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## MAKING THE TRANSITION: AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SOPHOMORES AT A MIDWESTERN RESEARCH-EXTENSIVE UNIVERSITY

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MAKING THE TRANSITION:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SOPHOMORES AT A MIDWESTERN  
RESEARCH-EXTENSIVE UNIVERSITY

By

Sheena Marie Kennedy

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

(Student Affairs Administration)

Under the Supervision of Professor Rachelle Winkle-Wagner

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 2010

MAKING THE TRANSITION:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SOPHOMORES AT A MIDWESTERN  
RESEARCH-EXTENSIVE UNIVERSITY

Sheena M. Kennedy, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2010

Adviser: Rachelle Winkle-Wagner

The purpose of this study was to explore the college experiences of African American females in their sophomore year at a Midwestern Research-Extensive institution. This study investigated these individuals' transitions to college and sought to understand their lived experiences. Also, the study examined what strategies these individuals employed to persist in college. The intent of this study was to contribute to research on African American women in higher education by documenting their experiences.

This study upheld the literature that African American students encounter feelings of isolation, alienation, and marginality on the college campus (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1998; Love, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Willie & McCord, 1972), have trouble balancing family issues with their transitional obstacles (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Love, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), and face a sense of academic unpreparedness (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Kobrak, 1992; Willie & McCord, 1972), and experience limited and often forced social connections (Davis, 1991; Davis, 2004; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Littleon, 2003; Museus, 2008; White, 1998; Willie, 2003).

After analyzing the data of eight face-to-face interviews of participants who were African American females in their sophomore year at the University, four major themes emerged: (a) Why Am I Here, (b) Reality Check, (c) Relate to Me, and (d) The Only Black Girl. The results from this qualitative study revealed how the participants got to college, aspects of college life they were not prepared for, their journey in establishing relationships, and feeling like they were the only one of their race present on campus. Implications for African American females, campus student groups, faculty members, and student affairs administrators and professionals are given, as well as recommendations for future research.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, for her guidance throughout the writing of my thesis. If she had not allowed me to assist her with research during my first year of graduate school, I would have not come upon the idea to look at the experiences of African American females at a predominately White institution. It has been a challenging and worthwhile process to conduct my study under the direction of a professor who truly cares about the experiences of students of color. Her expertise strengthened my study. Thank you Dr. Winkle-Wagner for investing time and effort into me!

Next, I must show my appreciation for my mother, Roxanne. As a single mother, she raised me to value education. No matter what, my mother supported my academic and career decisions. As a first-generation student, having encouragement from her was crucial to my development. Mom, thanks for inspiring me to do something with my life that enables me to help others persist in college. I could not have done it without your love.

Last, but not least, thank you to the participants who contributed their time and experiences to this study. Without these eight women, I would not have been able to give voice to their stories. May the field of education continue to shed light on the struggles of various student populations.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1—Introduction .....	1
Context.....	2
Research Questions.....	2
Definition of Terms.....	3
Overview of Study .....	4
Delimitations.....	5
Limitations .....	5
Significance of Study.....	6
Findings of Study.....	6
Chapter 2—Literature Review .....	8
Introduction.....	8
African American Students at PWIs .....	9
Alienation and Marginalization .....	11
Relationships with Family .....	13
Academics.....	14
Social Connections.....	17
Relationships with Fellow African American Students.....	17
Involvement .....	19
African American Women in College .....	21
Summary of the Literature .....	25
Theoretical Framework.....	25
Looking Ahead.....	29

Chapter 3—Methodology .....	30
Research Questions.....	30
Qualitative Research Design.....	31
Research Site.....	32
Participants.....	33
IRB Procedures .....	34
Data Collection .....	35
Interview Questions .....	38
Data Analysis .....	38
Researcher Reflection .....	40
Validity .....	41
Summary.....	42
Chapter 4—Findings.....	43
Introduction to Participants.....	43
Overview of Themes and Sub-themes .....	44
Theme #1: Why Am I Here .....	45
Family Influence .....	45
Self-Motivation .....	48
Theme #2: Reality Check.....	49
Grasping Independence.....	49
Adjusting to Academics .....	53
Theme #3: Relate to Me.....	58
Making Friends .....	58

Support of Learning Communities and Racial/Ethnic Student Groups.....	63
Mentoring.....	67
Theme #4: The Only Black Girl .....	69
Standing Out .....	69
Interacting with Other Black Students .....	72
Conclusion .....	74
Chapter 5—Discussion .....	75
Introduction.....	75
Summary of Findings.....	75
Linking Themes to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory .....	80
Research Sub-Question 1 .....	80
Research Sub-Question 2.....	82
Research Sub-Questions 3 and 4.....	83
Research Sub-Question 5.....	85
Recommendations for Practice .....	87
African American Females .....	87
Campus Student Groups .....	88
Faculty Members .....	89
Student Affairs Administrators and Professionals .....	89
Recommendations for Future Research .....	90
References.....	93
Appendices.....	98



## List of Tables

Table 1	Participant Demographic Information .....	36
Table 2	Participant Demographic Information Continued.....	37

## List of Appendices

Appendix A	Informed Consent Form.....	98
Appendix B	Recruitment Email to Potential Participations.....	101
Appendix C	Reminder Email to Participants .....	103
Appendix D	Participant Demographic Questionnaire .....	105
Appendix E	Semi-structured Interview Protocol .....	108
Appendix F	Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement .....	110
Appendix G	Master Code List.....	112
Appendix H	IRB Research Approval Letter.....	118

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Despite institutional attempts to support diversity in college, “the transition process can be challenging for some African American students attending a predominately White campus” (Littleton, 2003, p. 84). In order for the experiences of African American students to be enhanced, it is important to be cognizant of the perceived social isolation and alienation present at a predominately White institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Research on African American college students is limited and few studies focus on “the perceptions of African American students themselves” (Davis, 2004, p. 5). Willie (2003) reasoned that qualitative research on the experiences of African American college students “must be supported and encouraged so that we have more comparative data and can further appreciate the differences and similarities among groups” (p. 3).

There have been some studies on African American college students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), but little of this research looks at how the experience is perceived by African American female students. There is a scarcity of literature surrounding the lived experiences of African American females in college. Further, little research exists on African American female students attending a PWI. Through this study, I intended to fill this gap.

The purpose of this study was to explore the college experiences of African American females in their sophomore year at a Midwestern Research-Extensive university. This study investigated these individuals’ transitions to college and sought to

understand their lived experiences. Also, the study examined what strategies these individuals employed in order to persist in college. The intent of this study was to contribute to research on African American women in higher education by documenting their experiences.

### ***Context***

The literature indicates that African American college students experience social isolation, alienation, and distrust toward Whites (Fleming, 1984; Love 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Willie & McCord, 1972) as well as academic preparation disparities (Adams, 2005; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Kobrak, 1992). Yet, there is still relatively little work conducted specifically on the population of African American females.

### ***Research Questions***

The qualitative study explored the following grand tour question: What are the experiences of African American females in college? Additionally, I sought to explore the following sub-questions:

1. How do African American females describe the transition to college?
2. How do African American females perceive the campus environment of a predominately White college/university?
3. How do African American females describe their semester-to-semester persistence?
4. Who and what sustain African American female students along their journey?
5. What coping strategies do African American female students employ?

The research questions were influenced by Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, which views both life events and nonevents as having positive and negative implications on an individual. This theory discusses the ability for individuals to work through a transition depending on their situation, personal characteristics, support system, and coping strategies (also see Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman, 1995). Upon thorough examination of the literature and analysis of the data presented by the participants' face-to-face interviews, I was able to link the participants' responses to Schlossberg's theory.

### *Definition of Terms*

The following definitions are important for this study:

*Successful:* For purposes of this study, successful was defined as having achieved sophomore status. Students who completed freshman year and moved to sophomore status were on their way to obtaining an undergraduate degree (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 495).

*Transition:* Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as having occurred "if an event or nonevent results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5).

*College transition:* Described by Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, and Brower (1987) as "often a stressful and demanding period, during which many students confront new personal challenges and learn to cope with multiple demands" (p. 1179).

*African American:* Participants self-identifying as African American are defined by Garrett Park Press (as cited in Littleton, 2003) as "people having origins in any of the Black racial groups in Africa. This includes persons who may have come to the U.S. from

one of the Caribbean countries” (p. 87). The terms Black and African American are synonymous terms used by participants in this study and authors of related studies.

*PWI*: Predominately White institution. The terms predominately White colleges and universities (PWCUs) and PWI are synonymous terms.

*HBCU*: Historically Black college or university. The terms historically Black college or university and historically Black institution (HBI) are synonymous terms.

With the necessary terms defined, an overview of the study is provided.

### ***Overview of Study***

This was a qualitative study because “quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply [did] not fit the problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Quantitative questions would not have been able to fully describe the lived experiences of African American female college students. Like most qualitative studies, I, as the primary investigator, served as the primary instrument when collecting and analyzing data as “data collection involves fieldwork” (Miller, 2009, p. 1.8). I held face-to-face, 30-90 minute, semi-structured interviews with eight participants. Using the transcribed interviews, I collected information received from the participants and then analyzed it to reflect dominant themes. I coded the data and allowed themes to emerge. I employed the following validation techniques: (a) member checking, where participants can review their interview transcript and provide feedback, and (b) peer debriefing, where another person codes a portion of the transcripts and a comparison is made between the debriefer’s coding and my own. The information gained in the study was then restructured to highlight the themes.

### *Delimitations*

The study had delimitations because it was a qualitative study of face-to-face interviews. Only eight participants out of the possible 28 students meeting the requirements of this study were interviewed. The participants were required to be females who self-identified as African American. They were also required to be current full-time students in their sophomore year at the university. The university was a predominately White, research extensive, public, land-grant university in the Midwest. The participants stemmed from just one university in order to have consistency with the types of programs available to all members of the population. Selecting participants from one institution enabled a closer observation of students as opposed to multi-institutions being studied.

### *Limitations*

The results of this study may be limited for several reasons. The results of this study are not generalizable because the research was qualitative and there was a small number of participants. The sample population was selected purposefully for their unique perspective on the topic. Thus, they were not selected randomly and the students participated on a voluntary basis, meaning that these participants may not be representative of all African American female college students.

The point of this qualitative research was not to interview a large number of participants; rather the focus was on making meaning of their experiences. Also, there was a small sample in order to explore the participants' experiences in great detail. During the interviews, I attempted to make the participants feel at ease, but any one of the

participants may have been cautious to share all information requested during the interview.

This study was cross-racial research, as I self-identified as White and participants self-identified as African American. The participants may have shared more information because of this or they may have been hesitant to disclose as much. To overcome this, I told the participants they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and could turn off the voice recorder at any time. No participant selected to turn off the recorder but two participants did not answer every question. Participants may have found some of the questions to be irrelevant to their college-life experience or may have misinterpreted the interview questions. Following each interview, I asked the participant to identify any questions that were confusing or viewed as unrelated to the others so that the question could be reworded for clarity.

### ***Significance of Study***

This research is significant for several reasons: (a) the results focused on the experience of African American females attending college; (b) the results of the research could serve as a resource for the University as it continues to search for ways to recruit and retain students of color; and (c) the results could serve as a catalyst for future research on African American females in college.

### ***Findings of Study***

My grand tour question was: What are the experiences of African American females in college? I collected data to answer this question through a series of interviews with selected African American sophomore females currently attending the University.



From the data collected, these four themes emerged as influential factors in one or more of the students' experience in college: Why Am I Here, Reality Check, Relate to Me, and the Only Black Girl. Why Am I Here discussed the participants' reasons for going to college as being family support and self-motivation. Reality Check discussed the participants' trouble adjusting to academics and their independence. Relate to Me discussed the participants' desire to form meaningful friendships and mentorships. The Only Black Girl discussed the participants' feelings of alienation and not fitting in.

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature that is related to the study of African American females in higher education. In Chapter 3, I provide an explanation of how the research was planned and conducted. In Chapter 4, I provide a detailed explanation of the study's results is discussed. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I provide implications of the research and suggest future recommendations to build upon the data collected in this study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Introduction***

African American women in college have primarily been studied alongside African American males (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984; White, 1998) and are often studied in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups (Watt, 2006; White, 1998). Much of the existing research on African American women stems from studies comparing African American students that attend predominately White institutions (PWIs) to those who attend historically Black institutions (Willie & McCord, 1972). Rarely are African American women studied on their own. The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) found that Black women are outpacing their male counterparts in terms of graduation rates by a ratio of 2:1. According to Kanter's (1977) standards, once a group moves past 35% as a critical mass, those individuals shift from token representation to that of a collective group. This suggests that African American women are relatively successful in college and that a great deal remains to be known about the reasons for their success in college. Here, I will review the literature, looking at what is known about African Americans at PWIs and specifically, what is known about African American females in college.

The literature was reviewed by searching through books, government reports, and online databases of peer-reviewed journals. I paid attention to research from the fields of education, psychology, sociology, and the United States' governmental resources. With books and government reports, I used the search terms "students of color,"

“predominately White institutions” and “African Americans in college.” The journal databases used were Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), Google Scholar, and JSTOR. To locate relevant material, I used a combination of the search keyword terms, such as “African Americans AND college” or “African American females AND higher education.”

In addition to locating research on African American college students, I also looked at studies that have used Schlossberg’s transition theory. While conducting my search, I found limited peer-reviewed studies using this theory. Most studies were unpublished theses and dissertations. The student populations that have been looked at using Schlossberg’s theory include international students, college freshman, nontraditional students, and students who have not yet selected a major. African American females have not been studied using Schlossberg’s work. This chapter introduces research on African American college students attending PWIs as well as what is known specifically about African American female college students. In the first part, I discuss work that often combines men and women, as there is little work particularly on African American women.

### *African American Students at PWIs*

A look into the unique experiences of African American students attending a PWI deserves attention. African Americans have “historically been underrepresented in American higher education and continue to be so today” (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 489). Recruitment efforts for Black students to attend PWIs began on a large scale in the 1960s, following national desegregation policies (Fleming, 1984, p. 11). Despite this

advancement in civil rights, many higher education institutions failed to provide adequate academic and support services to assist Black students in their transition to the White campus (p. 13).

Today's PWIs continue to struggle to attain these goals. African American students are still facing obstacles in achieving academic success. The college-going rates between Whites and Blacks continue to show disproportionately lower enrollment rates for Blacks (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 490). Davis' (2004) review of the literature on African American college students led him to state that although there has been a continual rise in African Americans going to college, "there has been a steady decrease in the percentage of growth, albeit an increase in the proportion of Black students graduating from institutions of higher education" (p. 2). In addition, "Black students are achieving at a lower rate and graduating at a much lower percentage than White students at predominately White institutions" (p. 1). The U.S. Census' *School Enrollment: 2000 Census 2000 Brief* (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2003) reported that a total of 1,024,774 African Americans between the ages of 18-24 were attending college, compared to 6,756,030 White students in the same age group (p. 9). The college attendance rate for all African Americans in college was 27% compared to 38% of all non-Hispanic Whites (p. 9). The American Council on Education (2005) reported that out of all African Americans in college, 64% are female and 36% are male (p. 16). This suggests a need for further study of African American women.

Davis (2004) contributed the poor results of African American college students to institutions falling short due to their misunderstanding of African American students'

cultural background and lack of commitment to longitudinal research on the issue (p. 7). However, many institutions do actively try to provide support for African American students. As the result of the data gathered from their qualitative interviews with African American students and members of their family, Herndon and Hirt (2004) outlined four forms of support that students need from their institution: academic, emotional, social, and financial (p. 490).

Qualitative studies on African American students in higher education focus on feelings of alienation and marginalization (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Gossett et al., 1998; Love, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Willie & McCord, 1972), family issues (Feagin et al., 1996; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Love, 2008), academic experiences (Adams, 2005; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Kobrak, 1992; Willie & McCord, 1972), and social connections (Davis, 1991; Davis, 2004; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Littleton, 2003; Museus, 2008; White, 1998; Willie, 2003). I review each of these topics below.

