

ON THE ROAD TO GRADUATION: THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE OF  
STUDENTS AT A HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE

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## ABSTRACT

Since the early nineteenth century, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have existed through many challenges to provide access to a higher education for any student regardless of color or academic preparedness. Today, these institutions are relevant to efforts of continuing a legacy of producing scholars, ministers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, politicians, educators, and other professionals from all socioeconomic backgrounds. The purpose of this study is to explore how students define their first year experience at a Historically Black College.

The site of this study is Miles College, a private Historically Black College in the State of Alabama. This study is conceptually framed by the student involvement and student interactionist theories and conducted, through document analysis, observations and individual interviews. Themes emerged that provided insight into the first year experiences of the students. The data from this study indicates that the unique experiences academically and socially define the individual student's definition of the freshman year and strongly influences persistence to the sophomore year.

## DEDICATIONS

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Mrs. Jane Ethel Jackson Terry. While in pursuit of the degree of Doctor in Education, I served as her primary caregiver until her death in November 2010. It was her desire to see me complete this study but I was unable to do so before she passed away.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the physicians and nurses who helped me through several major medical issues endured during this study; my spiritual mentors who prayed for me; my students who serve as an inspiration for me to “wake up and go to work each day”; friends who support me; and family, especially my mother, Mittie Terry Williams, and husband, James Davis, Jr. who are a constant source of motivation to me daily.

It is my hope that this dissertation inspires other practitioners in higher education to take the time to listen to the students. The phenomena of the lived experiences of the young people on college campuses provide valuable insight that cannot be reflected on a graph or table. I also hope that Historically Black Colleges will continue to stand positioned to serve young people of any color who aspire to receive a higher education but may have no other opportunity to do so.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have addressed the issue of access to education from their inception. Following the Civil War, the need to educate the more than 4,000,000 Black people in the United States was critical. Educational institutions for Blacks began as elementary schools. From 1870 to 1890 higher education institutions in the South evolved to being primarily elementary schools providing basic education to secondary schools and eventually to colleges (Anderson, 1988). According to Anderson (1988), the lack of good elementary schools for Southern Blacks forced the Black colleges to do remediation and to provide training for students at lower levels. Further, as students acquired basic academic skills, more secondary and college level courses were offered. Many of these earlier HBCUs consisted of all levels of education while some focused primarily on vocational training programs. The Morrill Act of 1890 allowed states to establish public institutions of higher education that provided training in agriculture and mechanical arts. In the southern states, the Morrill Act of 1890 allowed for the founding of public Black Colleges.

Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 officially defined the Historically Black College or University (HBCU) as an institution whose original principal mission was the education of Black Americans, was accredited by its regional accreditation agency, and was established before 1964. Today, there are 105 Historically Black

Colleges and Universities. According to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), an organization founded in 1943 that provides operating funds and technological enhancement for its 39 member institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities play a critical role in the American higher education system (United Negro College Fund, 2006). The UNCF also provides scholarship assistance for students at over 900 different institutions. Moreover, HBCUs graduate more African American professionals and have earned accolades for their effectiveness in graduating African American students poised to be competitive in the corporate, research, academic, governmental and military arenas (United Negro College Fund, 2006).

The Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute was founded in 1966 by the United Negro College Fund to design, conduct, and disseminate research that helps guide policymakers, educators, the media, and the general public toward improving the educational opportunities and outcomes of Blacks (United Negro College Fund, 2006). According to the Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute (United Negro College Fund, 2006), while the 105 HBCUs represent just 3% of the nation's institutions of higher learning, they graduate nearly one-quarter of Blacks who earn undergraduate degrees or 7% more African American students than traditionally white institutions. More than 50% of the nation's African American public school teachers and 70% of African American dentists earned degrees at HBCUs and almost half of the members of the United States Congressional Black Caucus attended a Historically Black College or University. Spelman College and Bennett College, both founded to provide education to Black females, produce over 50% of the African American female doctorates in all science

fields with Xavier University ranking first in placing Blacks in medical school (United Negro College Fund, 2006).

According to Hurd (2000), the mission of HBCUs is to provide an opportunity for higher education for youth who might have otherwise been unable to attend college. Hurd (2000) asserts that HBCUs place students in a close environment and nurture those who aim to graduate. Gallien (2000) contends that HBCUs have historically worked to prevent academic failure among Black students. Astin (1982) asserts there is a myth and reality of equal access of minorities to higher education. The term equal is not characteristic of institutions because different institutions have different resources and offerings. Moreover, a student's choice of an institution is important. Minorities are less likely, according to Astin (1982), to enroll in flagship public universities or prestigious private universities and tend to be concentrated in two year public colleges. HBCUs provide access to a four year degree and, although they may be deficient in financial resources, they do have competitive academic opportunities.

Anderson (1988) maintains that white Southerners perceived Black institutions of higher education founded in the late 1800s to be disenfranchised and placed in a lower class status. White Southerners also held that education for Blacks should only give skills to provide laborers and to teach discipline and respect for the social order of the time (Anderson, 1988). Historically, there has been much discourse regarding the type of education HBCUs should provide (Anderson, 1988). Black authors and advocates such as Booker T. Washington embraced a vocational education for Blacks. This would enable them to acquire the training that was necessary to compete in the growing American industrial society of the North and the agricultural society of the South

(Washington, 1901). Conversely, William Edward Burghardt DuBois, championed the classical education and said that the liberal arts education of the private HBCUs would enable talented Blacks to gain the skills needed to address the problems of the Black society and aid in the continued development of the Black race (Du Bois, 1903).

From 1865 to 1935, Black colleges evolved from remediation and training in the industrial arts to embrace more of the classical liberal arts education (Anderson, 1988). The classical liberal arts education prepared Black leaders who could address political and economic issues affecting the Black people in the South (Anderson, 1988). Moreover, Black colleges had to balance criticism from the Black community who looked to them for social responsibility as well as benefactors who were industrial philanthropists that readily supported industrial training over a classical liberal arts education (Anderson, 1988). The classical liberal arts education, as opposed to the industrial training model of institutions such as Hampton or Tuskegee, aimed to provide an opportunity for Negroes to “achieve racial equality” in politics and in civil life (Anderson, 1988).

Black colleges supported by church organizations were small and inadequately equipped, understaffed, and meagerly financed (Anderson, 1988). Although they operated with meager resources, the church supported Black colleges undertook a huge responsibility. The missionary philanthropists assumed that education of exceptional Negro youth would uplift an oppressed people (Anderson, 1988). According to Anderson (1988), the missionaries felt that slavery prevented Blacks from developing moral and social values of thrift, industry, frugality, and sobriety; this prevented the development of a stable Black family life. Education would be necessary to teach values and rules of

modern society to freed slaves because “without education, Blacks would rapidly degenerate and become a national menace” to a civilized nation (Anderson, 1988, p. 241).

The term “talented tenth” was coined in 1896 in an essay written by Henry Lyman Morehouse, a white Northerner and strong supporter of liberal arts study for Blacks (Morehouse, 1896). This term was popularized by the writings of W.E.B. DuBois (Du Bois, 1903). The talented tenth referred to the “few and gifted souls” that were to be “trained to analyze and to generalize” through a classical liberal arts education in order to “propel a people onward” (Anderson, 1988, p. 243). These leaders, according to Anderson (1988) were trained as scholars, ministers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and politicians. Du Bois would also advocate the study of Black life and culture alongside the classical liberal arts curriculum. He argued that Black leaders, “men radical in their belief of Negro possibility,” could not be adequately trained for teaching and leadership through the industrial education model advocated by Booker T. Washington (Anderson, 1988, p. 244).

DuBois asserted that wealthy and prominent organizations supported the industrial education of Negroes that perpetuated a system of economic inequality (Anderson, 1988). The Hampton-Tuskegee Model of Industrial Education was often praised for being practical and for teaching dignity in manual labor (Anderson, 1988). The industrial educational curriculum was also strongly criticized for perpetuating a “racial caste system” where Negroes role was defined with limited political or economic power (Anderson, 1988, p. 248). Booker T. Washington favored a classical higher education for Black elites but industrial education for the masses (Anderson, 1988).



Black colleges had to balance criticism from the Black community who looked to them for social responsibility and benefactors who were often industrial philanthropists interested in funding vocational training for Blacks (Anderson, 1988). Most civic and business leaders endorsed the ideas of Booker T. Washington (Hirt, 2006).

The greatest influences on student choice to attend an HBCU today includes (a) geography, (b) the student's religion or religious affiliation, (c) the reputation of the institution and (d) the influence of relatives on the student who desire them to attend an HBCU (McDonough, 1997). Tobolowsky, Outcalt, and McDonough (2005) asserts that students choose to attend an HBCU because of (a) family, (b) academic, (c) institutional or (d) interpersonal reasons. Students who choose HBCUs consider factors such as family wishes, school reputation, the suggestion of a friend, and the perception that graduates get good jobs (Freeman, 2005).

