THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ACHIEVERS IN DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

Janice M. Hicks

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2017

APPROVED:

P. Daniel Chen, Major Professor
V. Barbara Bush, Committee Member
Barrett Taylor, Committee Member
Kimberly M. Lowry, Committee Member
Janice Holden, Chair of the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Bertina H. Combes, Interim Dean of the College of Education
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the Toulouse Graduate School
Hicks, Janice M. *The Lived Experiences of African American Community College Achievers in Developmental Education*. Doctor of Philosophy (Higher Education), May 2017, 158 pp., 2 tables, 4 figures, references, 134 titles.

Developmental education courses are typically defined as courses offered at postsecondary institutions below college level instruction. More than 60% of community college students are deemed non-college ready and required to enroll in non-credit bearing developmental education courses. Research shows that developmental education can be either a bridge or barrier to degree attainment for racial/ethnic minority students, particularly African Americans, who require developmental education more than any other racial/ethnic groups. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who were required to enroll in two or more developmental education courses. Achievers were defined as students who passed all developmental education courses and were enrolled in their final college gateway course at the time of the interviews. Utilizing a phenomenological approach and anti-deficit framework, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the essence of how African American achievers described, interpreted, and understood their journeys from developmental education to becoming college ready to completing college level courses. Twelve participants were female and three were male, ranging from 20 to 52 years old.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to give all honor and glory to my God. Not only did He start this good work in me, but He provided everything I needed to complete this journey. Next, I would like to acknowledge my committee members: Drs. Bush, Taylor and Lowry. Your feedback and expertise improved this work tremendously. To my committee chair, Dr. Chen, thank you for believing in me and validating me in ways that you may not ever know. Your high expectations challenged me to elevate my thinking and your generous support motivated me to complete this journey with excellence.

Next, I would like to thank my wonderful family for their continued support. My family is the reason I chose to do this work, particularly my younger siblings and nieces and nephews. If I can do it, you can too. To my best friend and little sister, Angela Hicks, your support is unexplainable and I would not have complete this dissertation without it. To my mom who raised six children by herself, this Ph.D. is dedicated to you. My entire family earned this Ph.D.

It truly takes a village to complete this massive project and I am forever indebted to the many friends, Soros, line sisters, colleagues, supervisors, and staff members who have contributed to this process. Whether it was a text message, phone call, encouraging word, prayers or weekly writing groups, it all meant the world to me. I would like to especially acknowledge my sister scholars Ah Ra Cho, Catherine Olivarez, Nydia Sanchez and Danielle Jackson. I love you to the moon and back and will miss our writing sessions.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the 15 brave, intelligent and determined achievers in this study. Without you entrusting me with your stories, this research would not be possible. I am extremely humbled to have met each one of you. You are truly the reason I persevered through this dissertation journey.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study and Research Questions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Key Terms</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Colleges</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Mission</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Enrollment Trends</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Readiness</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Education</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Purpose</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current State</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Entry and Placement Testing</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of Developmental Education</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation Strategies</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans and U.S. Higher Education</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rates</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Cultural Wealth</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Validation</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table/Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Academic Data</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>NCES college enrollment by type of institution, 2000-2013</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Percentage of 25 to 29 year olds to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>An illustration of the anti-deficit achievement framework</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>A model of community cultural wealth</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Developmental education is under attack.” As I sat at my banquet-style roundtable listening intently to the presenter, she proclaimed the above words and flashed them boldly on her PowerPoint presentation. She was a well-accomplished professor of higher education presenting to almost 200 community college practitioners and administrators on how to help community college students achieve success. This proclamation resonated with me as I had recently completed a research paper on developmental education and was keenly interested in how this level of instruction had the ability to provide low-income and often minority college students with a strong foundation as they begin their collegiate journey. However, what I learned during this conference was that developmental education was failing the most vulnerable part of the student population, and she argued that policymakers and institutions were well aware of it.

Historically, developmental education was designed to fill the gap when high school graduates were not academically prepared for college-level course work, particularly in reading, writing, and mathematics. One scholar defined remediation as “a class or activity intended to meet the needs of students who initially do not have the skills, experience, or orientation necessary to perform at a level that the institutions or instructors recognize as ‘regular’ for those students” (Grubb & Associates, 1999, p. 174). Developmental education has been a crucial piece of the community college system since the institution was founded (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Over time, demographics have changed in developmental education, as students from all socio-economic statuses are represented by a growing number of nontraditional-aged students (Bustillos, 2012; Parker, Bustillos, & Behringer, 2010). Nevertheless, the majority of developmental education classrooms are comprised of ethnic minority and low-income students,
which could be the result of subpar public high schools, or students choosing to suspend their
education after high school to work or care for family (Complete College America, 2012).

Developmental education could be a bridge to college credentials for community college
students who are deemed not ready for college. Since community colleges are the gateway to
higher education for many low-income and minority students, this level of education is
particularly critical to the college completion agenda presented by President Barack Obama
(2009). For African American students, community colleges serve nearly 50% of those enrolled
in higher education (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2016). However,
bachelor’s degree attainment for the same population is only 15% (National Center for Education
Statistics [NCES], 2012). Of the African American students enrolled in community colleges,
68% are not college ready and require some type of remediation (Complete College America,
2012). Yet, less than 15% who begin in developmental education courses earn a college
credential (Complete College America, 2012). Therefore, developmental education has been
labeled a bridge to nowhere or even a barrier to success, particularly for African American
students, which is counterproductive for the completion agenda (Strong America Schools, 2008).

College degree attainment is critical for racial and ethnic minorities because it increases
their lifetime earnings and opportunities for social mobility in the United States (Bahr, 2010;
Wessel & Summers, 2007). African Americans have a long history of fighting for access to many
rights, including the right to access quality higher education. Increasing college degree
attainment for African Americans moves the discourse beyond merely providing college access
but also ensuring student success. To this end, the examination of developmental education
policies and practices in community colleges is crucial. In fact, the Obama Administration
recently created two initiatives focused on cultivating degree attainment for African
Americans—My Brother’s Keeper and Advancing Equity for Women and Girls of Color (McClain, 2015; Obama, 2014). While both initiatives focus on all minority demographics in college, the majority of the participants are African Americans and Hispanics.

In recent years, developmental education policies and practices have been examined and evaluated to improve outcomes, and due to mixed results, several states reevaluated the effectiveness of their current developmental education policies (Bustillos, 2012; Jenkin & Boswell, 2002). As the U.S. continues to focus on college persistence and completion, much work still needs to be done to improve the current developmental education system, particularly for low-income and minority students (Obama, 2009), which is evidenced by the number of states that have recently changed their developmental education policies. In the past 3 to 5 years, several states, including Connecticut, Florida, Virginia, Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina, have implemented policy changes with the intention of improving an apparently broken developmental education system (Fulton, Gianneschi, Blanco, & DeMaria, 2014). With 60% of community college students enrolled in developmental education, it is vital that policy makers and higher education administrators determine the most effective and efficient way to deliver developmental education (Jobs for America, 2010). According to recent data, fewer than 25% of students who enrolled in developmental education completed a certificate or 2-year degree (Jobs for America, 2010). Indeed, developmental education has the potential to pave the way for African American community college students to attain a college credential, but the outcomes demonstrate a lack of success thus far.

Problem Statement

Developmental education is the required pathway to a college credential for more than 60% of community college students. Supporters of developmental education argue it provides
access and opportunity to many low-income, minority-student, and underprepared populations, while opponents argue it costs taxpayers money that has already been appropriated at the high school level. As a result of this continued debate and the low completion rates for students who begin in developmental education, there is increased scrutiny from policymakers and taxpayers. The focus of higher education has shifted from college access to accountability and completion; thus, developmental education has been brought to the forefront of this discourse. Community colleges are the primary providers of this level of instruction and serve a high percentage of low-income, minority-student populations, which places the pressure on these institutions to improve success rates, specifically in terms of degree completion.

In response to the heightened scrutiny, researchers have been investigating whether developmental education is a bridge or a barrier to a college degree for low-income and minority-student populations. A growing body of literature has addressed developmental education in the community colleges and developmental education outcomes for minority students (Bailey, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Grubb, 2010; Levine & Calcagno, 2008; Melguizo, Hagedorn, & Cypers, 2008; Wolfle & Williams, 2014), but very little research has focused on African American students and even less has focused on the experiences of students in developmental education (Bachman, 2013; Bahr, 2013).

The vast amount of literature on developmental education addresses cost, placement, effectiveness, and implementation, and only limited literature exists describing the experiences of students who are required to enroll in developmental courses. When mentioned in the literature, the pass-fail percentages in developmental courses or students’ refusal to enroll in these college readiness courses are typically addressed. There is a gap in the literature in terms of
understanding the perception and experiences of students who are labeled underprepared yet persist through remediation.

Developmental education provides remediation to over 60% of students in higher education and costs institutions more than $3 billion dollars to implement (Bettinger & Long, 2004; Fulton et al., 2014; Phillips, 1998). Because of the financial costs of developmental education, policy makers and institutions are constantly evaluating and attempting to improve developmental education. Yet, there is little to no literature addressing the lived experiences of students enrolled in developmental education courses, specifically those of African American students (Bachman, 2013).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully complete two or more required developmental education courses and enroll in the college-level courses that follow. Using a phenomenological approach, this research sought to better understand what and how African Americans who are successful in completing developmental education courses and subsequent college-level courses experience this level of instruction. Developmental education in the community college can be a bridge or a barrier to degree attainment for African Americans, and this research aims to provide a voice for and capture the essence of how successful students navigate the developmental sequence and the college-level courses that follow. More specifically, how do these students describe, interpret, and understand their journey from developmental education to becoming college ready to completing college-level courses? Two primary research questions guide this inquiry:
1. What are the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully complete the developmental education sequence and enroll in the college-level courses that follow?

2. What are African American community college achievers’ perceptions about their persistence through developmental education courses and the college-level courses that follow?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used to explore the lived experiences of African American community college students who successfully complete required developmental education courses and the college-level courses that followed. More specifically, phenomenology—a type of qualitative research—was used to fully explore the success of African American community college achievers in developmental education. This type of research allowed the participants to describe what and how they experienced developmental education and the factors that contributed to their success (Merriam, 2009). Purposeful sampling was used at a community college in the Southwest region of the U.S. to select 15 students who met the research criteria. Initially, 10 students were selected but additional interviews were needed to reach saturation (Merriam, 2009), resulting in a total of 15 interviews.

Significance

The significance of this research on the lived experiences of African American community college achievers in developmental education is twofold. First, it serves as a voice for students matriculating through the developmental education sequence, as well as through college-level courses thereafter in the community college. Second, it uses an anti-deficit achievement lens that can be used to identify the factors contributing to the continual success of
the participants. Using the achievement framework, rather than a deficit lens, allowed participants to provide counternarratives regarding African Americans in developmental education. This study provides data to policymakers, researchers, and administrators regarding the factors that contributed to the success of African Americans students in developmental education, which can be used to improve policy and practice. By studying the success of a phenomenon, findings can be used to implement effective strategies and eliminate those that are unsuccessful (Harper, 2012).

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions were used throughout this study and are defined for the purpose of this study.

Developmental education. For the purpose of this study, developmental education refers to courses offered by community colleges that are designed to prepare students for college-level instruction. This term is interchangeable with remedial education.

African American. This term refers to students who self-identify as Black or African American and those who have parents of African descent.

Achievers. Achievers are students who passed all developmental education courses. When using an anti-deficit perspective, this term is commonly used to identify students who have achieved success (Harper, 2009).

Community college. These are institutions that are classified by the 2015 Carnegie Classification as community colleges.

College readiness. This occurs when students have met all academic testing requirements to enroll in college-level courses. College readiness requirements vary from state to state and sometimes even vary from campus to campus.
Placement test. This refers to the standardized test used to determine if students are college ready (e.g., ACCUPLACER, COMPASS, or the Texas Success Initiative).

Students who successfully completed developmental education courses. This refers to students who passed all developmental education courses with a C or higher and who were permitted to enroll in the college-level courses.

Developmental education sequence. This refers to a series of non-college-level courses offered by community colleges in reading, writing, or mathematics that a student must pass in order to enroll in college-level courses. The number of courses in the sequence varies from state to state and sometimes varies from campus to campus.

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study was that it lacked participation from multiple minority groups. Another delimitation is that the study focused on students from one single institution. I chose to study only one ethnicity in one community college in the Southwest region of the U.S.; therefore, the findings may not resonate with all minority or all community college students. The final delimitation is that there is a time lapse in when students took their developmental education courses and participated in this study, allowing them to fully reflective on the role of developmental education courses in their success.

Organization of the Study

This study investigated the lived experiences of African American achievers who successfully completed developmental education and the college-level courses that follow. Chapter 1 provides an overview and foundation for the study, highlighting the background, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 describes and critiques previous literature related to this study. More specifically, the literature review highlights the following three areas
of research: (a) community colleges, (b) developmental education, and (c) African Americans in postsecondary education. Chapter 3 explains the methods used to address the study’s research questions, including research design, data management, and the researcher’s role in the study. Within seven major themes, Chapter 4 captures the shared essence of the achievers’ experience and identifies contributors to continual success. Because developmental education is positioned at the intersection of secondary and postsecondary education, Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for policy, practice, and future research presented for both educational levels.

Summary

With national attention on the outcomes of developmental education in the U.S., many policymakers, institutions, and even non-profit organizations are seeking solutions for the proven ineffectiveness of developmental education in serving low-income and minority-student populations. Given the historically limited opportunities for African Americans in post-secondary education, and given that they represent the majority of students enrolled in developmental education across the country, this study is remarkably significant in improving degree attainment for economic development and social mobility opportunities for this population of students. This study used a phenomenology approach, coupled with an anti-deficit perspective, to add the student voice to the discourse on improving outcomes for African American students in developmental education courses. There is a vast amount of quantitative research on developmental education, and this research adds a qualitative perspective to the discussion.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community colleges play a critical role in postsecondary access and success for students of color in the U.S. For African Americans specifically, community colleges serve as the primary gateway to earning a college credential. However, more than 67% of African Americans entering community colleges require enrollment in at least one developmental education course, making them the highest population in need of remediation (Complete College America, 2014). Researchers have fiercely debated the influence of developmental coursework on student success. While some researchers view developmental education as a barrier to student success, others argue that this level of instruction bridges student success for this often underprepared and underrepresented population. Though data supports the former assertion, sparse research exists that explores the “how” or “why” of these unfavorable outcomes, and even fewer studies investigate these outcomes using a qualitative methodology.

A systematic review of the literature was conducted using educational databases to search the terms developmental or remedial education, community colleges, developmental education in community colleges, African Americans in higher education, African Americans in developmental education, and experiences of African Americans in developmental education. Journals with a primary focus on community colleges, higher education, African American education, and developmental education were thoroughly reviewed. These journals included but were not limited to: Journal of Higher Education, Research in Higher Education, Review of Higher Education, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, Community College Review, Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, Journal of Negro Education, Journal of Developmental Education, and Research in Developmental Education. This chapter includes
three sections: (a) a historical overview of the role of community colleges in the U.S., (b) the significance of developmental education in the U.S., and (c) African American college students in developmental education. Each section includes an overview of supporting literature.

Community Colleges

History and Mission

Historically, community colleges have served as a gateway to 4-year universities, particularly for underserved, minority, first-generation, and rural student populations (AACC, 2016). When the nation’s first community college opened in the early 20th century, developmental education was not an essential component of the mission or goal of this 2-year institution. The mission of the community college was to educate freshmen and sophomore students before they entered a senior college or 4-year university. For this reason, community colleges were viewed as less than universities because they enrolled “lesser” students (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). The first community colleges also played a role in determining if students had the capacity to succeed in college; moreover, at the end of two years, some students were counseled out of pursuing higher education. From their inception, community colleges have served as a buffer between secondary- and university-level coursework, protecting the universities from enrolling ill-prepared students and jeopardizing their prestige, while seemingly fulfilling the democratic idea of postsecondary education access for all rather than only the elite students. Significant historical events, such as World War II and the Truman Commission, set the stage for developmental education to become a crucial part of community college education (Vaughan, 1995). After WWII, veterans gained access to community colleges by using the GI Bill, and shortly thereafter, in 1947, the Truman Commission added access to higher education to the national discourse. By paying special attention to community colleges, Truman expanded the
mission of community colleges to include general education, adult and continuing education, developmental or remedial education, student personnel services, and community services (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Nearly two decades later, following the signing of the Higher Education Act of 1965, demand for community colleges to meet students’ needs increased. As a result, students gained both the access and means—through federal financial aid programs—to enroll in postsecondary education. The additional access and the increased means to attend applied additional pressure to community colleges to meet a widening variety of students’ needs, particularly the needs of students labeled non-college ready. The response of community colleges to these expanding needs led to an increase in postsecondary educational opportunities for these diverse populations. In this way, community colleges became the gateway to higher education for underserved populations, particularly students of color (Vaughan, 2015).

Current Enrollment Trends

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2016), community college enrollment accounts for more than half of all undergraduate students in the U.S. As illustrated in Figure 1, in 2005, more than 6.5 million students were enrolled in community colleges, and half identified as students of color. Nearly 10 years later in 2013, enrollment had increased to 7.4 million with even more students of color. Over 60% of students enroll part-time, and 57% are female (AACC, 2016). Only 49% identify as Caucasian, with the other half identifying as a minority. Hispanics make up 21% of community college enrollment, followed by 15% African American (AACC, 2016). However, when looking at developmental education students, 56% of African American students require developmental education compared to 45% of Hispanics (Complete College America, 2014).
Figure 1: NCES college enrollment by type of institution, 2000-2013.


Community colleges enroll students with a wide variety of goals, including earning an associate’s degree, transferring to a 4-year institution, completing a trade certification, continuing educational training for a current job, or pursuing a hobby.

College Readiness

There is not a definitive definition or formula for college readiness as it varies from state to state and sometimes from college to college, typically involving high school performance and at least one standardized test (Conley, 2007). College readiness expert Conley’s (2012) definition seems to be accepted and used frequently in college readiness literature. Rooted in decades of research, Conley suggested that college readiness is the knowledge and skills high school graduates need to succeed in college-level courses at 4-year or 2-year colleges without enrolling in developmental education courses.
To supplement this definition, there are four key areas in which Conley (2012) deemed necessary for students to be labeled as college ready. The keys include cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. Cognitive strategies refer to the problem solving and critical thinking skills necessary to achieve success in a college environment, allowing students to engage in intellectual dialogue. Content knowledge refers to proficiency in areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics to ensure students possess the foundation necessary to succeed in college. This key area is primarily measured by college placement exams and/or standardized tests. Learning skills and techniques, also called academic behaviors (Conley, 2007), refer to non-cognitive factors (e.g., time management, self-efficacy, goal setting, and motivation) that contribute to college success. Transition knowledge and skills, also called contextual skills and awareness (Conley, 2007), refer to knowledge of the college culture and processes unique to successfully navigating the college experience. Low-income, minority, and underrepresented populations are usually not privileged to this knowledge; thus, the college environment is difficult and frustrating for them to navigate (Conley, 2007). This comprehensive definition of college readiness is ideal for the high socioeconomic status, non-first-generation, non-minority student who has access to unlimited resources, both human and financial. However, it seems unrealistic for the average community college student who wonders onto a college campus the day before classes began. Furthermore, these keys are very challenging to measure prior to college entry.

Contrary to what much of the general U.S. population believes, a high school diploma does not equate to college readiness. While the four keys coined by Conley (2012) are well researched and necessary for college success, the reality is that high school graduates are only likely to process one of the keys at best. This is particularly true for African American
community college students who do not possess the typical social and cultural capital to even understand the college admission and placement process, which often leads to the majority of this populations being labeled “non-college ready,” as determined by standardized testing focused on content knowledge only. Many college readiness researchers (Barnes & Slate, 2011, 2014; Conley 2007, 2010, 2012; Greene & Winters, 2005; Leonhardt, 2011; Zhao, 2009) reported that students who earn a high school diploma are not equipped with the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking strategies needed to be successful at postsecondary institutions. Therefore, placement into developmental education courses is an attempt to bridge the gap between high school education and college-level instruction. For African Americans who have the highest enrollment among all races and ethnicities in developmental education, college becomes more expensive than it is for their counterparts who are not required to take developmental education courses, and the pathway to earning a college credential is delayed, thus delaying their opportunity for economic development and social mobility.

Developmental Education

This section focuses on the history and purpose of developmental education, and how it has evolved throughout the years. College placement literature is also reviewed followed by the effectiveness of current developmental education practices.

History and Purpose

Developmental education has been an unshakable component of postsecondary education, but not in the form it is understood to be today. Since the creation of the first institution, Harvard University, which only offered instruction to students from elite families, there was a need to provide tutoring services to incoming students who were not experts in Latin, as the curriculum was taught in Latin. Since the beginning of postsecondary education in the
17th century, there has been a documented history and debate as to whether students enroll fully prepared for college-level instruction or whether institutions should be open to students who do not meet established standards (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). This philosophical tension permeates throughout the history of higher education institutions, and provides a rich historical foundation for remedial education, as it was called prior to the late 1970s.

Moving forward to the 18th century, admitting students “on condition” became common after the “people’s colleges” or land-grant institutions were established under the first Morrill Act. These newly federally-funded universities—created to focus more on agriculture and mechanics and less on liberal arts—were viewed as inferior to traditional universities. Further, land-grant institutions met a need different from the current universities during that time period; therefore, they attracted a different student population—a population viewed as underprepared for college-level curriculum. Thus, preparatory departments were established to increase the knowledge and skills of students, bringing them to readiness for college-level coursework (Casazza & Silverman, 1996). Nearly 30 years following the first Morrill Act, a second act was passed that opened access to African Americans who were prohibited from enrolling in postsecondary education, especially in the Southern region of the U.S. Because access to education at all levels was limited to African Americans, early African American colleges and universities excelled at providing remedial education to students (Casazza & Silverman, 1996).