### ***Alienation and Marginalization***

A review of the literature showed that African American students encounter difficulties in their adjustment on White campuses, citing feelings of social isolation, alienation, marginalization, and distrust toward Whites (Fleming, 1984; Love, 2008; Willie & McCord, 1972). To support this statement, Feagin et al.'s (1996) study of focus groups of African American students at an anonymous institution exposed a central theme of invisibility (p. 14). The participants stated that their interactions with White faculty, students, and university administrators and staff left them feeling as though they

were not being recognized as individuals with unique talents, interests, and problems (p. 14).

African American students typically sense that they stand out. Marginality, defined by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), is the awareness that one does not fit in, does not feel significant, and feels unneeded. Gossett et al. (1998) explained that marginalization can occur temporarily, during a transition such as starting college, or can be a life-long status, such as when individuals are caught trying to live within two different cultures (p. 23). The literature suggested that African American students at PWIs experience a struggle to overcome feelings of marginalization (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Fleming, 1984).

Gossett et al.'s (1998) study sought to discover African American students' sense of perception of marginality in comparison to non-African American undergraduate students at four large, public, PWIs in the Midwest. A total of 1,180 students took a likert-scale quantitative survey and the major finding concluded that non-African Americans have little realization of the perceived discrimination of African American students. These non-African American students did not think their institution treated African American students differently (p. 26). In addition, the study discovered that many African American students did not feel welcome at the PWI they attended (p. 26).

Among the work on African American students at PWIs, most studies are done using quantitative methods. The few qualitative studies found typically gain information through focus groups. Overall, African Americans lack the chance to share their individual experiences through one-on-one interviews. If African American students are

feeling out of place and unwelcome, then the levels of support they receive from others, such as family members, becomes crucial to understand.

### ***Relationships with Family***

How the family perceives a college education affects their African American children. Feagin et al.'s (1996) focus group interviews with the parents of African American college students showed support for their children's desire to get a college education (p. 25). For these parents, the ability for their children to succeed in college was worthy of sacrificing time and money (p. 25). These students' achievements in college transcended into feelings of hope and ambition for all family members (p. 25).

The support of family members was also shown to be important in Love's (2008) study. This quantitative study of 167 African American college students from three institutions of higher education from a large city in the Midwest revealed that students who cited not having a secure attachment with their parents had a higher chance of encountering obstacles in acclimating to college life (p. 37). Specifically, Love (2008) found that participants who perceived they had a supportive and caring relationship with their father were associated with a state of emotional well being in college (p. 37). For those participants who responded that they had a negative relationship with their parents, a lack of self-esteem and poor self-confidence was reported (p. 37).

At PWIs, African American students "rely on support from family members more so than White students at predominately White campuses and Black students at historically Black institutions" (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 491). Herndon and Hirt (2004) explained the family support is important to look at, as the family is the first unit to foster

a student's capability for learning (p. 491). For Black families, parents are typically "involved in the lives of their children well into adulthood" (p. 494). In general, African Americans see education as a way to ensure economic security and family stability among their community (p. 494).

The sources of support families provide is worthy of knowing. Herndon and Hirt's (2004) study of senior-level African American students and members of their families at PWIs revealed that the participants received financial, moral, and social support from their families (p. 499). The participants said that their parents and other family members promoted education and life long learning throughout their childhood (p. 499). The participants also discussed that being a college student meant they were role models to siblings and wanted family members to be proud of their accomplishments (p. 501).

The trends in the work on family seem to say that family social and financial support motivates African American students to do well in college as well as helps these students maintain emotional wellness and better handle obstacles during their transition to college. What remains to be known regarding family is how a lack of family social and financial support affects African American students and if other sources of support (friends, mentors, etc.) can replace the role of the family. The academic experiences of African Americans are discussed next.

### ***Academics***

Studies on African American students in college focus on academic achievement (Allen & Haniff, 1991) and interactions with faculty (Adams, 2005; Kobrak, 1992; Willie



& McCord, 1972). Allen and Haniff's (1991) review of the literature on Black college students led them to conclude that Black students do not experience realistic levels of academic achievement and college satisfaction on White campuses (p. 96). In their study, Allen and Haniff (1991) found that when compared to White students, Black students averaged higher attrition rates, weaker educational backgrounds, and less satisfactory relationships with faculty (p. 130). These results were found by conducting a quantitative comparison study of 1,580 Black students enrolled at an HBCU and 695 Black students enrolled at a PWI (p. 129). In this study, participants were asked to rank their perception on two major topics: racial attitudes and self-attitude (p. 129).

Faculty plays an important role in helping students adjust to academic rigor. Kobrak (1992) found relationships with faculty to be missing while conducting a literature review on Black student retention (p. 511). He stated that many universities provided limited contact between students and faculty. Also, students and faculty members often fail to seek out personal communication with each other (p. 511). Willie and McCord (1972) witnessed a similar disconnection after issuing a quantitative survey comparing Black college students to White students at four different PWIs in New York. The Black students in this study reported having a lack of trust in and level of discomfort with their professors (p. 54). Other complaints included believing that White professors ignored them, discouraged them from talking about their racial heritage in class, and graded them differently from White students (p. 54). African American students can also feel that the academic work of their culture is ignored in the classroom.

Adams's (2005) overview of research on PWIs found that African American students enrolled there were rarely exposed to "scholarly work related to the Black experience and must construct their young adult racial identities from the raw and flawed racial stereotypes perpetuated in the media and popular culture" (p. 285). Adams (2005) felt this lack of education on Black culture can lead to a perceived "hostile" campus environment that is accompanied with lower retention and graduate rates for African American students (p. 285).

Adams's (2005) mixed-methods study of 155 African American and White students compared the attitudes of those who had taken Black studies courses to those who had, not using data from the Black Ideology Scale and focus group interviews. The findings revealed that African Americans who had completed courses in Black studies had a significant relationship between placing importance in their academic success, being satisfied with the University, and feeling "socially successful, fighting against racism, standing up to Whites, having close friends, and being competitive" (p. 288).

Overall, not enough information is known about the academic and faculty issues that African American students experience. Most research is done using quantitative methods or mixed-methods, meaning no in-depth conversations are taking place with students of color. Studies have shown that there a disconnection exists between faculty and African American students and that these students feel ignored. In addition, African American students are rarely exposed to the scholarly work of other Blacks. All of these factors create perceptions of a hostile campus environment. One way that African

American students can combat the unwelcoming environment is through social connections.

### ***Social Connections***

While the transition process can be especially challenging for some African American students attending a PWI, taking steps to become connected to the campus is important during the transition process, and students do so through residence life, student organizations, the classroom, and off campus (Littleton, 2003, p. 85). Connections lead to becoming familiar with the campus and this provides the student with a greater sense of belonging (p. 85).

***Relationships with fellow African American students.*** Herndon and Hirt's (2004) qualitative study of 20 African American college students from two PWIs in a mid-Atlantic state and 10 members of those students' families revealed that many participants recalled their college adjustment as being difficult, desired to become a part of the Black community on campus, and valued having a fellow African American to confide in, as this individual was perceived to understand what the other was going through (p. 503). In many instances, Black and White students do not interact often at PWIs. Research has shown a tendency for Black students to stay among each other and these students report mixed feelings about this set-up.

Littleton's (2003) qualitative study, which intended to describe the experiences of African American students at small, predominately White liberal arts college, found that the majority of the participants felt an immediate sense of unity with other Blacks, yet this often turned into an obligation to be friends with other Black students (p. 91). Willie

(2003) found similar results when she interviewed African American alumni who had attended Northwestern University, a midsized, urban, private university in Illinois; the alumni described the campus as having two separate spheres of White and Black students, not always by choice (p. 46). Similarly, Davis (1991) conducted a quantitative study of 695 Black students attending a PWI as well as 888 students from an HBCU and proposed that on historically White campuses, Black students have fewer opportunities to form “meaningful interpersonal relationships” (p. 156). He also found that participation in student organizations and relationships with faculty had a positive correlation with university GPA (p. 152). In addition, students at PWIs disagreed that Black men and women on their campus failed to get along, while students at HBCUs agreed with this statement (p. 153). This study indicates that involvement in campus groups and relationships with faculty help African American students perform better academically. It also states that relationships with the Black community are stronger at PWIs than HBCUs. This may be due to the fact that having limited students of color creates a need for bonds to form.

Willie and McCord’s (1972) path-breaking qualitative study of Black college students attending four different PWIs in New York disclosed that the participants regarded the campus’ support from Whites to be unreliable, fragile, and risky, and thus these Black students turned to each other for friendship (p. 15). The negative result was that the social lives for Black students on these campuses were severely limited (p. 15). This section demonstrated that information found through qualitative studies revealed mixed emotions on the opportunities to befriend fellow Black students and that little

interaction takes place among Whites and Blacks. Many times students of color feel like they have limited options in building relationships. What remains to be known are what opportunities to interact with White peers exist on various college campuses and whether these interactions lead to friendship.

***Involvement.*** Opportunities to become involved the college campus often lie in residence life and within student groups. Davis' (2004) study of 18 African American college students attending Syracuse University consisted of individual interviews where participants were asked to reflect on their college experience during their sophomore and senior years. Many participants recalled the realization that Black students were directed and assigned to live in the same residence hall and often on the same floor (p. 52). A few of the participants shared that living near each other alleviated the stress of establishing friendships with other Black students (p. 54). However, some studies found that the residence life experience was hindered by the assumptions of White peers.

In Willie and McCord's (1972) study, the topic of altercations in residence life between White and Black students stood out. Some participants recalled being aware that many of the Whites in the residence halls had never lived near an African American before and asked a lot of "silly, embarrassing, insulting, and annoying" questions (p. 30). Many participants described the living situation as uncomfortable and grew weary of being seen as an "oddity" (p. 31).

When African American students feel misunderstood in the residence halls, they likely turn to racial and ethnic student groups for comfort. Museus' (2008) qualitative interviews with 12 African American and 12 Asian American students at a PWI found

that ethnic organizations served as “sources of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation” (p. 576). These students reported being able to connect with peers from similar backgrounds and the opportunity to become more educated about their ethnic and cultural heritages (pp. 576, 577). Ethnic organizations were able to offer African American and Asian American students a subculture in which to feel accepted (p. 579).

Davis (2004) found similar results in her qualitative study of 18 African American students at Syracuse University. Black organizations, cultural gathering, and other ethnic-related student groups served as safe havens for the participants, giving them a venue for establishing friendships on campus (p. 84). Contrary to Museus’ and Love’s stated benefits, White’s (1998) semi-structured interviews with 22 Black students attending a private PWI discovered that the participants felt an obligation to participate in “Black things,” such as Black student organizations, in order to survive on the campus (p. 113). In this case, the participants were joining racial and ethnic related groups as a way of enduring their college experience. White (1998) stated that Black students on a PWI struggle with dual identities, that is, they are students and they are also Black students, with ties to the Black community (p. 113).

It is evident that African American students tend to experience conflict with their White peers in the residence halls and may join racial and ethnic student groups in order to feel understood and accepted. However, no literature exists documenting the experiences of African American students who join non-racial and ethnic student groups.

Whether they excel in these groups or feel unwanted is unknown. Next, I look specifically at the research on African American women on the college campus.

### *African American Women in College*

Overall, there is more research on African American college students in general than studies focused specifically on African American females (Banks, 2009; Coker, 2003). The work on African American women in college includes the following topics: (a) motivation for advanced education (Coker, 2003; Fleming, 1978), (b) family relationships (Winkle-Wagner, 2009), (c) academics (Banks, 2009), (d) mentoring (Crawford & Smith, 2005), and (e) identity (Watt, 2006).

The presence of African American women on the college campus is growing, especially compared to African American males. Cuyjet's (1997) review of statistics on Black college students showed that Black females were going to college in proportionately larger numbers than Black males (p. 5). When compared to all other ethnic groups, African American women are the only ethnic group in which women outnumber men in degree completion (p. 6). Looking at the latest statistics from the American Council on Education, in 2005 they found that 36% of Black college students were male while 64% were female (p. 16). What motivates African American females to stay and succeed in college is worthy of research. Banks (2009) stated that there exists a need to comprehend the particular approaches that African American females employ to attain academic success (p. 10).

Understanding the motivations, challenges, and academic goals of African American women is important to helping them persist in college. Through focus groups

with 10 African American college women, Coker (2003) found that the participants were motivated to inspire others in their family through their pursuit of education and saw themselves as role models (p. 664). They also felt very aware of their presence as African American women and recognized themselves as being judged differently from their White peers and African American male counterparts (p. 666). Coker summarized that overall, “African American women’s lives as still affected by [racism and sexism] . . . and African American women continue to be unfairly burdened psychologically with this knowledge” (p. 672). This study indicates the importance of family support and the negative effects of sexism. The differences among males and females regarding motivation are worth looking at.

Fleming’s (1978) study looked at the difference of motivation determinants among 51 African American female college students from Radcliffe College compared to their male peers, using quantitative performance measures (p. 694). The results revealed that being high in achieving was negatively related to performing well in mathematics when the participants believe they were competing with males (p. 710). Fleming (1978) claimed that this is linked to the influence of traditional sex role constraints (p. 710). In addition, high achievers typically had mothers who promoted academic excellence and fathers who encouraged being socially assertive (p. 711). In general, Fleming (1978) argued that additional research was needed to identify whether White and Black women experience similar sex role pressures.

Since Fleming’s study, little has been done to answer her request for additional research. Watt (2006) conducted a study to determine whether a relationship existed



between racial identity, womanist identity, and self-esteem in African American women attending a HBCU. Watt administered a questionnaire packet to 111 participants who came from two separate, private HBCUs in the Southeast (p. 322). Analysis of the data showed that women who had a positive attitude about being Black typically felt positive about being female and the converse was also true (p. 329). Additionally, African American women who reported rebuffed the negative images of the Black race and of male domination had higher levels of self-esteem (p. 329). This study was conducted for women attending HBCUs and did not look at any women who went to PWIs. Future research must give voice the women at PWIs.

African American women can also experience negative aspects of family involvement in college and this next study pays attention to their struggles. Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study of 30 Black women (24 of whom were first-generation students) at a predominately White, public Midwestern institution, revealed through focus groups that many felt that after attending college, they did not belong on campus nor at home; that spending too much time at home would be distracting; and that pressure existed to behave differently when at home and on campus (pp. 11-12). Further, the participants experienced conflict between taking care of family members and disconnecting in order to focus on college (p. 13). This study is helpful because it shows the obstacles that African American college women face within their family relationships. The study did not determine whether the choice of women to disassociate with their family was permanent or temporary. Future research could look at this further.

It is known that African American females are facing gender-related and family stress on the college campus and must juggle this with the pressure to perform well academically. These women are not always ready for college academics. Banks' (2009) qualitative interviews with 19 African American women from three universities and one community college led her to determine that the majority of participants perceived they were unprepared for collegiate academics (p. 63). The participants talked about having to work harder to make up for their unpreparedness in addition to any unfair grading they received as the result of being Black (p. 63). Many related their negative experiences in the classroom to their race, class, and gender (p. 66). Some participants talked about being hesitant to speak up in class for fear of being stereotyped as an "angry Black" or receiving lower grades (p. 92). In order to deal with their academic unpreparedness and negative classroom experiences, African American females must have opportunities to establish mentoring relationships.

Mentoring is regarded by Crawford and Smith (2005) as being vital to enhancing an individual's skills, in welcoming an individual into a new social world, and in role modeling appropriate behavior (p. 54). The mentoring experiences of 7 African American female senior-level administrators at a college or university were gathered through open-ended interviews and revealed that none of the participants felt they had or had ever had a mentor (p. 60). Specifically, the participants recalled having no one to help socialize them into their campus culture (p. 60). Despite this, all of the participants desired a mentoring relationship and perceived it to have personal and professional benefits (p. 61). It must be

pointed out that this study did not look at college students. Research on the experiences of African American college females and mentoring opportunities is needed.

### ***Summary of the Literature***

There is not very much literature focusing explicitly on African American female college students. Further, the unique experiences of African American females attending college, specifically at PWIs, are not studied enough qualitatively. More interviews and focus groups need to be held when studying African American women in order to give voice to their stories. The differences in how African American females transition to PWIs, compared to their male counterparts, cannot be understood unless further research is conducted.

