look at their college experiences, societal expectations, and relational development. From their interviews, Baxter Magolda has added more depth to her self-authoring theory specifically regarding higher education and educational practices. In addition to the previously discussed theoretical dimensions and developmental phases of the self-authorship theory, Baxter Magolda introduced three environmental assumptions and revisited three education principles necessary for transition through the self-authoring process.

Environmental Assumptions

From her longitudinal work, the author found the given environment is critical to the self-authoring process. She advocated, in order to promote self-authorship, the environment must consist of knowledge that was “complex and socially constructed” (p. xx). Complex in this context meant knowledge could be acquired through a variety of interpretations and uncertainty. Within the epistemological framework, individuals have multiple methods of meaning making that is inclusive of input from and interaction with others. The environment also must understand “self is central to knowledge construction” (p. xx). Like Kegan’s theory, Baxter Magolda (2001) explained how the individual’s self-constructed inner self was essential
the intrapersonal dimension aspects, such as their role in the classroom, workplace and relationships. Lastly, Baxter Magolda assumed to further the process of self-authorship, the environment has to invite the individual to share and construct knowledge among peers. This assumption is vital to the interpersonal dimension of this theory for because the individual must develop the ability to work interdependently with others in order to effectively transition through the phases of self-authorship.

Education Principles

Baxter Magolda’s (2001) first education principle emphasized “validating learners’ capacity to know” (p. xxi). The authors found that the more participants were actively involved in decision making practices, whether in the classroom or workplace, the more these individuals felt their input was valuable and accepted as a part of the knowledge construction. When the individual is genuinely encouraged to share personal perspectives and principles, he or she can feel more invested in the meaning making activity. The first education principle suggest a standard for educators, and employers alike, to allow individuals to openly seek new knowledge and expand their capacity for knowing. Baxter Magolda also documented, whether in an educational setting or the workplace environment, “situating learning in learners’ experience” as her second education principle (p. xxi). This principle brought attention to the need for participants to use their preexisting knowledge and past experiences to form new knowledge. This allows the individual to opportunity to use reflexive thinking, instead of neglecting their cognitive foundation. It is important for educators and employers realize the value in meeting individuals were they are cognitively and supporting their growth in all areas.
Lastly, Baxter Magolda (2001) indicated the process of “mutually constructing meaning” between participants and their educators, or employers, as her final education principle (p. xxi). She implied self-authorship can improve when individuals are treated as equals alongside their educators and employers in the meaning making process. In an environment where this mutually constructed knowledge is prevalent and encouraged, the author noted participants strengthened their ability to refine their perspectives, as well as, learn to better “negotiate with others” (p. xxi). According to principle three, there must be a collaborative effort among educators and employers with participants in order to continue to foster an environment of complex learning and understanding.

Current Literature

In 2010, Baxter Magolda published a volume of featured discussions concentrated on the cultural aspects of self-authorship. Beyond Baxter Magolda’s own work, this text was inclusive of several culturally driven research perspectives from notable educators and practitioners. Structured into four main parts with part I as a review of Baxter Magolda’s theoretical foundations of self-authorship, the remaining three parts provided supporting scholarly inquiries on the multicultural perspective, as well as, challenges related to current methodology, theory assessment, and theory structure. Part IV, as an added bonus, presented an interview with Robert Kegan that discussed the future of research on self-authorship.

Multicultural Perspective on Self-Authorship

Torres (2010) studied self-authorship and Latino/a ethnic identity. Like this current study, Torres’s efforts were intended to address the lack of research in a particular area. Specifically, she focused on the need for more research on the development of Latino/a
students during the college years and the influence of ethnic identity development on their college experience. Using the theoretical framework of both Baxter Magolda (2001) and Kegan (1994), Torres conducted a three-year longitudinal study “to consider the link between the processes in self-authorship and ethnic minorities” (p. 68).

In traditional fashion of self-authorship research, the researcher employed a qualitative approach in which she gathered data through individual interviews with small number of students over a three year period. Torres’ (2010) findings suggested student development can vary between stages of growth, regression, and stagnation as an effect of environmental influences. These findings also brought up new questions related the role of minority status in American culture and how this affects the meaning-making process of minority population (Baxter Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros 2010).

Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

Pizzolato (2010) discussed the theoretical and methodological challenges in understanding and assessing self-authorship from a cultural relevance perspective. She chose to revisit the question of ‘What is self-authorship’ and its theoretical dimensions within the context of her previously published work. Through this exploration process, Pizzolato admittedly found error in her previous work as it related to ethnic identity and development.

Pizzolato stated it was a significant fault to evade developmental cues within the interpersonal dimension because the self was influenced by culture. She suggested for the Asian and Asian American student participants within her previous work “the intrapersonal question—who am I?—and the interpersonal question [—how do I want to construct relationships with others—] are intertwined and reciprocal” (p. 194). Pizzolato argued much of
the current research on culturally diverse student groups has too often failed to assess the appropriate use of current theoretical concepts and constructs, which in turn hinders our scholastic gain in those areas.

Evolution of Self-Authorship

Part IV in *Development and Assessment*, Kegan and Baxter Magolda acknowledged the limitations of current literature with regard to self-authorship. Both authors encouraged the expansion of research on its relevancy across cultural contexts and broader scholarly arenas. Baxter Magolda and Kegan agreed there is more to be explored in influential roles of both culture and personal development in the context of self-authorship. In order to fully understand self-authorship from a culturally diverse perspective, Baxter Magolda urged further study of “…how people construct experience and meaning-making in the cultural context…” (2010, p. 268). Both researchers believed that there is untapped value in the broadening the understanding of self-authorship. However, they both acknowledged much of the current literature on self-authorship is concentrated in the exploration of the epistemological dimension. As the applicability of self-authorship expands across other fields of interest, both researchers seemed to offer a charge for new research that is comprehensive of all dimensions of self-authorship and support for specific inquiries focused on the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions.

Conclusion

From thorough discussion and theoretical comparison of Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory (1994) and Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001) much can be assumed about the development of meaning-making across lifespan. Both of these constructive
development theories provide an illustration of progressive, gradual movement through a series of phases, or identifiable sets of behavior, to achieve a self-authored life (McCauley et al., 2006; King et al., 2009; Kiteau, 2010; Meszaros, 2007; Pizzolato, 2007). Unlike their predecessor Piaget (1982), Kegan and Baxter Magolda constructed their theories to have more fluid movement rather than a single-direction linear design. However, as neo-Piagetian, both authors believed a person’s development of meaning-making capacity is dependent upon one’s self perspective, environmental support, and interaction with others.

I chose Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory (1994) and Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001) to explore African American college student involvement because it goes beyond what has previously published. Conceptually, these theories can explain student development from different dimensions. Current literature on the African American college student experience is lacking in the diversity of theoretical foundations and is limited to a chosen few theories like Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement and Tinto’s (1975) student integration model of attrition. I believe the usage of Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001) will add new knowledge about the involvement trends of African American college students. The self-authorship theory offers a unique approach to examining involvement, by not only taking in account what these students are involved in, but also why these students made to the choice to get involved on- and off-campus.

As I explore the African American college student experience through the lens of Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001), I want to gain a better understanding of the possible connection between student involvement and the student’s meaning-making capabilities. This study will address specific ethnic cultural differences in the meaning-making process. I want to
document any differences in transitional movement through Baxter Magolda’s theoretical
dimensions among African American college students. It is my hope to add new knowledge
about the African American college student experience as related to involvement, self-
authorship, and collegiate success.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study was to expand the current knowledge about the African American undergraduate experience as it relates to the students’ co-curricular involvement. This study took an exploratory look at involvement and self-authoring process within a sample of African American college students at the selected research site. Though similar involvement studies chose to use more traditional student development theories, I believe there was relevance in the development of self-authorship and student involvement (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004; Museus, 2008). Unlike much of the current research on self-authorship, this study focused on the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the self-authorship instead of the traditional epistemological domain (Baxter Magolda, 2001; King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, & Lindsay, 2009; Baxter Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros, 2010).