Shortly following the Morrell Acts, community colleges were established, supporting the argument that postsecondary education should be open to all who desired a further education. When the first community college was opened in the early 20th century, developmental education was not a critical component of its mission. Rather, the primary mission focused on educating underclass students who were planning to transfer to a 4-year university. Grubb and
Associates (1999) defined remediation as “a class or activity intended to meet the needs of students who initially do not have the skills, experience, or orientation necessary to perform at a level that the institutions or instructors recognize as ‘regular’ for those students” (p. 174). This level of instruction has been a prominent fixture in community colleges since the mission shift following World War II (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Community college students referred for remedial coursework comprise a diverse group of students ranging from those who performed poorly in high school in multiple subjects to those deficient in just one subject. Others requiring remediation include older students who performed satisfactorily in high school but need to refresh their skills. Additional traits common among community college students include their status as a minority, first-generation, or rural student.

Current State

The term developmental education was coined in the late 1970s to refer to remedial education in a more comprehensive manner, which included more than academic instruction. As an alternative to the negative connotation associated with the term remedial education, developmental education programs recognized that college success involved more than successfully passing coursework, including skills mentioned by Conley (2010) when defining college readiness. Appropriately, the college student personnel field applied this term, deeming a holistic approach to student preparation instead of merely focusing on classroom instruction.

Over the past 40 years, state policymakers and higher education governing bodies have examined the cost of remediation and have begun to question “who” should provide remedial education (Levine & Calcagna, 2008). Should it be community colleges with lower tuition costs, or should it be both community colleges and 4-year institutions to ensure underprepared students have access to all types of institutions? Since the national agenda to expand postsecondary
education access accelerated the need for remedial education, the decision on where remediation is offered has been left to individual states.

Currently, 21 states have implemented policies that prevent or limit 4-year institutions from offering remedial courses, placing the responsibility for remedial instruction on community colleges (Bustillos, 2012; Parker et al., 2010). In fact, over a half-dozen states, including Tennessee, South Carolina, Colorado, Ohio, Oklahoma, Nevada, and Louisiana, provide no state funding for developmental education to 4-year institutions, and this number seems to be rapidly increasing (Jacobs, 2012). Some states that allow remedial education at the 4-year level have allotted a small budget—10% or less—for remedial education, which limits the amount of instruction provided (Bustillos, 2012; Parker et al., 2010). Another nine states, Arizona, Georgia, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, New Mexico, Utah, Tennessee and Virginia, prevent, or at least discourage, public 4-year institutions from offering remedial education (Fain, 2013).

Presently, policymakers are questioning the need for mandatory remedial education since researchers have not yet demonstrated the effectiveness of developmental coursework in ensuring student success (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bailey & Cho, 2007). Many are calling for remedial education reform. Florida, a pioneer state in community college policies, allows students to choose whether or not to take remedial courses regardless of their placement test scores (Fain, 2013). This groundbreaking policy went into effect in Fall 2014, and researchers are closely tracking the outcomes.

As “open-door” institutions, community colleges have long had to educate students labeled as not prepared for college-level work and take great responsibility for developmental education across the nation (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bailey, Dong, & Sung-Woo, 2010). From hiring staff to test students and instructors to teach developmental courses,
community colleges are charged with a difficult and, arguably, a vital task. As the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 ensued, all programs had to prove their value, and remedial education has not been able to show its effectiveness (Bustillos, 2012), leaving the future of developmental education in community colleges uncertain. Nevertheless, this level of instruction has continued to help underrepresented students gain access to postsecondary education, which is the essence of the Truman Commission.

College Entry and Placement Testing

In recent years, national attention on college completion coupled with escalating demand for expanded student access has created a unique opportunity for higher education administrators and policymakers (Obama, 2009, 2014). Increased access via community colleges has meant that more underprepared students have been admitted. In fact, more than 60% of community college students and 25% of 4-year university students are enrolled in remedial education, costing states more than $3 billion dollars (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Long & Boatman, 2013). The return on investment in remedial education is dismal; fewer than 25% of students enrolled in remedial courses complete a 2-year certificate or degree, which is counterproductive to the college completion agenda (Jobs for America, 2010). Commenting on this fact, one California congressman proclaimed: “Remedial education is the killer of college completion” (Complete College America, 2014).

Given the college completion goal and the large percentage of students enrolled in remedial education, critically analyzing college readiness in terms of college placement exams is more vital today than in past years. Since the 1980s, colleges have relied on mandatory college placement exams to determine whether or not students have the ability to succeed in college-level reading, writing, and mathematics (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Recently, some states (e.g.,
Florida and New York) passed legislation that does not require students to enroll in remedial courses regardless of college placement scores (Fain, 2013), and California began conducting placement testing in the 11th grade with intentions of using the 12th grade for remediation (Venezia & Voloch, 2012), a move that shifts the responsibility from higher education to secondary education.

Discourse about college placement testing primarily focuses on the accuracy of these assessments in predicting student success, which is defined as the ability to earn a college degree (Belfield & Crosta, 2012). Placement testing is crucial to college completion goals because students who enter remedial courses based on placement tests are less likely to complete college-level gateway courses and earn a college degree (Complete College America, 2012). Could placement tests misplace college students? Should these assessments align with high school graduation criteria? Do placement exams account for other college-ready measures (i.e., social and economic)? These questions prompt a need for continued exploration on the role and reliability of the college placement tests and are pivotal in improving development education outcomes. This section aims to explore the complexities of college placement exams and how they are a crucial piece of the developmental education puzzle.

College placement tests. Not to be confused with college entrance exams that students take prior to being admitted to college, college placement tests are administered after students are admitted (Armstrong, 2000). The College Board (2014) wrote that after a student is accepted by a college, the student may need to take placement tests, which can vary from school to school and student to student depending on the student’s admission packet. After determining whether or not a student needs to take a placement test, the college will use this test in subjects such as reading, writing, and math to evaluate the academic skill level of entering students (College
Board, 2014) and use the results as indicators to guide the placement of students in the best level of instruction.

College placement tests are administrated at both 4-year universities and community colleges, but most literature mentions these exams in the community college context because of the low or nonexistent admission standards. As a result, community colleges rely heavily on college placement exams to determine the appropriate level of education with regard to mathematics, reading, and writing (Belfield & Crosta, 2012).

Utilized for decades, college placement tests have been critically scrutinized in recent years regarding their validity and reliability in predicting student success in developmental versus college-level classes (Jaggar & Hodara, 2013). This scrutiny is a result of the national agenda to increase graduation and persistence rates coupled with the number of students who fail remedial courses. Since offering developmental education is expensive for already fiscally stressed higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, researchers have recently begun to explore the reliability and validity of the two most popular college placement exams (Belfield & Crosta, 2013; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Scott-Clayton (2012) asserted:

Despite the stakes involved, the validity of these exams has received relatively little attention. A Google search for “+validity ACT SAT” returns 2.8 million results, while an equivalent search for the two most commonly used placement exams, the COMPASS (published by ACT, Inc.) and the ACCUPLACER (by the College Board), returns just 4,610 results. And while there is a long history of empirical research into the predictive validity of college entrance exams, only a handful of studies have examined these high-stakes college placement exams. The test makers themselves have conducted most of these studies. (p. 2)
Scott-Clayton identified the COMPASS, which is developed and administered by ACT, and the ACCUPACER by the College Board, as the two most commonly used college placement exams. While there are many other placement tests developed at the state level (e.g., the Texas Success Initiative) and the national level, this section of the literature review focuses on the most commonly used exams at the national level, the COMPASS and ACCUPLACER. These two dominate the market—the COMPASS is administered at more than 62% of American community colleges, and the ACCUPLACER is administered at more than 42% of American community colleges, with many community colleges administering both exams (Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Both the COMPASS and ACCUPLACER are economically efficient tests because they are purchased in bulk and computer-based, meaning they save funds by not requiring additional human resources to administer (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Jaggar and Hodara (2013) reported that colleges are well aware that placement exams are not perfect. However, placement exams are the most efficient way to handle long registration lines of students who need to quickly enroll in community college courses. The question is whether these fiscally-efficient exams are worth the cost of effectiveness (Jaggar & Hodara, 2013). One researcher studied the reliability and validity of college placement tests in predicting student success and found that there was a low correlation between college placement test results and performance in college-level courses (Jaggar & Hodara, 2013). In addition, Scott-Clayton (2012) found that there is, admittedly, a high rate of inaccuracy when placing students in developmental courses solely based on their COMPASS and/or ACCUPLACER scores. Moreover, the coordinator guides provided by the test developer mentions that some students would either be under-placed or over-placed into developmental education, and the responsibility for handing this issue falls to college administrators rather than the test developer.
Both the ACCUPLACER and COMPASS are adaptive in nature since each test can range from 15 minutes to hours. The exam generates the next question based on the student’s previous response, and it can sometimes determine college readiness with only eight questions, which many researchers have found problematic (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Boatman & Long, 2010; Calcagno & Long, 2008). Moreover, Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine (2010) found college officials inaccurately communicate to students the importance of placement exam scores; as a result, some students are unaware of the consequences and do not adequately prepare for or take the placement exams seriously.

Best practices. Since this topic is an emerging area of research in higher education (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Jaggars & Hodara, 2013; Scott-Clayton, 2012), there is a dearth of best practices to report. With more than 60% of community colleges using placement tests, this topic is not likely to go unaddressed. Some states (e.g., Florida and Texas) have responded to this issue by creating their own versions of the COMPASS and ACCUPLACER (Barnes & Slate, 2014). Even though these states usually outsource the test development to the ACT (the same organization that develops COMPASS), states have a sense of control over the content when creating their own versions. These tailored college placement exams are more expensive than the standard tests, and the added cost presents a challenge for many states. For states not fiscally equipped to modify their placement exams, Belfield and Crosta (2012) suggested using high school transcripts either instead of or in addition to the college placement exams. Since the majority of community college students placed in remediation are unsuccessful, colleges and states have leverage to thoroughly examine the usage of college placement exams. Scott-Clayton (2012) stated that “allowing students to test into college-level work using the best of either their placement scores or an index of their high school background could markedly lower the
remediation rate without compromising college-level success rates” (p. 33). While there is never a one size fits all solution, recent findings from the literature on the reliability and validity of placement testing should be realized so more students are appropriately placed. A growing body of literature (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Scott-Clayton, 2012) addresses the inaccuracy of the ACCUPLACER and COMPASS college placement exams and the potential impact on minority students.

Demographics

Complete College America (2012) reported that approximately 1.7 million students enroll in developmental courses each year at a cost of more than $3 billion dollars to students and states, which is a large cost for states and students, especially when there are mixed outcomes. In this study, the number of students who complete the developmental education sequence and the subsequent college-level courses constitutes effectiveness. This study will not investigate whether or not developmental education assists students in achieving their intended college goals. Almost 60% of developmental education students are from low-income families who can only afford college through federal financial aids programs and institutional scholarships (Attewell et al., 2006). Moreover, the majority are first-generation African American and Hispanic students who are thrilled to gain admission to college (Complete College America, 2014; Orange & Murakami Ramalho, 2013).

The typical populations enrolled in developmental education on college campuses are the most vulnerable students who could benefit from postsecondary higher education the most and who possibly have a chance for upward social or class mobility. However, states and institutions cannot demonstrate whether developmental education is a bridge or a barrier to achieving the
American dream of earning a college degree (Complete College America, 2012), and there is a clear need to transform the ways in which institutions offer developmental education.

Effectiveness of Developmental Education

Presently, policymakers are questioning the need for mandatory developmental education as research shows mixed results on its effectiveness (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bailey & Cho, 2007). Furthermore, developmental education researchers continually debate the best method to show effectiveness (Bahr, 2007, 2008; Bailey, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Grubb, 2010; Levine & Calcagno, 2008; Melguizo et al., 2008; Wolfle & Williams, 2014). Stated differently, one reason that effectiveness results are inconsistent is because researchers cannot agree on which statistical method or approach most accurately answers the effectiveness question. One study argued that regression discontinuity was the best method while other studies suggested logistic regression models (Moss & Yeaton, 2006; Wolfle & Williams, 2013). Bailey, Jaggars, and Scott-Clayton (2013) argued that every method except regression discontinuity had a significant flaw when attempting to show the effectiveness of developmental education programs. Many developmental education researchers define effectiveness as successfully completing all developmental education courses as well as passing the reading, writing, and math college-level gateway courses. For example, a student in remedial math courses needs to pass all developmental math courses in addition to college algebra. Once the student passes college algebra, they are considered remediated. The problem with this definition is that less than 15% of students in developmental math pass the gateway course and less than 30% in developmental reading pass the gateway course (Jaggers & Stacey, 2014).

In the literature, there are studies that argue that developmental education works and is successful because developmental education students passed the gateway course at the same rate...
or higher as the non-developmental education students (Bahr, 2007, 2008, 2010; Boatman & Long, 2010). While these findings were accurate, the majority of these studies excluded students who failed the developmental education sequence. In fact, less than 25% of developmental education students successfully complete the developmental education sequence (Bailey, 2009, Complete College America, 2012). Therefore, many studies on effectiveness only examine the few students who actually pass all non-college-level courses to move onto college-level courses. Therefore, developmental education studies fail to provide evidence that includes the entire developmental education population, not just those who are successful.

Implementation Strategies

It is without a doubt that developmental education is a valuable component of higher education because it ensures that postsecondary instruction continues to be universal to all levels of learners (Bustillos, 2012). However, improvements are necessary given the high percentage of students who are unable to complete the developmental education sequence, particularly in math (Bailey, Jaggars, & Scott-Clayton, 2013). Thus, there is a need for innovative implementation of developmental education. In the past few years, institutions and states attempted to determine the best way to implement developmental education. Some states (e.g., Florida) are implementing abrupt policies while other states are allowing institutions to develop new strategies or promising practices, such as accelerated and integrated courses, summer bridge programs, learning communities, dual enrollment, and most recently, massive online open courses (MOOCs), to name a few (Parker, 2012).

While there is lack of literature on the efficacy of these innovative approaches or promising practices, they are steps in a direction toward improving developmental education (Parker, 2012). Scrivener et al. (2008) found that developmental education learning communities
increased the number of students who moved quickly through the developmental education sequence and helped them integrate into the community college. While the educational outcomes of the students participating in this random assignment study showed positive effects for that semester, the positive effects lessened the following semesters (Scrivener et al., 2008). A learning community is a group of students who enroll in two or more of the same courses with linked course content. For example, one remedial learning community included basic math, basic reading, and a learning skills course. The purpose of a learning community is to intentionally create a community of students who can provide support to each other in addition to receiving support from faculty and staff. There has been little large-scale research on the casual impact of learning communities on developmental education success (Bailey, 2009).

Another innovative approach or promising practice of developmental education are summer bridge programs, which historically were created for academically talented students who chose to get ahead—they occurred the summer prior to a student’s first year of college and lasted 6 to 8 weeks (Parker, 2012). In recent years, institutions have begun using summer bridge programs as a retention tool for minority students. For example, a university in Kentucky hosts a summer bridge program for minority students who elect to participate with the goal of acclimating and connecting students before the freshmen class of over 3,000 students arrive (Barnett et al., 2012). Furthermore, the state of Mississippi implemented a summer bridge program for developmental education students at all public 4-year institutions statewide (Mississippi Economic Policy Center, 2012). Strayhorn (2011) found that low-income students participating in a summer bridge program had increased academic self-efficacy after five weeks. While this study was conducted at one institution with a small sample size, the positive results led to further investigation of Summer Bridge programs designed for underprepared college
students. Developing an effective summer bridge program is costly for community colleges because they rarely have additional financial and human resources to fund such programs, typically for low-income student populations that cannot afford to pay any program fees without financial aid (Garcia, 1991; Stayhorn, 2011). Another study of a summer bridge program at an HBCU garnered similarly positive results, but recognized two major challenges (Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015). The first challenge was scaling up the program, which was the result of limited human and financial resources. The second challenge, which was similar to results from the research on learning communities, had to do with students’ inability to maintain academic success beyond the summer bridge program.

Since these innovative strategies or promising practices have not been effectively scaled to a level that impacts a large number of students, only a few students benefit from them. Furthermore, community colleges and universities are continually attempting new tactics in order to create the most cost-efficient and effective developmental education program. Yet, researchers have not investigated the experiences and perceptions of the students who are required to take developmental education courses (Jaggars & Hodara, 2013). Many students required to take developmental education courses perform well in high school with nearly 4 out of 5 achieving a GPA over 3.0 (Strong America Schools, 2008). The missing piece of the developmental education discourse is the students’ voice on how taking a sequence of non-credit bearing developmental education courses affects their perception of themselves, the institution, and their college experience (Bailey, 2009).

African Americans and U.S. Higher Education

Historically, there has been racial hostility toward African Americans in education at all levels, from K-12 through postsecondary education (Daniel & Walker, 2014; Davis & Palmer,
2010), which dates back to racial conflict in the U.S. as a whole (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) asserted that prohibiting African Americans from accessing higher education was a tool to keep African Americans from achieving independence. Museus (2008) stated that during slavery, if African Americans were able to read and write, they would depend less on their owners and would be better equipped to pursue freedom. Caucasians, out of fear, prevented African Americans from learning because of their unwillingness to let go of slavery (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006); consequently, the ramifications of this lack of education is still heavily impacting African Americans today.

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upholding the doctrine of “separate but equal”—segregated educational facilities for African Americans and Caucasian were found to be constitutional (Daniel & Walker, 2014). As a result of this ruling, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions continued to operate with racial segregation, and during this time, African Americans were educated at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Davis, 2015). In fact, the Morrill Act of 1890 had already established more than 20 HBCUs to serve the African American population separately from Predominately White colleges and universities. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was overturned in 1954 by *Brown v. Board of Education*, which marked the beginning of racial integration in education (Crenshaw, 2010; Daniel & Walker, 2014; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). However, postsecondary institutions were slow to integrate, especially in the Southern states, because this was the first time in U.S. history African Americans and Caucasian students could legally attend the same institutions of higher learning (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

During the civil rights movement that ensued, the U.S. federal government was active in providing long withheld educational opportunities to African Americans, one of which was to
enroll African Americans in predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Crenshaw, 2010). Thus, African Americans began to enroll in PWIs at an accelerated rate. Since then, access to higher education has been broadened and continually increased. In 1995 and 1996, African Americans were the largest racial/ethnic minority group in community colleges at 12% (Coley, 2000). In 2013, they made up 15% of public community college enrollment, second to Hispanics (22%) (NCES, 2013). When examining degree attainment, the percentage of African Americans who earn bachelor’s degrees in the U.S. increased from 13% to 22% between 1990 to 2014, compared to Caucasians who increased from 26% to 41%, further widening the degree attainment gap from 13 to 19 percentage points (Kena et al., 2015).

Graduation Rates

Historically Black colleges and universities. Much scholarship on HBCUs in the United States has been performed (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Harper, 2001; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Karanja & Austin, 2014; Kim, 2002; Slade et al., 2015; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). HBCUs are federally funded institutions of higher education created to provide a separate but equal education for African American students during the pre-civil rights era (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). According to Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965, all HBCUs were established prior to 1964 with a mission to educate African American students, and there are both public and private HBCUs, as well as 2-year and 4-year institutions. To date, there are 101 institutions enrolling 15.9% of African American students in higher education (Karanja & Austin, 2014).
Historically, HBCUs graduated more African American students than PWIs, and have been reported more effective at retention for African American students (Allen, 1992; Karanja & Austin, 2014; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). This is largely due to the fact that for majority of U.S. history, HBCUs were the only institutions allowed to educate African Americans. Today, HBCUs educate 20% of the African Americans with higher education credentials (Jones, 2014; The Network Journal, 2014). When examining all institutional types, Caucasians graduation rates are about 60%, whereas African Americans graduate rates are about 41%, when comparing 6-year rates. A significant gap in graduation rates exists between Caucasian and African Americans (Engle & Theokas, 2010; Karanja & Austin, 2014; Montgomery & Montgomery, 2012). While HBCUs only account for a nominal amount (3%) of all colleges and universities in the U.S., 40% of all African American congressmen, 12.5% of African American CEOs, 40% of African American engineers, 50% of African American professors at non-HBCUs, 50% of African

---

**Figure 2.** Percentage of 25 to 29 year olds to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher. Adapted from “The Condition of Education 2015,” by G. Kena et al., 2015, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Report No. 2015-144).
American lawyers and 80% of African American judges are HBCU graduates (The Network Journal, 2014).

Predominately White institutions. HBCUs conferred 20% of the 164,844 bachelor’s degrees to African American students in 2012-2013, leaving the other 80% to be conferred by other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) and PWIs. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2013) advocated for flagship and top-ranked PWIs to continually improve graduation rates for African American students. This campaign has been successful for the aforementioned institutions, but PWIs that are not top-ranked had much worse African American graduation rates. Moreover, the majority of PWIs in the U.S. are not flagships or top ranked institutions, and on the whole, graduation rates of African American students at these non-top ranked institutions are substantially lower than their counterparts. Nevertheless, PWIs still confer nearly 80% of the bachelor degrees awarded to African Americans in the U.S.