The majority of research currently available looks at both African American men and women as one entity and is done mostly using quantitative methods, such as through likert-scale questions. African American females need to be studied alone if we are to help them navigate their college experience comfortably and successfully. While current and past studies on African American students added to this study, a student development theory on transitioning also played a part in influencing my research.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This study used Schlossberg (1981) and Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) transition theory as the theoretical framework. This theory has been used in studies to understand the transition to college life for international students, college freshmen, and nontraditional students. Also, the theory has been used to illustrate how students decide on a major. This theory was reviewed before I began my study and

played a role in the development of my research questions and interview questions. After the study's themes emerged, I returned to Schlossberg's theory to reflect on it in order to determine if the data was connected.

Research on adults led Schlossberg to develop a theory on how they cope during transitions. From this theory, a transition model was produced to demonstrate the various ways in which adults handle change (Braxton, 2003, p. 323). Although Schlossberg's theory was not originally intended to explain college student development and is classified under adult development, factors of this theory are applicable to college students and their experiences (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 108). Braxton (2003) clarified that the theory is relevant to college student development since "life events and how individuals cope with them affect college students' persistence and departure decisions" (p. 324). Schlossberg's work provides "insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular time" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 107).

Schlossberg (1981) defined transition as having occurred "if an event or nonevent results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). Examples of events include graduating from high school or starting a new job and nonevents include the loss of a career aspiration or expecting a job promotion that is never received (p. 5). The outcome of a transition can be positive or negative as a transition is "not so much a matter of change as of the individual's perception of change" (p. 7). Schlossberg's work

is centered on the content of development and the important issues people face as their lives progress, categorizing her theory under psychosocial theory.

The four major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition, as originally outlined by Schlossberg et al. (1995), are the situation variable, the self variable, the support variable, and the strategies variable. These are known as the "4 S's" and as a whole describe the differences in how individuals cope with change and distinguish "potential assets and/or liabilities" (p. 47). Distinguishing between assets and liabilities helps clarify why individuals "react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (Schlossberg, as cited in Evans et al., 1998, p. 113). Each factor is explained below:

1. Situation: what is happening? The transition to motherhood is different from the transition to being a college freshman (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 47)

Within this factor, take into account what triggered the transition, the timing of the transition, who is in control, whether a role change is involved, the duration of the transition, whether the person has dealt with a similar transition, what other stressors are present, who or what is responsible for the transition and how the person's behavior is affected by the transition (Evans et al., 1998, p. 113).

2. Self: to whom is the transition happening? Every individual has a unique personality and has experienced unique life issues (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 47)

Within this factor, take into account the person's personal and demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, age, gender, stage of life, level of health,

and ethnicity (Evans et al., 1998, p. 113). Also important are the person's psychological resources, such as ego development, self-efficacy, and commitment and values (p. 114).

3. Support: what help is available? Every individual has varying options and support systems (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 47)

Within this factor, take into account the person's types of social support, such as family, networks, significant other, community; functions of social support, such as aid, affirmation, honest feedback; and measurement, such as the level of role dependency, whether supports are changing or are stable (Evans et al., 1998, p. 114).

4. Strategies: how does the person cope? Every individual steers through transitions in different ways (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 47)

Within this factor, take into account the coping responses: whether the person modifies the situation, controls the meaning of the problem, and/or manages stress in the aftermath (Evans et al., 1998, p. 114). Also important is the coping mode used: informing seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, or intra-psychic behavior (p. 114).

The following outline introduces the "4 S's," giving sample questions that determine how an individual's transition process is unfolding. These sample questions helped me to identify the study's research questions and influenced the interview questions.

### The Four S's of Transitioning

#### *1. Situation*

- a.* How does the transition fit in with timing?
- b.* What triggered the transition?
- c.* What is the duration of the transition?

2. *Self*

- a. What role does one's gender, age, health, or socioeconomic status play the transition?
- b. How does one's outlook and values effect the transition?

3. *Support*

- a. Does the person have family and friends to turn to?
- b. Does the person receive genuine advice or affirmation from his/her sources of support?
- c. Are his/her sources of support stable?

4. *Strategies (for coping)*

- a. How does one react to the transition?
- b. What steps does the person take to move forward?

***Looking Ahead***

Chapter 3 provides an explanation of how the research was planned and conducted. Chapter 4 gives a detailed explanation of the study's results is discussed. Lastly, Chapter 5 provides implications of the research and suggests future recommendations to build upon the data collected in this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

As reviewed in Chapter 2, there is a significant need for more work about African American women. The purpose of this study was to explore the college experiences of African American females in their freshman year at a Midwestern Research-Extensive university. This study investigated these individuals' transitions to college and sought to understand their lived experiences. Also, the study examined what strategies these individuals employed in order to persist in college. The intent of this study was to contribute to research on African American women in higher education. By documenting their experiences, we can better understand the factors needed to retain African American females. In this chapter, the methodology used to conduct the study is discussed.

### ***Research Questions***

The qualitative study explored the following grand tour question, which was linked to Schlossberg's transition theory: What are the experiences of African American females in college?

I sought to explore the following sub-questions:

1. How do African American females describe the transition to college?
2. How do African American females perceive the campus environment of a predominately White college/university?
3. How do African American females describe their semester-to-semester persistence decisions?



4. Who and what sustain African American female students along their journey?
5. What coping strategies do African American female students employ?

### ***Qualitative Research Design***

For this study, I decided that qualitative interviews would be the best way to understand the college transitional period for African American women because this type of research captures how people make meaning of their experiences and I was interested in understanding their college experience. This study draws on the phenomenological approach to qualitative research, which explores the lived experiences of the participants. The purpose of conducting a phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of participants in order to understand the “essence” of the experience as perceived by the participants (McMillan, 2008, p. 291). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research because with qualitative research, the “researchers are interested in meaning” (Miller, 2009, p. 1.8). Many qualitative researchers “consider there to be multiple realities represented in participant perspectives, this context is useful in providing an understanding of the phenomenon being investigated” (McMillan, 2008, p. 271). Each participant offered a unique story of her college experience and this could be vividly captured through in-depth interviews. Qualitative studies present “a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). The investigator called on the participants to describe various college experiences by answering open-ended questions.

In addition, I chose qualitative research because “quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply [did] not fit the problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Quantitative questions would not have been able to fully describe the lived experiences of African

American female college students. For example, a survey would mean that as the researcher, I knew exactly what questions to ask because I understood their experience. In reality, the lack of prior research on this group prohibited me from creating an effective survey. Qualitative work allowed me the freedom to explore multiple topics and take cues from the participants.

### ***Research Site***

The participants were all full-time students at the same Midwestern Research-Extensive University. According to the institution's Carnegie classification, it is a large, four-year institution with high research activity. The institution was established in the late 1800s as a land-grant university. Today, it is the largest public university in its state. Its three primary missions are teaching, research, and service. According to their website, the 2009 fall semester of undergraduate enrollment was just under 19,000 students. There were an approximate total of 456 African American students in the undergraduate population, compared to around 15,760 Caucasian students. This Midwestern Research-Extensive institution resides in the capital city of the state and is the state's second most populated city, with approximately 250,000 people. The city is regarded as a college town with a strong tradition in collegiate athletics, especially football.

The individual interviews with participants took place face-to-face on University property. Participants were given their choice of location as long as it would not be too loud to pick up an audio recording of the interview, e.g., the student union during lunchtime, nor did the interviews take place at their home. Six interviews were conducted in a small conference room in the Student Center. The remaining two interviews were

conducted in a small conference room in the College of Education building. Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their freshman year at the University, ranging from their perceived sources of support to their biggest surprise about coming to college (Appendix E).

### *Participants*

I conducted the study without expectations of what the participants would share. A purposeful sample of eight participants was used to gather information for this study. Purpose sampling was appropriate for this study because the idea is to “select people or sites that can best help you understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2005, p. 204). A purposeful sample can lead to an “understanding that provides voice to individuals who may not be heard” (p. 204). Initially, I contacted the Program Coordinator for the learning community for students with considerable financial need, the Program Coordinator for academic and intercultural support services, and the Diversity Recruitment Coordinator for the University to gather support in approaching qualified individuals for participation. These contacts provided me with a recommended list of students who met the study’s qualifications and were believed to have unique stories to share. These students’ email addresses and phone numbers were provided. Each contact also personally promoted the study to these students via email and in person. I then personally emailed these students with an invitation to participate in the study (Appendix B). I received four responses after my first email. I sent the same email to those who hadn’t responded a week later and received four more responses. Before conducting interviews, I worked with the University’s Office of Registration and Records to obtain a

list of African American women in their sophomore year. I then made sure that each participant's name was on the list before holding the interview. The day prior to the interview, I emailed each participant a reminder of when and where we would be meeting (Appendix C).

The participants in this study were eight African American females who were full-time students in their sophomore year at the same Midwestern Research-Extensive institution. I chose to look only at African American females due to the lack of research focused specifically on the female student of color perspective. I wanted to talk with the participants when they were in their sophomore year so they could reflect on their first year at the university without being too far removed from the experience.

Tables 1 and 2 provide each participant's demographic information, as learned through the demographic questionnaire. The participants are identified here according to their pseudonyms. By compiling these charts, I learned that from the seven participants who self-reported their GPA, this average was 3.145/4.0. The eighth participant chose not to disclose her GPA. The similarities that resulted from the interviews are as follows: seven of the eight participants belonged to at least one African student organization, seven of the eight participants held at least a part-time job during their freshman year, six of the eight participants belonged to a multicultural residential learning community, and four of the eight participants were first-generation students.

### ***IRB Procedures***

Before beginning this study, I completed a mandated training by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which concentrates on treating human subjects ethically. Collaborative

Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) is a web-based exam focused on protecting human subjects, which verifies that the researcher is respecting the best interests of the participants. After completing and passing CITI, I moved forward with the study. Once the study was designed, the required forms for IRB were completed electronically and submitted for approval. The IRB later filed a letter of approval (Appendix H) for my study, and the sample was then acquired.

### *Data Collection*

Like most qualitative studies, I served as the primary instrument when collecting and analyzing data as “data collection involves fieldwork” (Miller, 2009, p. 1.8). I held face-to-face, one-on-one, 30-90 minute semi-structured interviews with the eight participants on the university campus in a conference room located in either the Student Center or in the College of Education. The participants were given the option to choose somewhere on campus to meet, but all eight left the exact location to my choosing. I selected these conference rooms for privacy and to keep outside noise from interfering with the audio recording. When the participants arrived for their interviews, I had them complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). This enabled me to gain information on the participants, such as freshman year activities and parents’ education, without having them to list such information during the interview. Overall, each interview required 15 minutes for the participant to fill out the questionnaire and 30-90 minutes to complete the interview questions.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

Name:	Joanna	Lupe	Asmara	Octavia
Major(s) and Minor(s):	Psychology, Minor: History, Pre-med	Finance, Minor: Ethnic studies, Pre-law	Broadcasting, Minor: Sociology	Nutritional science
Parents' highest level of education:	- Mother and father went to college	- Mother: Masters - Father: Doctorate	- Mother: none - Father: elementary school - First-generation student	- Mother: Masters
Freshman year activities:	Multicultural learning community, two political organizations, pre-law club, four community service organizations	Multicultural learning community, learning community for students with considerable financial need, business learning community, pre-law club, community service organization, African student organization, residence hall government, honors program	Multicultural learning community, learning community for students with considerable financial need, three African student organizations, community service organizations	African student organization, diversity organization, campus programming organization
Freshman year job and hours worked:	Elementary school tutor for 10-12 hours/week.	College tutor for 2 hours/week, retail store for 6 hours/week, on-campus secretary for 15 hours/week.	Secretary for 8 hours/week.	Did not have a job freshman year.
GPA (self-reported):	3.545	3.66	2.75	2.56
Anticipated graduation:	May 2012	May 2012	2012	2013

Table 2

*Participant Demographic Information continued*

Name:	Rena	Diane	Andrea	Sandra
Major:	Civil Engineering	Psychology	Business Administration	Forensic Science
Parents' highest level of education:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mother: high school</li> <li>- Father: two-year college program, Sudan</li> <li>- First-generation student</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mother: some college</li> <li>- Father: Masters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mother: Associates degree</li> <li>- Father: high school</li> <li>- First-generation student</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mother: high school</li> <li>- First-generation student</li> </ul>
Freshman year activities:	Two African student organizations, diversity organization, two engineering students organizations.	Multicultural learning community, learning community for students with considerable financial need, two African student organizations, community service organization.	Multicultural learning community, learning community for students with considerable financial need, African student organization.	Multicultural learning community, two African student organizations, community service organization.
Freshman year job(s) and hours worked:	Residence hall dining services. Did not share hours/week.	Movie theatre, once a month.	Sandwich shop for 20-25 hours/week.	Retail store for 15-20 hours/every other week. Construction work for 20 hours/week.
GPA:	Did not share	3.7	3.0	2.8
Anticipated graduation:	May 2013	May 2012	2012	2013

### *Interview Questions*

Research for this study was conducted through a 23-question interview protocol developed and administered by me (see Appendix E). The questions sought to understand what the participants felt when they came to college, what experiences stood out to them, and how they reacted to academic, social, and family challenges. I used a semi-structured approach, allowing me to ask “some questions that are closed ended and some that are open ended” (Creswell, 2005, p. 598). The questions were formulated with the intention of being easy to understand as well as “cause the participants to reflect on experiences that they can easily discuss” (p. 223). Additional probes were used to clarify and follow-up with participant responses that I had not accounted for initially.

The length of the shortest interview was 30 minutes, while the longest lasted 90 minutes. With the consent of the participants, each interview was recorded on a tape recorder and replayed for transcription. The transcriptions were then sent via email to the participants for final review of their conversations. No participants chose to provide me with any feedback.

### *Data Analysis*

A transcriptionist who had no prior knowledge of the research or the participants in the research transcribed all of the interviews verbatim. After all transcripts were received, I read through each interview while following along with the audiotapes in order to verify accuracy. Any blanks or corrections were fixed at that time. To protect her identity, each participant was referred to by a pseudonym of her choosing throughout the entire process.



I read through each transcript three times in order to understand the overall picture of information gained. Once I had developed a sense of familiarity with each participant's transcript, I read through every transcript again, jotting down notes and highlighting words or phrases that stood out. The process I used to code was "in vivo" analysis, where the data is examined sentence-by-sentence to identify word clusters within each interview. These highlighted words and phrases became codes, or "labels used to describe a segment of text or an image" (Creswell, 2005, p. 589). For each transcript I created a word document listing all of the codes. From there I grouped similar codes and assigned each group a mid-level code, or code that did not make too high of an inference, indicating what part of campus was being represented.

The mid-level codes I assigned include: the classroom, professors, residence life, social and out-of-class experiences, learning communities, peers, family, work, and self. After assigning mid-level codes to the eight individual transcripts, I created a master document in which the mid-level codes became headings. I then inserted all of the codes from the eight interviews that classified under the particular campus location beneath it. This allowed me to see commonalities and differences among the participants' experiences in the classroom, in the residence halls, etc. With the master document I was able to take the codes and produce them into ideas for themes.

With a master document of codes before me, I was able to see a bigger picture of the information I had received from the participants and was able to analyze it to reflect dominant themes. The four themes were: Why Am I Here, Reality Check, Relate to Me, and The Only Black Girl. With these four themes established, I created a separate word

document for each where I copied and pasted relevant quotes from participant interviews. These quotes were deemed relevant because part of their statement was listed as a code in my master code list. From the themes, sub-themes emerged. These categories within a category allowed me to find deeper meaning from the participants' experiences. The sub-themes were revealed to me by reading through each theme document thoroughly and identifying shared occurrences. I highlighted sub-theme quotations in various colors on printed pages of each theme document. Each sub-theme had at least five strong quotes to back it up. The information gained in the study was then restructured to highlight the themes and sub-themes.

### ***Researcher Reflection***

I unilaterally conducted all eight interviews. I would like to address the biases I may have brought to the study:

1. I am currently a student at the university from which all participants were attending at the time of the interviews. As a result, analysis of the university environment could have been influenced by my own perceptions.

I navigated through this challenge by disregarding additional or background information that I knew about the professionals or campus services the participants spoke of. Instead, I saw the campus through their eyes.