Research conducted by McDonough, Antonio and Trent (1997) demonstrated that Black students who attend HBCUs are more socially integrated and persistent to degree attainment. Students at HBCUs have a more positive self-concept and are socially responsive to community outreach and politics (McDonough, 1997). These students also have greater professional or occupational aspirations than students who attended predominantly white institutions (McDonough, 1997). McDonough defines cultural capital as "widely shared, taken-for-granted cultural signals used in the social mobility process, as well as preferences, attitudes, and behaviors" (McDonough, 1997, p. 15). This is necessary for a student to move from aspiration to attend college to actually enrolling. Black culture equates education to social mobility. Black students report going

to college, in particular an HBCU, to get a better job and make more money (McDonough, 1997).

The Historically Black College or University (HBCU) is still relevant today. Students at Fisk University, founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee, would agree. A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Fischer, 2007) highlighted this institution's success in serving minority and disadvantaged students. The success is attributed to Fisk University's smaller class sizes and aggressive and early academic intervention strategies.

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, president of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia would also agree that the HBCU is still relevant today:

Why are historically Black colleges like Spelman not only still relevant but the preferred choice for many talented Black students? College choice is a reflection of identity—a statement about how you see yourself, who you are now, and who you hope to become. Students are drawn to environments where they see themselves reflected in powerful ways, places where they see themselves as central to the educational enterprise (Tatum, 2005, p. 1).

According to Tatum (2005), effective learning environments provide leadership development opportunities, affirm identity, and promote community. The HBCU experience for a Black student can provide an affirming community that fosters leadership and encourages academic achievement.

According to William R. Moss, III, president and CEO of HBCUConnect.com, an online community for HBCU alumni, students and supporters, Blacks must work to keep HBCUs relevant (ImpactWire, 2006). Moss argues that HBCUs are an important part of American history and that Blacks should preserve and maintain the schools that still remain open today.

The United Negro College Fund (2006) would also agree the HBCU is still relevant today. According to the UNCF (United Negro College Fund, 2006), the high cost of higher education and lack of financial assistance are the two main reasons students drop out of college. The United Negro College Fund is a minority higher education assistance organization that works to reduce financial barriers to college by providing resources to its 39 member consortia.

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the University of California at Los Angeles conducted a study that reveals “students at Black colleges work harder, party less and are far more likely to aspire to graduate study” as reported by the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (Spring, 1998, p. 76). This research examined the attitudes and characteristics of all college freshmen and revealed that Black college students dispelled the racial stereotypes that Blacks are “unreliable, shiftless, with a propensity to use drugs and turn to crime” (JBHE, p. 76). The study by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program also contends that students at Black colleges drank less, smoked less, and watched more television (JBHE, p. 76). This article did note that this study could be explained by the fact that many private HBCUs are affiliated with religious denominations and attract students with a more conservative social nature. In 2002, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* reported that freshmen students at HBCUs still party less, drink less, work more hours on a job and read more for pleasure than freshmen at other types of institutions. This report also added that although students attend HBCUs that have a conservative religious affiliation, students are more liberal and vocal about societal issues (Spring, 2002). The data from these reports would add to the argument on the relevance of the HBCU today.

While HBCUs exist to provide identity and a supportive academic community to its students and resources exist to aid in financing education at a Historically Black College, Blacks are underrepresented in the percentage of students who receive a college degree as compared to the overall enrollment of students in colleges and universities in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that of the 1,348,503 students that received baccalaureate degrees in 2003, only 8.7% were Black (U. S. Department of Education, 2005). The dropout rate for Black students is staggeringly high. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (Autumn, 2003) reported that the college graduation rate for Black students is 39%. While the percentage of Black students who graduate from college is low, many highly selective private liberal arts or flagship institutions boast of high percentages of Black student graduation. According to the Winter 2006 edition of the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, Harvard University boasted of a Black graduation rate of 95% followed by Amherst College with 94%. The flagship institution with the largest Black graduation rate in 2005 was the University of Virginia at 86%. A study of what makes these institutions successful in graduating Black students is important to informing administrators in program and policy development.

Student persistence is important because according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) from 1980 to 2003, the number of students who enrolled in post-secondary education increased by 39%. The number of Black students who enrolled in college from 1980 to 2002 doubled, however, from 1980 to 2002 the percentage of enrollment of Black students only increased by 4% (U. S. Department of Education, 2004). Statistics also reveal that historically Black colleges and universities maintained an average of 2% of the total enrollment of students who pursued post-secondary

education from 1980 to 2003. In 2002, the total percentage of Black student enrollment in all colleges and universities was 11.9% (U. S. Department of Education, 2004). Of the Blacks enrolled in college in 1980, 18.4% attended a HBCU while in 2002, only 12.4 % of the Blacks who were enrolled in college attended a HBCU (U. S. Department of Education, 2004). These findings suggest that the percentage of Black students who enroll in post-secondary education is significantly less than that of the total population of students.

### Statement of the Problem

A college degree is now the educational threshold according to Brower and Ketterhagen (2004). The Fall 2006 Occupational Outlook Quarterly reported a person who desires to obtain a job with above average earnings will require some postsecondary training. According to a special report on Blacks in the United States, Blacks who earn a baccalaureate degree earn substantially more income than Blacks who only have some college experience or no college experience at all (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). If postsecondary education is identified as a means to employment and Blacks are underrepresented in college and university matriculation and graduation, a study of this phenomenon is crucial to understanding the experience of Blacks in higher education.

Statistics do not tell the story of why Black students at HBCUs persist. A study that examines the experiences of a student at the HBCU is necessary in order to understand persistence. Having an understanding of the practices and the reported experiences of students and its effect on their choice to continue their education from year to year at an HBCU gives an institution data to drive decisions on programs and

services that can assist students. Incorporating factors such as access to education, student choice of institution, and academic preparedness aids in understanding the effect of pre-matriculation variables on student success. This study examined the experiences of students who matriculated at an HBCU and sought to understand how those experiences influence a student to continue his or her studies.

There are 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities available as a viable option for the education of any person not just Black (United Negro College Fund, 2006).

**Table 1. 1**

<b>Number and percentage of Black students enrolled in HBCUs Fall 2002</b>			
<b>Student race/ethnicity and type of institution</b>	<b>Number of students enrolled</b>	<b>Percent by type of institution</b>	<b>Percent of total enrollment</b>
Black	1,978,746	100.0	11.9 *
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)	244,442	12.4	82.6
Non-HBCU	1,734,304	87.6	10.6

*\* Percent of enrollment of all U.S. Title IV degree granting institutions.*

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, “Fall Enrollment Survey” (IPEDS-EF:02), fall 2002, previously unpublished tabulation (December 2004).

According to the United States Census (2000), 24.4 % of the population possessed a four-year degree or higher. Less than 10% of the population of people possessing a four-year degree or higher was Black. Black Americans consisted of 12.8 % of the total population (United States Census, 2000). These statistics imply that less than 20% of the population of Black Americans have a four-year degree or higher.

**Table 1. 2**

<b>Degrees conferred by Title IV degree-granting institutions in the United States by level of degree and race (Black,non-Hispanic) for academic year 2002-03</b>								
	<b>Total All Degrees</b>		<b>Bachelor's</b>		<b>Master's</b>		<b>Doctorate</b>	
	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>2,620,894</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,348,503</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>512,645</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>46,024</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Race/ethnicity								
<b>Black, non-Hispanic</b>	<b>237,615</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>117,774</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>40,046</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>2,362</b>	<b>5.1</b>

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

(2005). [\*Postsecondary Institutions in the United States: Fall 2003 and Degrees and Other Awards Conferred: 2002-03\*](#) (NCES 2005-154).

Once in American history, Blacks had high aspirations for a college education but limited access.

ONE day, while at work in the coal-mine, I happened to overhear two miners talking about a great school for coloured people somewhere in Virginia... I heard one tell the other that not only was the school established for the members of my race, but that opportunities were provided by which poor but worthy students could work out all or a part of the cost of board, and at the same time be taught some trade or industry... I resolved at once to go to that school, although I had no idea where it was, or how many miles away, or how I was going to reach it; I remembered only that I was on fire constantly with one ambition, and that was to go to Hampton. This thought was with me day and night. (Washington, 1901, p. 42)

This passage from Booker T. Washington's famous autobiography *Up from Slavery* written in 1901 describes how higher education for the disenfranchised Black person was highly valued. Washington was criticized for his position on education by scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois because of his position on Black educational training in skilled trades as opposed to a classical education (Anderson, 1988). The statistics today do not suggest that Blacks do not value or aspire to pursue a college degree, but clearly demonstrate that Blacks are not participating in or graduating from institutions of higher learning.

Blacks have not experienced an increase in pursuing higher education by much since 1995 (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Blacks however have aspirations to attend college and feel a degree is important (Freeman, 1998). The sociological model of student choice is defined as family socioeconomic background and student academic ability as a predictor of student's choice to attend college (Freeman, 1998). African American students are influenced by their mothers, extended family members' educational attainment, and job or career aspirations in college choice. Interestingly, Black students may hold high aspirations but choose not to attend college because of



other socioeconomic factors negating stereotypical beliefs that Black students are less motivated than other ethnic groups. Freeman (1998) found “while they place a high value on the benefits of higher education, their aspirations likely do not translate into higher education participation” (p. 187). While they aspire to go, Black students may not enroll because of school factors, psychological factors, or structural and societal factors (Freeman, 1998). HBCUs provide the answer to those socioeconomic factors that often prevent Blacks from going to college and enable students to overcome lack of social or cultural capital and achieve.