Community colleges. There has been much discourse about using graduation rates as a measure of success for community colleges. Because of the diversity in terms of institutional missions, many community college administrators oppose the use of graduation rates as the primary indicator of institutional effectiveness (Shapiro, Dundar, Yuan, Harrell, & Wakhungu, 2014). Graduation rates in community colleges are extremely low and even lower for those placed in developmental education courses. Of the 56% of African American students who begin in developmental education, less than 5% graduate with a credential (Complete College America, 2012). This study, however, is not focused on the students who are not successful, but the students who are successful in their developmental education course and remain to be persistent thereafter. In other words, this study used an anti-deficit approach, as defined by Harper (2010).
Conceptual Framework

While phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of the shared experience of the participants and does not require a conceptual framework, this study is loosely framed using an anti-deficit achievement framework, community cultural wealth model, and validation theory.

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Because this study focused on how African American students who are required to start their collegiate journey in developmental education succeed beyond developmental education courses, an anti-deficit achievement framework was most appropriate. Harper (2010) adapted this framework from the National Black College Achievement Study to guide how researchers approach inquiries for people of color. This framework focuses on successful people of color and what they attribute to their success rather than the traditional deficit or barrier-focused research conducted on minority student populations (Harper, 2010). This framework informed how creating protocol questions in an anti-deficit manner created counternarratives.

Harper (2010, 2012) utilized this framework to engage in positive inquiries about people of color, particularly males. Informed by psychology, sociology, and education theories, this framework poses an “instead of” (Harper, 2010, p. 68) question. For example, instead of utilizing Bandura’s (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory to examine why students of color lack the confidence to persistence in higher education, an anti-deficit achievement framework seeks to understand how student of color achievers develop and maintain their confidence as they persistence to and through higher education, creating counternarratives. Similarly, instead of utilizing Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory to better understand how low-income students navigate their collegiate journey without access to essential resources, an anti-deficit
achievement framework seeks to understand how these students were able to persist without the resources or utilize other forms of capital to reach success.

Divided into three categories, the anti-deficit achievement framework examines students at various points in the educational pipeline, including pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. Harper (2010) describes the educational pipeline as the path in which students take from kindergarten to college to the workforce. In this study, this framework will focus on the first two points in the educational pipeline. Within each category, there are researchable dimensions to be investigated. The pre-college socialization and readiness category includes familial factors, K-12 school forces, and out-of-school college prep resources. The college achievement category includes classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences. The final category, post-college success, includes graduate school enrollment and career readiness.

In order to reframe the perspective from deficit inquiry, the critical component to this framework is reframing research and protocol questions. Harper (2010, 2012) suggests two to three sample-reframed questions within each dimension. These sample questions are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive, but serve as a model illustrating how qualitative researchers could invert their investigation of people of color. Though in its infancy stages, there have been a couple dissertations (Sarcedo, 2014; Wright, 2013) utilizing this framework, and it has been cited by more than 50 peer-reviewed studies. While this framework primarily serves to organize and create research and protocol questions, it also creates the opportunity to focus on positive philosophical underpinnings, and challenges researchers to employ the “instead of” approaches.
Equally focused on what communities of color possess rather than what they do not possess, community cultural wealth broadens that definition of social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Born out of similar underpinnings as the anti-deficit achievement framework, community cultural wealth focuses on the capital in which students of color bring with them to college. This theory essentially recognizes the wealth of knowledge that underrepresented populations bring from their cultural background to higher education in order to achieve success. Since Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory focused on the knowledge possessed by high income, Caucasian students, Yosso (2005) created a model that not only includes idiosyncrasies of traditionally underrepresented students of color, but also describes ways in which these characteristics are celebrated.
Divided into six forms of capital, community cultural wealth is comprised of (a) aspirational, (b) familial, (c) social, (d) navigational, (e) resistance, and (f) linguistic capital. Since each form of capital is interconnected and builds on each other, Yosso (2005) emphasizes that they are not inclusive of one another. They are also fluid and ever changing. In spite of barriers, aspirational capital suggests students tend to commit to their hope and dreams of creating a better future for themselves and their families. Familial capital addresses the knowledge in which students bring from their home and even extended families. Social capital contends that students have social structures in the form of people and organizations, such as churches, which provide emotional support. Navigational capital highlights how students are able to navigate in, through, and out of situations that was unfamiliar to their community. Resistance capital suggests that students have grit or similar steadfastness as they experience inequalities (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). Finally, linguistic capital implies that students are able to use the multiple languages they may know to their advantage.
This theory will be used to frame the experiences of African American community college achievers in developmental education alongside validation theory, which focuses on institutional agents.

Theory of Validation

I used Rendón’s (1994, 2002) theory of validation as a lens to examine the in- and out-of-classroom factors that contribute to African American community college students’ success in developmental education. “Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Since this theory was developed for nontraditional, minority, and low-income
student populations in higher education, the six elements of validation offer critical insights to the students in this study.

The first element advises institutional agents (i.e., faculty, student services, academic advisors) to initiate contact with students instead of expecting students to reach out to them. This is especially critical for first generation college students attempting to navigate the unfamiliar college environment without support from home. The second element conveys the notion that validation from institutional agents provides students with a sense of self-worth or self-esteem, which may help students understand that they have the capacity to succeed in college. The third element is that validation can work compatibly with students’ development and involvement but validation needs to be present before involvement is possible. The fourth element is that validation should occur both in and outside the classroom. Consistency is key which leads to the fifth element. Validation is a continuous process throughout the collegiate experience and, for this study; it is particularly imperative for developmental education students. The final element suggests agents provide validation early in students’ college experiences (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Utilizing the six elements of validation, similar to other literature (Barnett, 2011; Cabrera et al., 2006; Fischer, 2007; Guiffrida, 2003) centered on underrepresented populations’ student retention and success, I analyzed the data to gauge the factors that assist African American community college students’ to achieve success in and through developmental education.

While a conceptual framework is not required for a phenomenological study, I used the three aforementioned models in specific ways. The anti-deficit achievement framework was used to design my research questions and interview protocol. The other two, community cultural wealth and validation, were used as a lens in which I analyzed data collected. Careful to ensure I
allow the essence of the participants’ experiences to emerge organically, I used the theories as needed to provide context as it relates to the key findings in this study.

Summary of the Literature

The review of literature began with investigating the history, mission and ever-evolving purpose of community colleges in the U.S., paying particular attention to the demographic trends. Next, college readiness is defined and explored to position the developmental education research within the appropriate context. Literature on developmental education was, then, reviewed, highlighting the importance of college placement exams and the difficulties that students, particularly minority students, have achieving a college-level score. The reliability and validity of the exams are inconclusive and a major part of the developmental education research and conversations about reform. To complete the literature on development education, the students in the courses, along with effective implementation strategy literature was reviewed, focusing on the lack of research on the achievers in this level of instruction. Following developmental education literature, a review of the history and degree attainment outcomes for African Americans in U.S. higher education was explored, followed by details of the anti-deficit perspective. While the anti-deficit perspective was used as a lens in creating the protocol for the study, there are two other theories that contributed to the conceptual framework. Finally, this literature review concluded with the conceptual framework which includes community cultural wealth, which pays attention to the familial and community support in minority cultures, and validation theory, which pays attention to institutional agents who help students achieve success, that was used to frame the study of African American community college achievers who successfully complete developmental education courses and the subsequent college-level courses.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The increased scrutiny on developmental education by researchers and policy makers has led to a resounding call to improve persistence and completion outcomes, particularly for minority populations that are overrepresented in developmental studies (Bailey, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Grubb, 2010; Levine & Calcagno, 2008; Melguizo et al., 2008; Wolfle & Williams, 2014). More specifically, African American community college students consistently struggle to complete remedial coursework (Complete College America, 2012), which leads to unfavorable persistence and completion outcomes. While there is an overabundance of developmental education literature magnifying its ineffectiveness, the majority focuses on quantitative inquiry and only very limited qualitative inquiry focused on the lived experiences of African American community college students in developmental education (Bachman, 2013). Moreover, most qualitative literature examines the issue from a deficit approach, exploring how and why students are not successful in these courses. In my review of the literature, there was no research on this particular population in developmental education using an anti-deficit approach.

Research Design

This study explored the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully complete required developmental education courses. There are four worldviews, or basic sets of beliefs, as it relates to the inquiry that guided the design of any research project. These worldviews include post-positivism, constructivism, transformative, and pragmatism (Creswell, 2014). The philosophical worldview associated with this study is constructivist, which relies on the participants’ view of the topic being studied (Creswell, 2014).
Whereas the post-positivism worldview seeks to determine and verify a theory and measure, constructivism seeks to understand, explore, and make meaning of a phenomenon. With this philosophical worldview, this study sought to understand and interpret the lived experiences of several participants who successfully completed developmental education courses in the community college context.

The constructivist worldview provides the foundation for qualitative research. This study employed a qualitative inquiry that sought to explore and understand a phenomenon. Whereas quantitative research focuses on how much and how many, qualitative research is concerned about how the participants understand their reality and the perceptions of what contributed to their understanding of their realities. In qualitative research, there are no absolute truths, because truth is contingent upon the worldviews of each individual (Merriam, 2009). Within qualitative research, there are several types of inquiry, including basic qualitative, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative, and ethnography. Each type has their own idiosyncrasies connected by the constructivist worldview that seeks to describe, understand, and interpret experiences. For this study, phenomenology was used as a type of qualitative inquiry.

Phenomenology originated from philosophy and is both a philosophical approach (in some disciplines) and a type of qualitative inquiry. The theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology are to explore, describe, and share the essences of a common experience of a group of people (Merriam, 2009). As a type of research, phenomenology is used to deeply understand the “what” and “how” of a common experience for several individuals (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). This type of qualitative inquiry was used in the study to capture the essence of the lived experiences of African American achievers who successfully complete developmental education in the community college. It is the most appropriate type of study when
exploring a common experience and should be used to richly describe the participants’ trajectory in, through, and out of the lowest level of college education. Creswell (2007) suggested the reader of any phenomenological study should leave with a feeling of understanding the experience of a phenomenon. This study sought to explore the phenomenon of an African American community college achiever in developmental education.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully complete required developmental education courses in the Southwest region of the U.S. The research questions that guided this inquiry are:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully complete the developmental education sequence and are currently enrolled in the college-level courses that follow?

2. What are African American community college achievers’ perceptions about their persistence through developmental education courses and the college-level courses that follow?

Site Selection

This study took place at a community college in a large metropolitan in the Southwest region of the U.S., hereafter referred to as Westside College. According to the Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), in Fall 2014, Westside College enrolled nearly 11,000 undergraduate students with 78% enrolled part-time and 22% enrolled full-time. At the time of this study, the gender breakdown was 54% females and 46% males, and the racial/ethnic demographic composition was 37% Hispanic, 26% Caucasian, 19% African American, 11% Asian and Pacific Islander, 4% race/ethnicity unknown, 1% two or more
races, and 1% non-resident alien. The geographical region in which Westside College resides is one of the most diverse regions in the U.S., and the demographic make-up of the college reflects this diversity. Since the college enrolls primarily racial/ethnic minority students, research on the minority population is critical to improve persistence. In this study, the focus was on the 19% African American students. The graduation rate of African Americans at Westside College is 9%, which is the lowest of all ethnicities and tied with Hispanics. The majority of the students at the institution are age 24 or younger (59%). I was granted full access from the institution to recruit students for this study.

Sample

Fifteen participants completed semi-structured interviews. Invitations were sent to 218 students who met the criteria. Twenty-three students responded, but after further inquiry, only 18 met the criteria and 15 showed up to scheduled interviews. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the participants, which consisted of 12 females and three males. The age range was 20 to 52 years old with an average age of 29. The majority of the participants were considered non-traditional-aged students with nine being over 25 years old and the remaining six 24 years old or younger. The participants were required to enroll in an average of three courses, ranging from two to six courses. All participants had aspirations beyond the associate’s degree. The majority sought to earn a bachelor’s or master’s degree, while one participant planned to enlist in the military. Approximately half of the participants had at least one child. The majority of participants were first-generation college students and only four participated in college preparation programs. Purposeful sampling was employed in this study. More specifically, I recruited a typical sample, which is defined by Merriam (2009) as “one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 78). For a
phenomenological study, intentionality in recruiting is highly important because of the in-depth nature of this type of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Table 1

Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th># of DE</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>1st Gen</th>
<th>College Prep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Samantha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Melonee</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Ray</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Jasmine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Jennifer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Ashley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Destiny</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Josephine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Tasha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Liberty</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Beyoncé</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Laquintia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Maria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Part</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Justin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criteria

The research questions were designed to explore African Americans’ college experiences because of their bleak persistence and completion rates. I used the following criteria to recruit and select participants:

1. Self-identify as African American;
2. Required to enroll in at least two (level or subject) developmental education courses;
3. Successfully passed all required developmental education courses;
4. Currently enrolled in final college-level gateway course (ENGL 1301 or MATH 1314) at the time of interview.

The criteria were intentionally specific in order to focus on the experiences of students who not only passed developmental courses but also persisted at Westside College or any other college in the Westside Community College system. This study sought to gain insights on the essence of their experiences through participant’s descriptions and reflections. Since community college students commonly swirl (i.e., take courses at more than one campus at a time), this study included students who had completed some courses at other community colleges within a 30 mile radius of Westside College.

Recruitment. Recruitment is essential for collecting quality data, and it is sometimes challenging in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), so I recruited students through two avenues. An electronic invitation was sent via email to all African American students who have successfully completed their required developmental education course and were currently enrolled in MATH 1314 or ENGL 1301. Email addresses were accessed through the student tracking software utilized at Westside College. I received a pre-filtered list of African American developmental education achievers and contacted them via email immediately. In the email, the
purpose of the study, criteria, and IRB approval were included. Additionally, it informed students of a $25 incentive that would be given to participants. The second avenue was to call and send a text message to each student who met the research criteria on the pre-filtered list.

In addition, I worked directly with the ENGL 1301 and MATH 1314 faculty to identify appropriate students and send them a personalized invitation. The faculty pool consisted of seven faculty members, and I contacted them via email and face-to-face. The same information shared with student participants in email, by phone, and via text message was shared with each faculty.

I interviewed students until saturation was reached, which occurs when knowledge shared becomes redundant (Creswell, 2014). Saturation was reached after interview 11, but I had already scheduled the other four interviews. According to Creswell (1998), one-on-one interviews with up to 10 participants are sufficient in a phenomenology study, but saturation was not reached until after the 11th interview. The interviews were conducted in June, July, and August 2016 and were audio recorded. In addition to the interviews, I also took notes to capture nonverbal clues.

Data Collection

There are multiple ways to collect data in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). In phenomenological studies, thorough or multiple interviews are primarily used to collect data (Creswell, 2014).

Interviews

For this study, thorough or in-depth interviews with each participant were conducted, ranging from 20 minutes to 65 minutes. The average interview length was 38 minutes. Since developmental education placement can be a sensitive matter that could cause participants to feel uncomfortable, one-on-one interviews were conducted in a comfortable location on the Westside
College campus (Merriam, 2009). The interview focused on rapport building, college preparation and readiness, experiences in developmental education courses, and persistence after successfully navigating developmental education courses. A semi-structured interview protocol served as a guide and allowed me to probe and ask follow-up clarification questions. The protocol was modified after the first interview to better answer the research questions. Upon completion of each interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire to collect supplemental information regarding their family and background. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed within 48 hours.

Data Analysis Plan

In qualitative research, data analysis is an ongoing process that occurs simultaneously with data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). A data analysis plan is critical in ensuring the integrity of a qualitative study. Merriam (2009) described data analysis as making meaning and providing insights to the words and acts of the participants in the study. All data (e.g., interview transcriptions, observation notes, and demographic information) were used to capture the way in which participants described the phenomenon. As data were analyzed, the researcher used a bracketing process to remove any bias or judgments from the process. Bracketing, which was created for phenomenological research, is the process of removing any assumptions that the researcher may have in order to convey the essence of the lived experiences of the participants.

Coding

Coding is a systemic way of organizing and labeling data until categories or themes emerge. Since qualitative research is an inductive process, the researcher carefully reviewed transcriptions until themes materialized. Interviews were transcribed no later than 48 hours after each interview. The initial review, also called open or axial coding, entails coding data using the
language and words of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Each transcription was analyzed at least twice using open coding, and once completed, I sorted codes into categories or themes using the conceptual framework as a lens. I repeated this process until all codes were in a defined category.

Management

All data, including demographic questionnaires and transcriptions, were securely located in an office in a locked file cabinet drawer and password-protected computer (Creswell, 2014). Only I had access to the file cabinet drawer and computer, and data will be kept for at least three years following the end of the study. All names were removed and replaced with pseudonyms prior to the coding process to ensure anonymity.

About the Researcher

Since the researcher is the research tool, recognizing my role through reflexivity is critical (Finley, 2002). Reflexivity is seriously evaluating the bias, background, beliefs, and assumptions of the human research tool (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The purpose is to critically reflect on the background the researcher brings to the study in order to temporarily remove bias and assumptions while conducting the study, ensuring the integrity of data collection and analysis is not comprised.

Reflexivity and Research Role

I initially became interested in this topic because many of my friends and family members have been required to take developmental education courses. More specifically, my younger sister and brother, who both graduated at the top of their high school classes, were required to enroll in these non-credit-bearing courses, and they had both positive and negative experiences, respectively, with developmental education. As I reflected on my college choice process and first-year experience, I realized I was the first in my family to attend a 4-year
predominately White Institution located more than 160 miles from home. Two of my three older siblings enrolled in the local community college to pursue higher education, and when I chose to attend the 4-year university, my opinion of the community college was that it was inferior, and I felt I was smart enough to attend and be successful at a 4-year college. Until this point, no one in my immediate family had even considered leaving the proximity of the local community college.

My dream of attending a 4-year university was almost compromised due to my devastating standardized testing experience. Even though I took the ACT test five times, my highest score was an 18, which was the bare minimum score accepted at a 4-year institution in my home state. More than anything, my academic confidence suffered because I was in the top 10% in my class and even ended my senior year with the highest GPA in my English and chemistry courses. After questioning my academic abilities due to my ACT scores, I decided to attend the 4-year university and give it my best effort. My goal upon entering this overwhelmingly large PWI, having graduated from an all African American high school, was to earn at least a 3.0 GPA, but I knew the odds were not in my favor. I met the minimum GPA (3.8) and ACT (18) requirements, and so I was not required to enroll in any remedial courses, as they were called nearly 15 years ago.

Armed with a determined mindset but little support as the first in my family to move away to attend a PWI, I vividly remember my mother and older sibling dropping me off at my residence hall, and as they said their farewells, my mother whispered, “You gone be alright up here with all these White people?” Not confident in my response, I nodded yes and my family did not visit me at the university again until my sophomore year when I joined a sorority, and finally, my senior year when I graduated.
While I was not required to enroll in developmental education courses, I believe I would have significantly benefitted from them, particularly in writing. My experience in freshman composition was a struggle at best. On my first essay, I earned a score of 28 out of 100 with a handwritten note to schedule a meeting with the professor. From that point on, I wrote my essays in advance so my professor could review them prior to the due date, which earned me a solid B in the course.

As an educator and aspiring scholar, I feel obligated to investigate developmental education in order to explore and understand what contributes to African American student success in remedial coursework. I have witnessed firsthand the difference remedial education can make in the lives of low-income, minority students. For my younger sister, developmental education proved a gateway to a better life for herself and her family. She earned her master’s degree in counseling psychology and today, she actively contributes to the mental health field as a licensed mental health therapist. A second sibling’s experience with remediation told a much different story. My younger brother struggled with developmental education and subsequent gateway courses. Due to an inadequate GPA, he was unable to retain his financial aid and remained in college for a year. Today, he is still on financial aid suspension while working part-time to pay for his college courses with family assistance.

Over the course of time, my perception of community colleges has evolved. Because of my chosen profession and research interests, the lens through which I view community colleges has moved from inferior to imperative. This adjustment occurred when I began to critically assess the student populations about which I am passionate. My inclination to help students from low-income, minority backgrounds led me to seriously explore the role of community colleges, and the students they serve, which forced me to re-examine by perspective of these multifaceted,
multipurpose institutions. As I gained more experience in higher education, my perception of community colleges slowly began to shift; however, it was not until my doctoral coursework that I was able to fully reflect on my perception and realize exactly how essential community colleges are to the student populations that I care about the most.

In this study, my role will be an outsider regarding developmental education courses since I have never taken one (Merriam, 2009). However, I will be an insider with regard to race, because I am an African American, and thus, I am able to more easily build authentic rapport with participants. To fully disclose, I will continue to reflect on my own educational experiences by writing memos as needed during this study. Memos serve as an outlet to informally express the researcher’s thoughts and feelings at a specific moment in time (Merriam, 2009). With the phenomenological approach, I will regularly bracket to ensure my insider and outsider bias are removed from the essence of the participants’ experiences.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Whereas quantitative researchers seek to generalize their results, qualitative researchers are concerned with the credibility and trustworthiness of their findings. Rather than appeal to the masses, the philosophical belief of qualitative work is that the reader should interpret and apply findings, as they deem necessary. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary instrument or tool used in the data collection process and therefore, has a greater chance of bias or misinterpretation (Merriam, 2009). There are a number of ways to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. In this study, I utilized member checks, peer review, reflexivity, and reciprocity.

Member Checks

To avoid misinterpretation of the data, member checks were conducted throughout the data analysis process. Maxwell (2005) affirms that member checks are the best method to ensure
that the essence of the participants’ perceptions and experiences are conveyed as described to the researcher during the interview process and also to verify that the researcher’s bias and assumptions were bracketed during the coding process. After preliminary findings were determined, I emailed the participants to review the accuracy of findings. Merriam (2009) suggests taking action to make necessary modifications after participants have reviewed the findings, and member checks give the participants an opportunity to provide feedback before final findings are determined and published (Creswell, 2014). Seven out of 15 participants affirmed the findings and were very appreciative of this research. One participant stated:

Thank you for including me into the dissertation! I love how you represented me, and gave the real-life experiences. I also like how you contributed your personal experiences, and what you went through. Overall, I think everything is great! I love how you included the things that we as African American students had to deal with and overcome. Also, I like how you went into detail about the numbers of developmental classes, as well as family history! I feel my voice is heard.