Dissimilar to the majority of scholarly studies on student involvement and self-authorship, I utilized a qualitative approach, with complementary survey research, to explore the undocumented phenomenon of involvement in co-curricular activities and the self-authoring process within an African American college student sample at a single science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] focused university. I hoped to gain more insight on the college experience of African American students from their perspective through reflective discussion and descriptive statistics.
Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach in conjunction with survey research to investigate the connection between student involvement and the development of meaning-making capabilities within an African American college student sample at the research site. This methodology helped present a fuller scope of the stated research problem. The research design allowed the researcher to first collect and review the survey research data. Then the researcher completed two focus group discussion sessions to better explain the results of the survey research. Collectively, related previous research has suggested a different methodology was necessary to better understand African American college student involvement experiences and how this involvement is instrumental in their development (Baker, 2007; Flowers 2004; Guiffrida, 2004).

The survey research and focus group interviews were interconnected to provide a holistic view of the research problem. The benefit of this approach was twofold. The survey report was designed to illustrate the student’s degree of involvement in co-curricular activities and the characteristics of self-authorship. The focus group interviews were constructed to further explain the descriptive statistics through exploring the thoughts and opinions of the student participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

As Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) suggested, I conducted a pilot phase to test the design quality and the ability of the student participants to relate to both research measurement tools. It was to ensure both instruments were comprehensible to the targeted student population. The pilot phase was completed within a one week timeframe. The end goal of the pilot phase was to create research instruments that yielded authentic and reliable findings.
For the survey research, the researcher-developed survey was created in and maintained through an online survey platform. Information gathered during this period was analyzed to determine potential trends and patterns among the completed surveys. The survey research phase was completed within a three week timeframe. The research investigation also consisted of two independent focus groups. The focus groups took place over a two-week period. Responses from both sessions were examined to show any commonalities within discourse and reoccurring themes among student participants. The results of the focus groups were then compared to statistical data results from the survey instrument.

Sample Overview

Institution

Carnegie Foundation classified the research site as medium selective, full-time four year university (2012). Of all applicants applied, this institution only admitted about 53% in a given admission cycle. Located in the North Texas region, this public state university offered a combined 130 undergraduate and graduate degrees. Though considered majority undergraduate, this institution has comprehensive doctoral programs and a strong research emphasis at all levels (Carnegie Foundation, 2012; College Portrait, 2012). Popular undergraduate degrees included biology, accounting, arts and technology, and electrical engineering. As a traditional four-year institution, the university was considered a residential campus. However, only about 24% of undergraduates lived in campus housing or residence halls during the 2013-2014 school year (College Portrait, 2012).

Study Population

The student population was estimated at 19,000 with undergraduates making up 61% of
the total numbers (College Portrait, 2012). Continuing the university’s tradition of academic excellence and rigor, 1140 was the average SAT score for the entering freshmen class. Outside of Texas residents, the university’s largest numbers of recruits were from across the world, including China and India. Asian American and International students accounted for 39% while Anglo, or White, American students accounted for a comparable 38% of the total student population. African American students made up about 5% of the university’s undergraduate and graduate student pool (College Portrait, 2012).

Participants

The targeted student population for this research study was intended to be self-identified African American undergraduates who were currently enrolled at the research site. According to the university’s Office of Strategic Planning and Analysis, there were approximately seven hundred African American undergraduate students enrolled for the 2013-14 school year. Contact information for the targeted student population was available upon request, with permission from the university’s Institutional Research Office and Office of Enrollment Services. As staff member at the selected research site, I was required to complete annual compliance training. Therefore, I am fully aware of the institution’s confidential policies and FERPA regulations. All student data was encrypted and saved to the university’s secure network.

For the survey research, I projected a 50%-70% response rate from the targeted population, equates to approximately 350-500 completed surveys (Groves, 2006). Table 1 offers a depiction of the student participants who completed the online Student Involvement Survey. Of the estimated 730 contact emails sent out, 49 eligible students completed the survey. The
sample pool consisted of both male and female students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, academic interests, and classifications.

Table 1

Survey Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>Parental Annual Salary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>≤ 25,000K</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26,000-40,000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td></td>
<td>41,000-60,000</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>61,000-80,000</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>81,000K</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Residential Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Sem. Course Load</td>
<td></td>
<td>Off-campus</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12hrs or less</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13hrs-15hrs</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16hrs and more</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the focus group discussion sessions, it was imperative to have a diverse sample of the African American student participants. It was necessary for the groups’ participants to bring varying involvement tendencies and demographics factors to the discussion table. For the intent of this study, student participants were purposefully selected from the pool of completed surveys to ensure the students were at least minimally familiar with the purpose of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

A total of twenty eligible students from the completed survey pool were sent an e-mail invitation to participate in the follow-up focus group sessions based on their survey feedback. Their involvement activity, responses to the selected HERI questions, and demographic questions were illustrative of a board information spectrum. Included in the original twenty invitations were students who indicated, at the end of the survey, their interest in participating
in the focus group follow-up sessions. Based on availability, fifteen students accepted the invitation to participate in either one of the two planned focus group sessions.

The first focus group session consisted of a purposeful sample of seven African American male and female undergraduate students. The second focus group consisted of a purposeful sample of eight eligible African American male and female students. There were a total of ten female student participants and five male participants. Four of the 15 student participants were transfer students from either the local community colleges or another Texas four-year university.

Table 2

*Focus Group Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement Activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM Related Majors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Student Affinity Group</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-STEM Related Majors</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Greek-lettered Organization</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student Volunteerism Events</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Profit Organization</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Faith-based Entities</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Residential Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Off-campus</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

*Survey*

Because I was exploring an undocumented phenomenon, it was important this survey elicited the intended data from the student participants. The survey instrument for this study was created to explore the potential link between student involvement and the development of characteristics of self-authorship among the sample population. It was designed to gather
information about the involvement of the targeted sample group in co-curricular activities, as well as, to help identify specific characteristics of self-authorship with in the interpersonal and intrapersonal theoretical dimensions. In order to provide a more complete description of the sample population, the research survey also included a full range of demographic information questions.

Similar to the nationally recognized College Student Experiences Questionnaire [CSEQ] (Pace & Kuh, 1998), this survey was a closed-form, Likert scale tool. As a Likert scale survey, each response choice had a numerical value for the survey research stage to quantify the information received. Unlike the extensive College Student Experiences Questionnaire, the content of the survey was specifically tailored to this study’s objectives to investigate the students’ degree of involvement and development of characteristics of self-authorship.

Within the Likert scale format, each answer choice option was assigned a numerical value based on the theoretical processes and expected progression with the meaning-making constructs (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). In essence, the answer options correlated with one of the self-authorship four theoretical processes—formula, crossroads, clarifying, and internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Answer choices options related to the formula stage had a numerical value of 1 and the value maxed out at 4 for answer choices correlated with the final stage of internal foundation.

**HERI Question Selection**

Much of the research related to self-authorship employed a strictly qualitative methodology (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As of current, there was not a standardized instrument available for use to evaluate the dimensions and phases of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda,
Creamer, & Meszaros, 2010). Rather than attempting to construct such a tool of measurement, this current study opted to explore the development of exclusive characteristics of self-authorship by utilizing survey items from a recognized, reliable national survey. The survey tool for this study incorporated four questions, with measurement scales from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) College Senior Survey. It was decided to use items from this particular survey because it was a comprehensive assessment of the collegiate experience, which addressed student involvement, college satisfaction, and student values among other things.

In an attempt to explore into the possible connection between the degree of involvement and the development of self-authorship among African American undergraduate students, the survey featured questions relevant to the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001). These types of questions were crafted to inquire about how involvement in the pre-described activities aid and/or challenge individuality, personal sense of self, maintenance of peer relationships, and independent decision-making, which are all common themes classified by the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions.

**Focus Groups**

The focus group sessions served as the primary research tool for this study. The focus group questions were designed to further explain the possible connection between student involvement factors and the development of characteristics of self-authorship within a sample of African American undergraduate students at a STEM-focused university. Information gathered from each of the focus group sessions was later analyzed and integrated with survey data to fully review the involvement experiences, as well as, its relationship to the self-
authoring process. Again, it was crucial to develop an interview instrument that was most beneficial to this study's purpose (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

From Krueger’s (2002) recommendations for focus groups, I created different types of questions to guide the conversation, such as introductory questions, transition questions and ending questions. The focus group interviews were meant to expound upon the data collected from the survey as a part of an interpretative research approach. However, I understood the importance of flexibility within the interview structure to address any reoccurring themes or topics among participants. In addition to involvement experiences, I crafted questions to specifically look at the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the self-authorship.