If the conditions of the K-12 experience are changed, then student outcomes can be changed (Orfield et al., 1984). Channeling can “impact the financial aid process and student’s economic outlook which can influence the type of postsecondary schools selected and subsequently the college experiences” (Freeman, 1998, p. 44).

The sustained disparity in college and university access, participation, and educational attainment among racial groups and the controversy that accompanies discussions that shape policies in educational systems and workplaces are indicators of the resilience of racism and the political dominance of the privileged. (Freeman, 1998, p. 44).

Disparity in college preparation in the K-12 experiences restricts access to college.

College preparatory course enrollment is related to a parent’s education and socioeconomic status. There are a disproportionate number of minorities in lower socioeconomic quartiles that may have inadequate academic facilities and have a disproportionate number of students enrolled in technical or vocational education courses instead of college preparatory courses (Orfield, et al., 1984). Students need quality high school activities that engage them such as extracurricular activities, rigorous homework and effective college advising to prepare them for college (Alexander & Eckland, 1977).

The K-12 academic experience may not have adequately prepared a student to attend a four year college or university (A Nation at Risk, 1983). Critics are heightening awareness of practices such as social promotion where students are passed along from grade to grade without demonstrating mastering of the previous grade level work or the ability to complete requirements such as graduation exit exams. Without the prerequisite foundation for postsecondary work, access to an education at a four year institution can be limited (Freeman, 1998).

Many institutions have implemented admission standards that will allow them to accept students who may not have had access to a college education otherwise. Often referred to as open, conditional or alternative admissions, students are admitted with special conditions or terms. One condition for admission may be placement in developmental or remedial courses in order to prepare them for college level coursework. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), minority students are overrepresented among low-income students who are more likely to be underprepared for post-secondary education. Often, these at-risk students may be unable to gain admission to traditionally white institutions. Through open admission policies, many HBCUs address the issue of access to education and providing the remediation that at-risk, low-income, minority students need.

The open admissions policy is related to the history and early mission of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Recalling that many Black colleges began as elementary schools that had to teach the basics of reading, writing and mathematics before being able to offer secondary and collegiate instruction, HBCUs have been

sensitive to the desires of any individual who wanted an education since their founding. Black colleges withstood criticism in offering remediation and basic instruction to people that many racist leaders felt were intellectually inferior. HBCUs opened its doors of opportunity to any person regardless of race or economic status.

Black colleges were also a viable option for non-traditional students who took advantage of open admissions policies. A non-traditional student is one who delayed matriculation, may be financially independent, possibly married with dependents or a single parent, and may be employed full-time (Horn, 1996). According to the U. S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (2002) 14% to 19% of first year students at HBCUs are non-traditional students. Many of these non-traditional students may be enrolled in developmental courses as “refresher” courses to become reacquainted with coursework that they have not used since high school. Many institutions provide special programs or organizations specifically for non-traditional students. Non-traditional students tend to have a higher withdrawal rate than do traditional aged students (Astin, 1975). Students who work many hours during the week, which is typical of non-traditional students, are less likely to return to college after the first year (Porter & Swing, 2006.)

Open admission policies have received criticism since their beginning. Not all Black leaders endorsed the open admissions policy for Black colleges. W. E. B. DuBois (1910) felt that Black colleges would better serve its people by having higher entrance requirements soliciting talented Negroes and by offering a challenging curriculum of literature, philosophy, and mathematics. There have been conflicting views over the basic goals of higher education. Astin labeled the goals as elitist, egalitarian or remedial

plans (Astin, 1971). These three plans differed in how resources should be allocated in education. The elitist plan has dominated the view of most individuals who hold the belief that only the ablest and brightest should receive a higher education in order to advance scientific and technological progress. The remedial plan would allow low performers to receive some form of postsecondary education. The egalitarian plan, however, promotes education for everyone and also advocates equal investment of resources across the spectrum of ability.

Proponents of open admissions embraced an egalitarian view that proposed the need to equalize educational opportunities for all people, especially minority groups. Those who opposed the egalitarian plan felt that institutional selectivity added to the college or university's prestige. Astin (1971) describes that opposition to open admissions stems from the cost that would be involved in institutions developing special programs for less prepared students and actually having to take responsibility in "educating" the student. He also believed that selective institutions could develop programs to educate Black disadvantaged students with lower abilities (Astin, 1972).

Other individuals who spoke against open admissions used research to defend their position. According to the American College Testing Program (1993), freshman to sophomore attrition was highest at those institutions with open admission policies and at historically Black colleges and universities. Those who defend open admissions often cite research that has shown that standard predictors used in selective admissions such as SAT scores are not as strong indicators for retention for Black students (Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986.)

It is necessary for Black students to get the guidance and resources they need in order to ensure educational advantages such as access to post-secondary education (Farmer-Hinton and Adams, 2006). The guidance includes instruction, development of social skills or interpersonal skills, and personal or familial needs. Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) contend that this is critical for a student's transition to college. They believe that counselors can aid the Black student in being able to prepare for college through exposure to the reality that a student can be successful in college. This aids a student in realizing how he or she can fit in a college setting and reduces the instances of the under-preparedness of Black students for college.

In order to improve the success rate of Black students in college, communities need to work at the grassroots with urban public school youth to provide avenues to expose students to college opportunities (Gallien, 2000). Retention of minority students at colleges and universities improves when they make an informed decision to attend a particular institution (Elam, 1989). Students who participate in pre-admission and pre-enrollment activities will be more likely to successfully integrate into the social and academic culture of the institution and will persist (Elam, 1989). These activities give students a realistic awareness of the college and greater appreciation for the need to interact with the institution academically and socially. Government programs such as Talent Search, Upward Bound and Student Support Services provide access to higher education and services to aid in persistence (Astin, 1982) Minority students benefit from these programs that were established to assist educationally or financially disadvantaged students.

Access to educational opportunities, academic preparedness, and motivation are all variables that influence a student's decision to attend college. The unique mission of HBCUs and its role in providing opportunities to students who may have overcome significant academic and financial barriers to attend college provides the backdrop for this study. In understanding how a Black student experiences the first-year of college, policies and programs can be created or improved to address the problem of Black students persisting to graduation. This study examined how a student at an HBCU defines the first-year and how first-year experience influences the decision to persist.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the first year experience on a campus of a private Black college and explore how these experiences influence student persistence. The first year of college is an important rite of passage that often determines if a student will complete a four-year degree (Barefoot, 2000). Given the problem that only 11.2% of the college population in 2002 were Black and 9.1% of degrees conferred in 2002 were awarded to Black students, and that a college education is becoming crucial to economic empowerment and competitiveness in today's society, it is important to examine those factors that can enable Blacks to obtain a college degree (U. S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Little research exists to explain why HBCUs are successful in their mission to educate people and in particular Blacks. This study aims to fill a void in research to examine Black students at HBCUs and the ways in which the experience during the first year influences persistence.

Black students at HBCUs have demonstrated high levels of aspiration, motivation and intellectual growth and have an unusual persistence in pursuing their educational goals (Gurin & Epps, 1975). HBCUs have been the training grounds for young activists who planned the Civil Rights Movement in the South and the intellectual stimuli for great scientists, educators, and politicians. HBCUs have stories of young men and women who overcame unthinkable obstacles in pursuit of the dream of a college degree. Many students at HBCUs can tell a story of how that school was the only school in which they could receive a higher education. What is unique about the historically Black colleges?

William H. Gray, III, former president of the United Negro College Fund, contends

We have a quality, hands-on, nurturing, warm, non-hostile environment. We have small numbers of students in our classrooms. We do not have graduate students teaching courses. The college president knows the student and knows his mama's telephone number. He is not a social security number. (1993, p. 64)

While there is little empirical evidence to support Gray's claims, research indicates that students who attend Black colleges are more likely to aspire to finish college and pursue post-baccalaureate degrees in ambitious fields of study (Wenglinsky, 1996). There is also a perception that Black students "fit-in" on a Black college campus. Historically Black colleges were not created to provide a place for Black students to "fit" but were established as a means through which a Black person could receive a post-secondary education. A student's feelings of the extent his or her values matches those of the campus community implies an "institutional fit" for the student and aids in preventing dropout (Bean, 1985).