Another participant simply said, “I love how you captured my entire story in a few short paragraph, and made recommendations to improve developmental education. You did wonderful, no changes needed.”

Peer Review

Peer debriefing allows another researcher to review the data analysis process and preliminary findings (Creswell, 2014). A colleague was recruited to serve as the de-briefer to ensure findings were logical and provided an accurate description of the data gathered from participants. The benefits of the peer review are increased quality assurance, maintenance of the integrity of the participants’ words, descriptions, and stories, and the ability to critically evaluate
findings with another aspiring scholar. I recruited an African American community college researcher and practitioner as a peer de-briefer. Her scholarly and professional endeavors gave her the context to understand the study. She validated the preliminary findings. She stated:

On the whole, your findings consistently reflect current literature on remedial student experiences at community colleges. Moreover, your study adds to the literature by giving voice to two distinct groups: 1) African American students who disproportionately enroll in developmental education and 2) students you successfully meet developmental education requirements and persist…In short, your qualitative investigation drew out nuances about African American achievers that will contribute to the success of future developmental education students in a community college setting.

Reciprocity

In addition to member checks, peer debriefing, and reflexivity, reciprocity will be shown by follow-up with participants throughout the rest of their collegiate journey. Participants also have an opportunity to assist the community college in utilizing the findings. After the completion of this study, participants who are interested will have the chance to meet with the leadership of Westside College to discuss how developmental education can be improved. According to Merriam (2009), it is crucial, especially when studying marginalized groups, to follow up with and include them in future endeavors.

Summary

To sufficiently answer the research questions, this study employed a phenomenological approach to discover the essence of African American achievers in developmental education courses at one community college in the Southwest region of the U.S. I have recognized my role and potential bias as the research tool, and I used bracketing to remove any thing that may hinder
my ability to accurately understand the experiences of the students in this study. Fifteen students were interviewed and axial coding was utilized to identify themes that emerged. To ensure creditability and trustworthiness, consultations with a peer reviewer and member checks occurred during the data analysis process.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who were required to enroll in two or more developmental education courses. Achievers were defined as students who passed all developmental education courses and were enrolled in their final gateway course at the time of the interview. In this chapter, results are presented from 15 community college students who were enrolled in either College Algebra or English Composition I. Twelve participants were female and three were male. Table 2 provides a summary of the participants’ academic data. Westside College calculates two grade point averages, GPA 1 includes developmental education coursework while GPA 2 does not. The semester after completing the gateway courses, the participants had an average GPA 1 of 3.04, ranging from 2.47 to 3.69, and an average GPA 2 of 2.96, ranging from 2.28 to 3.6. Participants earned an average of 11 hours not counted toward a college credential, ranging from three to 20 hours. The average length of time in developmental courses was nearly 2.5 years, ranging from one to six years. Eleven participants passed their gateway courses with a C or better, three earned a W, and one earned an N. A letter grade of N means a student failed to participate in the course and it translates to an F.

Two primary research questions guided this study: (1) What are the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully completed the developmental education sequence and are currently enrolled in the college-level courses that follow? (2) What are African American community college achievers’ perceptions about their persistence through developmental education courses and the college-level courses that follow?
Table 2

### Academic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>1st Semester GPA</th>
<th>Hours 1</th>
<th>GPA 1</th>
<th>Hours 2</th>
<th>Diff</th>
<th>Retaken</th>
<th>Dropped</th>
<th>Gateway</th>
<th>Years in DE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Samantha FA 15</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Melonee FA 13</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Ray FA 14</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Jasmine FA 11</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Jennifer FA 13</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Ashley SP 13</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Destiny SP 15</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Josephine FA 12</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Tasha FA 10</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Liberty SP 15</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Beyoncé FA 14</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Nate FA 15</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Laquintina SU 15</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Maria FA 14</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Justin FA 14</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Divided into two overarching groups, seven primary themes emerged from the in-depth interviews of the participants. The first four themes answered the first research question by addressing how achievers described their developmental education experience from pre-collegiate years through their college years:

1. Achievers overcame difficulty from childhood through college matriculation.
2. Achievers received support from familial and community agents.

3. Achievers encountered chilly instructional environments.

4. Achievers interacted positively with peer tutors.

Then, three themes answered the second research question by addressing factors that contributed to the persistence of achievers:

1. Achievers persist because of clearly defined goals.

2. Achievers persist because of help seeking behaviors.

3. Achievers persist because of intrinsic motivation that stemmed from difficult life experiences.

While the two groups of themes are presented separately to clearly demonstrate that each research question is fully answered, there is overlap in how they expressed their experiences and their perceptions about their persistence. Stated differently, some of their lived experiences explain their persistence through developmental education courses. The final section of this chapter provides reflections from the participants on whether developmental education was a bridge or barrier to their success thus far.

It is important to provide the context for each of the participants in this study. Phenomenology as a type of research requires that readers walk away with a sense of understanding of the participants’ stories and experiences. To this end, I included brief narratives of each participant’s lived experience to provide a glimpse into their lives leading up to their decision to attend Westside College. The 15 participants share a variety of experiences and come from all walks of life. Given that nearly 90% of African Americans who start in developmental education do not earn a credential, this research is critical in understanding the experiences and factors that contribute to persistence for the barely 10% who are successful.
Participant Narratives

This section provides a brief profile of each participant in this study. Phenomenology calls for an understanding of each of the participants, and the synopses below highlight the experiences each participant had prior to enrolling in Westside College. After reading this study in its entirety, readers should have a strong sense of what the participants experienced. The profiles are not prescriptive and vary in content.

Melonee

Less than 25 minutes after I sent my first recruitment email, I receive an email with the subject line, “Why Only African Americans?” In fact, Melonee was the third student to respond to my IRB-approved message. I thought to myself, “There is no way she will participate.” I first began to think, “Maybe she thinks I am White,” or “Maybe she thinks African Americans are being singled out.” While deciding how to respond, I was reminded that this was a great opportunity to highlight the importance of my study and to articulate why I have chosen to study African Americans. Approximately 20 minutes later, I responded:

_Hi Melonee,_

*Good question. African Americans require developmental education courses the most out of all other ethnicities. For this reason, this study focuses on our ethnicity in order to create better programs and services to achieve success. As an African American, I deeply care about us achieving success, and I feel our voice should be heard. I hope to tell our story with dignity and integrity. I hope you will participate! I think you will have very good feedback._

_Janice_
Melonee was my first interview and we both not knowing what to expect. She is a traditionally-aged college student who lives less than 10 miles from Westside College, and this, along with cost, led to her decision to attend Westside College prior to transferring to a “full university,” as she called it. As a first-generation college student, she explained that she had to learn to navigate the collegiate environment on her own. She has two older sisters, one who is a student at the university to which she intends to transfer and one who she described as “at home with her mother doing nothing with her life.” Family is extremely important to her, particularly making her father, who passed away after she enrolled in college, proud. She acknowledges that he is the reason she has never given up in spite of barriers faced with developmental and college-level math. She described her high school experience as average. Melonee explained that her parents only expected Cs and that is exactly what she earned.

Melonee enrolled in college immediately after high school and was required to take two developmental math courses. She was “never” good in math. To date, she has taken three math courses, and is currently repeating college algebra. She attributes her success in passing both developmental courses to tutoring with the TRIO program, specifically Upward Bound, and remaining dedicated and focused even when she felt defeated.

Josephine

Josephine was born in New Orleans, LA where a single parent raised her. She described her high school experience as a “social” experience. She chuckled as she revealed that she was voted class clown and was the student who made everyone laugh. She acknowledged that she told jokes and had a lot of friends, but was an average student. She remembered that in middle school she was a straight “A” student and her mother rewarded her for her grades then. That changed when she was in high school. She brought home Cs in high school and did not get
rewarded or punished. Josephine knew as long as she passed her classes and was not required to attend summer school, her mother would not bother her.

Since Josephine is a non-traditional student, she shared two stories regarding college choice. The first story took place in New Orleans. She was a senior in high school and had not even thought about going to college. As the oldest of four siblings, no one in her family had ever attended college. Further, she was the first of her grandmother’s grandchildren to attend college. During senior year, her best friend was “into” the college thing, so Josephine decided to tag along with her. Josephine’s mom did not have a car, but her best friend’s family did, so she went to visit universities in Louisiana with them. She described her mother’s involvement as limited in that her contribution was giving her $25 dollars to take the ACT and $25 for the college application.

The fall semester after high school, Josephine enrolled in the university that her best friend decided to attend. She described her best friend as being scared to attend the university two hours away from home, so Josephine went by herself. Her best friend joined her the second semester. She acknowledged that she partied the whole year and did not take her classes seriously, and as a result, she lost her financial aid the following year. Josephine’s mother had no money to send her back to college, so she was back at home to get a trade from a for-profit college as a dental assistant. She never worked as a dental assistant because she had no experience. Shortly thereafter, she started working in retail and became a mother. The idea of earning a college degree seemed impossible.

After Hurricane Katrina, Josephine, her husband, and their two children relocated to Texas. In 2012, as her children grew older, she felt it was a good time to go back to school to
show her children the importance of a college degree in today’s society. She described earning a college degree as a dream, and she wanted to show her kids that she could achieve her dreams.

Armed with a determination and two very important reasons why she needed to earn her degree this time, Josephine visited Westside College to enroll. When she found out that the developmental education courses she did not take seriously years earlier were still waiting on her, she thought to herself, “They don’t go away, it just never goes away.” Nearly 20 years earlier, she did not understand that she was taking developmental courses, but as a 36-year-old, she knew exactly what developmental courses were. After taking the TSI, she placed into one developmental English course and three developmental math courses. With the assistance of her high school sons, she graduated with her associate’s degree in May 2016, and her best friend who she started college with many years earlier was there to celebrate with her.

Jennifer

Ever since middle school, when she and her family dropped her aunt off at the most prestigious historically Black University in the U.S., Jennifer wanted to graduate from an HBCU. In fact, she only applied to HBCUs her senior year in high school. She described herself as an average student in high school who enjoyed having fun. While she was not heavily involved in extracurricular activities, she did vividly remember participating in the college preparation opportunities and acknowledged that she would not have figured out the FAFSA without assistance.

Unsurprised by her requirement to enroll in developmental math courses, she wished she had taken her first college experience at an HBCU in Louisiana more seriously. Due to her grades and the expensive cost of this private university, after two years she found herself back at her parents’ house “doing nothing,” as she described her returning home. She emphasized that
for an entire year, she did not work or go to school. She stayed at home allowing the
disappointment of not achieving her dream of graduating from an HBCU overtake her. There was
an overwhelming amount of guilt felt since her dad and aunt had taken out student loans on her
behalf. After a year of listening to her mother encourage her by yelling often, Jennifer went to
the closest and most accessible community college—Westside College—to enroll in classes.

Ashley

After her father passed away when she was in the 11\textsuperscript{th} grade, Ashley knew she had to
work hard to achieve good grades her senior year to make him proud. He was her only support
system, especially since her mother was incarcerated. At her high school, they were encouraged
to go to college, and Ashley planned to start right away until she realized she was pregnant. Even
after she gave birth to her son, she enrolled in Westside College, but stopped out because it was
too difficult to handle. She worked many jobs to make ends meet, and she had two more
children.

Armed with the determination to be a role model for her children, Ashley enrolled in
Westside College for the second time. This time she had life experience and struggles that
motivated her to stay the course. Her children were all school-aged at the time of the study, so
she had the flexibility to attend while they were at school. Successful in completing all required
developmental education courses, Ashley transferred to a university.

Beyoncé

Beyoncé described herself as gifted and talented while in middle and high school. She
attended middle school during integration and recalled being bused to the magnet school for
academically-talented students. She was on track to attend college until she became pregnant
while in high school. She acknowledged that she came from a poor family, and she was expected
to postpone her college aspirations to take care of her daughter. That was exactly what she did. She took the postal exam and worked for the post office for nearly 30 years until she retired in 2014.

After retiring, she took one semester off before enrolling in Westside College to pursue a business degree. With the support of her daughter, who is now a teacher, and her husband, she is extremely successful at Westside College, in spite of being required to take four developmental education courses.

Jasmine

Jasmine is a traditionally-aged college student who has spent the last four years attending Westside College on and off. As the first grandchild of 17 to attend college, she is determined to complete her social work degree. Though she was required to pass two developmental education courses, she still managed to remain motivated to finish her degrees. In high school, Jasmine struggled with math, which carried over into college. She struggled so much in high school that she thought she was not going to attain her diploma. When asked where her tenacity came from, she responded that she wanted to be the first in her family to complete college, and she is on track to do just that. As the oldest sister of three girls and the daughter of a single mother, she has a burning desire to be a role model for her family.

Liberty

Liberty is a non-traditional student who is the sole provider for a family of five, including a husband and three children. Because her husband and two of her children have a disability, she has been the primarily caregiver since 1995. Liberty described her childhood as very rough because she moved a lot due to evictions and even lived with her brother who sold drugs for a while. As she reflected on her high school experience, she remembered being an average student.
who had experienced childhood molestation at an early age. Since she had a child shortly after high school, she never considered enrolling in college. Her primary goal became providing for her child, and for her husband who became disabled early in their marriage. Therefore, she started to braid hair, and that has been her primary income since 1996.

She began thinking about going to college to pursue her calling of being a teacher after someone at her church encouraged her to step out “on faith.” Even when she became a licensed cosmetologist in 2006, she knew she always wanted to become a teacher. Though she was not convinced it was the right time, she took that leap in January 2015 at Westside College and was required to enroll in two developmental courses.

Tasha

Originally from East Texas, Tasha is a grandmother at the age of 36 who is determined to achieve her dream of becoming a nurse for her grandson. Admittedly, she enrolled in Westside College years ago to receive the financial aid benefits, but after she passed her first classes she realized she could be successful in college and achieve her goal of becoming a “real” nurse. She had worked in several nursing aide positions but was not satisfied with that work. She is focused on achieving her nursing degree so she can assist patients on her own.

Though she is a recovering drug addict and battles with mental illness, Tasha has a determination that is unwavering. This is evidenced by her high school experiences. When she was 13, her parents divorced, and just a year later she had her daughter, which prompted her to run away and drop out of high school. Within a year of dropping out, she re-enrolled and earned her high school diploma because that was extremely important to her. Now, Tasha has completed all the classes needed to apply for nursing school and is in the process of doing so.
Samantha

Born in Kansas to military parents, Samantha moved around frequently. She landed in Texas in middle school and graduated high school in 2015. Samantha was an average student who was extremely involved in high school. In fact, she participated in a college readiness program every year in high school, but she still was required to enroll in developmental reading, writing, and math. She described her decision to attend Westside College very casually. Her dream was to attend an HBCU, but she wanted to start close to home to get her basics covered.

Samantha thought her high school could have done a better job preparing students for college during their senior year. Her graduating class was only 37 students, and she acknowledged that her senior year was filled with plenty of free time. As she reflected, she concluded that the high school should have filled that time with TSI prep that actually prepared them for the difficult placement exam. She was strategic in that she finished her developmental courses in one semester by taking 8-week courses and is so thankful she chose that route.

Destiny

Destiny is a native of New Orleans and migrated to Texas after Hurricane Katrina. She graduated high school in Louisiana five years before the storm. She described her high school experience as the best time in her life and credits that desire to attend college to wanting to become a nurse. With supportive parents, she enrolled in college immediately after high school, but due to her grandmother’s illness, she did not finish college. Instead, she started working and became the caregiver for her grandmother until she passed away.

After she moved to Texas, she quickly researched the school and decided she would enroll in Westside College when she secured a job. No stranger to taking developmental courses, Destiny was shocked that she had to take two developmental courses before she could enroll in
college-level courses. Since she was determined to achieve her nursing degree, she took the courses and was successful.

Ray

Ray is a traditionally-aged college student who wanted to attend a university immediately after high school. However, he did not secure housing in time to make that dream a reality. He grew up with his mother, stepfather, and older sister. He described his high school experience as different, because he was voted “Most Shy” all four years. However, he acknowledged that he became more open in his senior year and it was the most exciting year he had in high school.

In high school, he was part of a college preparation program that ensured he applied to universities and was exposed to several different university environments. He is proud that he was accepted to the six universities he had applied. With the support of his mother, he enrolled in Westside College a week before classes started and described that experience as unpleasant. He elaborated by saying the “workers” seemed unhappy and provided poor service. Nevertheless, he enrolled and started in developmental education.

Nate

Nate described his experiences in middle and high school as dark because of his stepfather. In middle school, he did not do well academically and socially. In fact, when he went home each day, he immediately went to his room with his dog. He acknowledged that he felt more peace at school than at home. Eventually, his mother started to notice how quiet and withdrawn he had become but she did not intervene immediately. When Nate’s mother started to realize her marriage was not working, she began to reach out to him more. She even allowed him to talk to his biological father regularly on the phone.
At the end of Nate’s freshman year of high school, things started to improve at home, which caused things to improve at school. He and his younger brother began to get involved in extracurricular activities and they were very popular. Admittedly, he said his brother was more popular than him but he understood and continued to be his sidekick. Nate quickly shared that he had no intention of attending college when he graduated high school. His mother and biological father were both retired military and he wanted to follow their footsteps. However, the first order of business after high school was to get away from where he grew up and move in with his biological father who he refers to as his best friend. The summer after graduation, he moved in with his father and worked in the UPS warehouse for a year.

Since he hated his job, he decided to explore attending college. He and his father visited local universities but Nate was not impressed. Then, he received a postcard in the mail from Westside College and that piqued his interest. His father did not even know there was a community college in the same city in which he lived. Nate described the visit to campus as very open and welcoming and he registered that day. After he completes the construction management program next May, he plans to follow in his parent’s footsteps by joining the military.

Laquintina

With two children in college and one in high school, Laquintina describes the experiences leading to her enrollment at Westside College as extremely difficult. Primarily raised by her grandmother, she did well in high school. She even planned to attend college but she started working and within a year had her first child. College was pushed further from her mind as she focused on being a young parent. Before she knew it, she was in an abusive relationship and had three small children to provide for. In spite of her relationship, she still managed to work two jobs and enroll in a for-profit institution to become a medical assistant. This certification would
put her one step closer to achieving her dream of becoming a nurse. During her last semester, the institution lost their accreditation and she was unable to graduate. At the same time, she was in a physically violent altercation with her boyfriend, which forced her and her three children to move in with her parents. With the support of family, she walked away from a 10-year relationship and managed to rebuild her life.

After her family was independent again, she felt it was time to enroll in school again for nursing. Around the time when she re-enrolled in college, her grandmother passed away. This caused a deep depression in Laquntina for at least a year. Armed with the promise she made to her grandmother to become a nurse, she has been going strong at Westside College for over a year. She acknowledged that every time she considered giving up, she was reminded of her children and grandmother in heaven.

Maria

Maria describes herself as a loner. She has been a loner all her life. One reason is that she is “mixed.” Her father is Mexican and her mother is Black. Since her father was not a part of her upbringing, she was raised and socialized in a predominately Black neighborhood. She reflected on how she would get bullied by her neighbors because of her hair and skin color. Due to this bullying, she was shy and did not have many friends in high school. She could only recall two friends that were nice to her and encouraged her to do well. In fact, when she did not attend 10th grade for six months, it was the same friends who reached out and forced her to get back to school. During that six months she babysat her older sister’s three kids and she was not aware that she had not been to school for six months.

After her break from high school, she met a counselor at a charter school who mentored her. She credited this counselor for making sure she graduated from high school in 2004. After
high school, she planned to attend Westside College with the Rising Star Program but she decided to move to Atlanta to be with her boyfriend. She lived in Atlanta for 10 years and had a son before she moved back to Texas. When she returned, she immediately enrolled in Westside to finally pursue her dream of becoming a teacher.

Justin

As an accomplished student athlete in high school, Justin earned a scholarship to play football at a HBCU his junior year of high school. Due to getting his girlfriend pregnant, he decided not to take the scholarship to stay nearby and work. Justin described this decision as what was best for the future of his kid. However, his girlfriend miscarried the child, and soon thereafter they broke up. He stayed and continued to work.

After four years of working extremely hard in warehouses and family-owned businesses, he acknowledged that he had had enough. He weighed the cost and benefits of working without a college degree and realized it was not worth it. With the help of his ex-girlfriend, he enrolled in Westside College with a newfound focus. As he describes it, his priorities are now in line. Though he had to enroll in multiple developmental courses, he had the determination to finish Westside College and transfer to a university in two years.

Each participant traveled a unique road leading to their enrollment in developmental education courses. When thinking about college choice, many participants desired to attend a historically Black college or university but due to difficult life experiences they chose to attend the community college within 10 miles of their residence. When analyzing data related to their experiences, difficulty and hardships continually emerged in all participants’ stories.
Research Question 1:
How Achievers Experienced Developmental Education

The first group of themes address the common experiences amongst the participants in this study. They experienced difficulties throughout their lives, support from family and institutional agents, chilly instructional environments, and both positive interactions with peer tutoring.

Theme 1: Achievers overcame difficulty from childhood through college matriculation.

The first theme that emerged was that achievers experienced difficulty from childhood through college matriculation. Difficulty was experienced during their pre-collegiate experiences, during the college enrollment process and inside the developmental education classroom.