To support the data collected during the survey research stage, I hosted two focus group sessions comprised of fifteen African American undergraduate students attending classes at the research site (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Eliot & Associates, 2005; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). As Eliot and Associates (2005) recommended, I developed twelve, open-ended interview questions for my two semi-structured, focus group sessions. The interview questions were designed to gain more insight of participants’ perspective of campus activities, community involvement, and personal development.

The selection of the focus group participants was critical within this research design. The focus group phase was necessary to delve into the varying attitudes and experiences related to student involvement and self-authorship within the sample population of college students as identified from the survey research. In order to secure the study’s integrity and thoroughness, it was necessary to conduct two independent, yet uniform, interview sessions.
The pilot survey stage was to evaluate the survey’s format and language usage. A convenience sample of three African American students, were selected from the research site (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Eliot & Associates, 2005; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). These participants were briefed on the study’s purpose, methods, and instructions and were given the opportunity to make suggestions and recommendations. Although the data collection was completely online, this group of students received a paper version of the instrument to critique. All recommendations were considered before a final survey was distributed to the targeted population.

Once the final survey was approved by the governing institutional research boards, a pre-contact, introductory e-mail was sent to all currently enrolled African American undergraduate students at the selected higher education institution. Within seven business days, the same students received an explanatory e-mail with the survey link included in the body. To increase the overall response rate among the targeted population, I offered two $50.00 gift card incentives from the local university bookstore. However, because of the small response rate, the gift cards were never distributed.

Survey Distribution

An online survey platform was used to collect and maintain all survey data. I developed a weekly reminder schedule to encourage participation among the targeted population for the purpose of receiving a minimally acceptable 50% response rate, or 350 completed responses (Groves, 2006). Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) recommended three periodical follow ups with non-
respondents to increase response rates. The response action was minimal even with the scheduled reminders and possible incentives. This stage lasted three weeks.

Pilot Focus Group Session

As a member check, I asked a small, convenience sample of three currently-enrolled African American undergraduate students to critique the focus group questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). During the pilot qualitative phase, I provided an overview of this study’s purpose and expectations to the students before any suggestions or recommendations are made. Unlike the pilot survey test, modifications to format structure, language usage, and material content was more time consuming in order to ensure the highest level of objectivity. Although for the official focus group sessions participants did not receive a copy of the questions, for the pilot phase the students received copies to record their edits and questions. The student feedback was taken into consideration before the formal focus group sessions were scheduled.

Formal Focus Group Sessions

Both formal focus group sessions were held on the host campus site during the 2013-14 academic year. Each session lasted approximately two hours. This time block was inclusive of the overview of the study, a review of institutional research guidelines, participant introductions and a question and answer segment (Eliot & Associates, 2005). The participants for focus group interviews were selected from the survey respondents’ pool (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Therefore, I reviewed the pool of completed surveys to identify and contact potential student participants based on variability of the responses. The study’s survey also featured an option for students to self-nominate for the focus group interviews. All self-nominations were taken into consideration. Overall, the focus group participants came from
the completed survey pool and consisted of students with various levels of involvement, commitment, and self-authorship development as indicated on their survey (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Eliot & Associates, 2005). A professional colleague and I served moderators for both sessions. Audio from both sessions was recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

Interpretative Analysis

Survey

Data collected from the survey provided demographic information from participants, but, more importantly, it generated information related to their involvement activity and degree of involvement co-curricular activities. The survey explored the degree of involvement of African American college students in co-curricular activities. Therefore, this section of the survey focused on gathering information related to the students’ involvement and degrees of involvement in the following co-curricular activities on and off-campus: student affinity groups, Greek-lettered organizations, student volunteerism projects, non-profit organizations and faith-based entities and organizations. These five categories were representative of the majority of activities and organization available at the research site. Responses from this section gave vital insight to where and how African American undergraduates are getting involved in co-curricular activities.

The survey was also intended to collect specific background information and descriptive data for all participants. Demographic information collected from the survey, such as gender, age, residential status (on-campus or commuter) and academic interest/major (and/or minor), assisted to create a portrait of a sample of African American undergraduate students at this single, STEM-focused university. Other background information included current cumulative
grade point average, expected graduation date, parental education level and self and parental socioeconomic status.

Focus Groups

The data analysis phase of the focus group interview material involved an extensive process. From Bloomberg and Volpe’s (2012) format, I used a four-step process to effectively and efficiently analyze material from both focus group sessions. I first organized the focus group material by interview questions and generated general categories from the students’ commentary. For the final two steps, I identified recurring patterns among the students’ interview responses and later developed the final classification labels from the relevant material.

Organization of the Data

I transcribed both interview sessions verbatim. The transcriptions included nonverbal communication cues such as laughter, intentional silence, and interruptions, to ensure I did not miss any context cues interpretations. To better familiarize myself with the interview transcripts, I reviewed the audio recordings with the completed transcripts.

Generation of Categories

From the completed interview transcripts, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) recommended to create summaries for each participant and assign individual identifiers to be used through the remainder of the study. The student summaries were a valuable tool while working through the entire inquiry process. They were used as a member-checking instrument, as well. Focus group participants were asked to review their feedback and my interpretation of the discussion material to ensure the integrity of the study. In the process of generating categories, I isolated
the big ideas, or major themes, from the complied transcripts. This allowed me to initially characterize any words or word phrases found throughout the interview materials. These categories were then compared to the study’s purpose and research questions to determine relevance.

**Identification of Patterns**

Beyond generating categories of the big ideas and general themes, I had to distinguish between what was and what was not valuable to the overall purpose of the current study. It was necessary to establish initial broad units of categories as a part of the coding process of the interview data based on recurring, relevant themes. These classifications were fluid and flexible in order to consistently correlate to the interview materials. During this process, it was crucial to remain unbiased and objective in labeling the categories, as well as, in processing passages from the interview transcripts.

**Classification of Themes**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) offered several best practices in handling data and information during this phase. I identified my final classification labels through the coding process. With these labels, I developed data summary instrument to align focus group interview materials with research questions. Concurrently, I had to begin to categorize relevant statements from the students’ responses in summary instrument in support of the final classification labels. Also, I maintained a research journal. Journaling assisted me in documenting my thoughts about the interview materials read and the coding process.
Role of the Researcher

As a student affairs professional, I have almost nine years of experience in multicultural affairs. While conducting this research, I was also working with students in my professional role. In addition, I have served as an instructor the first-year experience course, as a cultural student organization campus advisor, and as a diversity scholarship coordinator. A major part of my job duties have included planning and implementing recruitment and retention programming specifically targeting traditionally underrepresented minority students at the research site, which is African American and Hispanic students. Working closely with African American students has remained a significant part of my daily tasks and continuous projects.

For the purpose of this study, I guarded against potential bias by the creation and distribution of the survey instrument by using primarily university email to gather student responses. Social media posts were limited and controlled by the student organization’s social media committee chair. The focus group sessions required more creativity in removing bias and influence. For the first session, I served as the moderator for the group participants. The students seemed to speak freely about their involvement experiences. However, it was a personal challenge not to add to the conversation by mentioning events and activities that the students had not first talked about or mentioned. In recognition of this challenge, I asked a recent graduate to moderate the second session. This graduate had research experience and similar research interests. She was briefed on the purpose of the study and focus group guidelines.
Ethical Considerations

For this project to move forward, it required the approval from the institutional review board (IRB) of both the research site and the degree-granting institution. Although the processes were similar, IRB departments had different standards and policies to follow in order to receive final approval. As the researcher, I wanted to ensure all participants understood their rights as participants and knew at any time they could opt out of completing the survey or sitting through the full focus group sessions. With the survey the students were first informed about their right to withdraw from the survey at any time and then they were asked for their electronic participation consent. The focus group interviews required more explanation and intentionality with the consent. I wanted to ensure that the students knew they were in a safe space to speak, but they also had the freedom to withdraw from the discussion at any point during the session.

The combined design model allowed for the triangulation of data collection through survey research and focus group interviews. This data collection process supported the credibility of the study. From a dependability perspective, the research design also outlined a clear and concise plan of action to follow and promoted the transferability of the data collection processes by limiting the researcher’s subjectivity and bias.