2. All of my participants self-identified as African American, whereas I am Caucasian. The participants may have chosen to reveal more or less during the interview depending on their feelings on race.

I navigated this challenge by carefully wording my interview questions and follow-up questions so as not to make the participant feel like she was being targeted due to her race. I knew that I could ask about experiences with discrimination or mistreatment without being too direct or blunt. Maintaining comfort for the participants was very important to me.

### *Validity*

The research questions were tested and examined by three pilot participants. The pilot participants provided me with feedback, which I then used to make changes to improve the clarity of the questions. All interview transcriptions were provided to the participants, although none opted to respond with feedback. This step is called member checking because I give the participants the opportunity to say whether the transcript was an accurate depiction of their interview. None of the participants had any feedback. Also, no major changes were made to the transcripts, only minor grammar and wording of some phrases due to transcriptionist error. After completing the coding of the eight interviews, I asked a colleague to peer debrief two-page excerpts from four interviews.

Peer debriefing is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind” (p. 308). Essentially the peer debriefer looked at the excerpts and coded on her own, making notes as needed. I then compared how she viewed the data to how I perceived things. We both shared similar views on what parts of the interview

stood out and should become codes. Peer debriefing was beneficial for my research in that it helped uncover bias or assumptions made of my behalf.

### *Summary*

Overall, I collected information received from the participants' interviews and then analyzed it to reflect dominant themes. The information gained in the study was then restructured to highlight the themes. In Chapter 4, I describe what I heard from the participants and how the participants responded to the interview protocol.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**





The purpose of this study was to explore the college experiences of African American females in their freshman year at a Midwestern Research-Extensive university. This study investigated these individuals' transitions to college and sought to understand their lived experiences. Also, the study examined what strategies these individuals would be employing in the near future in order to graduate from their institution. The intent of this study was to contribute to research on African American women in higher education by documenting their experiences. In this chapter, I present the findings from the study, introducing the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews with participants.

#### ***Introduction to Participants***

Each participant was required to be a female, African American student in her sophomore year at the university. No other restrictions were placed on the participants. The similarities that resulted from the interviews are as follows: seven of the eight participants belonged to at least one African student organization, seven of the eight participants held at least a part-time job during their freshman year, six of the eight participants belonged to a learning community, and four of the eight participants were first-generation students. Also, two of the eight participants disclosed they went on academic probation during their freshman year.

### *Overview of Interview Themes and Sub-themes*

From the research, four themes and subsequent sub-themes emerged. Here they are outlined and defined with a visual diagram (see Figure 1).

1 	Why Am I Here <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family influence</li> <li>- Self-motivation</li> </ul>
2 	Reality Check <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grasping Independence</li> <li>- Adjusting to Academics</li> </ul>
3 	Relate to Me <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Making Friends</li> <li>- Support of Learning Communities and Racial/Ethnic Student Groups</li> <li>- Mentoring</li> </ul>
4 	The Only Black Girl <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standing Out</li> <li>- Interactions with Other Black Students</li> </ul>

*Figure 1.* Thematic diagram: major themes and sub-themes.

- Why Am I Here: the factors which led the participants to attend college
  - Family Influence: the degree to which family members supported the participants going to college
  - Self-motivation: the participants' personal desires to further their education
- Reality Check: the aspects of college life that surprised the participants
  - Grasping Independence: the challenges faced as a result of moving out of their family homes and into the residence halls
  - Adjusting to Academics: how the participants reacted to the academic rigor of college life
- Relate to Me: the impact that peer relationships had on the participants
  - Making Friends: the approaches the participants used to form friendships
  - Support of Learning Communities and Racial/Ethnic Student Groups: the participants discuss how these organizations supported them
  - Mentoring: the participants share the positive impact of their mentors
- The Only Black Girl: the participants experienced isolation and alienation on the predominately White campus
  - Standing Out: the participants discuss how they felt singled out since they were not part of the dominant group on campus
  - Interactions with Other Black Students: the opportunities to interact with other Black students were a mixture of relief and frustration

### ***Theme #1: Why Am I Here?***

The majority of the participants talked about what factors led them to attend college. The theme “Why Am I Here” was split into two sub-themes: Family Influence and Self-motivation.

***Family influence.*** For most participants, attending college was an expectation, somehow influenced by their family's assumption that higher education was the next

logical step. Four out of the eight participants were first-generation students and despite this, many of the participants' families encouraged and empowered them to make the choice to go to college. No one felt that their family did not want them to attend college.

When asked who supported her preparation for college, Andrea, a business administration major and first-generation student said: "really my entire family: my mom, my grandma, my sister, my dad. [It was] non-questionable as to whether us grandkids were going or not." In Andrea's case, multiple family members influenced her decision and it was clear that college was an expectation for her. She never had a moment of second guessing the decision and contributed this to her family's appreciation for education. Similarly, Rena, a civil engineering major, understood that a college education was part of the reason her family relocated to the United States and became citizens. "It was engrained in my head that I was going to go to college. I didn't know how to go about it, I just knew I was suppose to go." Although she did not know the exact steps to take, becoming a college-educated woman in the United States was an important life choice to her parents. Rena also wanted to go to college so that she did not have to work in manual labor like her mother. "Seeing her in the morning [going] to work as a housekeeper . . . I didn't want that for me. I didn't want her to do that her whole life . . . I have to push myself." Rena's statement signified a level of pressure that she felt to work hard for herself and for her family.

Lupe, a finance major, came from a family where both of her parents held post-baccalaureate degrees. "Education is not a choice in my house . . . both of my parents are very educated. I never once thought in my head about not going to college. It's what you



do, you graduate high school and you go to college.” Lupe attributes her belief that college is a natural next-step to her parents’ own experiences in higher education. Her mother has a Masters degree and her father has a Doctorate. Further, both Lupe’s mother and father were active in her college search. “They went with me to campus visits . . . gave me the impression that I could get out and do what I want.” For Sandra, deciding to go college was mostly up to her, with a small push from her mother. “My mom told me . . . it was my choice . . . she told me she preferred I go, but it was pretty much my own decision. There was nobody to ever tell me not to further my education.” Even though Sandra’s mother did not demand Sandra attend college, she still made a point to say that she hoped Sandra would decide to go. Similarly, Aswara, a broadcasting major and first-generation student, felt that not going to college was not an option. “I knew I was going to [go]. I have to. It’s not a choice really.” Looking at the statements from the participants thus far, it appears that continuing on to college was not a choice, but rather an expectation. This left no leeway for the participants to ever consider not attending or dropping out once they were in college.

For others, like Octavia, a nutrition science major, college classes were introduced to her while still in high school. Her mother worked at a nearby community college and enrolled Octavia in courses during her senior year. Additionally, “my aunt helped me pick out classes.” Octavia’s family members were integral in her progression to college. However, family support was not the only factor in the participants’ decision to attend college.

*Self-motivation.* In addition to citing family as a factor in deciding to go to college, the participants shared their personal desires to further their education.

Sandra, a forensic science major and first-generation student, felt that giving herself additional education was a part of her life goals. “My three things that are important . . . [are] education, respect, and money . . . I just want to be successful . . . I’m going to take the steps I need to become successful. It’s going to be worth it.” To Sandra, a college degree equaled earning respect and money. “I don’t want to say that you can’t get [anywhere] in life without education, but it plays a big role. I don’t want a job, I want an actual career.” Her motivation to attend college rests largely on her desire to find a career that interests her.

Aswara recognized that college would not be easy for her but remained hopeful. She told herself “there may be obstacles but you’re going to face them. Educate yourself. It will be fun and you can do it.” Aswara mentally prepared herself for encountering obstacles in college and approached this reality with positive affirmations. Another participant, Octavia, convinced herself that college was worth it. “You either go to college or you’re just going to do nothing with your life. It got to the point where I was just like ‘I have to want this’.” Octavia seemed confident that going to college put her in line to accomplish things and that the alternative, not attending college, meant she would not fulfill her potential.

For Rena, an appreciation for the liberty to go to college, unlike in her native country Yemen, was a major motivator. “People that come from the same background as me, they don’t have the opportunity to come to the United States . . . I [am] very fortunate

to be [here] and have free education and be able to go to college.” Rena could not see any excuse getting in the way of her newfound ability to further her education after high school. On the other hand, Lupe focused on making herself as competitive as possible. “I took [advanced placement] and other difficult classes. I did really well on the SAT and [my] class rank . . . I made my application look as pretty as possible . . . I was looking for exclusiveness.” It was important to Lupe to feel like her hard work in high school would pay off in college. She received a full ride to attend the university.

In general, the majority of the participants were able to clearly discuss why they were in college. Family members and personal motivation influenced them to move forward with their educational plans. Next, I discuss the ways in which college life surprised the participants.

### ***Theme #2: Reality Check***

All eight participants revealed aspects of college life which surprised them. The theme “Reality Check” was split into two sub-themes: Grasping Independence and Adjusting to Academics. For the participants, coming to terms with both their newfound freedom and college academic expectations took some adjustment.

***Grasping independence.*** Every participant perceived her newfound independence to come with its own set of challenges. For three participants, moving out of their parent’s house and into the residence halls meant they now had the liberty to make their own choices. To best transition to this phase, Rena’s summer bridge program (a college preparatory program for disadvantaged students) advised her to tell her mom about her school schedule since she was a first-generation student. “[My parents] don’t know

anything . . . [I] better just tell them what is going on so they'll be understanding."

Telling her parents everything about college while grappling with newfound independence was likely a confusing task for Rena. Since Rena was the first to attend college in her family, telling her parents about how she was spending her time allowed them to better visualize what Rena would be experiencing. Living in the residence halls and no longer residing at home helped Rena to focus more on her studies. If she had stayed at home, "I would have had to pick up my brother and drop him off . . . I had my own life when I was in the [residence halls]. I went home when I wanted to go home." She seemed to enjoy having a choice of when to be with her family without any obligation. This preference is understandable for a college freshman that wants some control over how she spends her time.

Another participant, Aswara, also valued separation from her parents. "I have African parents, so they're very strict . . . all my life. Over here, they can't really control me and I have a lot of freedom to do what I please." College life was different for Aswara because she no longer had to directly answer to her mother and father. Lupe also had African parents and had a similar experience to Aswara. In college, "my mom [was] on my ass 24/7. I got a phone call every day. If I didn't call her, she would call me. I have a great relationship with my mom, but she's not willing to let me go . . . cut the umbilical cord woman!" Lupe's statement is a strong indication that she desired to be separated from her parents. Independence was considered a positive change for her. Moving to the residence halls presented Lupe with a chance to have space. "I appreciated the fact that when I walked out the door, I didn't have to explain myself." Compared to her high

school days, Lupe now made decisions entirely for herself and did not have to answer to her parents as much.

Two of the participants mentioned that living on their own was different because they still wanted to rely on their parents to help get them up in the morning. Octavia stated: “there’s no one to wake you up. You don’t have to go to class if you don’t want to . . . your mom’s not there to [say] ‘okay get up, it’s time for class’.” Octavia had additional issues with being on her own because the separation from her family caused homesickness. “I got homesick a lot, and I used to go home [a lot]. It got to the point where my mom was like ‘You need to stay [in the residence halls] because this isn’t helping you.’ I’d come back [to the residence halls] and would have assignments due that I forgot about.” On some level, Octavia’s decision to be home often and failure to keep up with her classes could signify a sense of denial about addressing her college independence. She may not have appreciated all of the changes associated with moving to college.

While some of the participants wanted independence, a few still wanted their mothers to be really involved. Like Octavia, Sandra’s mother provided Sandra with a wake-up for the first few months after she moved into the residence halls. “I used to have my mom call me every morning because I had an 8:30a.m. class and I had to get up and take the bus . . . [when she stopped calling it] was different, not having someone there to wake me up.” Sandra relied heavily on her mother’s calls to get her day going and was disappointed when the service ended. This indicates that Sandra had a hard time welcoming independence. Joanna recalled a similar frustration. “The biggest difference

for me was [my mom not making] me go to class. I get up . . . I'm tired . . . I just don't want to go to [class], but I know I have to because nobody else is going to [make me]. You can't write a sick note for why I'm not there . . . I have to take my own responsibility.” Joanna made the point that she was now in charge and unfortunately for Joanna, her mother no longer played a part in whether she woke up on time or went to class.

Two of the participants found their newfound independence to come with the baggage of having to be financially independent. Yet for Andrea, this wasn't a change from high school. She explained that since high school she has been on her own in terms of paying for personal things. “I always worked full-time in high school . . . I basically bought my own stuff. I'd even give my mom money sometimes. Even though I lived at home, I still did a lot for myself.” Coming to college, Andrea had to continue to support herself monetarily. For Sandra, she knew she would have to take care of herself financially in college and worked a lot to afford college-related expenses. Before and during college, Sandra held part-time to full-time hours at a retail store in addition to working on construction jobs. “I was working two jobs . . . starting [to] pay for everything. Everything I had to pay, like housing, I paid out-of-pocket by myself.” Being financially independent in college was a learning experience for Sandra as she had no idea how to go about paying her tuition.

I didn't know the financial aid system . . . when I came here I thought . . . at least some of my books [were] paid for. I remember when the bill arrived I [owed] about \$2,000 or \$3,000 for that month. I was freaking out. My friend told me ‘you didn't accept [any] of your grants or loans’. He went into [the billing system] and showed me how to pay and look up my bill and all that.

With the help of a friend who had been at college already, Sandra was made aware of the university's billing system. However, working two jobs to pay for everything was a source of stress for her. She couldn't turn to anyone in her family to assist her with her bills. "I don't ask my parents for [anything] because I already know what the answer is going to be: 'oh we don't have it' . . . It's not necessarily because they just don't want to give it to me, it may be because they don't have it." Sandra admitted that having to be financially independent is her "biggest setback in school." Financial independence appears to be a burden for Sandra, as she comes from a family that is unable to help her with money and yet Sandra was in no position to be able to support herself entirely while a full-time student.

It is clear that the participants experienced newfound independence upon moving to college. One of the ways they struggled with this independence was in their adjustment to academics.

*Adjusting to academics.* The majority of participants divulged that academic life in college wasn't entirely what they expected. Three participants specifically talked about not feeling prepared enough for the expectations of professors and coursework. For Octavia, understanding syllabi and knowing how to best study for tests were some of her biggest obstacles. "I kind of got behind . . . I didn't know to read the syllabus ahead of time. I just figured they'd tell you [about due dates] in class." Like Octavia, Joanna also did not grasp the concept of her class syllabi immediately.

Your teachers will give you the syllabus but not all of them will tell you when everything is due. They just expect you to have it on that day, whereas in high school, they remind you a couple of days before. And so, I wasn't into reading the syllabus and I learned the hard way. My first paper I turned in . . . was late.

Joanna learned through trial and error that she was expected to keep track of her class assignments on her own.

When it came to preparing for a test, Octavia thought it would be similar to high school.

[In] high school, things just came to me. When I got here [to college], I figured there was no need to study. I would read the [textbook] and think I was ready for the test, but it wasn't like that at all. I really had to learn the concepts and diagrams . . . I had to learn different techniques.

Octavia did eventually take steps to plan better for exams. "I took a class on how to study. It helped a lot . . . I don't learn how people normally learn. I have to be more hands-on with things." The nutritional science major noticed that the course on studying techniques improved her performance on tests in her math and science classes.

Sandra also experienced academic difficulty in college because her writing skills needed improvement. "My freshman year . . . I was not prepared at all to write papers. I had a lot of difficulty. You think [high] school would have prepared me better." She gave an example of the stress she felt when writing a five-page paper for a humanities course:

I was nerve-wracked and overwhelmed . . . I saved [the five-page paper] on my hard drive and it wouldn't come up . . . the assignment was due the next day. I'm a last minute person . . . but it was about 2 a.m. in the morning and I [sat] there just bawling. I [couldn't] believe this paper was gone and [didn't] remember what I had written. You know, when you panic, everything just blacks out. So this experience happened to me twice and the second time, I just wanted to drop out of school.

Sandra's statement implied that the experience was so worrying that she questioned her abilities and wanted to quit school because of it. She recalled re-writing the paper after another student on her residence hall floor calmed her down and helped her to focus.