Difficulties experienced prior to enrollment. Due to the difficulties achievers experienced prior to enrolling in Westside College, it is vital to include the essence of their pre-collegiate experiences. To skip these experiences is equivalent to painting half a picture. Research suggests that the college choice process begins as early as middle school (Freeman, 2005; Hossler & Gallapher, 1987), which requires higher education educators to fully understand students’ experiences during these formative years. Further, college-going behaviors are typically inherited or learned early in secondary education matriculation. Home life, high school performance and involvement, and college preparation all contribute to creating college-going behaviors, or the lack thereof. Experiences prior to the actual college experience are significant in understanding the rich stories of the achievers who persisted through several years of developmental education.

All participants had to overcome barriers in their home life at an early age. While college was always a desire for the majority of the participants, there were obstacles these students faced
growing up. It is common for African American students to grow up in environments that do not support college-going behaviors (Freeman, 2005). More than half of the participants reported life-changing events occurring in their childhood that delayed or deferred their enrollment in college. Destiny recalled being a sick child most of her life. While her illness made it difficult at times to pursue her dreams, it also fueled her desire to become a nurse. She stated:

I was sickly as a child, so I would always be at the doctor, and I just remember telling my mom one time I wanted to be a nurse, and she was like, “You can do it.” She just kept telling me I could do it and kept patting me on my back, “Keep going, keep going.” I started doing that.

A traditionally college-aged participant, Nate, reported difficulties with his stepfather that caused him to withdraw from his family at home during middle school and some of high school. Due to his experience with his stepfather, he described having trouble focusing at school or even making friends. He emotionally described his middle school involvement:

I didn’t do anything. I regretted going home [holding back tears]. Although I couldn’t stand school, I felt more peace when I went to school than I did at home…. When I went home, I’d just go straight to my room, grab my dog and just close the door.

Due to her parent’s divorce, Tasha, who often ran away from home, found herself pregnant at the age of 14. Though both her parents graduated from an HBCU, her pregnancy deterred her from even thinking about the possibility of college. She shared:

I grew up in a country town and my parents were together. They divorced when I was 13. Of course, I was shaken by my parents’ divorce and had my baby when I was 14. I was kind of rebellious. I dropped out of school and found an alternative school where I earned my high school diploma.
Tasha is not the only teenage mother in this study. Nearly half of the female participants had children during or shortly after high school, and the pregnancy forced them to delay attending college.

Another female participant, Liberty, experienced difficulty that led to her moving in with her brother who sold drugs. At the time, that lifestyle was better than what she experienced living with her mother. She emotionally talked about being sexually assaulted and molested by her alcoholic stepfather:

Because I was going through so much, I went through [holding back tears] my childhood was rough. I was sexually assaulted and molested by my stepdad, and so I moved out from my mom’s and moved in with my brother. Then, my mom had surgery and so she needed help so I moved back to the house. But as soon as she recovered from her surgery, I moved out and moved in with my now husband. He was my boyfriend at the time.

Moving around while growing up was not uncommon for many of the participants. Three participants remember moving around often because their parents were consistently evicted from several different apartments. One student said, “We moved around a lot, and I went to a lot of different schools.”

Due to difficult childhood experiences, the achievers were not motivated to perform to their best capacity in high school. Fourteen of the 15 participants reported meeting the expectations of their parents in terms of grades while in high school. If parents expected Cs, they brought home Cs. Melonee, who is a traditionally-aged student, shared that her parents expected her to pass, and that was exactly what she did. She shared:

I didn’t care because I guess I wasn’t motivated enough. All I cared about was getting a 70 on my report card for any class. Sometime I made As, sometimes I made Cs. I never
really failed a class, but I would just strive to get that 70. My parents, they’re really strict. If I failed a class, they would take my phone for the whole semester, so I would just aim for that just to keep my phone with me. I didn’t really care about my grades much.

Josephine had a similar experience. She stated:

Now that I reflect back on it, I didn’t get anything extra for being a top student. I received the honor roll, and I remember my 8th grade ceremony. I received so many awards and my mom took me to McDonald’s. It just didn’t seem like it was worth it. When I made it to my freshman year and then I brought home a C, my mom didn’t say anything about the C, so I just kept on getting them. I didn’t get rewarded, I didn’t get punished, so pretty much as long as I passed it was just “all good.” My mom used to always say she wasn’t paying for summer school, so I just knew as long as I didn’t make it to summer school I was okay.

While the achievers met their parental expectations, they missed the mark in meeting college readiness expectations. Key high school indicators are often used to determine if a student is college ready, including grade point average, performance on standardized tests, and even extracurricular involvement. While the college readiness literature (Conley, 2012) emphasizes the requirements to graduate high school do not align with what is required to be a successful college student, it is essential to highlight the commonalities among and differences between the participants as it relates to their high school experience. Majority of the participants described their high school experience as average. They were average students in their academics and extracurricular activities. While reminiscing Josephine recalled with a smile:

Wow, my high school experience was nearly 20 years ago. Twenty years ago, I was not really involved in school. I was more social. I was voted the class clown. I just told jokes.
I had a lot of friends. I was on the flag twirling team just for something to do. That was basically my high school. I was a very average student.

A traditionally-aged participant, Jennifer, had a similar perspective on her high school experience. She stated:

High school was fun. It was the best time of my life in high school. My grades were average. I was an average student. I could have been better, but [I was] lazy. I stayed average, and I guess that’s why I ended in [developmental college algebra] before this.

Melonee, a traditionally college-aged participant recalled, “I really didn’t do well in my academics in high school because I really didn’t care much.” In additional to students describing themselves as average, few of them experienced college preparation.

There are several college preparation programs that target high school and even middle school students. Typically, their mission is to expose them to college environments and provide tools and resources that increase the likelihood of college attendance. Common programs include AVID, TRIO programs, and Education is Freedom. The majority of the participants reported no college preparation, particularly the students who were first-generation college students. One participant explains she had no guidance or direction:

I didn’t have any role models in my life that went to college. I was the first of my grandmother’s grandchildren to even attend college. My senior year, I decided that I was going to join the marines so I didn’t really pay attention to any college anything. My mom never gave me any information. I had no direction.

Three students participated in college preparation programs including Upward Bound, AVID, and high school-organized programs. Jennifer recalled how AVID came to her high school to discuss college. She stated:
They just came out and helped the juniors and seniors get started thinking about college. I also had that program, which was a lot of help, because without them I would’ve been lost, especially doing FAFSA. Yeah, I always wanted to go to college, because I actually love school. Yeah, I really do.

The theme of difficulty permeated all of the participants’ experiences very early in the achievers lives. The hardships experienced by them directly impacted their decision to attend college and has continuously impacted their life trajectory. Wood, Harris, and Xiong’s (2014) community college socio-ecological outcomes model that emphasizes the importance of recognizing background, defining and society factors impacting students prior to unpacking their college experiences and propensity for student success is applicable in this study. Not only did the participants experience difficulty prior to college enrollment, this difficulty is woven in their college enrollment process as well.

Difficulty experienced during the enrollment process. The enrollment process is critical to the success of any college student. When students experience difficulties during the enrollment experience, they have very little confidence in entrusting the college with their education. In this study, three primary components made up the enrollment process, including (a) application completion, (b) placement exam, and (c) academic advising. The participants in this study reported various experiences with each of these components. The simplest part of the enrollment process was the application completion aspect. The majority of the participants described completing the application online on their own, but difficulties were experienced with the placement exam and academic advising.

None of the participants experienced issues with completing the admissions application to Westside College. They all had positive experiences and described the application as easy to
complete. When asked about their college placement exam experience, 14 participants were aware that they needed to take the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) assessment. One traditionally-aged participant was not surprised, but was disappointed in herself.

When I heard that I had to take the test, I was kind of mad. I was angry at myself because I could have actually done really well in high school and I probably wouldn’t have had to take the test. I didn’t like it.

There were others emotional reactions surrounding the idea of taking the college placement exam. Melonee described being nervous before she took the exam. She stated, “I knew that summer when I had to take the placement tests. I was nervous.” Another participant who was returning to college after taking a break for many years walked me through her nerve-wrecking experience:

I walked in and thought, “Oh my god. How long is this test?” The testing staff asked, “When are you going to finish?” I replied, “Really? I haven’t taken a test since high school and college was a long time ago. I’m old.” They laughed. I was serious. I wanted them to be patient with me. They responded, “Just sit down, relax, take your time. Bring your jacket in there in case you get cold, take it off if you’re hot.” When I sat down and started the test, the reading, I remember thinking, “Oh my god. This is a lot,” so I had to sit there, pray, and I only missed it by two points. Then, when I got to the writing, I was thinking, “Oh, I know how to do this,” I was all into the writing. When I got to the math I just prayed, “Oh my God. I don’t remember any of this stuff.”

Another nontraditional participant had the same experience, stating:

The reading and the writing was hard. That’s always been my struggle, so I felt, “Okay. I know it’s been a long time since I’ve done any schoolwork or anything like that,” but I
wasn’t really too nervous about that. The math, however, I felt like I was looking at Chinese, but it’s been like 10 years since I’ve been in school, so I felt very nervous and for some reason, I felt if I didn’t pass it, I wasn’t going to get in. I didn’t realize that it was going to tell you what class you get to start in.

When asked how they felt after they were told their placement results, more than half of the participants were discouraged. For example, a nontraditional female participant, Tasha, was frustrated because she felt it increased the number of courses needed to apply to nursing school. She stated:

It just knocked me back. I remember two years ago, I was sitting in the Westside office and the guy was telling me what my study plan needed to be, and he just threw this other developmental course in there and I just starting crying. I was thinking, “Why do I have to keep taking these?” It took too long for me. It’s discouraging. I feel like sometimes they really get in the way, but they help you, they make it as simple as they can make it for you, and I just feel like, “Dang, I got to do all this until I can do this,” and it kind of just stood in my way.

Like Tasha, Ashley had a similar perspective. She shared:

I felt bad because I was thinking, “Man, I know the other classes I have to take. I had everything together.” I was like, “I need these classes but now I got to take these two more classes.” That adds more time onto finishing. I’m already frustrated because I was supposed to been finished community college.

Samantha was angry when she found out about what courses she needed to take, particularly the reading and writing developmental courses. She shared:
When I found out I had to take them I was depressed, and I missed it by like two points. I missed the reading by a couple points. The math was like 20, and I remember thinking, “Oh, my gosh. What am I going to do?” I was just so upset that I had to take developmental courses. I wanted to scream, “What the heck?”

Samantha is a traditionally-aged student who just graduated from high school months earlier before enrolling in Westside. She further explained why she thought she was placed into developmental education courses:

Maybe it was because we didn’t take no classes 12th grade year. We took classes, but it was... what was it? There was just really no classes. No classes to help us get to where we are now. We weren’t ready for college. I don’t think we were ready.

Justin have a unique situation and expressed his frustration because if he had enrolled right after high school, he would have been exempt from the placement test based on his high school end of course scores. Because it had been four years since he graduated high school, he was required to take the TSI and placed into all developmental education courses. He stated:

I was upset. The reason why I was upset is because I graduated in 2010 and I got recommended on my [standardized test] scores. By the time I took my TSI, it was after four years of high school graduation and that was the fourth year. When I found out my [standardized test] scores didn’t count, that made me mad. I was frustrated because I worked my butt off for those tests in high school and now you tell me they don’t really mean nothing.

While half of the participants felt discouraged and frustrated, the other half, mostly nontraditional-aged students, expected to take developmental courses. Jennifer, who had been out of school for a while stated, “Math, I expected it.” She meant she expected to start college in
a developmental math course. Josephine, who graduated high school nearly 20 years ago, was not surprised and casually said, “I scored poorly so they told me I had to start at this math course] and work my way up.” Liberty also expected to take developmental math courses. She stated, “I knew I was going to have to take the math developmental class and so taking that class gave me the basics of what I really needed.”

Laquntina had been to college twice before attending Westside. She enrolled in community college right after high school more than 20 years ago, but she had children and did not finish. She also enrolled in a for-profit college when her children were pre-teens, but during her last semester, the school lost its accreditation. Extremely discouraged because she did not get her degree because of the accreditation issue. Years later, she decided to enroll in Westside College and had mixed feelings about taking developmental classes since she had been to college before.

The advisor, she was like, “These classes are going to get you prepared for college,” so I said, “Okay, because right now, I know what I want to do,” and they said, “You have to get these developmental classes done before you can go on so that you’ll be ready for college classes,” and I said, “Okay. I didn’t have to do this before.” They said, “You didn’t have to do this with the other college, but since their school is closed down, we can’t get any of your college records, so you’re starting off as a freshman.” I said, “Okay. That’s fine. As long as I get to where I want to be, I’m fine.”

After students complete the application and take the placement test, the final and arguably the most important component is academic advising. Academic advising is critically essential in ensuring that students understand their placement exam scores and are placed in the correct courses. Not only do advisors need to place them in the correct course, they also are
responsible for setting them on a path of success. This includes discussing with and guiding them regarding their program of study and degree plan to follow. Nine of the 15 participants experienced difficulty when meeting with an academic advisor. They left advising sessions with uneasy feelings towards their collegiate journey and ability to achieve success at Westside College. The very resourceful and tech savvy Josephine did not even understand the purpose of the advising. She stated:

I did come to advising and I didn’t get a good feeling. I came several times. The first time it was just a person who set me in front of a computer and said, “You need to take this, this, and this.” I felt, “Well, that was a waste of my time. I could do this at home.” The second time I went and saw the advisor, it was a totally different person and she, excuse me, but I thought she was part of a rehab program. I didn’t know if she was somebody who was getting community service or if she was really an employee because she was all over the place. I thought to myself, “Well, I don’t really want to get behind this because I don’t know if she’s just trying to check something off her list or what.” She really wasn’t guiding me. She was just printing off paperwork and reading it to me. I can do this at home. I said I’m going, and then I decided to come back. That’s when I realized the first person told me to put my major as an Associate’s of Applied Science. Well, I started Googling that and realized that’s not really getting me anywhere. I ended up wasting like a whole year.

The difficult experience with academic advising costed Josephine a year of taking unnecessary courses that will likely have consequences after she finishes her associate’s degree. The state of which Westside College is situated in has an excess hours policy that will require Josephine to pay out-to-state tuition when she reaches a certain number of hours before the 120 required for a
bachelor’s degree. Poor academic advising has the potential to financially impact students later in their collegiate journey. Josephine continued to describe the third unhelpful advisor she encountered:

This guy here, I’m sure he had retired at least 50 years ago and was just here for, I guess, another community service project or something to supplement his social security, because he was a waste of time as well… I just kept the faith and kept on going. From that moment on, I never went to advising because I was like, “I feel like I was learning more from Google than by wasting time there.”

Ray, who decided to enroll in Westside College a week before classes started, had similar experiences. When describing his advising experience, he questioned the happiness of the advisors. “Lines were long. Then people [advisors] don't really seem happy.” From Ray’s perspective, the customer service was extremely poor. He also described how the advisors did not listen to him and told him things that he later found out did not apply to his major. He further stated:

I don’t like how the advisors will tell you, “You have to take this class,” but they don’t tell you why you should, or they don’t really help you in the way that they should. They told me I had to take all these classes, but if you read the thing on criminal justice, it says you don’t have to take these classes.

Ray’s difficulty with academic advising could have led him to taking the wrong courses if he did not read program requirement information for himself. Beyoncé, who retired with nearly 30 years of work experience, described her disappointing experience with Westside College. She shared:
When I went to the college campus I was very disappointed because things were very unorganized and like a runaround. I’m thinking, “I thought these people were educated.” I’m thinking, “I’m the one that needs the education.” They kind of send you around and around, and I guess they don’t treat you any different than the kids that maybe can’t take one instruction at a time. I like to know what I’m going to do. I finally met with an advisor. Well, they wouldn’t let you meet with an advisor. You had to go through all of these other steps first. They gave you a piece of paper and the to-do list. I had to go through the list and do the things that needed to be done. I forget everything that we had to do, but I know what I wanted to go straight to and they wouldn’t let me. I had to do all of the stuff on the side.

Beyoncé described the zone registration process in which students start at the same location and are filtered through several lines before they meet with their advisor. Zone registration is a best practice in the advising profession, because it is meant to streamline the advising process (NACADA, 2016). However, this participant felt the process was unorganized and a waste of time and this process made it difficult for her to see an academic advisor.

In contrast, a few participants had encouraging experiences with academic advisors. The advisors knew their name, and the students repeatedly met with the same advisor during their collegiate journey at Westside College. Ashley describes her advising experience at a satellite campus that is close to her house. She shared, “I just went in there and talked to an advisor. I really like him. He's really nice.” Destiny had a similar description of her advisor. She stated, “He was actually great. The advisor that I had, I don’t remember his name, but every time I register and I have a question, I always go to him.”
A seamless enrollment process is critical to the success of college students. However the achievers in this study experienced difficulty when enrolling and registering for classes. This suggests Westside College has improvements to make in terms of introducing students to the collegiate experience. Conley (2012) emphasized that college readiness includes transitional skills and the ability to navigate the college environment. However, the difficulties faced by achievers during the enrollment process hindered them, in most cases, from learning how to properly navigate their new collegiate environment. This is detrimental to the success of these mostly first generational college students who are too familiar with hardships throughout their life. In spite of the difficulties experienced during the enrollment process, achievers successfully enrolled, but majority continued to experience difficulty inside the developmental education classroom.

Theme 2: Achievers Encountered Negative Instructional Environments

The second theme that emerged was that achievers experienced negative instructional environments. To fully answer the first research question, it is imperative to not only illustrate what achievers experienced leading up to college coursework, but also what they experienced inside the classroom. This theme is divided into three sections: (a) chilly learning environment, (b) negative experience with online instructional modality, and (c) no engagement from traditionally-aged students. Environment is understood and defined by each participant in different ways, instructional modality is how the actual content is delivered, and engagement focuses on the participants’ and professors’ level of interaction inside the classroom.
Chilly learning environment. When asked to describe the environment inside the developmental education classroom, 12 participants described it in extremely negative ways, including extremely quiet, strained, non-participatory, uncomfortable, and unwelcoming. Jasmine described the quietness of her first developmental education course. She said that the professor would help the students one-on-one, but other than that, no one was talking. Jasmine shared:

People weren’t really asking too many questions. If they were asking questions, it was more pertaining to the work that needed to be done. It wasn’t like, “How do you solve this problem?” It was more like a one-on-one. I was like... the professor was the only person that was talking. For example, you know how a teacher would be like, “Do you need me to go back over this?” It was just on to the next. It wasn’t no, really, no focus on just one particular problem. It was just on to the next.

She further explained that her first developmental education professor was less caring than her second professor. As a result, she developed a relationship with the second professor, and not the first one. She shared:

It was a more intimate... he was just more, I wouldn’t say caring, but it was just more like, “Okay, we all know what we’re here for and this is what we’re going to do. I’m going to help you make sure that you succeed and that you learn everything that you need to learn.” I was like, “Okay, well....” I’m not nervous to ask a question. It didn’t come off as that much harder as it would have if I had to sit there and do every problem.

Another female participant had a similar description and stated:
It was pretty quiet for the most part. Nobody really talked to each other. We were mostly spread out and just doing our own thing because I guess we were all just trying to learn at our own pace. No one really interacted with each other.

She elaborated about the environment in different types of classrooms. She stated:

Within the lecture classes, we just listened to the teacher talk, and then after that we would get up and leave. In my computer CMM classes—computer modularized math—if you’re next to somebody sitting at the computer, we’d probably work together but not really much communicating. We just do our own thing pretty much.

Beyoncé affirmed the negative classroom space by explaining how the environment was strained. She shared, “The developmental classes, they’re mostly strained. It’s like nobody wants to be there. It’s almost like a forced type thing to me. The first professor was great. She would make sure that everyone understood everything and if you had questions to ask questions, but a lot of times people won’t ask questions.” As a nontraditional student, she felt bad that some many “kids” who just graduated high school but were required to take developmental courses. She felt that they were cheated and shared:

I just felt that they must have been short changed somehow. It made me feel better because they were fresh out of high school and they didn’t know, but it didn’t put me up on a pedestal or anything. It just made me feel as though they were really cheated because when I came out of high school, I did know.

When asked why she did not ask questions, one of the traditionally-aged students felt she would be embarrassed. She said:

I wouldn’t say I was nervous to ask her questions, but I felt like I would be... I wouldn’t say humiliated if I asked her about something, but I mean, it was just like, “You all come
in here and you work.” I didn’t really want to ask questions just because I didn’t want to know what the response was going to be. I didn’t want to be felt to be... to be made as if I didn’t understand, as if I was dumb or something. Not knowing, this is the reason why I’m in the developmental class, because I don’t know it.

Campus climate research addresses the how positive campus environments are necessary in creating conducive learning environments (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Oseguera, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005). There is also a stream of research that addresses chilly classroom environments (Allan & Madden, 2006). This research primarily focuses on women in engineering programs, but can also be used to synthesis the learning environment experiences for the achievers in this study. Chilly instructional environments do not encourage classroom participation and is often times an uncomfortable space for students to ask question and fully engage in the content. The achievers in this study experienced negative, chilly learning environments in their developmental education courses. These environments were not better when taking online courses.

Negative experiences with online instructional modality. Seven of the participants took at least one online course in developmental math. The reason the participants enrolled in the online version of the course was due to convenience. Since the majority of the participants worked more than 30 hours a week, the online option best fit their schedule. Five of the seven participants would not recommend taking developmental math online. Tasha, who works full-time during the day, was left with no choice but to take math online, and she described her experience as horrible. She shared:

I will never do it again. It is horrible, it is the worst thing in the world that anybody could ever do. Don’t ever do that. Especially if you need that face-to-face instruction. If you
ain’t got no type of discipline, and you don’t know how to just sit down and just... don’t ever, ever, ever do that.