## Significance of the Study

This study is critical because there is little literature that specifically addresses persistence at HBCUs. There are unique characteristics of historically Black colleges and universities in their mission, resources, and student population that make it difficult to generalize results and applicability to these institutions. The significance of this study is that the information and data on student experiences will inform the programs, activities, and services that aid in retaining students through the first year at HBCUs. Institutions that are tuition-driven will be able to retain resources gained through tuition revenue and can use funds to strengthen programs that will assist student persistence. This study also contributes to the study of the Black college student out-of-classroom experiences as they complement academic first year experiences. HBCUs that are dependent on federal Title III funding designed to strengthen the programs and operations of these institutions will have evidence of activities that will aid in their funding formula that depends on enrollment, retention and graduation rates. Institutions can also experience reputation enhancement when students are retained within the first year (Porter & Swing, 2006). Many publications and college ranking systems such as the prominent *U. S. News and World Report* use factors such as first year retention to rate the quality of an institution. Kim (2002) suggests that the perception a student has of the HBCU plays a role in the choice to attend that particular college. Therefore, HBCUs compete in popular rankings such as the *U.S. News and World Report* in order to attract students who have more options as to where to attend school. HBCUs also use their success stories in helping and graduating former underprepared students to recruit (McDonough, 1997).



Institutions need to understand how the experiences of first-year students influence success and persistence. Without this information, an institution cannot effectively evaluate its current programs and services offered to first year students. Stakeholders who influence policy and decision-making at HBCUs require research and data to determine the effectiveness of programs that aid students. There are pre-college issues that influence the decision for Black students to attend college and that affect the first-year experience. Black students, out of lack of “institutional support” during the K-12 experience, may opt to join the military or pursue unskilled labor careers instead of attending or persisting in college (Lee, 2004). “Lack of encouragement by K-12 teachers may lead many Blacks to abandon their aspirations for college” (Lee, 2004, p. 96). Financial barriers also impact access to college or persistence while matriculating (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Academic factors such as college preparation, the learning environment, the number of majors offered by an institution, and the perception that a degree from that institution will help a student get a good job influence a Black student’s decision to attend or persist during the first year of college (Canale, Dunlap, Britt, & Donahue, 1996).

HBCUs have a unique ability to provide an environment that fosters achievement among its students regardless of ethnicity (United Negro College Fund, 2006). Lee (2004) suggests that institutions employ a student centered, customized first-year experience with tutorials and student specific advising that enables them to gain a sense of empowerment, cognitive maturity, and academic confidence. “Staff members such as recruiters, admission counselors, advisors, faculty who teach first-year courses, residence

hall staff, tutors, orientation staff, security officers, and secretaries have the first chance for the first-year experience to be a positive one” (Lee, 2004, p. 102).

This chapter established the purpose of this study to define the first-year experience of students at a historically Black college in order to determine the successful practices and opportunities offered by the institution that enable student persistence. This chapter has summarized the need to address the issue of the Blacks not obtaining college degrees although the opportunity for a higher education is there. The next chapter will review the literature on the First Year Experience, Student Persistence and the theoretical framework for this study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature relevant to this study explores Student Persistence and the Conceptual Framework. Research suggests that the greatest attrition for a college or university occurs during the first year. As a result, this study aims to understand the first year experience influence on student persistence. An understanding of what is meant by the first year experience and services associated with first year programs are important to this study. The conceptual framework for this study incorporates Astin's Student Involvement Theory and a revision of Tinto's Student Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure.

#### Student Persistence

Persistence is defined as re-enrollment on the campus as indicated by official university records (Bank, Slavings, & Biddle, 1990). Most students enter college with the goal of earning a degree (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2003). Surprisingly, 50% of students who enroll in college dropout at some point (Brawer, 1996). Student persistence is viewed as the gateway to student success which is defined as the successful completion of academic courses and development of critical thinking, problem solving and reflective judgment skills (Upcraft et al., 2005). Institutions of higher education struggle with student attrition (Braxton, 2000; Polinsky, 2002).

Early research on student retention or persistence sought to determine which students were most likely to drop out of college. Astin (1975) defined a drop out as a student who withdraws from college never to return. These studies of drop outs made generalizations about student characteristics such as gender, race, age, socioeconomic background, and other descriptive pre-entry characteristics. These descriptive studies were often done through a quantitative analysis that examined the relationship between demographic variables. Quantitative studies on student persistence failed to ask why a student dropped out of college. Later research began to use the data from these studies to attempt to explain why certain student characteristics had certain outcomes.

#### Foundation of Student Persistence Studies

Spady (1971) laid the groundwork for the study of dropout in higher education through the theoretical model on student dropout that identified variables such as academic potential, ability, socioeconomic status and family background important for a student to remain in college. According to Spady (1971), a student relied on support from friends in college and a peer group with shared values and this integration of a student into the social life of the college campus was important to reduce student dropout. Later research by Tinto (1975) and Bean (1982) would confirm the importance of student integration to prevent student drop out.

Bean (1982) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) conducted studies to examine why “student-institution fit,” academic, demographic, or financial factors affected a student’s chance to succeed. The work of Bean (1982) led to the Longitudinal Process Models and, Terenzini and Pascarella (1991) developed the College Impact Modes that

both emphasized the relationship between pre-entry characteristics and the effect of the experience of the student while in college on persistence. Other researchers such as Tinto (1993) sought to explain why students with certain characteristics persisted in college. Astin (1982) found that poor students and minorities had a higher attrition or dropout rate than traditional students.

The study of student persistence grew from the works of Tinto (1971), Bean and Metzner (1985), Astin (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), Tierney (1992) and Stage and Hossler (2000). Theorists began to study the reasons why students dropped out of college and proposed explanations such as the direct and indirect effects and relationships of personal and institutional variables upon each other or the integration of the student in the academic and social community of the campus. Few researchers have studied the persistence of minority students (Mow & Nettles, 1990; Tierney, 1992; Townsend, 1994). In these studies, minority students were studied at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

### Influences on Student Persistence

Student persistence is influenced by the experience of the student in college. A student can decide to drop out voluntarily because of perceptions about his or her involvement, belonging, or integration into the campus community or a student can be involuntarily withdrawn from the institution because of academic failure or disciplinary issues. First-year persistence is growing as an important area of study because research has shown that the largest portion of institutional leaving occurs during the first year of college (Upcraft, Barefoot, & Gardner, 2005). Research efforts are demonstrating that

there is a need to challenge and support first-year students academically and socially creating a collegiate environment that encourages student persistence. Researchers such as Tierney (1992) stress that the study of minority student persistence must be culturally sensitive noting that minority students have different institutional experiences and complicated pre-enrollment variables that have to be considered before applying standard models or theories of persistence. This study is important because it addresses the void in research on minority student persistence, particularly the persistence of Black students at an HBCU.

Levin and Levin (1991) reported that the following factors have the largest impact on minority student persistence: Academic preparedness; prior enrollment in college prep courses; being able to adapt to the “college experience”; and being committed to educational goals. Students who have lower grade point averages and who did not take college preparatory courses in high school as well as those who are not committed to their educational goals and have an inability to adapt to new and stressful conditions are less likely to persist. According to Astin (1982) the quality of the student’s academic preparation at the time of college entry proved to have more frequent and stronger relationships to most outcome measures. Minority student persistence studies were performed primarily at traditionally white colleges and universities. HBCUs have proven to matriculate students to graduation in spite of the odds of limited academic preparedness because of the student’s strong commitment to the goal of obtaining a college degree (Gurin & Epps, 1975). This study examines the first-year college experience of Black students at a private HBCU to note its effect on persistence.

The academic preparation measures used to study the persistence of college students are as follows: high school grades; aptitude test scores; study habits; high school curriculum (College Preparatory or Vocational/Technical); and perceived need for tutoring. Astin (1982) holds that a minority student who is young and had good high school grades and good study habits, and who also possesses high self-esteem and hails from an affluent, well-educated family has the best chance to persist. Research examining the effects of high school grades and standardized test scores, as well as the willingness to seek tutoring and improve study habits has been limited to minority students who attend predominantly white institutions. There is limited research of the pre-matriculation academic preparation of students at HBCUs and its effect on persistence.

#### Tinto's Theory and its Contribution to the Study of Student Persistence

In the classic work *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Vincent Tinto (1987) presents a theory of individual student departure from an institution of higher education. In the presentation of this theory, Tinto first refines the definition of student dropout that was held by researchers such as Alexander Astin as the failure of a student to obtain a college degree. Tinto claims that a single institution cannot count a dropout as failure to graduate but that dropouts or student departure can also include student transfers to another institution.

Tinto's model of student departure explores the student's characteristics and how that individual interacts with the academic and social environment of the institution. He claims that departure is not always because of academic failure but is often voluntary due

to incongruence and isolation (Tinto, 1987). Incongruence implies the student perceives that his or her needs, interests or personal preferences do not match what a particular college or university offers. As a result, the student does not feel as though he or she “fit in” with the institutional environment. This incongruence leads to isolation. In isolation, a student fails to interact with others because there are few opportunities for contact. External demands such as living off campus, employment, and family responsibilities may take a person away from campus activities limiting opportunities for interactions with others at the institution (Tinto, 1987). The student must be committed to his or her intention to complete college in order to overcome these obstacles that limit the involvement in the campus community. Tinto’s research did not adequately address student departure from a Historically Black College. This study is important because it looks specifically at Black students at a HBCU where there are more opportunities for student contact with the academic and social environment of the campus. According to Watson (1996), students try to find other students who are similar to themselves and they seek places and things that remind them of their background and values. It is important for researchers to understand how the college environment affects a student’s involvement on campus, change and development according to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) students in college gain knowledge and skills that enable them to speak and write, reason abstractly and solve problems. Students have demonstrated greater self-understanding, self-definition, personal commitment, and refined ego functioning as they matriculate through college (Watson, 1996).