Delimitations/Limitations

The current study was limited to eligible African American undergraduate students at a single STEM-focused university in the North Texas area. In response to the lack of a standardized, quantitative, survey tool to measure the development of self-authorship, the participating students completed a researcher-developed survey. The predicted limitations
included, but were not limited to, the completely voluntary nature of the survey research, self-disclosure during the focus group interview sessions, and low survey response rate.

Conclusion

Through the qualitative design model I explored the connection between student involvement and the self-authoring process within a sample of African American college students at a STEM-focused university. I used an online survey to assess the students’ involvement patterns, campus commitment, and perception of college life. The focus groups provided an opportunity for student participants to engage in reflective conversation about their involvement and various collegiate experiences. The research design was a definite benefit in explaining the statistical output and qualitative material.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Overview of Study

Introduction

The intent of this present study was to explore the self-authoring process and degrees of involvement within an African American college student sample at a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] focused university. Specifically, I wanted to examine the potential connection between involvement in co-curricular activities and the development of characteristics of self-authorship within this particular student population. Through this investigation of the collegiate experience of African American college students enrolled at a STEM-focused institution, I hoped to document a new phenomenon within the research avenues related to student involvement, self-authorship, and African American college students (Baker, 2008; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004; Museus, 2008)

Review of Research Questions

The current study was constructed on the foundation of three principle research questions to fulfill the previously outlined qualitative approach. In an effort to explain the potential connection between student involvement and self-authorship, each question has a designated purpose. Research question 1 was crafted as a means to identify what and how African American students are involved in activities at a STEM-focused university. Research question 2 was designed to comprehend the potential connection between the student’s involvement and development of characteristics of self-authorship. Lastly, research question 3
was meant to speak to the quantitative and qualitative data taken together. Collectively, these research questions were constructed to create greater illustration of the African American student experience at a STEM-focused university. Survey results were reported in parallel to the research questions. However, qualitative findings were outlined based on major recurring themes.

RQ1. What is the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities within an African American undergraduate student sample at a STEM-focused university?

RQ2. What is the connection between the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities and development of characteristics of self-authorship within an African American college student sample at a STEM-focused university?

RQ3. How does involvement activity explain the characteristics of self-authorship among these African American undergraduate students?

Summary of Methodology

In order to present a thorough examination of the research problem, it was necessary to utilize flexible methodology of data collection and interpretation. The focus group interviews were purposed to further explain and provide support of the survey research data. As a part of the survey research phase, all eligible students received the researcher-created Student Involvement Survey via their university email. Over a three-week period the students received three reminder emails and various social media posts. Two focus groups sessions were hosted at the selected site once the survey period was complete. For validity purposes, it was necessary to hold two independent sessions for a greater variety in the opinion of the students.

Survey Research Instrument

Characteristics of Self-Authorship

As previously discussed, this study concentrated on student involvement and the
development of characteristics of self-authorship within its interpersonal and intrapersonal
dimensions. The interpersonal domain is defined by a person’s ability to transition from
complete dependence on social group norms to the capacity for maintaining mutual
relationships with social groups, and individuals. Under the intrapersonal domain, it is expected
for the individual to learn how to cultivate a better sense of self and develop personal values
(Baxter Magolda, 2001; King, Baxter Magolda, Barber, Brown, & Lindsay, 2009; Baxter Magolda,
Creamer, & Meszaros, 2010).

It was critical to select questions from the HERI College Senior Survey that addressed
both identified dimensions, while supporting the purpose of this research. Survey question 5
invited students to share about their social interaction with friends, time spent within student
organizations, and social media habits based on time. Survey question 6 allowed students to
rate their satisfaction with specific areas of their collegiate experience. Lastly, survey question 7
solicited the students’ perspective of self in relation to the campus community at large. Each of
these questions dealt with either how the student wanted to establish relationships with others
or the student’s perception of self as it relates to the campus culture and campus involvement.

**SQ5.** During the past year, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the
following activities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Less than 1 hour</th>
<th>1-2</th>
<th>3-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>16-20</th>
<th>Over 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Clubs/Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Online Social Networks   |      |                  |     |     |      |       |       |         | (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
**SQ6. Please rate your satisfaction with your college in each area:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of campus social activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for the expression of diverse belief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Ethnic diversity of the student body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall college experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SQ7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have felt discriminated against at this institution because of my race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel valued at this institution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am interested in seeking information about current social and political issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel a sense of belonging to this campus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Online Platform**

As noted in the chapter 3, the quantitative measurement for this current project was completely housed through the research site’s Qualtrics platform. The survey was constructed, distributed and analyzed through this software system. By utilizing the university’s Qualtrics system, only currently enrolled, eligible African American undergraduate students had access to the survey via an emailed link. All collected survey data remained password protected and was only accessible to researcher through a secured university login.

**Formal Focus Group Discussion Sessions**

**Explanatory of Quantitative Measures**

This investigation was designed for the qualitative methods to provide complimentary,
in-depth information about the statistical data gathered from the Student Involvement Survey about the African American undergraduate experience in co-curricular activities. The full list of the focus group interview questions have been provided in Appendix A.

To begin with, the survey asked students to report what type of activities they were involved in and how exactly they were involved. So for the focus group questions, it was important to ask questions that would help the researcher gain a greater sense of why these students chose to get involved, their involvement tendencies, and their perspective of their peers’ involvement.

The set of statements related to how the students spent their time per week participating in social activities was supplemented up by interview questions that asked students to share their most rewarding involvement activities and identify challenges of getting involved from their point of view. The survey’s satisfaction statements were further supported the interview questions about how has being involved helped the students overcome hardship and experience something new and profound. Lastly, the set of statements dedicated to the campus climate from the survey were directly related to the interview question about the story, or legacy, the students hoped to tell about their overall college life.

*Characteristics of Self-Authorship*

Much of the significance of this research rested on the ability to clearly identify perceived characteristics of self-authorship through intentional and intrusive inquiry. Therefore, the interview questions for the focus group sessions were devised to specifically address both interpersonal and intrapersonal elements of the self-authorship theory as it related student involvement. As previously discussed in other chapters, this study was different from its
predecessors because it took aim at the interpersonal and intrapersonal constructs of the given theory instead of the cognitive development angle. Each of the focus group questions was on concentrated around one of the following questions, either “How do I want to form relationships with people?” or “Who am I?”

Survey Summary

Survey Overview

As approved by the necessary governing research entities, the quantitative instrument is featured in Appendix A. It was estimated that the survey would take student participants approximately five to seven minutes to complete. All qualified African American undergraduate students at the designated research site received an introductory email from that contained a link to the Student Involvement Survey through Qualtrics. An exit question was included with in the research survey tool to eliminate any non-African American undergraduate student responses to ensure only eligible answers were a part of the final summary report. Of the over 730 possible responses solicited, 49 surveys were completed in their entirety and were used for the survey summary report. The completed surveys were inclusive of variations across demographics, involvement ranges, involvement levels and perceived benefits of involvement.

Degree of Involvement

According the completed surveys, African American students at the research site were active participants in several types of students organizations, campus happenings and off-campus commitments. Approximately 71% of the students who completed the Student Involvement Survey reported they were satisfied with the availability of campus social activities. Students were given the option to select multiple involvement activities. The majority
of the students’ responses indicated a heavy involvement in student affinity groups and student volunteerism events. Of the total responses, the majority of students reported they were either involved in student affinity groups like the Black Student Alliance and the National Society of Black Engineers or student volunteerism events like National Day of Service or Senior Give Back Day.

Table 3

*Degree of Involvement Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Degree of Involvement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Affinity Groups</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Elected Officer</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Leadership Position</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General Member</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek-lettered Organizations</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Elected Officer</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Leadership Position</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General Member</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Volunteerism Events</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Elected Officer</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Leadership Position</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General Member</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit Organizations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Elected Officer</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Leadership Position</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General Member</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based Entities</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Elected Officer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Leadership Position</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>General Member</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey responders also had the opportunity to share information about their roles within the identified involvement activities by choosing whether they were elected officers,
general members or other leadership positions. The survey results suggested that most of the students were general members, with only 28% indicating they held an elected officer position. In addition, very few students identified themselves as holding leadership positions, such as committee chairs or appointed senate representatives.