Samantha had a similar experience with online math. She stated:

You definitely got to take that in class, the math. You definitely want to take that in class so you can get a full understanding. Watch him write it on the board. You can ask more questions. I don’t recommend that math online because you can just cheat.

On the contrary, only two of the seven online learners described why the online math course was the best option for them. They both had similar reasons. Liberty described how, in the online course, the professor shows you only one way to solve the problem instead of multiple ways. She shared:

Taking that developmental class, I took the developmental math first, then I messed up and did a summer of the intermediate and I’m like, “This man is going too fast, I don’t know what to do.” I really did my best and tried my hardest and I still came out of there... he gave me an E. He gave me an E for effort. Because he knew I was trying, I was asking a gazillion questions. [chuckling] I even came for the tutoring that he had offered and everything and I still didn’t make it. I ended up taking it online the next fall semester and I did really well on the online class. I think it was mainly because, in the classroom with math, they teach you more than one way to do the particular problem. My issue is with them giving me those multiple ways of doing it, [because] my brain computes the information... it intertwines it so I’m like, “I don’t know what goes with what,” and I get really confused. Doing the class online, I’m looking at only one way and I’m sticking with that one pattern and I was able to understand it.
Justin had a similar perspective. He also elaborated on the convenience of taking the course exclusively online, stating:

The thing is, it’s like you have an instructor and he’s showing you how to break certain problems down in the classroom, but in all actuality, you in a classroom on a computer doing your work anyway so what’s the point of me going to the classroom if I’m doing my work online anyway? It’s still not going to make sense. I feel like I enjoyed the online course because I can do everything within the time frame that my work needs to be done. I could go to the tutoring when I needed help and certain stuff I knew how to do on my own, so with that being said, I feel like I didn’t want to waste time being in the classroom when I could do that at home.

While online courses are convenience for students who have a family or work full-time, most participants in this study has a negative experience with this modality, particular in math. As Tasha articulated, online courses especially at this level are for extremely disciplined students who do not require in-person interactions. As community colleges continue to explore different models in offering this level of instruction, online courses should be carefully considered and advisor should guide students in assessing if this mode of instruction is best for them. In addition to chilly learning environments and negative experiences with online courses, there was a significant difference in the classroom engagement levels between traditionally-aged and non-traditionally-aged achievers.

No engagement by traditionally-aged students. Engagement was different for nontraditional and traditional students. Nontraditional students were more engaged in the course content while traditionally-aged students tended to be more nervous or afraid of judgment from peers and professors. This finding connected to more than half of the participants who felt
discouraged when they placed into developmental education courses. The discouragement turned into an inability to fully engage in the classroom or in an online setting. One participant discussed the age composition of her class. She stated, “There may have been about 30 of us in the classroom. There may have been maybe five actual adults, life-experienced adults, and the rest were 18-year-olds.” She further revealed that she asked the most questions in the course and others were not engaged at all. She stated:

I asked lots of questions. [Smiling] The professor would help us work in groups and try to help each other through some of the questions. You would always have a group member that didn’t want to do anything, not participate and just get the answer. That type of thing. Most of them are in their own world where everybody is on the cell phone and doing something else instead of really doing what they need to do. Not everybody, but you would have at least one person in a group that would do other things.

Another nontraditional student jokingly shared that there was only one other person in the class who had more questions than her. She further explained that, even though she got strange looks from her classmates, she did not care because she needed to fully understand the content taught. She shared:

There was one other lady in the intermediate class [who] asked more questions than I did. [Laughing] But the other students were like, “If y’all don’t shut up.” You know, you get the looks from people. I’m like, “Look, I’m trying to get this.”

In addition to obvious difference in levels of student engagement by generation, participants reported how engaging the professors were. There were mixed findings. For example, one male participant reported he loved his math professor. He shared:
My math class, I loved the teacher. He made the class fun. I actually could focus. When I was in high school they really didn’t give us enough time to actually sit down and understand everything. But that course really helped. He made sure he went through everything, even after the test and stuff, he’d show us where we did wrong. He never let us take shortcuts or anything. We got to see what we did. He always wanted to have you understand what you [were] doing.

In contrast, another male participant described his professor as boring and had difficulty engaging the class. He even said he felt the professor did not care whether the students understood the content or not. “When I first got here, my first teacher, she was a math teacher. She was so dull and boring and stuff.”

Negative instructional environments were prominent throughout the achievers experiences. Due to the chilly classroom spaces, achievers continued to experience difficulty as they matriculated through their developmental education courses. These less than standard classroom spaces, physical or virtual, cost students time and money as several struggled to achieve success because of either the professors’ pedagogy or their perceptions of appearing ignorant. Even though the instructional environments were not conducive to learning, achievers continued to remain motivated through support received from their family members and some institutional agents.

Theme 3: Achievers Received Support From Familial and Community Agents

The third theme that emerged was that achievers experienced support from familial and community agents. In communities of color, support typically comes from one’s family and it is essential to success in any endeavor. While family members often lack the college navigation support, they are critical in students of color’s ability to stay focused on their goals. Like many
others not included in this study, completing developmental education courses took some participants semesters and years longer than they had imagined or planned. Achievers experienced familial and institutional support that contributed to their success in spite of the longer-than-expected journey to college-level courses.

Inspirational and practical family support. Yosso (2005) identifies familial capital as the cultural knowledge used to create a sense of wellbeing for a student. Participants in this study experienced unconventional support, including practical support and inspiration support, which assisted them in staying focused and motivated throughout their college experience. Josephine, a nontraditional student, discussed how her entire family was part of her journey to completing her developmental education math courses. She explained that her son was in high school learning the same math she was learning in college, and he often assisted her with homework. She shared:

At the end of my math, my son started tutoring me. My kid, who’s in 11th grade said, “Oh wait, Mom, let me show you.” My husband, he’s like a math genius; however, he can’t teach it. My son, he was having patience with me, just like he should. He was like, “Oh, we’re working on that.” Then I really felt awful, but he was sitting down, he’d be like, “Well, you do it.” He was really helping me. My son was tutoring me, he was showing me some stuff. I would ask him a question. We was sharing calculators and everything. It was real cool.

While her husband did not have the patience to tutor her, he was supportive in their household:

My husband pretty much... his support was taking care of the household when he knew that I was doing homework. I would just go close up, and I would hear him say, “Your mom is doing homework.” He would cook or just whatever. He’s not cleaning, but he was cooking.
Josephine elaborated on how important it was for everyone in her house to be a significant part of her educational journey. Similar to Josephine, another participant who was a mother had support from her two children. Laquntina said:

They both support me. They’re like, “You have homework? You trying to do homework?” They’ll close my door and try to keep their noise levels down with their company, “You all be quiet, my mamma’s trying to do homework.” My son, especially, coming in, “You good? You need some help?” I’m like, “No, I’m good,” and they close the door and go back in there. I just need them to understand, it does not matter how old you are, how long it takes you, how many times you fall, get back up and keep on going. Say a prayer, put it in God’s hands, and keep pushing forward.

It was important for her children to see her striving to reach her goals of successfully completing a college degree. She was surprised by their determination to ensure they did not distract her while doing homework or studying. Nate, who lives with his dad, also had support in his house. He explained that his dad is his biggest supporter:

I think my dad is my biggest supporter right now. Me and my mom are very close, but me and my dad, I don’t know. Me and my dad are like best friends. He told me just to focus on the school. My first semester he told me about the work I could get after college. I think that’s why I did so good during the first semester, I didn’t have anything to worry about. He took care of everything there at home. Dishes, yard, just everything.

Although there were a few students did not receive support at home, those who did reported a great deal of assistance from their families. Beyoncé also reported moral support from her family. She shared:
My husband supports me and my daughter supports me, but not academically. They’re like morale support. They’re like, “You can do this. You got this.” He would not insist that I cook or do different things around the house. He would let me not do a lot of things in order to do what I needed to do for my grades to be successful.

While Liberty did not understand how her mother, who did not support her in high school, could now support going back to college, she still identified her mother as a source of support:

My sister and my mom were so excited that I had chosen to go to school. It was, like, you’ve always been a teacher. There’s never been a doubt for anybody. I took it as negative from my mom because I’m like, “You never encouraged me to go to school.” I’m like, for her it was, whatever. My sister was my biggest cheerleader. My sister and my mentor. She was really good and she would often ask me, “Did you get your assignment in?”

Jasmine, who was unsuccessful at an HBCU, shared that she went home and did nothing for a year. She did not work or go anywhere. In spite of her depression that year, her mother believed in her. When she went back to school, she continued to encourage her. She shared:

My mom, she knew that I had needed to pass this class in order to go and succeed in what I wanted to do. She was supportive. When I’m working on stuff and she’ll pop her head in, and say, “How’s it going?” “It’s good, I just need you to get out. I need to concentrate.” She was supportive, she was real supportive. My baby brother was really good in math and science. Really good. He’s helping me now and he’s been helping me.

While the majority of the students experienced familial support that contributed to their success in developmental education, only four experienced the opposite. Ashley very emotionally shared how she felt on her own as it related to family support. Her father and
grandmother passed away when she was a teenager, and her mother was in jail. When asked about family support, she said she had none: “I don’t have no support. I didn’t have no support back then. That’s why I think it’s taken me so long to finish school because of not having that.” Her three children are young, and she said they were in school during the same times she went to Westside College.

A female participant shared that she had support from her family when she had good grades and everything appeared to be easy, but she did not have support when she was having difficulties, which was majority of the time. She shared:

I would say that I had support when things were going good. When things weren’t working out the way that they should or just... they understood that I needed to complete my work and things like that. They would give me space and things like that. It wasn’t just, “Yeah, we’re rooting for you. Now go ahead.” It wasn’t. More so, when I would pass my classes with just As and Bs and everything, it was just like... it was support there. Not just like... I would say from my grandparents. For example, my grandma, I remembered her asking me last semester, she’s like, “Well, I know you have a lot of math work. I know some college students. I know that I’ve seen them and they don’t have a lot of work like that.” She was like, “Do you think that at this point in time in your life, that you want to go through with this, or that this is not working out?” In a way I felt as if she was discouraging me. Right there, that made me feel like, “Wait a minute. What are you saying? Do you not see the potential or see me trying? Do you not see me trying to better myself?” That gave me a push to keep going and not to let anybody distract me or make me think differently.
While her family was not supportive in the harder times, Jasmine used their words as motivation to demonstrate to them that she could achieve her goal of earning a college degree. Often times, in the African American community, in additional to family support, there is a reliance on faith.

Community support through faith and church. In additional to familial capital, many participants possessed social capital that assisted in their success at Westside College. Yosso (2005) identifies social capital as support from a network outside the family, typically peers and community resources. Half of the participants reported possessing social capital in their college journey. Of the students who mentioned peer and community support, the majority mentioned spiritual support through prayer or church. This spiritual support is consistent with Huber’s (2009) expansion of community college wealth to include spiritual capital. The African American community has a longstanding history of being spiritually connected through prayers and the church (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). One participant described how her decision to go to college was fueled by a teacher from her church. She said:

The teacher encouraged me, “Liberty, you need to go back to school.” She didn’t say back to school, I never had even been to college. She said, “You need to go to school. You’re good at this [teaching vacation bible school] and it’s a gift. You just have a gift.” I was like, “You think so? How am I going to go back to school? I’m taking care of my family. If I don’t make them money, how do we eat? I never want to be on government assistance again.” I was like, “It’s a good idea, I don’t know if it’s the right time for me.” After several conversations with the teacher, principal, and her pastor, Liberty decided to step out on faith. She stated:

She was like, “There’s never going to be a right time. You are going to have to step out on faith and just do it.” She was praying with me and everything. She was an awesome
teacher. Because of her, I stepped out on faith, went in, filled out my FAFSA paperwork online, got approved for the Pell Grant, and I was in there.

The aspiring elementary school teacher continued to lean on the support of her church community. She expressed how supportive her church is along this journey. She shared:

My pastors and everyone were really excited about me going back to school. I think because everybody knew because I’ve always expressed it. I taught the arts and crafts for Vacation Bible School. I used to actually teach a Bible class for the younger kids, preschool age. I’ve always done that. I actually taught the adolescents, the 11, and 12-year-olds. I used to teach Bible study with them. I’ve been teaching wherever [laughing]. I just never went to school to teach.

Josephine organized a bible study for women who were committed to following God’s plan for their life and family. She shared how most of the women were currently enrolled in school and serve as a source of support for each other:

As far as church, I go to church, but I’m not involved with different programs. I’m just a bench member at church. I didn’t have that. I lead an outside bible study group. My girls in my pinky promise group were very, very supportive. It was a lot of us that were in school. In the beginning I was really shamed to say what part of education I was at because most of them were getting their master’s and I was pretty much one of the oldest in my little group, but they did not care. They encouraged me anyway.

While she looked to the women in the group for support, Josephine felt ashamed initially because she was only working on her associate’s degree. Nevertheless, her pinky promise group celebrated successes together and held each other accountable. Jasmine, who felt little support
from her family, reported that she felt a great deal of support from her church members. She stated:

Yes, from several people in my church. They would ask how I was doing and things like that. I felt like they really cared for that aspect. There are a lot of educators and things like that at the church I go to. There was a lot of support from those individuals.

The achievers utilized their social capital and spiritual capital to navigate the difficulties experienced in developmental education courses. While majority of the participants reported not attending church, all of them used their faith as a source of strength and support.

Theme 4: Achievers Interacted Positively With Peer Tutors

The fourth theme that emerged was that achievers experienced positive interactions and sessions with peer tutors. While tutoring proved to be a positive experience for achievers, there was a significant difference in peer and staff tutoring. Higher education institutions, including community colleges, are increasingly driven by outcomes. These outcomes include graduation rates and retention; therefore, more institutions, including Westside College, have begun to focus on improving student success. While there are a number of programs and strategies utilized by colleges to assist students in being successful, this theme focuses on one area that are designed to foster student success—tutoring. When examining the achievers’ experiences with this vital area of student services, there were polarizing results. While participants experienced positive peer tutoring experiences, they had negative staff or professional tutoring experiences.

Tutoring has been a significant component in the college education process since the founding of Harvard, and has expanded greatly since then. Every college campus has a tutoring center, or something similar in nature, to assist students with homework or to review assignments and papers. It is safe to call tutoring an essential part of the teaching and learning process. Eleven
of the 15 students in this study experienced tutoring and identified it as one of the main contributors to their success. Peer tutoring was overwhelmingly the preferred choice of learning assistance.

Melonee explained that she passed her developmental math course by going to tutoring every day. She shared, “I think I passed it by at least going to tutoring every day. I had two hourly sessions three days a week and that really helped. MyMathLab really helped me too.” She continued that she was determined to do her part. In some cases, she missed out on things with her family and friends to complete her math homework on time or to spend more time with her peer tutor. Laquintina fully supported tutoring for math and stated, “Tutoring was great for math. The tutors that I had were very patient.” She explained that sometimes she did not realize that she was missing steps when solving problems on her own. Tutoring made a significant difference in whether she passed the class. She stated:

I had student tutors. Anytime I went I had student tutors. It was great. It’s just… I realized that most of the time I only went with, like, one issue that I had. Then I realized that once you get that one issue down, then you’re able to complete the other stuff.

Ashley shared that she preferred peer tutors to staff tutors. She stated, “It’s your peers. That’s a good thing because you’re more comfortable asking this person from here than asking a teacher.” She was more comfortable with another student working with her. Melonee shared a similar perspective:

The student tutors, they were really helpful because they gave me what they experienced when they took the same classes that I’m going through. That actually helped me. They gave me some of their notes and showed me some shortcuts and how to do the math
problems the easy way instead of doing [them] the long, long, harder way the professors show you.

Ray explained the difference in math and writing tutoring while emphasizing that he preferred the writing tutoring to math tutoring. He also was not fond of the way tutor was structured. He shared:

For math, I didn’t like the tutoring, because I went to math lab. I was like, “Can you show me how to do this?” Then they’ll just write down the whole problem and they do the whole thing themselves. Then, they’ll be like, “Just here, look at that,” and stuff. If you’re doing it by yourself and I don’t understand it, then what am I looking at? I went to one old guy, he was like, “Just show me what you want to do, and I’ll do it.” He did the whole thing, and then another young guy was showing, he would say it, but then still like, I don’t really understand. Then, they don’t really stay with you. They give you some block or something [and] you can flip it over when you need help. It’s like you’re just there, lost, to me. They’ve got computers that you can work on homework, but then one problem, they’ll just leave. I’ve got 10 more problems I need help with.

On the contrary, he enjoyed his writing tutoring as he shared:

Then, with writing, I like it because they’re straightforward with you, and they give you a slip at the end of the tutoring thing to give to your teacher for extra credit. If they don’t understand, they’ll tell you, “You did a good job here,” or, “You forgot the comma,” and stuff. They don’t do everything for you. They just edit it and then they give you key points on how to make it better. If they don’t understand the purpose of the essay, then they can’t really help you. I really liked the help from them.
Justin also mentioned the extra credit earned by going to tutoring. He contributed his knowledge of tutoring to his professor who required it. He stated:

I stayed in tutoring. To be honest, if it wasn’t for one of my professors, we used to get graded for going to tutoring. The reason why is because I didn’t even know the tutoring center existed. Some people still don’t, so with that being said, it’s like they break everything down so you really can understand it.

Laquintina was a strong advocate for tutoring and attributed her success in all developmental math courses to tutoring. She said:

Whenever I need help with something, I get there early so I can go to tutoring. I’m in tutoring before and after class, at the weekends, and I’m like, “Give me your number because I still don’t get this.”

She elaborated by admitting she was in tutoring when they opened every day. She stated:

That was my very first math class, and if not for the Learning Center, I don’t think I would’ve passed that class. I got with the tutors in the Learning Center and became good friends with them. They were like, “We’ve got you. Come here before class, after class.” My classes started at 9:05, I would be there at seven o’clock waiting on them to open the door. “This is what she gave us yesterday. I don’t understand this.

Research Question 2:

Factors that Contributed to the Persistence of Achievers

While the two research questions contain some overlap in content, it is imperative to clearly show each research question was answered. This section includes three themes that addressed the achievers perceptions of their persistence, including clearly defined goals, help seeking behaviors, and intrinsic motivation.
Theme 1: Achievers Persisted Because of Clearly Defined Goals

The first theme that emerged was that achievers persisted because of clearly defined goals. As I analyzed the data, this theme emerged as all achievers had established clear mid- to long-term goals. I defined mid- to long-term goals as aspirations beyond the associate’s degree. All participants had concrete plans to pursue after Westside College. These goals had passed the test of the many difficulties each achiever had faced and was still facing in their academic and personal lives. The participants were deeply committed to their mid- to long-term goals. Many of them had discovered their purpose or passion and were working vigorously to fulfill that purpose. Jasmine discussed how she witnessed family members receiving public assistance and how that helped her clarify and hone in on her goal of becoming a social worker. She stated:

When I was growing up, I was always saying that I wanted to be a social worker. I know that you have to have a bachelor’s degree for that. I was just like... different family members being on housing and food stamps and stuff like that. I knew that I didn’t want to be that one. I didn’t want to be the one to settle for this or just do enough just to get this. I knew that I wanted more out of life, so I have to do something to get that. I was like, “I can’t stop here.”

Jasmine’s family had a strong impact on her motivation, because she wanted to be the one person who created a better life. She elaborated on why she had never given up:

I don’t like to... what is it called? Give up on what I started. Just seeing the different people in my family and stuff. I just knew that I didn’t want to be like this for the rest of my life, or settle for working at Walmart or Walgreens. Just knowing that I can do more. No one can take that away from you. Like I said, when I was younger, people always said I was naïve. I would always give all my stuff away. Sometimes people would just take
stuff. I felt like by doing this and achieving this, nobody can take that from me. From them thinking that I’m naïve, “Oh, you really think I’m naïve now? I’m going to show you that I’m not.”

Samantha, who was extremely saddened by the demographic make-up of her developmental reading and writing course, emotionally questioned why the majority of her class was African American. She has chosen to become a pharmacist to combat this narrative in the African American community. She shared:

As African Americans, we have to be educated. We definitely have to be educated. It’s the key to racism. If first we educated, that could stop. I definitely want to be educated so I can go to different communities. Because I want to be a pharmacist. When I become a pharmacist, I want to go back to the different African American communities and be like, “You can do it.” It’s not just because they’re uneducated, or the good food stamps, and blah, blah, blah. It’s just because they don’t have time. It’s not because we’re uneducated, like people say.

In addition to clarified goals, the achievers adjusted their mindset to ensure these goals would be realized. Majority of the participants, regardless of age or gender, discussed how adjusting their mindset contributed to their success and ultimately kept them focused on their mid- to long-term goals.

All of the achievers shared how extremely important it was to take the developmental courses serious. They emphasized how important the courses were to achieving their ultimate goals. Nate shared:
Take it seriously. Don’t think that just because it’s a developmental class that you really don’t need it. It actually helps you out a lot. To me it put me in that mode to actually get into the college life and everything. The college experience.

Justin took it further by saying students needed to change their mindset and priorities to be successful. He stated:

You got to have your priorities in line. You got to know the reason why you going to school and what you [are] going to school for, because I ain’t going to lie to you, when I was going to Navarro, I changed my degree plan so many times. I didn’t know what I wanted to do with myself so when I really went into the real world I know what I wanted to do.