The opportunity to interact with other students is not based on institutional size. Private schools tend to be smaller than public institutions and it could be assumed that the intimacy of the campus would allow for greater opportunities for interaction. Tinto, however, argues that there are greater rates of departure in very small institutions with less than 500 students. Isolation is the result of the “degree of student involvement in the life of the college and the size and variability of student and faculty subcultures in which student involvement can occur” (Tinto, 1987, p. 34). HBCUs provide a peer group, student subculture or community with the likelihood that there are similarities where a student can find his or her niche. There is a greater chance for the centrality of the students to the institution at an HBCU. Students are less likely to feel like an outsider or detached member of the community. This congruence prevents isolation and aids in student persistence. According to Tinto (1987) if an institution has a peer group for a student to join, there is an increased chance for student integration in the campus community. More studies to examine integration into the HBCU campus community are necessary.

Incongruence and isolation along with adjustment and difficulty are experiences that an individual undergoes at the institutional level. The student’s perception of these four experiences influences persistence. Most researchers agree that the college experience after a student begins his or her studies has more of an effect on student departure than one’s prior experiences before college (Tinto, 1987). Pascarella and Terenzini (1975) claim that what occurs on campus, namely interaction with others, is more important in influencing student persistence than the pre-matriculation experiences. Adjustment includes the social and intellectual transition a student must make upon

entering college. Tinto compares this adjustment to Arnold Van Gennep's (1960) study of the rites of passage where individuals proceed through stages of separation, transition and incorporation in different phases of life to adulthood (Tinto, 1987). Tierney (1992) criticizes Tinto's use of Van Gennep's anthropological notion of rites of passage claiming that it cannot adequately explain an individual's progression from one culture through another cultural experience. Tierney also says that Tinto's separation and rites of passage cannot explain the integration of minority students in a majority culture (Tierney, 1992). Black students do not leave the past experiences of their Black cultural experience behind in order to adopt another culture as Van Gennep's rites of passage would suggest.

Experiencing difficulty is the ability of a student to meet the academic standards of an institution. Tinto's analogy of Emile Durkheim's theory of anomic suicide which is a result of excessive regulation and norms demonstrated that institutions with seemingly unachievable standards will lose students to less restrictive environments (Tinto, 1987). Black students in college maintain connections with family, the community and the church, that serves as an influence or encouragement for them to attend college (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Black students do not separate themselves from past support while in college. External support interacts with institutional experiences to influence first year social integration and persistence (Christie & Dinham, 1991). According to research by Christie and Dinham (1991) external support included parental encouragement and possessing old friends who allowed students to break ties in order to move on and experience college life. Christie and Dinham (1991) also propose that as students meet peers and become engaged in college activities, they form new friendships and adopt new supportive communities which aids in social integration.

How one perceives and responds to the institutional experiences is referred to as the individual disposition of the student. The individual level of persistence implies that a student has intention and commitment. According to Tinto (1993) a student with high goals or high intentions is likely to complete college. Tinto also suggests that there may be first year indecision in that goals can change or a student can be uncertain about his or her goals. A committed student has the drive and motivation and exhibits effort and a willingness to work towards achieving the goal. Tinto claims that lack of willingness or commitment is a “critical part of the departure process” (Tinto, 1987, p. 44). This lack of commitment does not imply that a student is unable to complete college but that they do not want to “stick it out” and persist through unfavorable circumstances (Tinto, 1987, p. 47).

Black students at HBCUs experience richer experiences than Black students at other institutions due to the perception of the experience, their effort while in college and their educational gains (Watson, 1996). Watson (1996) also suggests that activities related to academic and interpersonal involvement, relationships with faculty and administrators on campus and interactions with other students have a greater influence on students at HBCUs. Although students at an HBCU may be more academically challenged than students at other institutions because of pre-matriculation factors, they are more confident and more motivated to seek assistance if they need it (McDonough, 1997).

Tinto contends that the more selective the institution the greater the rate of student persistence (Tinto, 1993). More selective institutions have greater perceived prestige, well known-mission statements, greater resources, prestigious faculty members, and

competitive admission standards. More prestigious institutions only admit a small percentage of its applicants. These applicants are usually the most competitive students who go on to graduate. Institutions that employ open enrollment standards or more liberal admissions policies produces a student body that is underprepared for college which leads to lower completion rates.

### Underpreparedness Influence on Student Persistence

Students who enter college under conditional admissions practices with pre-matriculation factors that render them unprepared to undertake college level coursework will require some remediation. This remediation may be through developmental studies offered by the college. HBCUs are often the college of choice for Black students who may be underprepared for postsecondary education because they often offer remediation (Jackson, 2001). Losak and Miles (1992) traced the history of developmental education in American higher education to the colonial period. During the colonial period, only affluent young men were afforded the opportunity to attend college. The prerequisites needed to gain admission were one's pedigree. Because early education during the colonial period consisted of memorization and recitation, the "developmental" aspect of their education was the building and refining of character and leadership. If a student required remediation, they received it from a tutor and the institution was not focused on remediation of skills a student did not learn prior to admission.

In 1825, Yale and Princeton began to administer pre-tests to students to assess their English grammar abilities. This was the earliest evidence of demonstration of "standards" for admission. The preparatory schools of the 1830s began the training of

individuals to prepare them for collegiate studies. These preparatory schools were often associated with a college or a part of an institution. Preparatory schools ushered in the concept of a freshman year where time was spent to remediate a student so that he could move on to the sophomore year of advanced studies (Losak & Miles, 1992).

A surge in the number of institutions and the number of students enrolling in school occurred after the Civil War and with this increase the number of “underprepared” students grew as well. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 also contributed to the rise in college enrollment and shifted the philosophy of education from “a luxury for the affluent” to a more “functional, pragmatic focus on the newer fields of agriculture and technology.” The Morrill Act also provided a genesis for an institution’s implied “open-door” admission policy. During this Post-Civil War period, entry testing and stronger prerequisite requirements for admission were instituted (Losak & Miles, 1992).

The early 1900s ushered in a time of greater standardization. In 1900 the College Entrance Examination Board established its standards tests. High schools began to increase their role of preparing students for college and preparatory schools began to close. The Carnegie Unit, established in 1908, influenced many institutions to raise its admission standards requiring a high school education for entry. Although educational opportunities increased, the need for remediation and developmental courses at colleges and universities did not decrease. HBCUs historically provided opportunities for its students meeting them at any academic level to aid them in obtaining an education towards a baccalaureate degree (Anderson, 1988).

*A Nation at Risk* (1983) would address the woes of the educational system that serves as an argument for the need for developmental education today. Almost 25% of

all college students according to this report took at least one remedial course in Reading, Writing, or Mathematics, and 82% of all institutions offered at least one remedial course. Tinto (1993) suggests that 30-40% of entering freshmen demonstrate some academic deficiency in college level reading and writing and take remedial coursework in mathematics, reading or writing. Developmental education began to grow as a field with researchers who looked at more than why a person was unable to read, write, or “do math” but investigated social and economic barriers that may be the culprit for an individual’s lack of ability to demonstrate college-preparedness. Understanding the history of developmental education and its goal to assist students in mastering the basics of reading, writing, and mathematics is important because it parallels the history of HBCUs and its mission to provide an educational foundation for Blacks (Anderson, 1988).

An underprepared student will need remediation provided through developmental education courses offered in the first year at a college or university. More studies that examine why an institution that maintains an open-enrollment policy is successful in enabling a student to persist further challenging research that suggests selective institutions are more successful in student persistence are needed. This study examines what factors contribute to the success of first year persistence at an HBCU that provides an opportunity for any student who desires a college education a chance to matriculate.

Much of the literature on student persistence has shown that effective programming during the first year can positively impact the academic and social integration of a student (Tinto, 1993). Tinto identifies six principles necessary for successful first year student success and persistence at a college or university (Tinto,

1987). The first is students are provided the opportunity to acquire the skills necessary for academic success. Students develop personal connections that will extend beyond the classroom. Next, the college or university employs systematic institutional retention strategies. The retention strategies are implemented early to meet student needs. The retention strategies are centered around the development of the student. Finally, the overall goal of the institutional retention program is student learning.

Tinto (1993) suggests that employment of the above listed principles will contribute to student academic and social well-being. Current research on the freshmen year experience, now referred to as the first year experience, has not addressed the unique needs of students at Black colleges. Willie and Cunnigen (1981) reported that research has shown that many Black students at Black colleges had poor precollege preparation. Although they may not be academically prepared for college in many instances, students at Black colleges are unusually persistent in pursuing their educational goals (Gurin & Epps, 1975).