“Trying to write a paper and staying up all of those nights . . . trying to finish everything . . . I wasn’t prepared for that. It was just so stressful.”

Rena also expressed frustration at learning to write at the college level. She took a summer English class prior to starting college as part of a bridge program and encountered an incident that has stuck with her since:

We had to write our first paper and [the professor] came back and said [to the class] ‘you guys write like fourth graders.’ Basically it made me feel like I wasn’t a great writer . . . if I write like a fourth grader than maybe [those fourth graders] should take my place . . . maybe [the university] wasn’t the place for me.

Her reaction was to feel hurt and doubt her ability to succeed in college. “English [isn’t] my first language. I was self-conscious about it. [The professor’s words] were harsh. I felt that I just needed to get through college.” Rena was able to redeem herself by going on to receive an A- the next fall on a paper in another class. “I got . . . an A- and I was so excited because it changed my whole perspective on writing. It made me feel way better.”

Two participants shared that they went on academic probation their freshman year due to their low grades. Octavia recalled feeling ashamed when she found out.

I felt like a loser . . . in high school I was on the honor roll and never had a GPA lower than 3.0. It was a wake-up call . . . I was embarrassed to tell people and then after awhile, everybody was on it. But I knew was I going to get off [academic probation]. There was no dropping out.

She immediately took steps to improve her GPA. “I took the help that people gave me and I . . . tried to stay focused on things. I partied a lot first semester . . . but second semester I calmed down and [it] became routine to study.” Too much partying and not enough focus on academics appeared to be the culprit for Octavia’s academic probation.

Rena also went on academic probation and broke down crying upon reading the official letter. “It was horrible . . . I cried . . . I remembered what that English teacher had said [about writing like a fourth grader].” Rena seemed to have internalized the professor’s comment and started to believe she wasn’t fit for college. Luckily, she too made plans to improve her GPA. “I retook one of the classes I failed . . . my attitude was that I was going to do the best I could in my classes. Take it one step at a time.” Unlike Octavia, Rena had extra support from the university to get off academic probation because she belonged to a learning community.

I had to have six hours of study . . . each week. I had to talk to [two staff members who worked for the learning community] every week about what’s going on and what’s my plan . . . I was embarrassed and did not want to talk to anyone.

Rena also decided to go to the English teacher that had critiqued her writing abilities to receive further editing assistance. “I feel like the person that comes out harsh and mean . . . is the person that wants to see you do better. I [felt] like she could help me excel.” Interestingly, Rena took a bad situation and turned it into a learning opportunity. She faced the professor who pointed out a perceived weakness and sought additional feedback for improvement.

Unlike the experiences of the participants who went on academic probation, two participants commented that they did not feel challenged enough. Lupe admitted that she was bored with the academic rigor of the university. “In [high school] I took the hard and demanding classes . . . I was taking Calculus my senior year . . . [in college] nothing was challenging! I’m a go-getter...[I have] the mentality of a runner . . . hard work equals great results. That’s what I was used to.” Lupe further explained her disappointment:

I had very high standards coming here . . . I had a 3.75 [GPA] my first semester, on the Dean's list, in the Honors program and yet I felt in no way challenged . . . I felt I was taught by incompetent professors . . . like I was dealing with idiots on a daily basis . . . it took me a week to realize [that coming here] was one of the worst mistakes I'd ever made.

Lupe's dissatisfaction with academic life caused her to consider transferring to another institution, however she later decided to stay. Diane had a similar take on academics, stating that she had expected more. "The honors classes were super easy to me . . . I was kind of disappointed."

Lupe shared an incident with a professor in a freshman Honors course that hindered her academic experience. "I wrote a paper . . . I didn't think it was a bad paper, but [the professor] gave me a B and wrote . . . 'maybe English is not your first language'." Her reaction to the professor's comment was a mixture of offense and fear.

I was very offended . . . I didn't know what to do and I was scared, because . . . the class wasn't over yet and the class was the only class I didn't have an A in. I showed [the paper to another professor] and joked that maybe I should start speaking another language in class today . . . I expected more out of him. I think it was an ignorant act and in no way was it professional...nor did it teach me to be a better student, [to be] a better writer in class. I'm still holding my grudge against him.

Lupe felt it would have been more appropriate to offer her a resource for improving, such as mentioning the campus' writing center or providing her with specific examples of why she was docked points.

Generally, the participants faced a "Reality Check" of some sort their freshman year. For most, coming to terms with their newfound independence and then adjusting to college academic life were at times overwhelming and unexpected. Additionally, the

professors mentioned did not play a positive role in supporting these students. Next, I address the influence of peers on the participants' college experience.

***Theme #3: Relate to Me***

The majority of the participants discussed the impact of peer relationships during their freshman year. The theme "Relate to Me" was split into three sub-themes: Making Friends, Support of Learning Communities and Racial/Ethnic Student Groups, and Mentoring.

***Making friends.*** Six of the eight participants talked about their methods of forming friendships at the university and what obstacles stood in their way. For many, roommates were central to their social life, but each participant varied in her feelings on whether her roommate was helpful or hurtful to her adjustment. Three participants did not enjoy their experience. For Aswara and her roommate, their living situation began awkwardly. "I remember the tension . . . when I moved in . . . she was already [there]. She had her [television] on my desk and was going to leave it there . . . I was like 'are you serious?' but she was cool . . . and very sarcastic. We weren't close-close, just cool." Aswara did not end up forming a close bond with her roommate but felt it was a tolerable situation, despite the roommate having a preference for "partying" and Aswara preferring to go to bed early.

On the flip side, Octavia encountered long-term difficulties with her roommate.

I had so many problems with her . . . she called herself a modern day hippie and it was horrible . . . [I] was embarrassed to walk into the room [because] it smelled so bad [because] she didn't like to shower. She ran all of the time . . . it didn't bother her, but it bothered me.

A lack of cleanliness was intolerable for Octavia and she tried to resolve the issue by talking with her roommate:

We talked about things, but then it got to the point where . . . there was no point in talking about it . . . eventually it became ‘I’m done with this, here’s your side, here’s my side, and the two shall never meet.’ I became numb to it. I had the chance to move, but I had a super-double . . . so I didn’t want to leave, she didn’t want to leave, so we just stayed . . . we just kept our distance.

Although the roommate dispute did not turn out well for Octavia, she chose to endure it for the sake of a more spacious living space.

For another participant, sharing a room with someone introduced the concept of a lack of privacy. Joanna’s roommate came with something that Joanna did not expect: a boyfriend who slept over.

My roommate had a boyfriend . . . that didn’t even cross my mind . . . I remember [waking] up one day and he was lying on the couch. She wasn’t even there. I [had to] get all of my stuff and go to the bathroom and change. I went to lunch and came back . . . he was still there, sleeping on the couch. It was like . . . this is not just my room. I got used to it I guess . . . she would have a lot of friends over and I asked her if she could limit [having people over] to just a couple of times a week. Eventually I ended up switching rooms.

After Joanna switched rooms, she was paired with a roommate who was hardly ever around, affording her more privacy than before.

She was [never] there . . . it was like having a room to myself. [My roommate] was in a couple of my classes, but that was the only time we talked to each other. She lived here in town and was only in the [residence hall] because of her scholarship. It was two extremes of roommates, from always being there to never being there.

Two of the participants did share positive experiences with their roommate.

Sandra explained the support she received from hers. “She was a real big help. If [she] ever saw I was upset, [she] would take the time to ask and reassure me that everything

would get better.” Sandra valued that her roommate cared for her and a friendship developed. “My closet friend freshman year was my roommate. We both went through things as far as family goes.” They were able to confide in each other and understand what the other was going through. “We came to each other for anything and everything. I’m grateful I have her because . . . she is the one who stuck by me . . . even on those late nights, trying to get papers [finished] . . . having a good time. . . .” Sandra’s roommate turned out to be a confidant and the two took turns supporting each other. She shared this story:

I was pretty much her main support . . . her step-father passed away . . . her mom ended up in the hospital . . . I think she could just relate to me. [For me], if there was something wrong, she would always be there . . . she knew my mindset. She knew when I didn’t want to talk and she’d leave me alone. She would say ‘I’m always here for you.’ When it was time for me to be there for her, it was the same way.

Sandra had a meaningful and reciprocal relationship with her roommate. Rena also had a friendship with her roommate, yet they did not tell each other as much as Sandra and her roommate.

I think we might have been on academic probation together . . . I don’t know though because I didn’t tell [anyone]. She probably felt the same way too . . . we got into fights, but we got over them right away . . . we were like sisters . . . my best memory is with her and my friends.

Outside of the residence halls, three of the participants expressed displeasure about establishing friendships. For Aswara, meeting new people was not a top priority. “I already had friends, I didn’t care if I had more or less . . . I wasn’t really looking for a friend.” Another participant, Octavia, had a falling out early on in her friendship with a girl named Nina.

When we first got here, we were really close . . . we did everything together. Second semester, a guy came and messed up our friendship. It was hard when we stopped being friends. When I think about the situation . . . it was dumb. For [someone] who says she's grown up . . . you say something and she takes it the wrong way . . . it was just stupid on our part.

The situation impacted Octavia and she did feel that close friendships were available to her.

I don't get along with a lot of other girls that are friends. Take a loss and get over it. I'm friends with [everyone] . . . I have more associates than close friends here. I'd rather be friends with [everyone] than have enemies. It's not that big of a deal.

Octavia appeared to see herself as alone without a strong bond with other students at the university.

Lupe articulated her frustration with not relating to her peers. She recalled the "exact moment" that she realized she did not fit in at the university.

I was sitting in class and a girl was talking about wanting to help Darfur and its people. I thought that was great . . . a freshman already planning to work in Peace Corps. I was like 'so you want to go to Sudan?' . . . and she did not understand that Sudan is the country where Darfur is. I was like . . . I'm done. I'm going to go home. I wasn't challenged. . . .

This interaction was devastating to Lupe because her mother is in the field of journalism and Lupe grew up watching the news with her family. "I think that's why I have an international perspective. Coming to [the university], I read the newspaper every day and I have these great stories to tell, but guess what, no one knew what I was talking about." Her disappointment in her peers invaded not just the classroom, but also her social life. All of her high school friends went out of state and Lupe remained behind. "I don't have a problem making friends. I'm a social butterfly . . . if we want to be honest with each other, if I were only to have 10 friends [here], I would probably keep in touch with one of

them after graduation.” She continued to expand on her dissatisfaction with her peers, stating that she considered herself different than her peers.

My problem is . . . I don’t fit in with my generation. I’m long-term oriented. What is this test going to do for me tomorrow . . . you know what I’m saying. Freshman year, second semester, I came back to the [residence hall] and people were going to bits. No one wants to put forth the effort . . . [they think] ‘I’m going to have a good time’ . . . going to fraternity parties . . . but guess what? You’re a student first.

Lupe did not form any close friendships her freshman year and kept in close contact with her high school friends who had left the state for college.

Sandra, Rena and Aswara did communicate uplifting memories with friends from freshman year. Sandra said “freshman year I met a lot of people . . . people from different ethnic groups.” She spoke of the benefits of getting out and talking to others. “With me being involved in a lot of organizations, [the other students] helped me get connected to the campus, as far as getting to know different people from different organizations and upperclassmen. It helped a lot.” She spent a lot of time in the company of others. “Most of the time I was with everyone from around the [residence halls]. I was [always] at organizational events . . . on the weekends, with upperclassmen.” She found her campus involvement and friendships to be connected. Rena discussed spending time in the residence halls with other girls on her floor. “All of our time was hanging out in the [residence halls] in our pajamas, watching movies, reading our books . . . making jokes and laughing.” Aswara also recalled happy times in the residence halls with the other girls. “Rashel and Mala [had] the community room . . . everyone would just go in there . . . we hung out with each other a lot.” For these participants, relating to others could be



achieved on some level. Some ways that the participants formed friendships were through involvement in learning communities and racial and ethnic student groups.

*Support of learning communities and racial/ethnic student groups.* Whether it was through a residential learning community or a racial/ethnic student group, the participants found their involvement to provide them with support. Six of the eight participants were in a residential learning community as freshman and four of these participants were in two residential learning communities. All eight participants discussed the perceived benefits of being a part of these organizations.

The learning communities allowed for the six participants to live and learn together in the residence halls and in the classroom. Rena summed up her opinion: “if it wasn’t for the learning communities I was in, I wouldn’t have made a lot of friends, or know the people I know now, or get as close to them. I could have been lonely.” She seemed to believe that the learning communities provided an environment that fostered friendship. Joanna also felt the learning communities made it easier to meet people. “Half of the people on my floor . . . I may not have known them at first, but going to class, I would see these people three or four times a week. I got to know them and we [became] really good friends.” She was relieved to have a fast connection to others, being from another state. “I [can be] shy . . . it would have taken me longer to make friends . . . they would come and invite me to do stuff. Coming from out of state, I didn’t know [anyone] . . . so it was great to have them.”

Andrea felt the learning communities made the university feel more intimate. “This is a pretty large campus . . . yet my friends and I were in the same classes. We

studied together . . . you got to meet people like you, doing the same things as you . . . being in the same building was nice.” The chance to bond with the other learning community students was presented at a retreat. Rena explained: “We went for a day . . . we made collages and talked about ourselves . . . we got close.” Aswara also commented about the retreat, saying that she established a close friendship with one of the other girls. “We just clicked . . . we started hanging out . . . we were similar in morals. . . .” This closeness continued in the residence halls. Rena explained “we had all our classes together so we did our homework together . . . wrote papers together . . . [it] made us like a family . . . so it made it easier.” She compared the learning community to a family, signifying that something meaningful took place among the students.

For others, the learning community staff and programming were also beneficial. Lupe mentioned the learning community coordinator as always being ready to lend a hand.

Amazing, amazing woman. Any question I’ve ever had in this world, that woman can answer in five minutes. If she doesn’t know it, she will email you that night with an answer. She used to help me fix my [academic] schedule. I didn’t even go to [my college’s advising center].

She was able to receive guidance from this coordinator and felt welcome to ask for help. Diane also expressed being grateful for the staff of her learning community. “[They] prepare us for what’s to come . . . what I was thought was the far future . . . I also received mentors from the program . . . I had like three or four mentors my freshman year, so that helps a lot.” Diane appreciated the preparation and mentoring that her learning communities offered.

In addition to learning communities, six of the eight participants talked about their involvement in racial and ethnic groups. Diane shared her reasons for joining two African student organizations: “I came from an all-White high school . . . I wanted to see what was out there.” She desired to become a part of the “the Black community” and felt it was a refreshing experience. “It’s nice to be a part of a Black student government that really does things.” Aswara too wanted to connect with her identified racial group. “I associate myself as being African and like to be involved. Someone has to do it unless you want it to be eliminated.” Aswara did not want to see the African American organization dissolve.

Octavia talked about how the African student organization she joined made her feel more comfortable on campus. “That first semester was really hard for me . . . once I started to stay [on campus], because I got more involved . . . that helped me a lot.” Rena also felt supported by the groups she joined because the members were there for her. “They’re willing to help the freshman . . . all you have to do is ask. If they can’t do it, they’ll find someone who can. I felt lost . . . but they’re really supportive.” Sandra had a similar feeling about her organizations.

They [have] an academic committee . . . that pushed for all the freshman to do [well]. For freshman [that] did [well], they did something called Reach for the Stars . . . where they write the names of the freshmen who got an A or B in [a class].

Sandra seemed to think that programs like Reach for the Stars were motivating and rewarding for freshmen. These racial and ethnic-related student groups were not just helping out socially, but also academically.

Two of the involved participants conveyed their perceived negative aspects of the racial and ethnic groups they belonged to. Aswara, who is Eritrean, talked about the conflict between African Americans and Africans in one organization.

You don't tend to see Africans and African Americans having a relationship. In the meetings, you see it and we always talk about it . . . we need to have [better] relations, but no one takes [the initiative]. There's not really a relationship between the two groups.

She elaborated, saying "they don't really collaborate. A lot of them have different identities . . . [African Americans] don't associate themselves as being African even though they have African roots . . . there's not an understanding . . . they're confused."