Furthermore, achievers attributed not staying discouraged as the reason for their success in developmental courses. While all participants were discouraged when they started their collegiate journey in non-college level courses, half of the participants emphasized the importance of moving past the discouragement. Jennifer said, “I believed in myself that I can actually do it.” Ray elaborated by saying “developmental” does not mean a person is dumb or stupid. He continued:

There’s a lot of great people out there that still had to take developmental classes. They just don’t say it. They don’t want to seem like they started at the bottom. They just want people to see their success. They don’t want people to see their struggle. People see your struggle, they will see your success. Your struggle is as important as your success.

It was important for achievers to conquer the discouragement to stay focused on their clearly defined goals. They began to view the courses as a starting point, not an ending point. Setting clear goals focused on their purpose was significant in moving in, through, and out of
developmental education. Because of the dedication to these goals, achievers shifted their mindset and moved past the initial discouragement that could have prohibited them from being successful. When they recognized the courses as a small part of their overall journey to their mid- to long-term goals, they were able to achieve success in spite of difficulties. It is important that institutional agents assist students who might not have clear goals move through the process of creating them. In addition to persisting because of clear mid- to long-term goals, achievers had to conquer the notion of help seeking.

Theme 2: Achievers Persisted Because of Help-Seeking Behaviors

The second theme that emerged was that achievers persisted because of help-seeking behaviors. In the African American community, seeking help proves to be difficult, particularly in an educational setting (Palmer, 2015). The achievers in this study realized they would not have been successful if they did not seek assistance. Twelve of the 15 participants sought help from professors and tutors. Jasmine stated, “If you need help, don’t be afraid to raise your hand or go out for outside help.” She further shared in a very serious tone, “I took advantage of all the tutoring, all the notes, all the outside help that I could get.” No matter how the students felt about seeking help, the achievers identified it as critical to their success. While peer tutoring was identified as the main contributor to the achievers’ success, this theme highlighted that help was received from other intuitional agents—some professors and some academic advisors.

Rendón’s (1994) validation theory thoroughly describes the importance of institutional agents in the lives of students of color. Institutional agents include all employees with whom students come in contact when enrolling in and matriculating through and out of the college. Validation from institutional agents such as advisors and professors played a major role in the
success of half of the students in this study. Of course, peer tutors were the most influential institutional agents, followed by academic advisors and professors.

Academic advisors as institutional agents. While the majority of the participants had negative interactions with academic advising, six achievers contributed a portion of their success to the relationship with their advisor. Destiny shared that since she enrolled, she had kept the same advisor who encouraged her and provided her with accurate information. She stated, “I always request him.” Higher education literature indicates that multiple meetings with the same academic advisors contributes to student success in developmental education courses (Bahr, 2012). Maria shared very important advice that her advisor told her when she first registered for classes:

I had an advisor tell me that... because math has never been my strong suit, so she said to me, “Maria, that’s not your strong suit. It might be a good idea for you to take all of your math classes and get them out of the way. That way, what you get from one class you can take it to the next class and so on,” versus you saying, “Okay, I took that math class. Whew, I don’t want to think about math again.” take another class and then having to go back and try to remember from the last class that was probably a couple of semesters ago or whatever, so that, I took that and was like, “Okay, even though I don’t like math, I’m just going to go ahead and knock them all the way out.” That was helpful to me because what I learned in the last class, I see some of that in this class too.

This advice shared by Maria’s advisor made a tremendous difference in her journey through developmental education courses. Without that advice, she may not have finished the developmental math courses in two years.
Justin even developed a friendship with his advisor and recommended that every student follow suit. He stated:

I would recommend you to get a relationship with your advisor. The reason why I say that is because you have to get used to doing stuff on your own as far as with Blackboard, with E-Connect, and E-Connect and Blackboard. You can’t expect your advisor to always be there. You got to learn how to do that for yourself. Now, I just go to him for advice. I have a friendship with him.

Professors as institutional agents. Similar to advisors, some professors were strong institutional agents for achievers in this study. While the classroom environment proved to be chilly and even uncomfortable, the validation of professors was critical to students’ success. In some cases, even if the student did not enjoy the style of lecture, they believed that the professor cared for them and wanted them to succeed in the course. For example, Liberty contributed her success to her professor. She stated:

I really feel like I was successful by the professors having patience and re-explaining and actually doing it step-by-step and not having the attitude of, “You should have got it the first time.” They really encouraged me.

She further explained:

Math was not my strongest suite and because I had the professors... they wanted us to get it. They expressed that when we first started at Westside College, that it is their job to make sure that we get it. They made themselves available to us if we did not get it right away.

Students were engaged and successful in classes where the professor was intentional in making them feel comfortable and validating where they were academically in spite of their fears.
“I was really scared when I started that intermediate class, but the professor, she was really good.” While seeking assistance from institutional agents was difficulty for achievers, college success courses, which will be discussed next, usually facilitated the help seeking behaviors.

College success courses prompted help-seeking behaviors. Westside College often pairs developmental education courses with a college success course that focuses on non-cognitive factors that contribute to college success. Research has shown that college success courses are important in students’ transition (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). While Westside College does not require students to enroll in these courses, academic advisors are highly encouraged to place developmental education students in these courses. These courses are designed to show students how to navigate the college experience, which includes the importance of seeking help when needed. Justin clearly articulated the purpose of the college success course at Westside and was thankful that his advisors put him in the course. He stated:

That’s why they have us taking the human development [college success] course, and I appreciate the fact that my advisor put me in that class. Basically the professor instilled a lot of encouragement in us. That is what the class was about. It was all about accepting as far as being successful in college and in the future. It was essential. At the time I didn’t realize it, but it is because without me taking that class, I wouldn’t know the stuff that I know now.

He gladly elaborated on the things he learned in the course. What he explains is critical to the success of college students. He stated:

Basically, with that course, it’s like somebody guides you as far as what to expect in college, what not to expect, to go beyond and above about all your capabilities. Don’t be
scared to ask questions. Always ask your instructor questions. You’re not paying him, but that’s what you paying tuition for. It’s like their job to do that. I learned how to properly write emails because when I first started school I didn’t know how to write emails. I’m not computer literate so I didn’t really know how to write emails properly.

While seeking outside help is not customary in African American culture, the achievers in this study realized how essential it was to their success and sought assistance often. Their college success courses, professors, and advisors encouraged and reinforced help seeking behaviors making it vital to their achievement of success.

Theme 3: Achievers Persisted Because of Intrinsic Motivation That Stemmed From Difficult Life Experiences

The third theme that emerged was that achievers persisted because of intrinsic motivation that stemmed from difficult life experiences. Every participant in this study had tears when they talked about the reasons why they wanted to earn a college degree. It was evident that each student had carefully thought through why they persisted in spite of their past life struggles and the discouraging developmental education courses. When analyzing these data, a resounding and even surprising theme was the intrinsic motivation that stemmed from previous difficulties or struggles. Intrinsic motivation was focused solely on the internal factors that fueled them when their journey was tough and when they felt like quitting.

This theme primarily focused on the clearly articulated “why,” not the “what,” that contributed to each student’s persistence. Typically, when colleges recruit students and parents, the recruiters share what the students would be able to do with their earned credential. For instance, a nursing program recruiter might share that their graduates are licensed nurses who can work in various settings and make a certain salary. Rarely do institutions help students
uncover why they should choose to earn the credential. In this study, the intrinsic motivation called the “why” kept achievers committed even when they repeatedly failed developmental education courses. All participants reported the urge to quit at some point in their collegiate journey, but all actively chose not to. This theme uncovered the grit and resilience of the achievers. Four reasons emerged related to the students’ motivation, including desire for independence from government assistance, being a role model for their family, tragic events, and the difference in male intrinsic motivation.

Desire to be independent from government assistance. Four of the participants mentioned how they did not want to utilize public assistance such as food stamps or welfare. Liberty discussed why she chose to get her cosmetology license years ago. She shared, “I was constantly on food stamps. I wanted to be off of the system knowing I can make more money for my family and not have to always have the support of the system. I went back to cosmetology school.” She further discussed why it was important to earn her degree in teaching. She described it as a calling and emphasized that she did not want to struggle financially anymore. She stated:

My ultimate reason is because I know the passion that I have for teaching and I want to see the end result. I want to see myself in that classroom with my own class. That’s what I want. That end result of I have my certification, I’m in the class, and I’m making a difference for those students that are coming up. I’m going to tell you what kept me going, because I know if I don’t keep going I’m going to still be scraping the bottom of the barrel income wise.

Ashley, who was still utilizing public assistance, emotionally discussed how she hated receiving those benefits. When asked why she enrolled in college and continued to persist, she immediately mentioned food stamps. She shared:
I’m going to go in there [Westside College] and I’m going to get off of food stamps, get off of Medicaid. I want my own house. That’s what really pushes me. That’s what made me come back. Having three kids, to raise them and look up to me. I don’t want my kids to look at nobody else as a role model. I want my kids to look at me as a role model. That’s why I decided to come back.

She tearfully discussed how her children hold her in the highest regard. In spite of not having any support, she continues to be motivated. She shared:

My motivation comes from my life, my experiences, what I’ve been through. I know that I already hit rock bottom and I don’t want to stay there. I want to keep moving up. I learned that had to come from me. It doesn’t come from nobody else. I feel like you’re not looking from no support from nobody because nobody has your back but yourself.

Jasmine discussed how she witnessed family members receiving public assistance and how that drove her to stay focused on her goal. Her family had a strong impact on her motivation, because she wanted to be the one person who created a better life. She elaborated on why she has never given up:

I don’t like to... what is it called? Give up on what I started. Just seeing the different people in my family and stuff. I just knew that I didn’t want to be like this for the rest of my life, or settle for working at Walmart or Walgreens. Just knowing that I can do more. No one can take that away from you. Like I said, when I was younger, people always said I was naïve. I would always give all my stuff away. Sometimes people would just take stuff. I felt like by doing this and achieving this, nobody can take that from me. From them thinking that I’m naïve, “Oh, you really think I’m naïve now? I’m going to show you that I’m not.”
Role model for family. Four of the 15 participants mentioned that being a role model for their children was the reason they continued to persist. Josephine, whose son helped her with her math homework, often shared that her children were the reason she was determined to finish. She shared:

I decided to return back to school because I always wanted to complete my college degree, but as my children grew older, I decided that it was really time to complete it so that I could show my children that an advanced degree is needed in today’s society. Only because of my kids. To be honest with you. It was only because of my kids. I just couldn’t show them that I gave up because I don’t want to grow up and be like, “My mom’s good. She works at a bank. She’s this. She makes X amount of dollars, being comfortable.” I didn’t want them to see that. I want them to see that, “My mom didn’t give up. She just kept going.”

Maria shared a similar perspective:

I have a purpose. I have somebody, a little person that’s watching me so… I have a son. My son is very smart, but I also… it’s really important for me to show him that when you have a goal, you don’t quit because you may not, you know, there’s bumps in the road. You have to keep going and so, for me, him watching me helps me go on even though I have to go to work, cook dinner, get him to school, you know, all that and still… there’s no quitting because of him.

Tasha, who was a grandmother at the age of 36, credited her 2-year-old grandson for her new desire to finally earn her nursing degree. She shared:

I want to be a nurse. I’ve always wanted to be a nurse. I have a 21-year-old, well 22. I had her when I was 14, so it’s always been my goal to try to just achieve my dream. I
have a grandson, [and] I need for him to see his grandmother make it as well. I haven’t just been to school to just hurry up and get through it, it’s been a process, but it’s been challenging because I waited a little later in life to continue this. I have achieved so many great things in my life. I’m a recovering addict, and it’s just something that I want to do. I want to just be able to overcome my obstacles and be what I dream to be.

Promise to lost loved ones. Two participants reported that they made promises to family members who passed away to complete their college degree. Melonee lost her dad her first semester at Westside College and promised him she would finish. She shared, “I lost my dad. He is the motivation to continue with school. I made a promise to him that I will keep.” Laquintina lost her grandmother who raised her and had difficulty grieving her loss. She even attempted suicide. When asked why she never gave up while in developmental education, she credits her grandmother. She shared:

The last thing I told my grandmother, standing over her coffin was, “I’m going to be a nurse before I leave this world. You’re going to be proud of me because I’m going to get this nursing certificate.” That has been my motivation. Whenever I feel like I don’t want to do it, I want to quit, I just think about it, and I can hear her saying, “You stop if you want to. I’m going to slap you from heaven all the way to hell.” Bam. I stay focused. Sometimes I get scared when I see certain things and I don’t know how to do something, but I figured it out. If you don’t ask, you don’t know.
Males intrinsic motivation differed from females. Two of the three males reported going to college and their determination to achieve their goal of earning a degree grew from not ever wanting to work manual labor in warehouses. Nate, who did not even consider attending college after high school, decided to enroll after working extremely hard in a warehouse. He shared:

I worked in the warehouse loading trucks. It really hit me when I was in my trailer one time just thinking. I just think when I’m working, I just think. That just stopped, I was like, “This is not going to be my life. This isn’t going to work.” My dad always said, “A college degree doesn’t mean anything when you have it, it means everything if you don’t have it. Basically what I’m saying is people that don’t have a college degree won’t get as good of a job as people that do have college degrees,” and I kept thinking about that. So I started looking at some stuff, seeing what I could major in. Even if I’m just going for my basic, I need something. When I told him that, I came to talk to him, and he said, “After a year, it took you that long to realize you weren’t going to go anywhere?” You could hear him bust out laughing. I said, “Yeah, that was my lesson.”

Justin had a similar experience, but he worked in a warehouse longer then Nate. He emphasized that the warehouse forced him to get his priorities straight. He reflected on how his friends responded when he started school and took it extremely serious:

I try to encourage my friends to be in school. I don’t want to go to work and just to work just to pay a house or apartment, car off. Living the paycheck. I’m not trying to live like that so basically they don’t understand I can’t go to these bars and these clubs and stuff like that. At first they were kind of mad about that because they were like, “Oh you just trying to be funny because you in school.” No, I had to take the time out to study. Society basically taught me how the real world works as far as not having a degree. I don’t want
to be that person you see at Walmart. I don’t want to live like that. I’m not trying to be funny at all. It’s like my priorities start kicking in.

Ray’s motivation surrounded his future family and children. He shared:

Just thinking about the future. When I have kids, I don’t want to be looking around me, and being like, “I could have done better.” I don’t want to be, like, in Section 8. I don’t want to have food stamps. Nothing like that. I want to be able to look at my wife, and say, “We did it. I did it. I did all this. I have no regrets. I’m proud of myself.”

All participants utilized aspirational capital to be successful in the developmental education courses that prove to be a barrier for the nearly 90% of African American students required to enroll in developmental education courses. Yosso (2005) defined aspirational capital as committing to hopes and dreams in spite of real or perceived barriers. In this study, the required developmental education courses were both real and perceived barriers for all of the participants. For many participants, there were other barriers as well. Because the students knew and understood their “why,” or the intrinsic motivation inside of them, they were able to persist in, through, and beyond the developmental education courses. In addition to knowing this intrinsic motivation, all participants had clarified mid- to long-term goals and had discovered how to seek help in order to be successful.

Perception of Developmental Education Courses: Bridge or Barrier?

Complete College American (2012) released a controversial report entitled, *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere* in 2012 documenting how broken the remediation system was in higher education at both universities and community colleges. Similar to the majority of the work on developmental education, this report focused on the number of students who do not achieve success in developmental education. This study examined the experiences and
perceptions of students who were successful in completing all required developmental education courses. Participants were asked if they felt the developmental education courses were necessary to their success in college. All participants viewed developmental education courses as a bridge to their success. While most participants were discouraged when they were placed into them, after completing them and enrolling in the gateway courses, the students realized the courses were essential to their success. Jennifer stated, “Even though I don’t like developmental classes, they are a big help. They are. They really are.”

The participants felt that developmental math was essential more than developmental reading and writing. Beyoncé stated that since she had been out of high school for so long, it was necessary. She said:

I think that the developmental class really helped a lot with preparing me for college algebra. Yes, I guess because I graduated from high school so long ago and kind of forgot about different things, but I guess for someone that’s coming right out of high school then they may come in college ready for it.

Similarly, Tasha shared:

It really, really helped. I know a lot. I think it’s good to have the developmental classes because I know what I’m doing and I’m more confident. That’s a really good thing, especially in math.

While she acknowledged that classes were critical to her transition back to the college environment, another nontraditional student, Josephine, did not feel she needed all the courses. She stated:

I really feel like I just could’ve took the last one to bring me up to speed and then we could go from there. I just feel that it’s just too many developmental classes. We have this
number, that number, this number. Why not just make it all combined or semester programs to just bring you up to speed instead of spreading it all out? Why do you have to do 3 and 4 and different things like that? I do know that a combined course was implemented like a year or so ago but it’s only for certain majors, only if you’re not majoring in this, or majoring in that, then you can take this dual math situation. Why not make it like that for every major? It’s a waste of money and it’s a waste of time. Just try to get some kind of curriculum that can give me a whole build upon situation and if I pass that class then I can move on instead of going step by step by step.

Even Samantha, who was extremely upset to be placed in developmental classes, appreciated the course. She shared:

> It definitely helped me because when I took DMAT last fall... I was thinking the same thing. I was like, “I’m taking this 8-week course. How is this integrated algebra going to help me with my regular algebra class?” Then I looked when I took algebra in January through now. I was like, “Oh, wow,” because I still was remembering the stuff from intermediate algebra. I think the reason why I didn’t do good in algebra was because it was still like DMAT, but I think it was coming up so fast.

After passing her fast track developmental math course, Samantha failed college algebra and realized she needed to slow down to focus on the content. Ray shared the same perspective. He stated:

> Every single last one of them did. I even have to repeat... I repeated the DMAT 310, and the reason why I repeated that, that was my fault because I took a lot of courses that semester and I said, “You know what? I’m going to do the assignments later on.” I failed that course... I made like a 67 in that class and I was mad at myself. I told you with that
DMAT you have to have certain problems done, and ever since then, I was like, “Dang,” because I was burnt up because I had been going to summer school and everything. So, with that being said, that was motivation to me too. I went back and I retook that class during the Christmas break and I made a higher score than what I did the first time in that class.

All participants referred to the developmental courses as a bridge to success. One participant dramatically emphasized that the courses helped her build up to the college-level classes. She stated:

No, no, no I needed... the developmental classes. They are the step to the next step, so it does help. It really does help. It’s just like steady building, building, building, building, and I kind of getting lost in there somewhere, but as I think back, it’s just going back to the basic step. If you could add, subtract, divide, and multiply, you can do math.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of African American community college achievers who successfully passed all required developmental education courses and were enrolled in the gateway college-level course during the interview. Qualitative methods were used to uncover the essence of the 15 participants’ experience as well as the perceptions they had of their ability to persistence. Twelve were female and three were male, ranging in age from 20 to 52 years old. Six were required to enroll in only two developmental education courses, while nine required three or more developmental education courses. The average number of developmental education courses among the achievers was three, ranging from two to six. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that were transcribed and analyzed using an anti-deficit achievement lens (Harper, 2010). Furthermore, Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model and Rendón’s (1994) theory of validation was utilized in the analysis process. While there is a considerable amount of literature on developmental education, there is limited research utilizing qualitative inquiry focused specifically on African American students.

Due to the dearth of qualitative research on students in developmental education courses, the results add significant research to community college, developmental education, and African American education scholarship. Results are consistent with the limited research on African American community college student experiences, which suggest they experience many barriers earlier in life that may hinder them from excelling academically at all levels of education, thus having greater distance to travel in terms of educational attainment than their Caucasian counterparts (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008; Wood & Harris, 2014). Results revealed that their pre-college experience was as important as their current college experiences in persisting
through developmental education courses. Another theme revealed that achievers repeatedly asked for help from tutoring services and their professors, and this differed from existing literature on African American students success, particularly for males who rarely seek help in an educational setting (Greene et al., 2008; Palmer, 2015). Many themes are consistent with Yosso’s (2005) and Rendón’s (1994) theories in that the majority of participants expressed the importance of familial, institutional, and personal support. Four forms of capital (e.g., spiritual) played a major role in their persistence through non-college-level coursework. Institutional support aligned seamlessly with validation theory in that students who felt their institutional agents (e.g., professors, tutors, advisors) cared about them experienced fewer perceived obstacles than their peers (Rendón, 1994, 2002). The intrinsic motivation theme adds to existing literature in terms of personal drive, and understanding the reason why they desired to earn a college degree was the top contributor to success for students in this study.

In answering the first research question in this study, results revealed that all achievers experienced obstacles in their pre-collegiate experiences that impacted their ability to focus on their academics. Some achievers experienced abuse from their stepfathers while others experienced moving from apartment to apartment due to the inability of their parents to pay rent. Other achievers experience teen pregnancy, an experience that delayed but did not deny them their degree attainment dreams.

The majority of the achievers experienced high school as average students in their academics and extracurricular activities. During the interview, I uncovered that it was important for each student to meet the expectations of their parents. While they did not strive to be average students, they were interested in not being punished by their parents who consistently expected the minimum passing grades. Thus, achievers were not required by their parents or even their
high school teachers, counselors, or administrators to put forth a concerted effort to move beyond average, so they did not. While the literature in this study did not identify students in developmental education as middle achieving students, the findings suggested it was one of the characteristics, thus adding to the research on the diverse demographics of the population required to enroll in this level of instruction.