### First-Year and Student Persistence

An examination of the factors that aid a student in successfully completing the first year is important because it can assist an institution in policy and programming to address the needs of this particular group of students. Most colleges and universities offer programming such as first year seminars that are designed to aid in orientating a student to the institution and providing skills and instruction to encourage persistence. The First-Year Experience is a term and a programmatic thrust that began on the college of the University of South Carolina in 1972 by John Gardner (Barefoot, Gardner,

Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005). USC initiated a first year seminar entitled University 101 that was designed to be an innovative curricular and co-curricular course offering to address a need to “maximize the student’s potential to achieve academic success and to adjust to the individual and interpersonal challenges presented by collegiate life” (University 101, 2002, p.2). The goals of the University 101 course include building academic and personal life skills; familiarization with the institutions services, resources, and facilities; and understanding of the traditions and values of the university. At the University of South Carolina, the University 101 course utilizes peer leaders, is academically rigorous and allows the students exposure to interdisciplinary presentations throughout the semester (Barefoot et al, 2005). According to Barefoot et al (2005) the University 101 course of the University of South Carolina is the leading first-year experience that is an example of how the leadership of the president, faculty involvement, and ongoing assessment enabled a university challenge to become an opportunity in the education of freshmen students.

The success of the University 101 first-year program at the University of South Carolina gained national attention and many institutions initiated similar first-year initiatives for their students (Barefoot et al, 2005). First-year programs are assessed by nationally noted instruments such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the survey published by the Higher Education Research Institute entitled Your First College Year. Standardized assessment instruments enable an institution to perform analysis and assure program accountability. Assessment also provides data for evaluation and program improvements.



First year seminars have different course content components depending on the institution. Some may emphasize study skills and time management, or provide an explanation of campus policies and procedures. According to Porter and Swing (2006) participants in first year seminars have higher grades in other first year classes, are less likely to be placed on academic probation, participate in campus activities, utilize campus services, and establish relationships with faculty members. They also report that students at private institutions who enroll in first year seminars have higher persistence rates.

Tinto (1987) contends the greatest proportion of students who will drop out of college leave during the first year. This places a great responsibility on colleges and universities to ensure that measures are taken to retain students during the first year. Activities such as freshman orientation programs, special freshman housing, first year mentoring programs, and student support services have been designed with the goal of providing the environment necessary to aid first year persistence.

Early research on the first-year experience of students at an institution of higher learning has been shown to be important in student success (Hughes, 1987; Fordham, 1988; Lang, 1986; Lang, 1992). According to Braxton (2000) students who dropped out of college decided to do so within the first five weeks of school. Programming offered through student support services, counseling services, enrollment management, and academic departments for first year students must ensure they address the development needs of freshmen students early in their matriculation at the institution.

Skipper and Argo (2003) list six developmental issues that first year students address that aid in academic success and first year persistence: intellectual and academic

competence; interpersonal relationships; sexual awareness; career goals; health and wellness; and development of a philosophy of life (Skipper & Argo, 2003, p.vii). Involvement in the “intellectually rich, socially positive and personally engaging” campus aids in student retention (Skipper & Argo, 2003, p. x). This engaging and stimulating campus aids the student in forming identity and in identifying future career goals. In order to persist to the sophomore year of college, a first year student must demonstrate academic competence and successfully pass coursework. During the first-year, the student begins to form relationships on campus with faculty, staff, and other students. Skipper and Argo also stress that the first year student begins to develop a philosophy of life where values are clarified, religion and spirituality is challenged and embraced, and civic orientation is awakened (Skipper & Argo, 2003).

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study incorporates Student Involvement Theory of Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto’s Student Interactionist Theory modified by Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon in 2004 for residential colleges and universities. These two theories best address the conception that a student entering a college as a new student undergoes an experience that influences persistence. This study demonstrates that the student’s involvement during the first year in the campus life and that student’s interaction with peers and campus faculty and staff made some impact on his or her decision to reenroll for another school year.

### *Student Involvement Theory*

In his work *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*, Astin (1975) found that Black students who attended HBCUs were more likely to persist than Black students at white colleges. Students who are able to identify or “fit” with the institution are more likely to become involved on campus. The greater the amount of involvement in activities in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. Student activities on a college campus are designed to foster the personal development and maturity of the individual and to encourage democratic citizenship among the student body. The campus being its own unique society consisting of young individuals seeking knowledge provides a venue in which administrators must create opportunities for growth and development. The campus life must aid the students in learning how to be good citizens. Skills learned while in college are transferable to life experiences post-graduation.

According to Astin (1999), involvement refers to “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.” Student involvement can take many forms such as “absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel” on campus.

The theory of student involvement has five basic postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the “investment of physical and psychological energy” in a particular student experience in college. Students who aspire to attend college and seek a degree will invest effort in the class work and activities he or she has deemed necessary to successfully meet goals.

2. Involvement occurs along a continuum in which a student will devote the energy in different degrees at different times. Students will not be engaged in course work and activities with the same degree of intensity all of the time. Some opportunities for involvement may be more desirable or advantageous than others. The level of energy will fluctuate based on the student perceptions of the opportunity for engagement.
3. Involvement has “quantitative and qualitative features” that can be measured objectively or subjectively. As an institution provides opportunities for student involvement, quantitative measures should be taken to assess the frequency of student engagement in activities and services. Qualitative measures can assess the usefulness or benefit by getting subjective feedback from the students.
4. “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.” The more a student becomes involved in an activity or service, the more the benefits of that program can be experienced by the student. Programs that are not utilized by students will not have a significant influence on student outcomes.
5. “The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.”  
Quantitatively, the effectiveness of a program can be assessed by the level of student involvement.

Astin argues that colleges compete with outside forces that influence a student’s use of energy. These outside forces, which include family, friends, jobs, and any non-

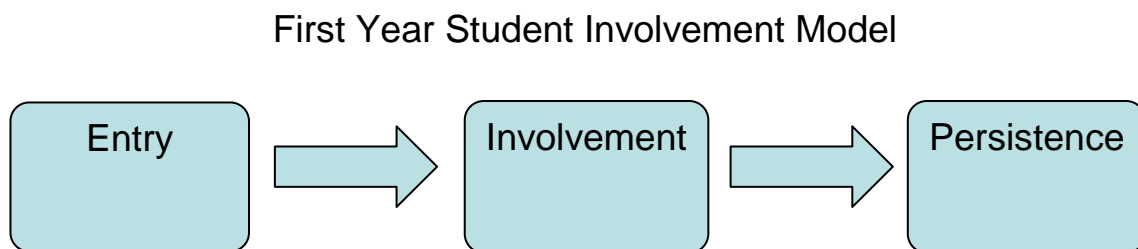
campus activity, can reduce the amount of time a student devotes to educational development. The theory of student involvement began with Astin's work (1975) in studying college dropouts and the factors that affect student persistence. He found that lack of involvement contributed to a student's dropping out of college. Students who lived on campus, joined social organizations, participated in extracurricular activities and sports, enrolled in honors programs, participated in ROTC and worked alongside professors in research projects or with staff in part-time jobs or work-study placements were less likely to drop out of college. Astin proposed that if a student spends time on campus, he or she will come in contact with other students and college personnel and reduce the amount of time that a student may engage in competing pursuits that would reduce retention.

Astin (1962) also proposed the Input-Environment-Outcome model. A student comes to a college or university with "inputs" that are his or her characteristics at the time of entry. Astin identified 146 input variables such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, high school GPA, standardized test scores, marital status, religious preference, income, and parental educational background. Students entering a HBCU may have significant inputs to consider such as aspiration, socioeconomic status, underpreparedness, and general background characteristics (Astin, 1993). The "environment" is the college experience of the student. Astin identified 192 environmental variables to include the following: institutional characteristics, student peer group characteristics, faculty characteristics, curriculum, financial aid, student major, student place of residence, and student involvement. The experiences include the programs, policies, interaction with faculty and peers and any conceivable educational experience that a student undergoes.

The “outcome” according to Astin (1962) is the change or growth of a student after being exposed to the environment. Astin identified 82 outcomes that included career endeavors, overall satisfaction with the collegiate experience, academic achievement, and retention. These changes or growth can occur in a student’s characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior (Astin 1993). According to Astin (1993) students at a HBCU have an outcome of higher GPA, the likelihood of graduating with honors or choosing a career in science, and are more likely to attend cultural events such as recitals and concerts.

The Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model of Astin is the study of the effect of college on a student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). An effect of the first year of college for a student includes persistence. Astin (1985) holds that “students learn by becoming involved.” The institutional environment, according to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), offers “academic and social opportunities to become involved with new ideas, people, and experiences.” Students must engage or capitalize on “opportunities and become involved, actively exploiting the opportunities to change or grow” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The I-E-O Model suggests that input plus involvement equals persistence.

**Figure 2.1**



In the above First Year Student Involvement Model, the entry variables include aspiration and student pre-matriculation characteristics. The environment includes the student effort which is influenced by the aspiration of the student and his or her participation in the institutional opportunities and utilization of institutional resources. Research has shown that student involvement academically and socially leads to persistence (Astin, 1996; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1993). The involvement in the environment contributes to the outcome of persistence. In this model, the change as a result of the environment is in attitudes and increased knowledge and skills that contribute to the student choosing to continue matriculation.