Lupe, who is Sudanese, had a similar comment about the distance between the two groups. "In [the African group], the dominant were males from African countries who are studying here. Very rich families . . . at meetings, people would take things personally . . . people interrupting each other." Lupe had additional frustration about the social aspect of the groups she belonged to.

I hate to admit this . . . it is harder to get into an African American social group than it is into a White group. That's my honest opinion . . . it has never been an issue for me to make friends with White people . . . the African American community is . . . small and clique-like.

Lupe's statement uncovers a within-group difference. She also spoke of another difference between White groups and African American groups: a lot of hugs. This comment displays an example of solidarity for African Americans who are in a predominately White place.

There's the welcoming aspect . . . my first week . . . random Black people come up and talk to you and give you a hug. I'm like how are you giving me a hug, I don't even know you. It was welcoming, but as for the long-lasting dedicated relationships . . . I think it's a lot harder with people of color.

Lupe felt it was “weird” to be a part of such a “welcoming” community. “You meet them once and . . . you see them again . . . and they give you a hug. I’m so tired of hugs. It’s a very African American community thing to do.” She did not seem to agree that hugging made achieving genuine friendships any easier. In addition to the support of student organizations, mentoring relationships were also helpful.

***Mentoring.*** Five of the eight participants discussed the value of having mentors in college. Such mentors included upperclassmen, a friend outside of college, high school teachers, a tutor from a summer bridge program, university staff, a teaching assistant, an academic advisor, and a professor. Sandra befriended an upperclassman who really impacted her.

He helped me around campus . . . told me about places I needed to go [for resources]. He was . . . like an older brother. He would tell me ‘don’t do this’ or ‘make sure you’re in the books’, ‘make sure [no one’s] influencing you to do [something] you don’t want to do.

Being a first-generation student, Sandra appreciated his concern for her success.

Another first-generation student, Rena, kept a relationship with her summer bridge program tutor. This mentoring relationship came in handy when she went on academic probation. “When she heard . . . she was there for me . . . telling me what to do . . . what I should do. She was just there to guide me.” Rena chose not to tell her parents about being on academic probation so this mentor was someone she could confide in. For Octavia, she looked to her Biology lab teaching assistant and a university staff member in the multicultural office for advice.

[The teaching assistant] knew it was a hard class . . . but she made it fun . . . we got to listen to music and a take a tour [of a lab]. She helped me pick out my

classes for second semester. She goes to [another university] now, but we still interact . . . she really helped a lot.

It meant something to Octavia to have a current student looking out for her. As for the staff member, Octavia developed a connection with her while on academic probation.

“We talked every other week, had lunch together. She’s the one who helped me get into [a program] that helps students get off academic probation.” In addition to the teaching assistant, Octavia had a university employee who cared; this was motivating for her to improve her academic standing.

Joanna felt her academic advisor was supportive. “My advisor [was] willing to work with [me]. [She never] said ‘you can’t do this.’ [She] tried to keep [me] realistic.” Joanna respected her advisor’s honesty. On the other hand, Lupe made a profound connection with a humanities professor. “The minute I met her I loved her.” According to Lupe, the feeling was mutual.

We hit it off pretty well . . . I ended up spending two hours in her office . . . she thought I was hilarious and would write down my quotes . . . she wrote me a letter of recommendation for a scholarship . . . she was for me to transfer [schools] and she was like ‘I can help you do it.’ But I ended up not [transferring] and she was like ‘would you like to be my research assistant?’, which I am doing now.

Lupe describes this professor as a “great woman” and shared how the two met regularly at coffee shops and Lupe even house-sat for the professor. She seemed to light up as she spoke of her mentor.

Overall, the theme “Relate to Me” revealed how the participants sought out friendships with their peers, joined learning communities and/or racial and ethnic groups to meet people with perceived similarities, and valued having a mentor while adjusting to college life. The last theme showcases the effects of being African American at a PWI.

***Theme #4: The Only Black Girl***

The final theme discovered from the interview transcripts is “The Only Black Girl.” This perception likely stems from the sense of isolation that students of color experience on a predominately White campus. From this discussion on race stemmed two sub-themes: Standing Out and Interacting with Other Black Students.

***Standing out.*** All eight participants spoke of being “the only Black girl” in aspects of campus life and discussed what that meant to each of them. Aswara knew that African Americans were not a dominant group on campus. “Demographics are predominately White . . . that was something I acknowledged.” Sandra stated “I’m one of the only African American students in my class.” She equated this situation to standing out in the classroom.

Sometimes when I speak up in class I get some looks, like ‘wow, she really just answered that question?’ It just makes me feel like I should be the one to speak up . . . because I am that minority . . . the only African American female . . . in a lecture of 200 people . . . to be able to answer just one question . . . makes me feel good about myself.

Sandra’s statement implies that when she shares her thoughts in class, she feels she is representing her entire racial group, due to the fact that African Americans in classes at the university are uncommon. Sandra noticed that people paid more attention to her and professors knew who she was. “Most of the time in a class with 200 people, the professor is less likely to know your name. Last year, all of my professors knew my name. For them to say, in front of a room of 200 people, ‘Sandra, what’s your answer?’ I liked that.” She appeared not to be offended by this. Many of the participants noticed that professors knew their name. Rena stated, “the teacher’s passing out [papers] . . . they know who you

are by name. It was interesting because I'm the only Black girl in the class, in most of my classes, so I'm pretty noticeable." Rena perceived standing out as coming with obligations. "It put pressure on me to be in class everyday and not be late." Rena's comment implies she felt the need to dispel stereotypes about African Americans.

Aswara felt that standing out was a sign that achieving diversity on the campus still had a ways to go. "That's how you know there is a problem . . . we don't have that many [Black] faces. To be familiar with your name because . . . of the color of your skin . . . I don't have a problem with it. I feel special." She seemed to not find this insulting. Octavia attributed her standing out to have some positive aspects. "Basically being African American on campus . . . you're able to voice your opinion. At the same time, you want to be nice about it." However, sometimes she was asked unusual questions. "My professor was like 'how do you describe the ghetto?' and I'm like, 'I've never lived there, I wouldn't know what it's like.' Sometimes you can't ask everyone that [question] because not everyone has lived that way." Octavia's interaction regarding the ghetto question illustrates that the professors at the university seem to be uneducated and unsure of how to approach African American females and perhaps student of color in general. Other questions included inquiries about her appearance.

[Other students] would ask me about my hair. I'm not going to lie, my hairstyles were kind of crazy . . . They'd ask 'how does your hairdresser do that?' or they'd want to touch it and I was like 'don't touch it.' They'd ask about extensions and flat irons . . . I'd answer 'em with no problem because it's just hair.

Octavia seemed open to the questions regarding her different hairstyles.

Octavia did feel uncomfortable during some class discussions and at times in the residence halls. "[In Sociology], when they talked about violence and racism . . . it was



hard to sit there and pay attention . . . it was like ‘if you only knew, it’s not really like that.’ That is one class that made me feel out of place.” While living in the residence halls, Sandra also felt like an outsider when she would wrap her hair up with a scarf while getting ready in the morning. “People would just look at me like ‘oh my god.’ It was awkward on my floor because it was me and one other African American girl. [Wearing a wrap] is just something I do differently than others . . . the weird looks bugged me.” These reactions show a lack of education on the other students’ part about differences in appearances.

Some of the participants divulged experiences regarding their race that impacted them. In a humanities class, Lupe encountered a White male student that held some racism beliefs. While working on a group project, the student “flat out said to me, ‘I think of you all as niggers.’ He’s from a nearby city, very rich. The only time he’s ever seen anyone of color . . . was a cleaning lady at his house. He’s never seen a successful person of color.” Lupe’s was mortified but chose not to respond with hurtful words. Her outlook changed after conversing with the same student at the end of the semester.

He was like ‘my opinion has changed’ and I teared up because the class changed him. He told me ‘that was how I saw Black people, and then I met you . . . you have your life together, you’re so smart, you have this great personality, and I feel dumb for being this way for the past 18 years.’

Lupe was genuinely touched by this turn of events but felt situations like this weren’t over. “[This university] is predominately White . . . you’re going to get ignorant-assed people. I’ve gotten a lot of rural people saying ‘you’re the first Black person I’ve ever seen’ and I’m like ‘I hope I made a good impression.’” Lupe appeared to deal with racist situations with quick comebacks and a hint of anger and annoyance.

Others, like Joanna, became paranoid from her sense of standing out. “I thought people were watching me . . . it just got to me . . . we’re further along, but not as far as I thought.” She was uncomfortable with the perceived attention she received due to the color of her skin, and it made her realize that equality wasn’t yet achieved. Andrea was just as matter-of-fact with the situation as Joanna.

I am Black . . . it is an all-White student-based city. There’s more international students here than . . . Blacks. People just say dumb stuff. They’ll tell me I talk like I’m White. Last year, one of my professors [said] ‘you should be a mentor because you speak articulately.’

Andrea seemed to feel that this professor’s comment was not meant to be harmful.

“People think Black people can’t speak I guess . . . I think she just meant I [spoke well] in general.”

Diane shared an experience that seemed to be aimed at her for being African American.

I had taken a girl’s clothes out [of the residence hall dryer] and she came back . . . I [said] ‘I’m sorry, I took your clothes out, I should have waited’ and she was like ‘that’s okay, they’re dirty now.’ She ended up putting too much soap in the washing machine . . . that it was coming out of the top . . . because my hands had touched them.

Diane explained this situation matter-of-factly and straight-faced. She did not respond to the student’s racist retort and did not share any additional information. For Diane, this was only one of a few race-related experiences she encountered on campus.

***Interacting with other Black students.*** On campus, the opportunity to be with fellow Black students was much appreciated for some and frustrating for one participant. In general, most participants felt that more African American students should be present on the college campus. Sandra explained “I’m thinking right now about how many of my

friends should be in college right now . . . they aren't even in school, but probably as smart as me." Aswara had a similar comment. "I knew I was going to college, but [some of] my friends . . . some of them graduated [high school] and had babies. I think we need to [have more] people of color . . . we have a Black president, but what does that really mean." Aswara's comment illustrates that she was doing something different from much of her peers. Both she and Sandra were navigating the college experience while some former friends took a different route.

For Andrea and Diane, they came from predominately White high schools and looked forward to making friends with other Black students. Andrea found it helpful to be able to relate to these students. "Being with other Black people . . . you experience stuff that other people don't understand." She enjoyed being around these "hardworking, Black people that will hopefully do something . . . to change the stereotypes of African Americans." Because of the struggles that are unique to African Americans, Andrea could confide in them about certain things. "We talked a lot about the differences we had as Black students." Diane also felt the university offered more opportunities for diversity. "Coming here was really nice . . . it's nice to see other young Black males and females doing things that are positive." However, it wasn't easy to begin interacting with other Black students for Diane, who went to a predominately White high school. "At first it was really intimidating . . . I wanted to be around other Black students . . . but when it was in front of me, it was scary. I [had] to get my own spot in the group."

Lupe also mentioned making her way into the Black community, but felt an obligation to do so. "I was forced to be friends with Black people . . . I was forced to be

friends with everyone on my floor.” Living together on the same floor due to involvement in the learning community was a culprit. “I got myself trapped. If I went into the cafeteria, if there was a Black person, I had to say hi. If I wasn’t eating with someone, I had to eat with them. It’s just those rules because there’s such a small community.” Lupe resented not having the freedom to hang out with whoever she pleased. “Every moment I looked out my door . . . everyone who is Black was my friend and who I hung out with.” Lupe touched on the pressure she felt to only associate with Black students.

Along the same lines, Andrea cautioned future Black students on the campus to remember to branch out. “The world is not full of minorities . . . it’s important to get along with and work with all of kinds of people.” Overall, the theme “The Only Black Girl” spoke to the idea that race was a part of the participants’ everyday lives, from standing out in the classroom to interacting with fellow African American students.

### ***Conclusion***

From the data collected in the study, four themes emerged as influential factors in the majority of the participants’ college experience. The topics in these themes included how the participants got to college, realizing aspects of college life they were not prepared for, their journey in establishing relationships, and feeling like they were the only one of their race present on campus.

The following chapter discusses the implications of these findings as well as provides directions for future research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### ***Introduction***

The general discussion in this final chapter is based on my results after analyzing the data and connecting the findings to the review of the literature. Once I organized the results of the study, I rechecked the study's research questions against the four themes and nine sub-themes and discovered a number of claims that corroborate with the literature. In the following pages, I (a) address how the research question and sub-questions were answered through the literature and analysis, and (b) discuss implications for practitioners and make recommendations for future research.

#### ***Summary of Findings***

My grand tour question was: What are the experiences of African American females in college? I collected data to answer this question through one-on-one interviews with eight African American female sophomores currently attending a Midwestern Research-Extensive university. From the data collected, four themes emerged as influential factors in the majority of the participants' college experience. The topics in these themes included how the participants got to college, realizing aspects of college life they were not prepared for, their journey in establishing relationships, and feeling like they were the only one of their race present on campus. The following is a brief summary of those themes.

Most of the participants came to college due to the motivation of their family members and personal desire to earn a college degree. Four of the participants grew up

with awareness that attending college was an expectation in their family. These four participants felt encouraged and supported by various family members. None of the participants were discouraged from attending college by family members. However, a few of the participants stated that some of their peers from high school did not attend or persist in college. In addition, the participants had individual aspirations to further their education for reasons such as achieving success, finding an enjoyable career, and taking advantage of the access to college that is unique to the United States. The theme suggested that having family support and a personal goal to earn a degree allowed these participants to make it into college. This finding is supported by the literature on family relationships, as encouragement of parents and other family members have been shown to help African American students adjust to college life better, overcome obstacles, and persist in college (Feagin et al., 1996; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Love, 2008).

Regarding adjustment, every participant was surprised at some aspect of college life. Most felt a mixture of shock and stress regarding their newfound independence and expectations for academic achievement. For the majority of participants, the impact of being separated from their family and living on their own in the residence halls was a transition that took some adjusting. Regarding academics, three felt unprepared for college-level courses and two subsequently went on academic probation freshman year. On the other hand, two other participants did not feel challenged enough. Thus, there was variability in the way the participants perceived the academic rigor of the university. Seven of the eight participants self-reported their GPAs, as one chose not to share, and these ranged from 2.75/4.0 to 3.7/4.0. Two of the participants disclosed that they went on

academic probation during their freshman year. This could mean that the participants had different levels of academic preparation in high school and had numerous methods of preparing and studying for college courses. For example, some literature suggests that African American students typically have weaker educational backgrounds or fewer educational opportunities when compared to their White peers (Allen & Haniff, 1991).

Issues with professors also took place for a few participants as they struggled to understand how their academic performance was being evaluated. In some cases, professors made discriminatory, blatantly racist, and stereotypical comments to the participants. Such actions from these professors signified a lack of support in the participants' eyes. This finding upholds the literature that says that African American students perceive faculty as ignoring and discouraging them (Kobrak, 1992). However, this finding also contributes to the literature as a new finding because it indicates that some professors may be uneducated in ways to appropriately support and interact with these students. Overall, this theme suggested that the participants did not have realistic expectations of the academic standards at their particular university, felt a lack of support from faculty, and may have not known what resources existed to support them.

Many of the participants talked about the impact of relationships during their freshman year. Attempts to connect with others on the campus were made through residence life, learning communities, racial and ethnic student groups, and mentoring relationships. Six of the eight participants were involved in a residential learning community for diverse students. Due to the nature of their learning communities and the fact that all participants were in racial and ethnic student groups, most did not establish

friendships with White students. All participants valued and sought out a connection with their African American peers, although not all were successful. This theme suggested that the participants easily related to other African American students and did not have many outlets to diversify their relationships. The lack of opportunities to make friends outside of the Black community is consistent with the literature. African American students at PWIs tend to stay among each other but are not always happy that White students and Black students operate in separate spheres (Littleton, 2003). While African American students tend to feel as though they can relate with each other and understand what obstacles each other are going through (Herndon & Hirt, 2004), many see friendships with White students as being unreliable and risky (Willie & McCord, 1972).