*Characteristics of Self-Authorship*

The Student Involvement Survey included three sets of questions derived from the Higher Education Research Institute’s College Senior Survey. This different set of questions was expected to shed light on the development of characteristics of self-authorship among African American undergraduate students at the designated higher education institution. The first set of questions gave insight to how students spend their time interacting with friends through whether social media, student organizations, or face-to-face. The second set of statements allowed students to speak to their satisfaction with different facets of campus life. The final set of statements inquired about the students’ thoughts about the campus climate.

From the first set of questions, the responses established that the majority of the students spent a weekly average of zero to fifteen hours socializing with friends. About 81% indicated they spent one to ten hours a week participating with in student organization related activities. Taking a closer look, 38% reported to spend at least three to five hours weekly participating in student organization activities, meetings, or events. The results also showed that about 28% of the students spent another three to five per week utilizing social networks, like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to interface with friends. Overall, it seemed these students spent a reasonable amount of their time during the week socializing and interacting with friends.
Table 4

**Time Spent Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Less than 1 hour</th>
<th>1-2hrs</th>
<th>3-5hrs</th>
<th>6-10hrs</th>
<th>11-15hrs</th>
<th>16-20hrs</th>
<th>Over 20hrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socializing with Friends</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Clubs/Groups</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results from the second set of statements provided an illustration of the students’ satisfaction with campus activities, diversity on campus, and their college experience. Over 70% of the students said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the availability of social activities on their campus. The students’ responses signified a general approval of the diverse student body and respect for the expression of diverse principles. Ninety-three percent of the students reported they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their collegiate experience thus far.

The final set of statements allowed the students to share their experience within the campus climate. Almost 90% of the students acknowledged they had not felt discriminated against in any form at the research site. The responses within this set of statements suggested
students had developed a sense of belonging to their institution and genuinely felt valued as a student at the designated university. Approximately 79% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a sense of belonging to their respective school, while about 87% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt valued.

Table 5

*Satisfaction Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Availability of campus social activities</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>尊重 for the expression of diverse belief</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Ethnic diversity of the student body</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall college experience</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

*Campus Climate Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have felt discriminated against at this institution because of my race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel valued at this institution</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am interested in seeking information about current social and political issues</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel a sense of belonging to this campus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus Group Interviews

*Focus Group Overview*

As outlined in chapter 3, for this study, there were two individual focus group sessions
hosted at the research site with a total of 15 students. Focus group participants were a sample of the African American student population from the selected research site. The groups included undergraduate students with different majors, involvement activities, and family backgrounds. Both interview sessions were held during the fall semester. Each lasted approximately two hours, which was inclusive of an overview of the study, dinner, discussion, and debrief.

As outlined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), the qualitative analysis was a four-step procedure. The data was first organized by the designated interview questions. The categories were identified as the students’ individual responses. Repeated statements or similar phrases were classified as patterns. The final classification themes were derived from the interpretation of the quoted student statements.

Organization of Qualitative Data

Separately, each session’s recordings were transcribed and all responses were organized by the corresponding interview question. Once completely transcribed, the feedback data was combined into one comprehensive document. It was important for analysis purposes to have the ability to generalize student responses from both focus group sessions as a whole rather than put the emphasis on individual feedback. For member checking purposes, the transcribed document was then critiqued by two previous participants individually for content and clarity (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). The twelve focus group questions were created in relation to the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the self-authorship theory as outlined by Baxter Magolda (2001). This is explained further in chapter 5’s discussion.
Generation of Categories

The students’ various responses and comments served as the categories. Though there were a total of 15 student participants from both focus group sessions, on average each question generated feedback from six to eight students. Of the 12 questions, two questions invoked responses from ten students. A different pair of questions managed to solicit feedback from nine students. Two of the 12 questions maxed out with a total of 12 student interview answers. Interestingly, one of these questions was the last question that spoke to what kind of story, or legacy, did these students want to tell about their collegiate experience.

Identification of Patterns

Data gathered from both focus group sessions offered valuable insight into the African American undergraduate experience at a STEM-focused university. The students’ commentary was extensive and rich with details about their involvement activities and tendencies. From the transcribed interviews, there were identifiable patterns in the students’ responses. The full interview data was reduced down to a more manageable text to include the simplified main points for each student response under each interview question category. These simplified statements were the highlights of the conversation. Within the highlighted comments, patterns of commonalities in experiences among the student participants began to appear. The patterns of common concerns, experiences and issues served as the foundation from the final classification themes.

Classification of Final Themes

There were four major, repetitive themes, interpreted from the provided focus group discussion. Connection, diverse, or new, experiences, membership in student organizations,
and volunteerism, or service projects were the most repeated classification labels from the identified patterns within the student feedback and discussion. These classification labels had the highest frequency of the almost 40 themes established from the highlighted focus group text.

**Connection**

Throughout the entirety of the focus group interviews, connection was a key topic of the discussion among the students as they described their involvement on- and off-campus. When asked about their motivation to get involved in either on- or off-campus activities, the students had much to say in this regards. One of the non-traditional, veteran student participants shared his thoughts stating:

I just wanted to ...experience the college life... I involve[d] myself as much as I could to assist any way that I could...So, doing that my first year, I was able to make some connections with people and I still, you know, keep in contact with them.

There were a few student athletics in the focus groups; and they had a different perspective on getting involved in on-campus activities. Unlike other students, they sought out team sports as a means form connections with other students. One mentioned, “The reason why I got involved was because I didn’t know anybody. So, I started out with my passion sport and through that I met a lot of people...” Another other student athletic offered her thoughts saying, “I got involved because...I was passionate about soccer and...I wanted to share that same passion with the other girls on my team.”

Many of the students spoke about their connection to their peers and supportive staff members through organizations, such the Black Student Alliance and the Multicultural Center.
A senior ATEC female student, who was also a part-time student employee in the Multicultural Center, had this to add to the conversation:

A lot of my involvement comes from the Multicultural Center and it has helped me get connected with students that are not in my major, which has been great because there are so many different students here and I’ve made a lot of different friends that way...that aren’t all doing the same exact things that I’m doing.

A few of the students mentioned specific programming offered through the Multicultural Center and the impact those programs have had on their outlook. During the fall semester, in partnership with other university departments, the Multicultural Center hosted 40 students from the Houston-area during a university preview day event. One of the student volunteers from that event shared her feedback about this event:

I did the [preview] college day with them it was really rewarding to me. I actually still kept in contact with two of the high school kids who were there. And, I know that one of them has applied here for sure. It was just rewarding to know that we did get across to these kids not only as far as talking our school, but talking about our college experiences.

Also during the fall semester, the Multicultural Center began a new initiative working specifically with African American young men and women on campus through smaller programming efforts. One of the female students who participated in that specialty program shared her personal insight:

The girls’ night out retreat hosted by the Multicultural Center...It was a way for me to really connect with some young women on campus that I had seen previously but didn’t really know on a deeper level. It was a way for me to get in touch with some things that I really hadn’t wanted to face about myself, but that would bring a better understanding and a better productivity for me personally.

The importance of connection seemed to be a major success factor for the transfer students who were represented in both focus group sessions. One of the STEM-major, junior
female students summed up this idea in her comment related to overcoming hardships through involvement:

But it wasn’t until I came to UTD, sought out resources, and got involved in other things, that’s when I got positive feedback from people around me...telling me that I could do it and I had everything I needed to do the impossible...they motivated me to get on my grind and start heading in direction that I need to be.

Diverse/New Experiences

As the focus group interviews continued on, the students were asked to speak about their most rewarding involvement experiences on- and off-campus, as well as, share something new they encountered because of their involvement activities. One of the junior, business major female students, originally from Houston, reflected on advice she was given before she went off to college stating:

I got involved because I was told that experience is what you make it and when I got to this school it was totally opposite of what I used to do...I got myself more involved so that I could have better experience verses would have happened if I had not joined anything.

Another junior female student, who was less involved on campus, offered her thoughts about trying something new on campus:

I always considered myself as an introvert so when I first came here I was really shy. I didn’t want to get involved on anything, it was hard making friends. Two months ago I applied to be a first year leader. Basically you teach a unit, you teach a freshmen level class...that really took courage on my part because I had not been involved in so many activities and events and organizations and meeting new people...This opportunity has built me up as a person. It made me realize how important it is to be a leader and to step forward, and sometimes you have to do what you have to do.