Students enroll in a college or a university with a range of background characteristics that will predict how he or she will interact with or become integrated into the college system (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). These pre-collegiate background characteristics include demographic and socioeconomic factors and will influence continuance in college. Bean (1980) concluded that student background characteristics are insignificant to student performance in college. This suggests that there is no significant causality in dropout due to pre-matriculation factors.

According to a study on the effect of pre-matriculation variables on student persistence, “returning students were significantly more likely to report better academic habits and goals, study more, take fewer developmental courses, have higher ACT scores, and have higher high school grades and class rank” (McDaniel & Graham, 1999, p.16). McDaniel and Graham also reported that students who persist also receive financial aid in the form of grants and scholarships more than they do loans. This study suggests that

pre-matriculation variables could successfully be used to predict students who would persist but not necessarily potential drop-outs. It is important to note that pre-matriculation variables are not causal for persistence or withdrawal but the experience of the student academically and socially. The college experience, which includes integration in campus life and participation in co-curricular activities, support from faculty, and social connectedness, has a significant impact on educational gains (Watson, Terrell, Wright, Bonner, Cuyjet, Gold, Rudy, & Person, 2002).

Co-curricular activities are those college experiences outside of the classroom designed to promote student involvement. The more an individual becomes socially and academically “integrated” in the college system, the greater will that same person strengthen his commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduating (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration is demonstrated by the student’s performance and intellectual growth and development while matriculating. Evidence of academic integration is demonstrated through student transcripts. Social integration is a result of interactions with peers and faculty. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) students who have positive interactions with faculty and staff benefit in many ways. These benefits include greater academic self-confidence and integration into the academic and social culture of the university. Students also are more likely to demonstrate commitment to persist and improved academic performance. They will also maintain commitment to the institution and to goals such as graduation and career (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

The life task perspective survey is employed to learn how new students adjust to college (Cantor et al., 1991). This survey suggests that there are seven tasks that a student must master while becoming acclimated to college life: getting good grades;



making friends; being on one's own without family or friends; establishing future goals; establishing an identity; managing time; and, managing one's physical health and well-being. This survey is used to predict academic and social stress and adjustment and persistence in college. Students should balance in all seven tasks in order to become adjusted to college. Brower and Ketterhagen (2004) found that Black students at HBCUs remain or persist when they set realistic expectations and goals and find a balance between their college network of friends and family and high school friends. This study revealed that Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have to work harder to master life tasks which negatively influence persistence.

According to Terenzini and Pascarella (2005), HBCUs provide a more supportive social environment which suggests the reason for its net advantage in persistence and degree completion as compared to predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

“Black students attending HBCUs are more likely than their peers at PWIs to report a positive and supportive environment on their campuses, including perceptions of a student-oriented faculty, and satisfaction with the overall college experience” (Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005, p. 394). Black students at HBCUs are more likely to interact with peers, become involved in activities offered by the institution, and utilize services to assist them academically. The smaller classes and intimate environment also allows the opportunity for faculty and staff to know students by name and encourages more interaction with students outside of the classroom. These environmental qualities of the HBCU make it successful in producing a positive outcome experience for its students. The implication for the student involvement theory is that it can aid institutions such as

HBCUs in identifying ways to assist students in learning and persistence by encouraging engagement in the college experience.

*Tinto's Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure*

The second theory guiding this study's conceptual framework is Tinto's Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure Revisited for Residential Colleges and Universities. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) proposed a revision to Tinto's theory of student departure that proposes those factors that influences the social integration of a student at a residential college or university which reduces student drop out. Spady (1971) originally hypothesized that student integration into the social life of the college campus was important to reduce student drop out. Later, early theorists would continue to study why students drop out of college Tinto (1971), Bean and Metzner (1985), Astin (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), Tierney (1992) and Stage and Hossler (2000). Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon's revision of Tinto's interactionalist theory places attention on those forces that effect institutional commitment which aids in student persistence. The six factors that influence social integration are as follows: Commitment of the institution to the welfare of the student; institutional integrity; potential of the student to find a community to which to belong; proactive social adjustment of the student; psychosocial engagement of the student; and ability of the student to pay for college (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004).

In order for a student to feel positive integration into the campus community, the student must perceive "that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students" (Braxton et al., 2004, p.23). An institution demonstrates commitment to the welfare of

students through fair treatment and demonstrating a commitment to student learning. The college or university relays its commitment to the students through its mission statement and students develop expectations of the institution based on it achieving that to which it claims to aim. “The more a student perceives that the institution exhibits institutional integrity, the greater the student’s level of social integration” (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 24). Institutional integrity implies that college or university is true to its mission.

The communal potential, according to Braxton et al. (2004), is defined as the potential for a student to find a community of peers that share similar values and goals. For a residential college, communal potential is found in residence halls. Communal potential can also be found in student organizations and the classroom. Berger (1997) studied Tinto’s theory on the effect of the campus community on the student integration process and supported research by Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997) that held there is a relationship between student integration and persistence. Tinto (1993) suggested that residential life enhanced student persistence. According to Berger (1997), residence halls provided an opportunity for the students to develop a sense of identity and to interact and bond with each other. Residence life provides an opportunity for students to form a community.

A first year student seeks to gain acceptance or membership into the social community of the campus. According to Braxton et al. (2004) the student must proactively adjust to the social stresses of integrating. Students invest psychological and physical energy when they are involved in the campus experience and perceive they are not well integrated if they have invested little energy into their interaction with peers or in co-curricular activities (Braxton et al., 2004). The more a student is involved in the

campus life, the more likely a student becomes socially integrated. Christie and Dinham (1991) proposed that co-curricular activities aid in social integration at a residential college or university.

### Conclusion

The greatest percentage of student departure occurs during the first year. A study of the significance of the first-year experience is crucial in understanding student persistence and institutional strategies for student retention. Historically Black Colleges and Universities have existed for over 150 years to provide educational opportunities to Blacks in the United States. While today, they are not the only option for Black first year students, HBCUs still prove to be a viable post-secondary choice for any student regardless of race. The mission of HBCUs suggests that they implement specific measures to ensure academic success and persistence of Black students. Little research, however, exists to explore just what HBCUs are doing to contribute to the statistics of the highest percentage of Black graduates from higher education and the large number of successful Black professionals in fields such as business, health, and education.

This study examines the freshman year experience of Black students at a private HBCU within the context of the Student Involvement Theory and the Student Interactionist Theory of Student Departure, to explore what contributes to student persistence. Understanding the history of HBCUs and what is meant by student persistence, the freshman year experience, and student involvement and departure enables this study to contribute to a void in research that specifically examines the perceptions and experiences of students at a HBCU. The next chapter discusses the research design that was used to obtain the data for this study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the first year experience of students at a private Historically Black College. This research project was completed using a qualitative approach as a means to better understand students' lived experience. Through the use of qualitative techniques and subsequent analysis, "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) emerged providing a deeper exploration of freshman student involvement, the student's perception of the freshman experience, and how the experience contributed to re-enrollment for the sophomore year.

#### Statement and Rationale for Overall Research Approach

"Rarely, if ever, have studies assessed what the quantitative findings mean from the perspectives of the different groups. There will always be a missing step between perception and reality if individuals do not have a say in the definition of their reality," suggested Freeman (1998, p. 190). Programs will not be successful if participants have no voice or stake in the direction of their own lives (Freeman, 1998). Giving participants a voice in research argues the importance of assessing how a student feels and not just quantitatively measuring what the student does.

The experience of a student in college should not be viewed as one with separate distinct divisions within one. Academic faculty may only consider a student's academic

success and staff may only consider a student's involvement in the campus life. The classroom is the "gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social community of the college" (Tinto, 1997, p. 617). Tinto (1997) suggested that for persistence the academic experience and the social involvement are both important for the student.

According to Tinto, "the intent of the qualitative component of the study was to understand, from the student's point of view, how participation in a collaborative learning program influenced student's learning experiences" (1997, p. 605). Tinto used participant observation, interviews, and document review of catalogs, class materials, course syllabi and schedules in his study. He found that learning communities allowed students to build a supportive peer group, foster a shared learning experience to aid in balancing academic and social adjustment, and encourage active participation in the construction of knowledge. Learning communities could include special Freshman Programs where students live and learn together. Tinto also found that students who are involved academically and socially, bridging the academic and social divide and learning with their peers, are more engaged in learning which leads to heightened persistence (Tinto, 1997). Student Involvement Theory proposed by Astin and Tinto's Student Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure as a conceptual framework provides a lens through which to construct the design of this study and to assess what contributes to the persistence of first-year Black students at a residential HBCU.

Anderson (1998) believes that through qualitative research one can understand the world using observations in a natural setting and conversations rather than through manipulating experimental methods under artificial conditions. I have chosen to do a

qualitative study because I am seeking to explore how the freshman experience of students at a private historically Black college influences persistence. Because this study specifically examined the perspectives of the subjects' experiences within their environment, the qualitative study was determined to be the best method to answer the research questions. This study gained feedback on processes such as the orientation program, registration, classroom interactions, advising, and co-curricular activities and their effect on a student's decision to reenroll for another year at the institution.