Similar to the literature, the eight participants in this study had scarce interactions with White peers. Their college experience is likely to be severely effected by the fact that they had few connections with their White peers. With this limitation, they are likely to carry negative perceptions of their peer Whites. Further, all eight participants were involved in at least one racial and ethnic student group and did not talk much about non-racial and ethnic activities. The literature says that African American students see racial and ethnic organizations as being sources of cultural familiarity, expression, advocacy, and validation (Museus, 2008); essentially providing these students with a place to feel accepted and to establish friendships (Davis, 2004). However, these organizations can also make African Americans feel obligated to join, due to the small population of Blacks at their PWIs (White, 1998). Many of the participants in my study did cite joining in order to meet other Black students; yet some participants complained of their frustrations



with the racial and ethnic student groups they belonged to and felt obliged to remain a part of them.

Awareness of being “the only Black girl” on a predominately White campus was discovered in all eight participants. This finding is strongly supported by the literature on isolation experienced by students of color in PWIs (Feagin et al., 1998; Fleming, 1984; Love, 2008). Every participant felt that as individual African American females, they stood out on the campus. As a result, the participants shared the perceived positive and negative repercussions. For example, a few mentioned that their professors seemed to easily remember their names and birthdays, despite large class sizes and similar recognition not being evident toward White students. The professors knowing the names of their African American students could mean that they simply do not often have students of color in their classes, due to being at a PWI, and thus these students are more recognizable than the masses of White students in the room. The participants had mixed feelings about this personal recognition, from feeling “special” to the overwhelming feeling of having to be a good representative of their race in terms of being present in class, prepared, and on time.

In addition, racist comments and interactions from their peers and faculty members had a strong effect on some of the participants. These participants seemed to create a coping strategy in response. When they spoke of the event in their interview, they would follow it with a statement such as “not a big deal” or “it didn’t bother me.” This suggests that brushing off the incident is a coping mechanism. One participant’s approach, after being told by her professor that the entire class wrote like fourth graders,

was to continue to visit the professor and receive feedback on her writing materials for other classes.

With regards to their interactions with other Black students on the campus, this was met with a mixture of appreciation and frustration. Many liked the opportunity to connect with other Black students, but a few felt forced to be friends simply because of their shared racial identity. The literature also has also found African American students to place importance on friendships within the Black community at a PWI, but have mixed feelings about the limitations this establishes for them (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Littleton, 2003). This theme suggested that the participants desired more African American students to be present on the campus and believed that society was far from viewing all people equally. As one participant put it: “everyone’s equal . . . no we’re not.”

### ***Linking Themes to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory***

I was able to connect my findings to Schlossberg’s theory by letting the themes emerge and then returning to the theory and reflecting on it. Upon thorough examination of the literature and analysis of the data presented by the participants’ face-to-face interviews, I was able to link the participants’ responses to Schlossberg’s transition theory in order to arrive at the concluding statements that solve the following five sub-questions with successive relational themes.

***Research sub-question 1.*** Research sub-question 1 sought to explore how African American females perceived their transition to college, using questions inspired by Schlossberg’s transition theory and the “4 S’s:” situation, self, support, and strategies (for coping). The transition to college is unique to each individual, as every person holds

different characteristics, as well as varying perceptions of the transition, levels of support, and coping strategies (Schlossberg, 1981). The situation variable looks at what is happening, the timing, whether a role change is involved, the stressors present, and how the person is affected (Evans et al., 1998).

For all of the participants, the same general transition took place: the transition to being at college. However, none of the participants had the same reaction to this transition: some were excited to start the new chapter in their lives, some were disappointed that they were attending the University, and some were unsure of what they needed to do to be successful in college. For all participants, the timing of the transition was positive in that they had just graduated from high school and had expected to progress to college. They were changing roles though; they moved out of their family's home and into the residence halls and had a new sense of independence. This newfound freedom meant they were now college students and had a new set of academic responsibilities. The stressors resulting from going to college for almost all of the participants involved adjusting to the academic rigor, finding new friends, and becoming a part of the campus community. These stressors affected everyone in different ways. For example, Sandra worked two jobs to try to pay her tuition and living expenses, had difficulty keeping up in classes, and stated that she felt overwhelmed and sad during these tough times. Sandra revealed in her interview that she was not returning to the university for the second semester of her sophomore year so that she could work more and save up money in order to return. On the other hand, Lupe felt unchallenged in her

classes, could not relate to her peers, and considered transferring to another institution, although she ended up choosing to stay.

In summary, the participants perceived their transition to college as being tough, due to their struggle with their independence and in most cases, their unpreparedness for academics.

***Research sub-question 2.*** The second sub-question looked at how African American females perceived the campus environment of their PWI. The questions posed to find out about the campus environment involved the support variable. This variable addresses the social support provided at the University, whether feedback and affirmations were present, and whether supports were changing or stable (Schlossberg, 1981). The participants talked about their social support stemming from mentors and being involved in residential learning communities and racial and ethnic student groups. They also discussed positive and negative interactions with professors, which either enhanced or took away from their social support.

Concerning functions of social support (feedback, aid, affirmation), five of the eight participants had mentors and valued their advice and comfort. For Lupe, her mentor was a professor she bonded with during the first day of class. This professor invited Lupe to help her with her research and talked with her when Lupe considered transferring. For Sandra, her mentor was an upperclassman who walked her through the financial aid system and calmed her when she fell behind in her coursework.

The learning communities also were a source of support as they organized retreats and other group activities to encourage bonding among the students. Six of the eight

participants were involved in a learning community and appeared thankful to be in an environment that fostered friendship and high academic standards. The racial and ethnic student groups that all of the participants were involved in also had benefits such as providing a place for students to feel welcome, a sense of solidarity among African Americans, promoting the academic success of freshmen through recognition programs, and partnering upperclassmen with freshman for additional mentoring. Overall, the participants valued the opportunities to belong (learning communities, student groups), but felt pressure to preference the Black community and not broaden their relationships.

Not all of these support sources were viewed as stable. Schlossberg (1981) and Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) maintained that whether support is seen as stable or constantly changing affects the person in transition. The participants appeared to view their mentoring relationships and involvement in learning communities and racial and ethnic student groups as stable. However, their varying interactions with faculty were not as reliable. A few of the participants had negative encounters with professors regarding racial insensitivity and stereotypical assumptions. This created a level of discomfort and distrust and made the effected participants feel unwelcome in the classroom. In summary, the participants perceived the campus environment at their PWI to have a welcoming Black community and occasionally unwelcoming White community. These women felt obligated to stay inside the Black community and did not appear to branch out.

***Research sub-questions 3 and 4.*** The third sub-question explored how African American females described their semester-to-semester persistence decisions and the

fourth sub-question sought to discover who and what sustained African American female students along their journey. Schlossberg separates sources of support and strategies (for coping); however, the data in this study emerged with them connected, because the things that sustained the women were also the ways in which they coped. The strategies (for coping) variable looks at how the person adapts to the situation, controls the meaning, and manages stress in the aftermath (Evans et al., 1998, p. 114). Seven of the eight participants persisted to their fourth semester, or end of their second year, at the university. Looking at the participants who continued on consistently, their personal motivation to succeed in college and support from family, mentors, and campus involvement appear to have contributed to their persistence. For the participant who did not persist, she encountered a lack of family support, academic difficulty, and limited financial resources. She stated in her interview that she intended to return to the university after taking one semester off.

The participants' personal motivation, which is a sub-theme in the study, seems to be a strong factor in their persistence. Knowing why they are in college and why attaining a degree is important has shown to help them navigate through obstacles. When many of the participants were feeling underprepared academically, they would tell themselves they could get through it and reminded themselves of why they were there. This allowed them to control the overall meaning of the problem and thus helped to manage stress. They were also able to turn to family or mentors for guidance. These people showed concern for the participants' success and offered affirmation and feedback.

The learning communities and student groups also were factors in the participants' persistence. These organizations gave them a community to become a part of, with cultural, social and academic activities made available. Rena compared her learning community to a family, saying that everyone studied together and spent time hanging out in the residence halls. Diane discussed how the racial and ethnic student group she joined was "refreshing" because she had not had many Black friendships at her predominately White high school. When some of the participants doubted why they were in college, friends from their learning community and student groups stepped in to help. These organizations played a role in keeping the participants at the university due to their sense of community and overall encouragement for student success. In summary, the participants' persistence decisions were effected by family support, mentoring relationships, and involvement on campus.

***Research sub-question 5.*** The final sub-question sought to understand what coping strategies African American female students employed. This question, like the previous one, was also aligned with Schlossberg's strategies (for coping) variable. However, this question focused specifically on the coping mode that the participants used: informing seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, or intra-psychic behavior. Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined each coping mode:

- Informing seeking involves the person trying to understand the context of the situation
- Direct action means the person takes steps to confront the situation
- Inhibition of action means the person attempts to block or suppress reacting
- Intra-psychic behavior is the mind sets individuals use to resolve problems that arise. These mind sets, which include denial, wishful thinking, and misrepresentation, enable people to move forward. (p. 74)

Schlossberg et al. (1995) felt that those who coped effectively used a variety of these strategies.

Combined, the eight participants in the study demonstrated all of these strategies. Rena, who struggled with her independence, took steps to learn about how her first-generation status would affect her family and involved them in her daily activities with regular, descriptive phone calls. This showed informing seeking, and direct action from Schlossberg's theory. The result was that Rena could communicate what she needed from her family and in return, she had a family that could better relate to her. Sandra, who did not have a stable financial background, knew that she would need to work two jobs during school to keep up with bills. She took direct action and worked steadily during her freshman year. However, Rena also possessed wishful thinking and did not realize that working too much would negatively affect her academic performance. During Octavia's first semester, she was in denial that the amount of time she spent partying would affect her academics. When Octavia learned she was on academic probation, luckily she took direct action, turning to others for guidance and studying more.

For the participants who experienced racist comments or situations with their peers or professors, they generally responded with inhibition of action and misrepresentation. Lupe, who had a professor write on her paper "maybe English isn't your first language," was offended, but too scared to confront her professor for fear of being graded poorly or failing the course. For Octavia, who experienced class discussions on violence and racism, she would sit through the class quietly, choosing not to respond



to claims about the struggles of African Americans. She felt out of place and did not want any attention brought to her.

A professor told another participant, Joanna, that she spoke articulately and should become a mentor. She recognized that this statement inferred that her speaking abilities did not match her racial background; she chose to brush it off and assume that the professor meant well. This type of misrepresentation enabled Joanna to move past the racist comment. Further, Diane encountered a White female student who began to rewash her clothes in the residence hall laundry after Diane had touched the clothes. The student told Diane that they were dirty again because her hands had touched them. Diane did not elaborate on the how this racist situation made her feel. This also may be a form of denial in order for her to get past the hurtful encounter. Overall, the participants utilized all of Schlossberg's strategies (for coping): informing seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intra-psychic behavior.

### ***Recommendations for Practice***

Based on the study's key themes and findings, I made the following practical recommendations for the eight African American female students and students similar to these participants. Recommendations for the target audiences of African American females, campus student groups, faculty members, and student affairs administrators and professionals are the results of inferences gained from the eight participants' experiences.

#### ***African American Female Students***

1. The eight African American females I interviewed experienced negative situations on their college campus. These participants suggested that more

opportunities for healing are needed. This can be achieved through dialogue with their mentors or peers, or participation in diversity enhancing activities, where they can share their experience with people of varying backgrounds.

2. African American females should become involved in both racial and ethnic-related and non-racial/ethnic activities on campus. The data suggested that African Americans need interactions with students of color as well as White students in order to feel welcome and supported on their campus.
3. African American females should become involved in an organization that promotes academic success and overall preparation for college life, such as a residential learning community. The data suggested that high school preparation was shown not to be enough for the participants in this study.

### ***Campus Student Groups***

1. According to these participants, student groups must recognize that interaction and collaboration among racial and ethnic-related groups and non-racial and ethnic groups must take place in order to foster supportive relationships. For the eight participants, separate spheres appeared to exist on the college campus.
2. The data suggested that student groups must advertise that all types of students are welcome to attend their meetings and social activities.
  - a. Attention should be paid to their advertising methods. Do their flyers and posters appeal to the general body of students as opposed to a certain group?

- b. These groups also should reflect on ways, both implicitly and explicitly, that they might be excluding students of color.
3. Members of student groups should participate in diversity enhancing activities where they can share their campus experiences with people of varying backgrounds and learn from others.

### ***Faculty Members***

1. Faculty members must seek education on how to support and interact with students of color on a predominately White campus. From this, they can avoid asking offensive questions and learn to make students of color feel welcome and appreciated in the classroom.
2. Faculty members must also provide constructive feedback to students who did not complete coursework to their standards. The students must understand what steps they can take to improve as well as what resources exist to assist them in improving. This can be done through detailed written feedback, verbal feedback, or during office visits.

### ***Student Affairs Administrators and Professionals***

1. This study will help the university community understand what the transition to college is like for African American females. The information learned can be used to create or improve the campus' academic support services, mentoring opportunities, and residence hall programming.
2. Student affairs researchers could use the data to recognize the struggles that African American females face. They can be helpful to these women's

struggles by discussing the data with student services offices across the campus, from residence life, student involvement, to faculty members. These offices can then decide how they will enhance the student of color experience.

3. Student affairs administrators and professionals can use this study to appreciate the significance of family support, mentoring, learning communities, and racial and ethnic student groups.
4. Student affairs administrators and professionals can use this study to understand the negative consequences of students of color feeling forced to choose the Black community over the entire campus community, as well as the impact of racist and stereotypical comments on these students.
5. Student affairs administrators and professionals can also establish mentoring programs for African American females and other students of color to assist these students through their transition into college.
6. These practitioners should think of ways to connect student groups on their campus so that students interact more across racial lines. Diversity-themed discussions, retreats, and all-campus dances could provide a welcoming environment.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

Based on the study's key themes and findings, I recommend future research in a number of areas related to African American females. This study looked at the experiences of eight African American females at a single PWI. Future research should be conducted to determine whether similar experiences take place for African American

females at different PWIs. Further, this study consisted of less than one-third of the total African American females in their sophomore year at the university: (a) Further research should be conducted to determine whether the results would have been the same or different if our sample would have been larger, and (b) further research should be conducted to determine whether the sample was representative of the group as a whole. This study also used Schlossberg's transition theory to form the research questions and this informed the interview questions. I found the theory useful and applicable to the experiences of the eight African American females and recommend future use of the theory in the study of various college students.

Moving on to specific findings, several of the participants talked about their unpreparedness for the academic rigor in college. Future research should be conducted to determine what preparation students of color are receiving in high school and its effectiveness. Also, several participants shared negative racist and stereotypical experiences they had with peers and faculty members. Future research should be conducted to understand the perception of White peers and faculty members toward students of color at PWIs.

To conclude, the results of this study are applicable to African American females, campus student groups, faculty members, and student affairs administrators and professionals. Each group can use the data to create a more inclusive and welcoming college campus.

The study also spurred possibilities for future research on the topic of African American female college students. Additional research could determine whether the same

results happen with more participants or at a different institution. Other areas of interest include understanding the preparation for college that students of color receive and how White peers and faculty perceive the college experience of students of color.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent Form**




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OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

Student Consent Form

IRB#

Title of Project: Understanding the Essence of African American Female College Students

This is a research project that explores what persistence strategies African American females utilize for college success. This study will investigate these individuals' transition to college and seek to understand their lived experiences. Also, the study will explore what strategies these individuals are employing in order to graduate from their institution. The investigator hopes this study will contribute to research on African American female students in higher education as well as help institutions better support African American females in college. Interviews will be held with current UNL students to discuss the above topics. You have been chosen because you've been identified as an African American female student.

Participation in this project involves participation in today's discussion that will take approximately 90 minutes of your time and will be held in a room in the Nebraska Union. You will be asked to complete a short demographic sheet and the interview portion will be audio taped. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study. You must be 19 or older to participate.

Any information obtained during this project that could be identified with you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked box in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigators and a transcriptionist during the study and will be kept under lock for one year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in educational journals or shared at educational conferences but the data will be reported as aggregated data. The audio tapes will be erased after transcription.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this project. You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may call the investigator at any time at (402) 871-5565. Please call the investigator should you have any concerns or complaints about the research or in the event of a research related injury. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 if you wish to talk to someone other than the research staff to obtain answers to questions about your rights as a research participant, to voice concerns or complaints about the research, to provide input concerning the research process, or in the event the study staff could not be reached.