When asked about how important it was their peers to be involved in same or similar activities, one of the graduating senior had the following to say about her lack of diverse involvement experiences:
I don’t think it’s as important for your friends to be involved in the same or similar activities...Because I was on the soccer team, I was limited from other activities...I was always involved with soccer, whether it was a game or practice or something team related...It limited me from meeting other people and being involved in other activities.

On the other end of the involvement spectrum, one of the junior, business major female students shared her thoughts about how being connected several student organizations and serving in a new leadership position forced her to do some introspection:

I would say getting involved on campus...I’ve been put in a position to be a role-model for other people and to me once I’ve been set in the position, it pushed me to work harder on myself. Because you can’t address somebody else until you address yourself...It allowed me take a step back and work on me and work on my present issues, internal issues, and also external issues and then be able to move forward and inspire other people.

When asked about their most rewarding as of yet, the students had plenty to say. Some students spoke about their interactions with services and events hosted by different student support services departments on campus. For other students, merely being an African American student at this STEM-focused institution was the reward. This was clearly illustrated in a comment from a senior student athletic as she talked about her experiences with her team mates:

I came from a pretty rough area in Houston, so to be around a bunch of people from different races that grow up a lot different from me... was pretty rewarding...They really motivated me to do different things...They have helped me grow as a person...They have pulled me into different organizations they do, say like Campus Outreach...so it’s kinda cool.

Membership in Student Organizations

As the students shared their stories about being involved in either on- or off-campus, the value of being active in various student organizations became a reoccurring subject within the discussion. Besides student athletics, membership in student affinity groups and Greek-
lettered organizations were the main means of connection to campus life and involvement in the community. The students described their experience with the affinity groups as family and their home away from home.

Several of the students also brought up the benefits of being involved with different student organizations. They talked about the importance of networking with professionals, giving back to the community, but most importantly how being involved helped them through times in their college career. One of the senior male students offered his viewpoint stating:

Being here from out of state, I had out of state tuition, I did not receive any financial aid...It took a little bit of time but I joined the Black Student Alliance and that’s where I met many of my close friends. I also met one staff that was able to connect me to another staff member and because of the two of them I was able to get a university scholarship and in state tuition...So, I felt like being involved...show[ed] them that I really wanted to be here.

One of the focus group participants was a part a statewide scholarship program and she had very positive feedback about her experiences within the program:

As a Terry Scholar, we have mandatory cultural events that we have to attend every semester...We have been to the Dallas Symphony...just to expose us to different things as, to build us up as a person...We go in big groups, hundreds of students... it’s a good experience to have the whole honor college going with you and you’re going alongside people that’s headed in the same direction.

One of the junior transfer student participants offered this insight about how being involved with in a student affinity group has helped her adjust to the academic culture of this STEM-oriented university:

Being a transfer student, academic life at UTD is so different...So being able to be involved on campus with BSA...I met a lot of really good people here...They’ve helped me improve my study habits, so I can succeed. Because the family here at UTD is very close, they definitely want you to succeed.
Another female transfer student, originally from the Austin-area, majoring in Healthcare studies, shared her concerns about building her peer connection and the importance of networking:

I don’t really have any friends that are going on the same route as I am. So, to fill my professional circle and network...I have to go outside of my comfort zone and find things that, although I may not know people in those organizations that will benefit me at the end of the day.

In summary, one the current leaders within a campus student affinity group said it best in her comments about the extended support and connection through student organizations:

I am one of those BSA people...It is a family to an extent....when you really need something, I do feel like you do have that support...You can always go to at least one person and they will be able to help you...even if its class or a personal problem, you get some kind of guidance or assistance.

In regards to serving in notable student leadership positions on campus, one of the male student participants, who had been featured in official university publications for his achievements and involvement, spoke about the privilege of being a student leader:

I wanted to look for students who were like me. As a Student Ambassador, we’re known to be one of the top leaders...To work under the Office of the President, as well as, the Office of Alumni Relations...Joining this organization really helped me to be surrounded by others who are very dedicated and involved...as well as wanting to take their leadership to the next level.

Volunteerism/Service Projects

Along with being involved in different organizations, it can be assumed being involvement in service projects, or continuous volunteerism efforts, was a priority for these selected African American undergraduate students based on the interview commentary. Over and over, the students talked about past service projects and volunteer efforts they had been a part of on- and off-campus.
Two of the male students, who were active members of Greek-lettered organizations, spoke about how their organizations raised money for annual community scholarships through volunteering at the local, professional football team home stadium. Both male students also talked about the work their respective organizations do with young males in the community. In expressing how important it was to participate in such programs, the graduating senior student added to the conversation with:

I would probably say the same thing with my Fraternity...going out to schools and talking to the younger kids...I know the feeling of not having any male role models around...So, it is fulfilling for me to go out and talk to younger boys to tell them, if they need somebody to call, you can always call me.

Other students provided details about how being involved with specific programs or job assignments had an impact on them, as presented in this comment from a female healthcare studies major:

It’s nice to see that I can go out and help people that are less fortunate...I have something to offer to somebody else...Serving other helps me not get bogged down with everything I’m going through.

Another junior female student, originally from the Austin area, talked about her time spent volunteering at a local middle school. And in her statement below she expressed why she felt it was necessary to make a personal commitment to this particular service project:

I volunteer at a middle school and...I’ve gone home and just cried at how uninvolved some of the people in the school district...Seeing there are people who just don’t have the resources like I did back home, so I go there and show just them, Hey, you can you can do it...You have a cheerleader in me...I’m just there a couple of days, but I know I’m making a difference by giving them what they don’t necessarily have, as far as, a support system...I’m a mentor and a big sister to those of them that don’t really have anybody to look up to.
In the spirit of teamwork and Thanksgiving, one of the student athletics shared a story about her and her teammates/roommates deciding to do an impromptu feed the homeless project:

So, the day before Thanksgiving I got some of my team members together and we made sack lunches...We went to Walmart, brought a few of those rotisserie chickens...Went home, cut them up and made sandwiches...We made little bags with chips and water...And we just literally drive around the North Dallas area Thanksgiving, giving out sandwiches to anyone we saw...It was just so cool to see people just so happy for this lunch...It’s just so cool to my teammates help out with something that I wanted to do randomly and they had a good time.

Interpretative Analysis

Overview

This research study was design as a modified qualitative project. The qualitative output was meant to further explain the involvement data collected through the research survey tool (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Separately, the survey responses and students’ commentary from the focus groups generated an incomplete picture of the connection between student involvement and the characteristics of self-authorship among African American undergraduate students. Yet taken together, the interpretation of the both the survey and focus group data provided greater insight into the original research problem.

Explanatory Factors

In this attempt to determine the connection between student involvement activity and the development of characteristics of self-authorship, it was critical to utilize survey results in combination with the focus group results. Survey Question 5 primarily gave a depiction of how students spend their time developing relationships with peers. The corresponding focus group interview questions yielded the student’s motivation to get involved, any noted differences in
being involved in co-curricular activities, and their peer’s perception of their involvement
tendencies. Survey Question 6 offered a look into the students’ satisfaction with their campus
experiences. Going beyond a simple satisfaction rating, the parallel interview questions were
crafted to explore the students’ most rewarding involvement activities, discuss any challenges
with getting involved, and share their peer’s involvement activities. Survey Question 7 offered a
description of the students’ perception of the campus climate. The supporting focus group
questions were constructed to invoke a deeper introspection from the student participants
about their involvement activities.

Degree of Involvement

From the Student Involvement Survey it is assumed, based on the given responses,
African American undergraduate students at the research site were involved in variety types of
co-curricular activities on- and off-campus. Student affinity groups, such as the Black Student
Alliance, National Society of Black Engineers and similar cultural based organizations, were the
most popular campus activities within this group of students. With Student Volunteerism
activities being the second ranked choice, it can be presumed giving back to the community and
service to others is a high priority for these students.

With 93% of students from the survey declaring their overall satisfaction with their
college experience, the students’ commentary from the focus group interviews without any
doubt added depth the description of the involvement trends of a sample of African American
undergraduates at STEM university beyond the given statistics. Within the conversation
context, students spoke about how being involved in organizations, like the Black Student
Alliance and the National Association of Black Accountants university chapter, were vital
resources to their professional and personal growth. When asked about the most rewarding involvement activity, all the students gave examples of opportunities where they were able to spend their time helping and serving others, whether it was through a community program or non-profit organization. These students expressed their enjoyment and satisfaction they felt from speaking to youth groups, reading to third graders, and volunteering at a local food bank. Throughout the focus group discussions, the student participants talked about how they sought to get involved to continue a personal interest, to network early with professionals, and to serve with peers on various service projects. Many of the students also expressed their gratitude for involvement opportunities available to them through campus support services, such as youth empowerment programs, student conferences, and an African American women’s affinity initiative.