Only four of the 15 achievers participated in college preparation programs. The programs ranged from the federally-funded TRIO programs to a program created by the high school with the intent to prepare students for college. Three of the four students who participated in a college preparation program were surprised and even upset that they were required to enroll in developmental education. Three of the four achievers were between 20 to 21 years of age and had recently graduated from high school. They felt the high school failed at preparing them for college. One suggested the senior year be utilize to bridge the gap between high school and college by preparing for the placement exam as opposed to plenty of free time. On the contrary, 11 of the 15 achievers did not have access to a college preparation program and wished they had. Research states that college preparation programs vary in effectiveness (McDonough, 2005; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). The results of this study showed that all participants felt that college preparation programs could have prevented them from enrolling in developmental education. While that is a sound conclusion, the reality is the research does not consistently show college preparation programs lead to success (McDonough, 2005; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000).

The enrollment process for students in community colleges can be confusing and complex. The process includes completing the online admissions application, taking the placement exam, and meeting with an academic advisor. Consistent with the confusion and complexity of the enrollment process, results show that while the majority of achievers had little
difficulty with the online application, they had much difficulty with the placement exam and academic advising. Most participants revealed that they thought about studying for the placement exam, but did not know how or what to study. There is little literature on the effects of placement preparation (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Scott-Clayton, 2012) and whether or not it increases students’ scores. Many of the achievers took the exam the same day they completed the application. Because they received limited advising prior to taking the exam, they reported not adequately understanding the implications of not achieving the cutoff score. One achiever took all sections (i.e., reading, writing, and math) in one sitting after work, starting at 3:00 p.m. He remembered finishing the test around 7:00 p.m. When asked if he felt he would have achieved a better score had he not taken it after work, he said yes. He also added that he thought he would have achieved a better score if he had taken one section of the test at a time. However, he confirmed that, due to his work schedule and caring from his grandmother who has dementia, he did not have time to take a test on three separate occasions. There should be additional research focused on the effectiveness of placement preparation (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Scott-Clayton, 2012). After taking the placement exam, the final step of the enrollment process is to meet with an academic advisor.

Academic advising can be used to increase the success of students in developmental education courses (Bahr, 2008; Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). Bahr (2008) concluded that enhanced academic advising throughout the developmental education journey increased success for students in the lowest levels of developmental education. The findings in this study revealed that nine of the 15 achievers experienced difficulty with academic advising at Westside College. The achievers experienced working with incompetent advisors who, in some instances, attempted to advise them to enroll in applied degree programs because they were required to take
developmental courses, consequently requiring them to take unnecessary courses that prolonged their enrollment. One achiever thoroughly explained how unhappy the advisors seemed to be at doing their job. Because of these experiences, many achievers did not consistently meet with advisors; they only did so as required. On the other hand, six of the achievers developed a relationship with their advisor during their first meeting when they were enrolled in their developmental education courses, and they consistently visited the same advisor throughout their developmental education journey. After the achievers experienced the enrollment process, they described their difficulties inside developmental education classrooms.

The learning environment is critical to the success of students at any level of education. This environment is particularly important for students who fall in the gray area of successfully graduating from high school, but who are labeled non-college ready (i.e., students in developmental education courses). Experiences in the classroom include the atmosphere and the level of engagement from peers and professors. Twelve of the 15 achievers described the atmosphere as very quiet. One achiever even used the word “boring,” while another summed up the atmosphere by saying it was “strained.” The majority of the achievers felt nervous and anxious about being labeled as dumb or stupid. In most instances, the environment felt chilly because only a few of the students wanted to be there. Literature that addressed campus or even classroom climate defines chilly as an environment unconducive for teaching and learning (Salter, 2013). The finding adds to the literature on creating a classroom environment that debunks all stigmas felt by students required to enroll in developmental courses.

Because of the chilly atmosphere, there was limited engagement with peers and professors in the classroom. The level of engagement differed significantly by age group. For the six achievers over the age of 30 years old, they were highly engaged and felt they needed to
connect with the professor and peers in order to be successful. One achiever even laughed about asking so many questions during class. She felt she was getting on her peers’ nerves, but that did not stop her from engaging. While this study’s literature review did not address differences between nontraditional and traditionally-aged students, the results suggested that there are differences that should be explored. In this study, there were a couple instances where age did not equal engagement, but that was not the case for most of the achievers.

The mode of instruction made a significant impact on success for the achievers in this study, particularly in math courses. The majority of the achievers were unsuccessful in online math developmental education courses. This finding is consistent with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) study that concluded that students enrolled in online developmental math courses experience less success than students in traditional face-to-face settings (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Multiple achievers strongly advised other students not to enroll in any online developmental education courses. If students needed convenience, achievers suggested registering for fast-track or accelerated courses instead of online courses. Fast-track courses are offered at Westside College as 8-week courses, instead of the traditional 16-week courses. Offering fast-track courses is consistent with the developmental education research (Complete College America, 2015; Hodara, 2014). For example, one achiever took both her developmental integrated reading/writing and gateway Composition I course in one semester; eight weeks in developmental integrated reading/writing and eight weeks in composition. While achievers experienced hardships early in life at home and in school, difficulty with placement and advising during the enrollment process, and chilly, minimally-engaged environments inside the developmental education classrooms, they still persisted.
In answering the second research question, results painted an intricate picture of factors that achievers identified as contributors to their success. At the center of their persistence was the use of capital and validation. Results were consistent with the three forms of capital in Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth theory, including spiritual capital (Huber, 2009). This theory intentionally focuses on the capital in which achievers possess rather than areas in which they lack. Findings indicated that familial capital was essential in 12 of the 15 achievers’ success. Despite the lack of much financial support from family, findings indicated that inspirational and practical support was necessary for success.

Inspirational support came in the form of encouraging words and much tough love. One achiever credited her mother, who is a military veteran, for firmly pushing her when she wanted to give up on her goal of achieving a college degree. Practical support came in the form of house chores and tutoring at home. All of the married achievers described their spouses cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the children while they focused on their homework. In addition to familial support, achievers cited community members, particularly church members or bible study groups, as contributors to their success. This finding was consistent with Yosso’s (2005) social and even spiritual capital (Huber, 2009), and also with literature surrounding the influence of church on African American persistence (Greene et al., 2008). Findings also reinforced the significance of institutional agents validating the experiences of minority, low-income student populations (Rendón, 1994, 2002).

In addition to family and community support, achievers credited tutoring and college success courses as instrumental to their success. This finding is consistent with academic learning support literature, particularly research focused on peer tutoring (George, Khazanov, & McCarthy, 2015). All participants who reported receiving tutoring services emphasized that peer
tutors helped them understand and retain the content rather than professional tutors. Consistent with literature on peer tutoring (George et al., 2015), this finding reinforces the critical need for well-trained peer tutors, especially for students in developmental courses. An unanticipated finding was that college success courses were an important institutional factor of success.

Though I did not include any questions about college success courses, achievers brought them up when describing why they felt they were successful. While there is limited literature surrounding college success, but in this study, the courses were as important as the actual developmental courses, particular in learning help-seeking behaviors. One achiever, who lost her grandmother right before she enrolled at Westside College, described the journal assignments in her college success course as critical to her forging towards her goal of becoming a nurse and making her late grandmother proud.

The final and most critical contributor to success for achievers was their intrinsic motivation. This includes understanding why they chose to pursue a college degree and their perception of how critical the enrollment in developmental education courses was to their success in the gateway courses. Research surrounding grit and resilience are echoed in the results of this study (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007; Strayhorn, 2014). After my sixth interview, I began to cogitate and reflect on the data collected thus far, and I was astonished by the tenacity of the participants in this study. When asked if they ever felt like giving up, all 15 achievers quickly said “of course.” Then, I followed up with, “Why did you keep going?” and the responses brought all achievers to tears. This theme surprised me, and the data adds to the existing literature on the success of students required to enroll in developmental education courses. Family and institutional factors were significant to the success of achievers in this study,
but their intrinsic motivation that stemmed from difficult life experiences was the most important by a landslide.

In response to the heightened scrutiny, researchers have been investigating whether developmental education is a bridge or a barrier to a college degree for low-income and minority-student populations. Another interesting finding indicated that all achievers felt their developmental education courses were, without a doubt, necessary and a bridge, not a barrier to success in gateway courses. It is important not to negate the fact that the majority of the achievers were not excited about taking two or more developmental courses that did not apply to their college graduation, and that they felt, as a result, that they were labeled as dumb. Bear in mind, the achievers were enrolled in the gateway courses at the time of the interview and were currently experiencing the content and rigor of College Algebra or English Composition I.

Implications for Policy

Developmental education lives in the often unexplored space between secondary and postsecondary education. The requirements for earning a high school diploma do not align with college readiness expectations from postsecondary education institutions. There is a strong need for reform to close this gap. While this study is not about placing blame or passing the proverbial buck, there is a need to call for policy changes at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. In this section, I have identified one policy change for secondary education and four for postsecondary education.

For secondary education, there is a need to transform the senior year of high school. Labor market data shows that students need at least a credential beyond their high school diploma to earn a livable wage. At the same time, the current U.S. leadership continues to push their completion agenda. With these things in mind, policy makers are well aware that earning, at
the minimum, a community college credential is advantageous for all students, including students who are pursuing trades that once only required an apprenticeship. Transforming the senior year of high school can address this issue. Instead of half days and a significant amount of free time, as one achiever described, the high school senior year could be used to prepare for life after high school. Whether the student will enter the workforce or attend college, policies could be implemented to ensure the senior year serves as a transitional bridge to students’ next step. If thoughtful policies are created and implemented correctly, the senior year transformation has the potential to decrease the number of students who test into developmental education, or at the very least, the number of years spent in developmental education.

For postsecondary education, there are four policy recommendations. First, there ought to be a required pre-placement course. While the reliability and validity of placement exams remain questionable (Scott-Clayton, 2012), the findings in this study suggest that students do not know how or what to study and are not adequately prepared to take the exams. While Westside College and other institutions across the U.S. require an online pre-assessment prior to the exam, I would recommend a face-to-face course to prepare students to take the placement exams. One way to implement this policy is to include this course in the senior year of high school. This would bridge the secondary and postsecondary educational gap. If students have been out of high school for several years, this policy could be implemented through continuing education departments. While this policy will need both human and financial resources to implement, there will be a return on investment when institutions reduce the number of faculty and staff to teach and support developmental education.

Second, a college success course ought to be required to provide holistic college readiness for students and should count as a general elective towards graduation. Conley (2012)
includes four key areas in his definition of college readiness, including (a) cognitive strategies, (b) content knowledge, (c) learning skills and techniques, and (d) transition knowledge and skills. The way American higher education currently measures college readiness and creates interventions to improve college readiness tends to focus on cognitive strategies and content knowledge areas. Learning skills and techniques and transition knowledge and skills are often ignored, but they are usually addressed in college success courses. The findings on college success courses emerged organically in this study, and students benefited greatly from the non-cognitive focus of the courses.

Third, all developmental education courses should be accelerated or provided as a co-requisite courses (Hodara, 2014; Parker, 2012). This is a recommendation based on my interpretation of the participants’ experiences and my understanding of the current higher education literature. Complete College America (2015) conducted national research on accelerating developmental education courses and found successful outcomes. In this study, the average length of time in developmental education courses for the achievers was 2.5 years, ranging from one to six years. Students earned an average of nine hours (ranging from 6 to 18 hours) that did not count toward their degree. Accelerating or providing courses as co-requisites would decrease the number of years in non-college-level coursework and the number of fruitless hours earned.

The final and most controversial recommendation for policy is that developmental education courses should be counted as credits toward a college degree or credential. Historically, no college credit has been given for these low-level courses, and this has impacted how students, professors, and support staff view developmental education courses. Not offering college credits for developmental education courses create a chilly environment for everyone
involved in developmental education. Students feel the courses are a waste of time and money because they do not count. Therefore, on the one hand, the developmental education courses are very important for the success of students who need them, but on the other hand, neither professors nor students value these courses because they do not count towards a degree. While this recommendation requires a shift in the way developmental education is offered, the positive outcomes would create a win-win for students and colleges alike.

**Implications for Practice**

Creating local, state, and national policies are important in improving developmental education for the more than 60% of community college students who require this level of instruction, but implementation and practice is just as vital. Three recommendations for practice should be considered by higher education and high school administrators. First, there should be a strong presence of college readiness coaches in high schools to make the most of the senior year. This recommendation applies to both secondary and postsecondary administrators and staff. High schools should work with community colleges to create senior year curriculum that prepares students for college readiness in all four key areas defined by Conley (2012). This should include enrolling in dual credit courses, placement exam preparation courses, and interacting with professors. High school senior year can and should be utilized so that college placement exam and college-level expectations are not foreign to high school graduates.

Second, there are significant improvements needed in terms of academic advising and tutoring. Academic advisors must be well trained to work with students prior to students taking placement exams and after their scores indicate that they are required to enroll in developmental education courses. Perhaps, there should be specialized academic advisors who are trained to work with this vulnerable student population. These academic advisors should be responsible for
assisting students in establishing mid- to long-term goals and demonstrating to them the benefits of seeking help. There is also a need for regular advising sessions with the same academic advisor. Along the same lines, institutions should invest in peer tutors in developmental English and math. Findings of this study indicate that professional staff tutors are not effective during tutoring sessions. Community colleges could hire peer tutors from surrounding universities to work with students.

Lastly, full-time faculty should teach developmental education instead of part-time and adjunct faculty. Research suggests that adjunct faculty are more likely to teach developmental education courses, but they are the least prepared to work with this vulnerable student population (Bahr, 2008). Because more than half of the community college population is enrolled in developmental education, institutions should provide trainings to faculty, including adjuncts, on how to create a positive learning environment and engage developmental education students.

Implications for Scholarship

Given that research on the experience of African American community college achievers in developmental education is nonexistent, this study provides a glimpse of the experiences of the participants in this study while deepening the understanding of African American students who experience this level of instruction. Because this study was grounded in phenomenological inquiry, the essence of the achievers’ experiences was uncovered. However, this is only the beginning in exploring this topic. There are several opportunities to explore this line of research further. First, perhaps a larger sample size may strengthen the findings in this study. Second, perhaps connecting this research to resilience theory or the concept of grit would provide better insight on why achievers who continuously experience obstacles never give up ((Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). If each participants were given the GRIT inventory
(Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), there could be implications to add to this line of research. There is also an opportunity for this study to utilize the underpinnings of the community college socio-ecological model.

Finally, future investigations could be conducted across race, socioeconomic status, and age. Is there a difference in experiences for Hispanics or Caucasian developmental education students? What about when disaggregating by age? Do nontraditional students experience and perceive persistence through developmental education differently than traditionally-aged students? I would also like to uncover how the students fully uncover their “why”? There are opportunities to explore all of these questions to further understand students who persist in, through, and out of developmental education.

Limitations

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of students from one community college in a specific region of the U.S. This is a limitation in that it does not account for other regions. Second, there are few studies focused on African American achievers in developmental education, making this study exploratory in nature. The final limitation is that there was a small quantity of male participants. While I utilized several recruitment methods to recruit male participation, I was unsuccessful. This is a critical limitation since degree attainment for African American males is much lower than their female counterparts, and I hope future research will address this limitation.

Conclusion

There are three major conclusions in this study. First, understanding the context of the achievers’ experience prior to enrolling in Westside College was critical in uncovering the essence of their experiences while enrolled in the community college. Failing to understand the
rich descriptions of the achievers’ pre-collegiate experiences and enrollment process would paint an inaccurate picture of how and what they experienced in the lowest level of college education. The achievers had similar backgrounds and pre-collegiate experiences to other African American students across the U.S. in general. These students, however, had a burning desire to strive to achieve degree attainment against all odds.

Second, achievers perceived the environment inside the developmental education classroom as strained or even chilly. They experienced very quiet classrooms with limited interaction with the professors and peers. Part of the dynamics of the environment stems from students being ashamed and nervous about taking developmental education courses. There is an overarching feeling of “less than,” or in the words of the achievers, dumb and stupid. The other part of this chilly environment stems from the pedagogy of the professors. Achievers repeatedly revealed that professors did not engage with them on the course content. Some reported that they were unsure if the professors cared about their success in the course. To combat the chilly environment inside the classroom, students turned to peer tutors who simultaneously eased their discouraging feelings and assisted them with the content of the course.

Last, achievers in this study knew, with no doubt, why they needed to persist through developmental education courses. All students had clear goals and could easily articulate why they needed to earn a college degree or what intrinsically motivated them. This finding also adds to the literature on developmental education success for African American students. Achievers revealed that when they wanted so desperately to quit, their “why” kept them focused on the goal. Community colleges should help students uncover their intrinsic motivation because that could improve the dismal outcomes for students in developmental education. To ignore the success of African American students who start in developmental education is to continue
disenfranchising this marginalized group of students and thus perpetuating their feeling of not belonging in postsecondary education.
APPENDIX A

INVITATION EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS
Dear (student name),

My name is Janice Hicks, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Daniel Chen, Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education. I want to examine the lived experiences of African American community college students who successfully complete all required developmental education courses. If you are African American, passed all your developmental education courses, have at least a 3.0 GPA, and have completed at least a semester following the completion of your developmental education classes, you are eligible to participate in this study!

All you need to do is participate in one (1) individual interview. Your interview will last 45 to 60 minutes and will occur at place and time convenient for you. Interviews will be recorded, but all participants will be given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. You will also receive $25 for your participation.

If you or someone you know may be interested in participating in this study, please reply to this email. If you have any questions about my research, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx, email: jmhicks@dcccd.edu, or my major professor, Dr. Daniel Chen, in the UNT College of Education, Department Counseling and Higher Education, at 940-369-8062 or Daniel.Chen@unt.edu.

Thank you,

Janice M. Hicks
Higher Education Program
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
College of Education
University of North Texas
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
Name_________________________________________________________________________

Gender: Male____ Female____ Age ___

Which best describes your college goals?

__ Complete a certificate and/or trade program and start working.
__ Complete my associate’s degree and start working.
__ Complete my “basics” and transfer to a 4-year college to complete a bachelor’s degree.
__ Complete my associate’s degree and transfer to a 4-year college to complete a bachelor’s degree.
__ Complete my associate’s degree and transfer to a 4-year college to complete a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree.
__ Other (please explain) _______________________________________________________

With whom do you live?

Self _____ Parents _____ Family members _____ Friends_____

Are you the primary caregiver for anyone (children, parents, siblings, etc.)? Yes ____ No _____
If yes, how many people are you responsible for? ______________

Are you working during the school year?

Not working _____ Full-time _____ Part-time _____ Other _____

Are you attending school?

_____ Part-time (6 hours or less)
_____ ¾-time (9 hours)
_____ Full-time (12 hours or more)

What is your parents’ and siblings’ highest level of education? (Please check)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Sibling 1</th>
<th>Sibling 2</th>
<th>Sibling 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/GED</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How many miles is your community college from your home?

_____ 0-10 miles  _____11-20 miles  _____ 21-30 miles  ______ More than 30 miles

How would you rate your community college on the following attributes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Very Unfavorable</th>
<th>Somewhat Unfavorable</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat Favorable</th>
<th>Very Favorable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Strength</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Reputation</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition Cost</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Facilities</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Safety</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Life</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Favorability</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you apply to any 4-year institutions after high school? Please circle: Yes or No

If so, how many? _________________________

Where you admitted to any 4-year institutions after high school? Please circle: Yes or No

If so, which ones?

Did you participate in any of the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Preparation Programs</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upward Bound</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent Search</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVID</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gear UP</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Please List</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you complete a…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Diploma</th>
<th>GED</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Procedures

- Begin session within 10 minutes of start time by introducing yourself.
- Hand out 2 copies of student consent form.
- Explain the form to participants, read through form and ask participants to sign. Explain to participants that one form is theirs to keep. Collect signed forms.
- The researcher should manage the timing of the discussion portion, to be completed within 70 minutes, ensuring time for students to complete questionnaire.

Introduction

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Describe your high school experience, including academics, involvement, and home life.
   a. What are some of the positive and negative experiences prior to attending college?

Lived Experiences

Perception of DE Courses

1. Tell me how you felt when you first learned you were required to enroll in developmental education courses.
2. What were your perceptions of developmental education courses prior to enrollment?

Placement Exam

3. When did you learn you had to take the placement exam?
4. Did you prepare for it?
5. Do you believe you would have achieved a higher score if you prepared? Why or why not?
6. Tell me about your experiences with the placement exam.

Atmosphere/Environment

7. Describe the environment in each of your developmental courses.
8. Were students engaged? Explain.
9. Did you interact with your peers? Explain.
10. Did you interact with your professor? Explain.
11. Do you feel your professor believed you were college material? That you could be successful?
    a. Why or why not.
12. Did you believe you were college material? That you could be successful?
    a. Why or why not.
Support
13. Describe the role of your family as you took your developmental education courses.
14. Describe the role of your community as you took your developmental education courses.
15. Describe the institutional support as you took your developmental education courses.
   a. Faculty
   b. Advising
   c. Tutoring
16. What are other factors that contributed to your success in developmental courses and now your college level course?

Perceptions about Persistence

Persistence
1. Why do you think you were successful in your developmental courses?
2. Did you ever want to quit? If so, why did you keep going?
3. What was the most difficult part of your developmental courses?

Semester Following Developmental Education Completion
1. Describe your experiences in non-developmental coursework.
   a. To what do you attribute your success after completing your developmental education classes?
   b. How are the college level courses different from the developmental education courses?
   c. How did developmental education influence your current academic experience?
   d. How did your family contribute to your success?
   e. How did your community contribute to your success?
   f. How did your institutional contribute to your success?

Advice for students and institutions
2. What are the top 3 reasons you feel you were successful in developmental education courses?
3. If you had to give students advice about taking developmental education courses, what would you say to them?

Wrap-Up
1. Is there anything else you would like to add?
2. Do you know of any others who would qualify to participate in this study?
3. How can I reach you if I need to ask follow-up questions?
4. I will be in contact with preliminary data to ensure I have accurately captured your experiences.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006