April 2009



You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. All responses will be kept in strict confidence. While confidentiality of information shared within the group cannot be guaranteed, participants are asked not to divulge information outside the group.

\_\_\_\_ Check here if you agree to be audio taped during the focus group discussion.

Signature of Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

Name and phone number of investigators

Sheena Kennedy, Principal Investigator

Cell: 402.871.5565

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment E-mail to Potential Participants**

### **Recruitment E-mail to Potential Participants**

Hello! You are invited to be involved in a study about the experiences of African American females during their time in college. My hope with this project is to identify strategies that African American females use to be successful during their time in college. The findings of this study will be used to shed light on ways to better serve African American females and students of color more generally on college campuses.

If you are a sophomore at UNL and also spent your freshmen year at this university, I would like to hear about your experience thus far. Your participation in the study would include involvement in an interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The time and location of this meeting can be determined by you. If you are interested in learning more about this opportunity, please contact me at the following e-mail address: skennedy4@unl.edu or on the telephone at: 402-871-5565 (Cell).

If you do not wish to participate in this study but know of someone who will, please tell them about this study and pass along my information. You may also give me their contact information if you feel comfortable.

Thank you. I look forward to meeting with you and to talking more.

Regards,  
Sheena Kennedy

~~~~~  
Sheena Kennedy  
Masters Student, Student Affairs  
Department of Educational Administration  
Email: skennedy4@unl.edu  
Phone: 402-871-5565



## **Appendix C**

### **Reminder E-mail to Participants**

### Reminder E-mail to Participants

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study of the college experiences of African American females. Your participation will be greatly appreciated and valuable to the university.

**Don't forget! You will be interviewing with me on *DATE*, at *LOCATION*, from *TIME*.** The interview will last approximately 90 minutes. If you have any questions please:

1. Call me at 402 871-5565
2. Email me at skennedy4@unl.edu

Your interview will be kept confidential. If you have any questions or comments about this study, we would be happy to talk with you. Thank you very much for helping with this important study.

Regards,

Sheena Kennedy

~~~~~  
 Sheena Kennedy  
 Masters Student, Student Affairs  
 Department of Educational Administration  
 Email: skennedy4@unl.edu  
 Phone: 402-871-5565

## **Appendix D**

### **Participant Demographic Worksheet**

**Participant Demographic Worksheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

(Name to be utilized in the documentation of the research)

**Please circle the appropriate response for the questions 1 and 2:**

1. Gender:     F         M         Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

2. Self-identified Race/Ethnicity:

White

African American/Black

Hispanic/Latino

Asian

Multiracial

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Major(s)/Minor(s): \_\_\_\_\_

5. GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Expected graduation date:

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you consider yourself a first-generation college student (first in your family to attend college)? Explain.

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

8. Mother's highest level of education:

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

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Father's highest level of education:

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---

10. What campus, community, or national/local organizations were you involved in as a freshman? (Include community service. Please list)

---

---

11. What job(s), if any, did you have during freshman year? How many hours per week did you work?

---

---

12. What campus, community, or national organizations are you currently involved in? (Include community service. Please list)

---

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13. What job(s), if any, do you currently hold? How many hours per week do you work?

---

---

14. Briefly describe yourself.

---

---

---

## **Appendix E**

### **Semi-structured Interview Protocol**

### **Semi-structured Interview Protocol**

1. Describe what coming to this university was like for you.
  - Tell me about anything you did to prepare to start college . . .
  - Who were your supporters?
2. What about coming to college surprised you?
  - Was there anything about college life that you didn't expect?
3. What role did being an African American female play in your transition to college?
  - What role did being a first-generation student play in your transition to college?
4. Tell me about freshman year . . .
  - What was one of your favorite experiences freshman year?
  - What was challenging for you freshman year?
5. Describe the campus environment.
6. How did you feel about classes? Faculty?
7. Tell me about your campus involvement.
8. Describe your closest friends during freshmen year of college.
  - How did you make friends?
9. What strategies did you use to make it through freshman year?
10. What factors made it difficult to succeed in college thus far?
11. Who or what programs have made you feel supported while in college?
  - Who or what programs have made you feel unsupported while in college?
12. What has your experience as a college student taught you so far?
13. What strategies will you use in order to graduate from this university?
14. What advice would you give to African American females who will come to this university in the future?
15. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

## **Appendix F**

### **Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement**



### **Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement**

This agreement made on this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 2009, between Sheena Kennedy, primary researcher, and \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptionist.

The transcriptionist agrees to keep any and all communication (oral and written) pertaining to the research study conducted by Sheena Kennedy strictly confidential. This includes, but is not limited to any and all conversations, audio tapes, or e-mail correspondence pertaining to the transcription, and/or transcription copies (electronic and paper.)

The transcriptionist agrees not to duplicate any materials provided by the researcher or presented to the researcher without the consent of the primary researcher. This includes, but is not limited to, audio tapes and transcriptions. The completed transcriptions will be electronically sent to the primary researcher after completion and also saved on a flash drive. Any e-mail or electronic correspondence or files containing transcribed information will be destroyed after receiving confirmation of receipt from the primary researcher.

The transcriptionist will return any audio tapes, or copies thereof, to the primary researcher along with any electronic copies or paper copies of the transcriptions within a reasonable amount of time as by the transcriptionist and the researcher.

By signing this confidentiality agreement you agree to the terms discussed above limiting you, as the transcriber, from sharing any information obtained during transcription or through the use of the audio tapes to anyone except the primary researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix G**

### **Master Code List**

Campus Reputation/Selection

not expecting to come to UNL  
 looking for exclusiveness  
 didn't work as hard as I did  
 made my application look as pretty as possible  
 money came into the equation  
 felt like I threw away hard work  
 ended up getting a full ride  
 graduated for free  
 Don't like it here  
 Have a lot to offer students of color  
 UNL wasn't my first choice  
 Gave me the most money

Counselor/advisor

Talking to my counselor about majors  
 Talking to my counselor about what to expect  
 Went every other week to change my major  
 I go to my advisors a lot  
 Talk to my history adviser a lot  
 it's who you know  
 you need a tutor, they got you  
 helped me fix my schedule  
 Followed the wrong advisor  
 Talked every other week  
 Helped me to get off probation

Academics

Brought my GPA down  
 Re-take it  
 Don't like picking a definite major  
 I don't know what I want to do  
 So I'm not here for 12 years  
 How do I go about picking the right major?  
 I'm a procrastinator  
 Didn't feel like I had to study  
 It was so much faster (pace of class)  
 Hadn't read the syllabus

Bounce ideas off each other (peers)  
 They would remind you (peers about homework)  
 Together kind of things (peers and homework)  
 My own responsibility (to go to class)  
 Your teachers aren't going to tell you (when things are due)  
 Turned it in late  
 Can definitely do it in 4 years  
 3.75 GPA first semester  
 Dean's list  
 Felt in no way was I challenged  
 Extremely bored  
 Nothing was challenging  
 No one was on the same page as me  
 Worst mistakes  
 "ethnic studies," required for LC  
 sat in the front  
 you don't know until you're hit with it  
 big reality check  
 learned so much about myself & society  
 I wasn't ignorant & I wasn't naïve  
 I'm the worst of the worst  
 Double-jeopardy  
 Light bulbs going off  
 Ripped people a new one  
 Nothing to back them up  
 Class changed him, that's amazing  
 Didn't know how to read the syllabus  
 Figured they'd tell you in class  
 Class I didn't even need  
 Change my major  
 Get off track  
 How to study for college  
 Learn how to study  
 Hands-on  
 Academic probation  
 Felt like a loser  
 Big wake-up  
 Embarrassed

Academics continued:

Love to voice my opinion  
 I know who I am inside  
 Discussions on racism  
 We're just the lowest  
 Perceive AA students  
 Never lived there (ghetto)  
 Can't ask everyone that  
 Never hurt me in general  
 You just feel so small  
 Hated going  
 Don't fit in that category  
 Feel out of place

Professors/Teachers

Can't be depending on professor  
 Taught by incompetent professors  
 My teachers . . . could always go and ask them  
 Helped me with my ACTs  
 Helped me with references  
 You're a really great student. I want you to do well.  
 Teachers are really important  
 Teachers make a difference  
 Always being there for me  
 Had amazing teachers  
 Had support on that side  
 Dr. Sanchez of ethnic studies  
 her research assistant now  
 the minute I met her I loved her  
 we hit it off pretty well  
 wrote letter of recommendation  
 was for me to transfer  
 can help me do it  
 met at coffee shops  
 house sit for her  
 Befriended professors  
 The professor knows my name  
 English is not your first language  
 More appropriate  
 Very offended  
 Ignorant act  
 Not enough women in math & science

More than capable  
 Dumbs everything down  
 Pushed into domestic things  
 Talked to professor too late  
 Could have helped me  
 Meet with me after class  
 Never emailed me back  
 Never showed  
 Bad evaluations  
 Try to meet professors  
 Talk to the professor  
 Talk to the TA  
 They should be there to help us

Residence Halls/Roommates

Living in the dorms  
 Getting used to that kind of openness (residence halls)  
 One of those kids with my map  
 Living with a random person  
 I don't really talk to people  
 I feel kind of rude (asking for help)  
 Roommate had a boyfriend  
 Didn't even cross my mind (a guy staying over)  
 Having a room to myself  
 Two extremes (comparing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> roommates)  
 Problems w/ her (roommate)  
 Embarrassed to walk into the room  
 No point in talking about it  
 Ignore her  
 Here's your side, here's my side  
 Became numb  
 What is she wearing on her head  
 Awkward  
 Me & 1 other AA  
 It was just hard  
 Differently than other people  
 Bugged me  
 Weird looks  
 You get used to it  
 Let it roll off my shoulders  
 Never paid attention to it

I am who I am

Out-of-class/Social/Organizations

How much it meant (dance marathon)  
Stay out and help as long as we could  
(dance marathon)

Out-of-class/Social/Organizations

Harder to get into an AA social group  
than a White group  
never been an issues to make friends  
welcoming aspect  
random Black people come up & talk  
give you a hug  
so tired of hugs  
very African  
very uncivilized  
dominant was male  
people take things personally  
interrupting each other  
pushed me far from African group  
I did tutoring  
First semester was really fun  
Got more involved  
Obama won President  
We were all joined  
Crying  
Touched everyone's heart  
Amazing experience  
Peaceful  
Called everybody

Peers/Student mentors

Wrong people influence you  
Mentors (Melvin Jones)  
Always wanted to be a mentor  
Our mentors were our friends  
Helped us (mentors with chemistry)  
They're just kind of there for you  
(mentors)  
Most ignorant people  
Play, play, play  
Not enough work, work, work  
People that came back this year

Friends are lazy asses  
I had great stories to tell  
No one knew what I was talking about  
Intellectual conversation  
we're not as tight as we used to be  
only friend that knows  
always there to listen  
had my back  
Forced to be friends w/ Black people  
Trapped  
Abel 8 did that  
"expected" of me  
have to eat with them  
had to say hi  
make lemonade out of lemons  
don't tell people  
don't have positive peer pressure  
Helped me out (sophomores)  
Through friends  
Took the help people gave me  
We were really close  
Messed up our friendship  
You live & you learn  
Friends w/ everybody  
More associates than close friends  
Don't have a lot of close friends  
APU willing to help freshman  
Upperclassmen  
People in same major  
Pillow talks  
Heart-to-hearts

Learning Community

People from the alumni class come out  
and help (LC)  
Closest friends were all in the Melvin  
Jones community  
Felt great because I already had friends  
We really got know each other (LC  
retreat)  
We're all together (LC)  
They would come and invite to do  
stuff (LC members)

Really great to have them here (LC members)  
Had classes together (learning community)

Personal/Self

Don't take no for an answer  
I was shy  
It would have taken me longer to make friends  
I was here all on my own  
In my shell  
Coming here by yourself  
Really liked doing community service  
My friends go through the same thing  
Biggest obstacle  
Be more realistic  
Do what you like  
Be open to change  
wasn't hard moving in here  
didn't have to do that whole transition  
planning on going to law school  
Out-of-state  
Came here on my own  
not typical student in my race  
both of my parents are very educated  
never thought about not going to college  
graduate h/s & go to college  
a go-getter  
didn't need peoples help  
I'm a social butterfly  
Long-term oriented  
I'm going to go get it  
Study abroad in Ghana  
McNair research  
Went through a denial stage  
Very high standards  
Very goal oriented  
Worry a lot  
Lost confidence  
Not as eager as I used to be  
You wake up . . . and know who you are

Never let my race or gender define me  
went downhill for me so many times  
cried  
Didn't struggle coming here  
No one there to wake you up  
Don't have authority  
Push myself  
Partied a lot  
No dropping out  
Have to want this  
Got homesick a lot  
Go home a lot  
Getting off track at home  
Focus on my school year  
Hard time for me  
Didn't really want to be here  
Felt lost  
Questions about my hair  
Want to touch it

Awareness of Race

Ethnic studies . . . hilarious and serious class  
You would never have thought of  
Hadn't ever thought of that  
Everybody was just so open  
Big discussion class  
Horror stories of people being outwardly racist (heard)  
Never had that happen to me (racist acts)  
Black kids and White kids can't go to the same school (story told to her)  
Only incident I can think of  
Kind of struck me  
How unaware I was  
Glad that I had been unaware  
Became really paranoid  
Never noticed  
I'm just that blind  
Got me to see things differently  
Look at the big picture  
It's still here (racism)

We're further along, but not as far as I  
thought

Awareness of race continued:

Sometimes one person in your class  
looks like you  
She asked me versus anybody else  
People expect me to know it  
Your race is your identity here  
I stand out  
Take it to your advantage  
Don't let gender/race hold you back  
It's not a big deal  
Very racist  
Sounds racist  
Thought of you as "n\*\*\*\*\*"  
Never seen a successful person of  
color  
Big reality check for me  
Not ignorant  
We will never be equal  
Ignorant-assed people  
You're the 1<sup>st</sup> Black person I've seen  
Hope I made a good impression  
ignorance is bliss  
became paranoid

Family

never had that (missing family)  
mom is on my ass 24/7  
got a phone call every day  
not willing to let me go  
expected me to come home  
My aunt  
My mom  
Helped me with financial aid  
Had a lot of support  
Phone call from a family member

Work

Job told me I was too efficient

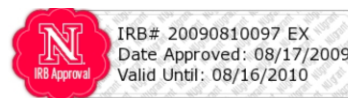
Money

Makes enough not to be in poverty  
Don't qualify for SSS  
Struggle  
Financial aid/scholarships  
Took out loans  
Come out pocket  
Not really stressful

## **Appendix H**

### **IRB Research Approval Letter**





OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

### Student Consent Form

Title of Project: Understanding the Essence of African American Female College Students

This is a research project that explores what persistence strategies first-generation African American females utilize for college success. This study will investigate these individuals' transition to college and seek to understand their lived experiences. Also, the study will explore what strategies these individuals are employing in order to graduate from their institution. The investigator hopes this study will contribute to research on African American female students in higher education as well as help institutions better support African American females in college. Interviews will be held with current UNL students to discuss the above topics. You have been chosen because you've been identified as a first-generation African American female student.

Participation in this project involves participation in today's discussion that will take approximately 90 minutes of your time and will be held at a location and time of your choice. You will be asked to complete a short demographic sheet and the interview portion will be audio taped. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study. You must be 19 or older to participate.

Any information obtained during this project that could be identified with you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked box in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigators and a transcriptionist during the study and will be kept under lock for one year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in educational journals or shared at educational conferences but the data will be reported as aggregated data. The audio tapes will be erased after transcription.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this project. You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may call the investigator at any time at (402) 871-5565. Please call the investigator should you have any concerns or complaints about the research or in the event of a research related injury. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 if you wish to talk to someone other than the research staff to obtain answers to questions about your rights as a research participant, to voice concerns or complaints about the research, to provide input concerning the research process, or in the event the study staff could not be reached.

April 2009



You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. All responses will be kept in strict confidence.

\_\_\_\_ Check here if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

Signature of Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

Name and phone number of investigators

Sheena Kennedy, Principal Investigator

Cell: 402.871.5565