The transfer students offered a different point of view in regards to the adjustment to the campus culture of a STEM-focused university. During the focus group interviews, these students brought up the unexpected intensity of academic requirements and unspoken competition among peers. Yet, the transfer students seemed confident in their decision to transfer to the research site and were willing to accept any academic challenges that occurred. Another highlight stemming from the transfer students’ feedback was their collective desire to seek out other like-minded students through student organizations, service projects, and campus activities to support their adjustment to the unique campus culture of the university.

Conclusion

Findings from this research study suggested that African American undergraduate students were quite active at this STEM-focused university. The survey results showed how
African American students were involved in co-curricular activities, how they chose to spent their social time, how satisfied they were with campus life and how connected they felt to the campus environment. During the interviews, the students discussed their different motivations to get involved, reflected upon their collegiate experiences, and addressed why specific involvement activities were significant to their success.

As reported from the survey results, the students’ involvement activities ranged from general memberships in campus cultural student groups to long-term service projects with non-profit organizations. During the focus group discussions, student participants shared their driving motivation to get involved and what role involvement played in their ability to succeed at the university. The survey gave insight to how much time African American undergraduate students spent on social interaction. Many focus group participants confirmed they were active, and possibly over active, with involvement commitments on- and off-campus. Ninety-three percent of the student respondents stated they were satisfied were their overall experience at this STEM-focused university, while 87% of the students who completed the survey agreed they felt valued at the university. Both of these themes were demonstrated in the students’ focus group conversations. The students repeatedly spoke about how being involved has added value to their collegiate experience. In short, the survey results and focus group material provided a board depiction of the involvement activities of African American students at a STEM-focused university.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Overview of Purpose of Study

This current study was intended to address the current research gaps related to the African American college student experience at science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] focused universities, self-authorship development within a minority population and student involvement. It was designed to explore and explain the potential connection between student involvement trends and the development of self-authorship among the selected student population. The emphasis of this research project revolved around the expansion of knowledge about the self-authoring process through student involvement in co-curricular activities within a sample of African American undergraduate students enrolled at a STEM-focused university. The methodology allowed for greater introspection into the problem of the study from the students’ perspective.

Discussion

To close the final loop within this present study, it was essential to discuss the findings in the context of the research questions. Both the survey and focus group results produced an ample amount of useful data. Through the design framework, it was easy to identify a clear, concise relationship between the data interpretation and the actual research questions. I will discuss the findings of this study based on the research questions and the research literature.

Research Question 1

RQ 1 asked, what was the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities within an African American undergraduate student sample at a STEM-focused university?
It was recommended by Flowers (2004) to carefully identify specific co-curricular activities in order to better distinguish between which activities have the greatest impact on the development of African American college students. From chapter 4, we know student affinity groups and volunteerism events were the most popular involvement activities of the five choices among this particular student population, which supports Museus’s (2008) study on the membership benefits of ethnic-based student organizations. African American undergraduate students considered their membership and association with the different student affinity groups, such as the Black Student Alliance and the National Society of Black Engineers, as their family away from home. Going further than Flowers’s suggestion, this study also inquired about how these students were involved in the labeled co-curricular activities, whether they were elected officers, general members, or held other leadership positions.

The survey results indicated that most student respondents were general members in selected student organizations; and about 81% of the students spent about one to ten hours per week participating in student organization related activities. From the focus groups, we know that the time spent participating in student organizations related activities usually included service projects, networking with professionals, or just building better relationships with their peers. In terms of Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001), the survey results and focus group material illustrated these students are forming relationships with their peers through involvement in specific types of on- and off-campus activities; and they are defining who they are by their commitment to the activities offered by their respective organizations.
Research Question 2

RQ2 asked, what is the connection between the degree of involvement in co-curricular activities and development of characteristics of self-authorship within an African American college student sample at a STEM-focused university?

To accurately define the connection between the students' involvement trends and the development of characteristics of self-authorship, it was important to take into account the survey results and focus groups equally. Survey questions 5, 6, and 7 were selected from the HERI College Senior Survey because each of these questions encompassed characteristics of the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of self-authorship. Survey questions 5, 6, and 7 were relatable to at least of the following the dimensions’ questions: “How do I want to construct relationships with others?” and “Who am I?” (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

These findings addressed the limitations of previous studies on African American college student involvement by allowing the students to share how they benefited from specific involvement activities, whether academically, personally, or professionally (Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004; Baker, 2008). These students seemed to have a good understanding of how being with the right involvement activities for their interests could only improve their collegiate experience. Because of the academic culture of this STEM-focused university, these students seemed to be strategic about how and where they spent their time outside of the classroom, only giving their time and efforts to activities they deemed valuable and worthwhile. In contrast to Fischer (2007), the students’ involvement in off-campus activities did not serve as a deterrent of their connection to campus. The students seemed to take pride in their
commitments to off-campus service projects; but they were just as committed to their involvement with the student affinity groups and student support services on campus.

Unfortunately, because of the low response rate for the survey, I was unable to conduct the planned statistical analysis to determine the correlation between degree of involvement and the selected HERI College Senior Survey questions. Therefore, the statistical outcomes were limited to descriptive demographic and frequency data. As discussed in chapter 4, the students’ survey responses plainly presented how these students spent their time interacting socially, how satisfied they were with university’s activities, and their feelings about campus connectivity. Going further, with in-depth conversation from the focus group sessions, it became easier to get an understanding of the connection between involvement tendencies and the development of characteristics of self-authorship as defined by the theoretical dimensions.

In support of the Baxter Magolda’s (2001) interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions, the students’ statements provided evidence of how students expected to build relationships with others through campus involvement as well as the students’ perception of the importance of maintaining established relationships. As students described the legacy that they hoped to leave behind, they ultimately offered insight on how they viewed themselves and how they wanted others to see them. The findings of this study answered the charge given by both Kegan (2001) and Baxter Magolda (2010) to expand the theoretical application of self-authorship beyond the epistemological dimension, to be inclusive of the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. The students’ survey and focus group responses did shed light on the connection between student involvement and the development of relational characteristics of self-authorship.
Research Question 3

RQ3 asked, how does involvement activity explain the characteristics of self-authorship among these African American undergraduate students?

The interpersonal and intrapersonal constructs of Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship theory (2001) are categorized by students’ self-awareness and relationship development. The findings of this study presented valid explanations of the connection between student involvement and the self-authoring processes though both the survey and focus group data. In the comparison of data, there were several indications of how being involved allowed students to learn more about themselves through exploring new activities both on- and off-campus. Students expressed an appreciation for the opportunities they had to network with peers and professionals within their future careers fields through school events and pre-professional organizations. In short, this study’s findings suggested that involvement in co-curricular activities did strengthen the African American students’ connection to the university, as a whole, which is in support of Tinto’s 1975 integration model of attrition and Astin’s 1984 theory of involvement.

Several junior and senior level students in the focus groups gave examples of how their involvement tendencies changed throughout the course of their undergraduate careers. Within the framework of the theoretical processes of self-authorship, I saw how these students moved from being told what to get involved their freshmen year to now being involved intentionally in self-selected activities. The collected data suggested that African American undergraduate students valued their involvement with student affinity groups and volunteerism activities. They respected the academic culture of this STEM-focused university and set their academic
success as first priority before their involvement activities. Lastly, these students understood the short-term and long-term benefits to being actively involved with selective on- and off-campus entities.

Implications

*Student Affairs/Life Practices*

Student life professionals have the responsibility to create, plan, and implement co-curricular experiences that cultivate student development at all levels (Baxter Magolda, 2001). From academic to professional to personal application, student life programming should encourage active participation from all students. Findings from this study advocated for intentional outreach to African American undergraduate students in order to promote active involvement in campus activities and events. Intentional outreach affirms the students’ connection to campus life and reassures the genuine development of relationships between staff and students.

The study results suggested that student life professionals must recognize the influence of student affinity groups on their campuses. Because of this influence, it is important to assist these groups with proper leadership development opportunities and organizational management guidelines. Student affinity groups can also be great programming collaboration partners because of they provide student input and promote student buy-in among peers. Volunteerism was a major involvement priority among African American undergraduate students within the sample. Student life professionals should work with student groups to plan and execute more meaningful service projects. When students feel their time is being spent on something worthwhile, they are more likely to want to repeat the project or establish a long-
term commitment to the project. Student life professionals should help with the logistics of establishing relationship with community partners of their student organization’s interests.

Overall, African American students were active participants in on- and off-campus activities. They were involved in all types of student organizations and attending student life events. It was evident these students are developing characteristics of self-authorship through their involvement activity. They built relationships with the campus community through student life programs and events, as well as, discovering their self-identity through their campus experiences. Therefore, it is critical for student life professionals to expand their assessments of programming to include specific elements related to the self-authoring process.

**Future Research**

As previous researchers have commented, there is much more to learn about the African American college student experience (Baker, 2008; Berger & Milem, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2004). This study took an in-depth look at the African American undergraduate experiences of a sample of students at a STEM-focused university to investigate the connection between student involvement and the development of characteristics of self-authorship by a modified qualitative design. Currently, there is little research related to this topic. Therefore, this area of study has ample room for expansion.

These African American students in this study were active in co-curricular activities. However, it is still unknown whether or not the involvement tendencies of these students remained throughout their collegiate careers. Is there a particular pattern, or trend, of involvement activity from first-year to senior among African American students? Are there predisposed factors that can predict involvement trends? Also from the findings, it seemed
African American students are comfortable with being general members and participating in service events. How do we encourage and/or train these students to be campus leaders? How do we ensure service projects are encompassing the interests of African American college students?

In examining the connection between involvement and self-authoring process, there is more work to be carried on by researchers and practitioners alike. There is much unexplored territory in understanding the nature of the association between student involvement and the development of self-authorship. Is there a direct correlation between the degree of involvement and the maturity of self-authorship among African American undergraduate students? What co-curricular activities have the greatest potential to influence the self-authoring process among college students? These are the type of questions that remain unanswered, but if pursued can shed new light on this topic.

Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this research study was the unexpected low response rate to the Student Involvement Survey. Less than 10% of eligible students completed the online survey. These numbers changed the statistical direction of this study. With such minimal numbers, the usage of correlation statistics was useless and produced insignificant results. Therefore, the descriptive statistics were used to provide a portrait of a sample African American student involvement at the selected research site.

Because of the nature of this research project, time became a limitation. The data collection process had to be completed within the timeframe of the fall semester. It was impossible to identify the best time to distribute the survey, in hopes of getting the best yield
rate. Scheduling the focus groups became an issue as the semester was coming to a close and students were preparing for finals. The focus groups actually ended up being two weeks apart due to inclement weather closings of the university.

The major limitation for this study was the lack of input from first-year and second-year students. First-year and second-year students had an extremely low response rate to online survey. Only one first-year student participated in the either of the focus groups. In the discussion of student involvement and the development of self-authorship, it is vital to have feedback from the underclassmen to fully comprehend the connection between the two dimensions.

Concluding Remarks

Although one study cannot answer all the questions, this study attempted to address a significant gap in the current literature by examining the African American undergraduate experience at a STEM-focused university. Holistically, the findings of this research study seemed to offer evidential material supporting a direct, positive connection between student involvement and the development of characteristics of self-authorship within an African American undergraduate student sample at a STEM university. The study suggested these African American undergraduate students did exhibit characteristics of self-authorship through their involvement activity. However, researchers and practitioners must continue to explore the connection between student involvement and self-authorship. There is more knowledge to gain and better practices to implement, as a result.
APPENDIX

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS
Greetings Comets,

The purpose of this research project is to explore the connection between student involvement and self-authorship among undergraduate students at the STEM-focused institution. I am conducting this study as a part of my final doctoral project. You are invited to participate because you are a currently enrolled undergraduate here on campus.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time during the survey. There is no penalty for withdrawal from this research study at any time.

The process involves completing an online survey that will take approximately 10 minutes. Your response will be confidential and I do not collect identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address. The survey focuses on student involvement and personal development.

I will do my best to keep your information confidential. All data is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with other university representatives.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me via email. This research has been reviewed according to the university’s IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT - Please select your choice below

Clicking on the ‘Agree’ button indicates the following:

- You have fully read the provided above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research project
- You are at least 18 years old

If you do not wish to participate in this research project, please decline participation by selecting on the ‘Disagree’ button.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree
Page 2-Student Involvement Survey-Fall 2013

Student Involvement
Are you currently involved in any of following organizations or activities (Please select all that apply):

☐ Student Affinity Groups (i.e. Black Student Alliance, National Society of Black Engineers, National Association of Black Accountants, or similar organizations)

☐ Greek-lettered Organizations (i.e. Honor, Social, Service, or Pre-Professional)

☐ Student Volunteerism Events (i.e. National Service Day, Senior Give Back Day, or similar campus sponsored events)

☐ Non-profit Organization (i.e. NAACP, Young Professionals-Urban League, or similar community-based organizations)

☐ Faith-based Entities (i.e. Youth Ministry, Worship Ministry, or similar faith-based activities)

☐ Not Applicable

Degree of Involvement
How would you define your involvement in the following activities or organizations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elected Officer</th>
<th>Other Leadership Position</th>
<th>General Member Only</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Affinity Groups</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Greek-lettered Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Volunteerism Events</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-profit Organization</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith-based Entities</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native ☐ Hispanic American

☐ Asian/Pacific Islander ☐ White/Caucasian

☐ African American or Black
During the past year, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the following activities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Less than 1 hour</th>
<th>1-2</th>
<th>3-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>16-20</th>
<th>Over 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socializing with Friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Clubs/Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please rate your satisfaction with your college in each area:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of campus social activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for the expression of diverse belief</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Ethnic diversity of the student body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall college experience</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have felt discriminated against at this institution because of my race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel valued at this institution</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am interested in seeking information about current social and political issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel a sense of belonging to this campus</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If you could make your college choice over, would you still choose to enroll at your current college?

Definitely Yes   Probably Yes   Definitely No   Probably No
Gender (Please select one):  Male_____  Female_____  

Parental Education Level (Highest level completed):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High School Diploma/GED</th>
<th>Associates Degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s Degree</th>
<th>Master’s Degree</th>
<th>Doctoral Degree</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parental Annual Salary (Please select one):
Less than 25,000  26,000-40,000  41,000-60,000  61,000-80,000  81,000 and above  N/A

Classification:  Freshmen  Sophomore  Junior  Senior

Current Academic Interests/Major: ______________________

Expected Graduation Date (Please indicate semester and year):
Fall_______   Spring _______

Current Cumulative G.P.A (Please select one):
2.0 or below  2.1-2.5  2.6-2.9  3.0-3.5  3.6 or higher

Average Course Load Per Semester (Please select one):
12hrs or less  13-15hrs  16hrs and more

Residential Status (Please select one):  On-campus Housing  Off-campus Housing

Employment Status (Please select one):  Full-time  Part-time  N/A
If you are interested in participating in a related student focus group, please enter your email:

Netreia McNulty, M.Ed
Doctoral Candidate, UNT College of Education
Focus Group Questions

1. What motivated you to get involved in on/off campus activities?

2. What are the differences in being involved in on-campus activities versus off-campus activities?

3. How would your close friends describe your involvement on or off-campus?

4. How important is it for your friends to be involved in the same or similar campus activities?

5. Describe some activities your close friends are involved in that you are not affiliated with?

6. What on-campus activities do you think are most rewarding for your personal growth and/or collegiate experience?

7. What off-campus activities do you think are most rewarding for your personal growth and/or collegiate experience?

8. Please describe some challenges with actually getting involved in on-campus activities and off-campus activities.

9. Please describe how being involved, whether on or off-campus, has helped you overcome a personal hardship.

10. Describe a time when you encountered something new as a result of being involved in on campus/off-campus activities.

11. Describe a time when you experienced something personally significant, profound through being involved in on/off-campus?

12. When you graduate, what story do you want to tell about your collegiate experience?

    Are there any highlights of your campus life you could share today?
REFERENCES