Anderson (1998) also contends that qualitative research allows the researcher to interpret, explain, understand and bring meaning to the reality of the subject placing emphasis on the process and not the outcome.

According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research allows the study to serve as the instrument for data collection and analysis and usually involves field work employing an inductive research strategy that produces a richly descriptive analysis. This method employed for this study was the case study. Merriam (1998) defines the case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 27). Yin (1989) contends that a case study can employ the use of multiple sources and techniques for analysis and interpretation. This institutional case study will include individual and group narrative interviews, and document analysis. Yin explains that case studies can be used to answer "How" or "Why" descriptive questions that seek to explore relationships or processes (Yin, 1989, p. 13). Merriam (1998) adds that the case study is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Case studies focus on a specific question that produces data with thick description and provides understanding for the researcher (Merriam, 1998). Through the case study, I gathered data about the various

experiences of students during their first year of matriculation at the institution. Through the interviews, I secured data to recount the student's experiences and retold their stories through their perspective. Document analysis and input from the participants on the usefulness of the documents allowed me the opportunity to review the information first year students receive to assist them in acclimating to the institution upon entering as a freshman. All major documents distributed to first year students were obtained from the institution. These documents included the college catalog, the student affairs handbook, and the orientation manual.

### Research Questions

The following questions were examined:

1. How do students define the first-year experience on the campus?
2. How do students articulate social integration in the campus community?
3. How did the first-year experience define a student's identity as a member of the campus community?

These questions provided a guide to attempt to understand the experiences of the students during their first year of matriculation at a HBCU and to draw conclusions on how these lived experiences may have contributed to their decision to reenroll for the sophomore year.

### Research Site

Miles College, founded in 1905 by the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, is a private liberal arts historically Black college located west of Birmingham, Alabama in a



suburban city called Fairfield. The institution is approximately 70 acres on two campus locations nestled within the center of the Interurban Heights neighborhood. Miles College is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Alabama State Department of Education, and the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award bachelor's degrees in 25 degree programs in six academic divisions: Business and Accounting, Communications, Education, Humanities, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and Social and Behavioral Sciences.

In 2006, Miles College was recognized by the Education Trust, a national nonprofit organization that analyzes education issues, as 4<sup>th</sup> in the U.S. with 72% of its Black students graduating within six years of enrollment (Miles College, 2007). Only Stanford University, Duke University and Spelman College had higher graduation rates for Black students. Miles College, the Birmingham area's only four-year Historically Black College, has experienced steady growth in enrollment reaching 1,732 in spring of 2006. The college's annual operating budget for 2006-07 was \$27.6 million. Miles College has 97 full-time faculty and 45 part-time faculty. The college has almost 8,000 alumni of record with more than 5,000 alumni living in the greater Birmingham area and contributing to the city as educators, ministers, business executives, entrepreneurs, politicians, and community leaders.

Miles College is a member of the Birmingham Area Consortium for Higher Education (BACHE), a partnership among the five, four-year colleges and universities in the greater Birmingham area created by the presidents in 1996 to advance academic excellence through collaborative activities and shared resources. BACHE enhances

educational opportunities for students and provides services and support to faculty, staff and the community. The college is also a member of the United Negro College Fund.

Miles College enrolls approximately 400 first time students and retains approximately 55%. Nearly 700 students live on campus in four dormitories. Approximately 60% of the students are commuter students. The student to faculty ratio is 18 to 1.

Miles College was selected as the site for this study because it is a private historically Black college. At the time of this study, the college also had an above average rate of student persistence to graduation and a small faculty and student population, which made it an excellent choice for the study of first-year persistence. The college has a history of remaining open to all qualified persons regardless of race, religion, or national origin, which makes it a good site for the study of a diverse group of students with different types of pre-enrollment characteristics.

Miles College also utilizes standardized assessment tools such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and offered academic experiences for freshman through ED 111 Freshman Orientation and ED 112 Freshman Interdisciplinary Seminar at the time of the study. The college participated in the BEAMS Project made possible through funding from the Lumina Foundation and restructured its freshman student experience into the project called the First Year Academy. The First Year Academy launched in Fall 2007 with three new courses that replaced ED 111 and ED 112: FYA 100 New Student Orientation; FYA 101 First Year Academy I; and FYA 102 First Year Academy II. This site has the advantage of being one of a few HBCUs that have highly structured first year experience programs for its students. Another HBCU could have

been chosen as a site for this institutional case study, but Miles College had the variables in place necessary to get the best information about the first year experiences of students at a private historically Black college and its effect on student persistence.

### Participant Selection

This study utilized purposive sampling to ensure the recruitment of subjects who met the needed criteria (Berg, 1989). With purposive sampling, the research aimed to either discover, understand, or gain insight from a specific select sample (Merriam, 1998). This nonprobability sampling technique enabled the researcher to discover what occurred during the first year for the subject group and the relationship of the experience to the outcome of persistence (Merriam, 1998). According to the definition of first-year persistence for this study, sophomore students who had elected to re-enroll for another year of study at the institution were solicited for individual interviews. This sample group was determined to be “information-rich” (Merriam, 1998). The criteria for their selection included the following:

1. Currently enrolled as a sophomore
2. Recently completed the freshman year the academic year prior to the interview
3. Attended Miles College for the first-year.

The participants for this study included sophomores who were first time freshmen the previous year. Volunteers for this study were solicited from observations and conversations with students in facilities such as the student union building, residence halls, cafeteria, and library. I went to places where students congregate and asked random students if they were a sophomore who was enrolled at Miles College last year.

Upon confirmation that the subject met the criteria for this study, I asked if they would be willing to participate in this study. If the subject agreed to participate in this study, the interview was conducted. This study employed the use of the snowball or network sampling technique by asking participants to refer other students who met the selection criteria (Merriam, 1998). Student participants in activities such as the Honors Curriculum and the Non-Traditional Student Organization were also solicited to participate in an interview.

#### Data Collection Procedures

In this case study, data was first collected through document analysis. All documents for the institution that relayed information to first-year students or that contained policies and procedures for the delivery of services to first year students were reviewed. These documents included The Miles College Student Handbook; The Miles College Orientation Manual; and The Miles College Catalog. The purpose of the document review was to determine if students had access to the resources needed for a successful freshman year through information provided to first-year students from the institution. This data was used to determine if the resources from the institution were beneficial to students during the first-year.

Prior to the interviews, I met with the participants to discuss the purpose of the study. Care was taken to ensure the students understood what would occur during this study. I read the consent form to the student prior to securing their signature. Each participant was assured of confidentiality. I explained to the subjects that real names and other identifying characteristics would not be revealed. They were also assured that data

would be stored in a secure location. Subjects were not paid to participate in the interview and retained the right to see the results of the interview before the data was used.

Data collection consisted of 21 individual interviews. Interviewing “may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon . . .” (Van Maanen, 1990, p. 66). The interviews were held on campus in an administrative building conference room or the residence hall meeting room where privacy and convenience to the students were assured. My goal was to engage the participants in a semi-structured dialogue where they could candidly share their views and opinions about their freshman year and what encouraged them to persist towards continuing their education. The interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants. Although the interviews were tape recorded, I also took hand written notes. While the interview protocol has specific questions that I wished to explore, the subjects were given the opportunity to share their story as they wanted to allow them to recall as much of their experiences as possible. Multiple questions, Yes-or-No questions and leading questions were avoided (Merriam, 1998). In my study, I retold the stories of the participant interviews in a narrative chronology and summarized major themes that demonstrate the factors that influenced persistence beyond the freshman year. Interviews of this “information-rich” sample group revealed insight into the typical experiences of a first-year student that led to student success.

In addition to individual student interviews, I used observational data. My own direct observations of the campus life of the participants in this study and my

understanding of the participants' expressions during the data collection provided valuable information used to understand the emerging themes in this study.

### Data Analysis Techniques

During the interviews, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously with audiotaping and note-taking. The theories used to construct the interview questions were Student Involvement Theory of Astin (1984) and the Tinto's Interactionist Theory Revised for Residential Colleges and Universities by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004). The participants were asked open ended questions about their freshman experiences on the campus. I also collected basic demographic information about the participants such as age, sex, major, hometown, and resident or commuter status. Students told short narratives or stories about their lives through the individual interviews (Creswell, 2003). During the interviews, I looked for emerging themes in the student's stories employing constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998). Immediately following the student interviews, I listened to the audiotapes to note the students' responses. The handwritten notes were also reviewed immediately following the interviews.

Triangulation of data in this study was achieved because of the use of data from multiple sources. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), triangulation is using more than one data source to illustrate a particular point. Triangulation validates the findings emerged from data collection. This study used document analysis of resources provided to freshman students, observation by the researcher, and individual interviews with students. Triangulation was confirmed as saturation was noticed during the

individual student interviews. As the audiotapes, handwritten notes and transcriptions revealed no new or relevant data the process of comparative analysis continued as the responses were categorized or grouped into themes.

### Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study on the campus of Miles College was granted by Dr. George T. French, Jr., President of Miles College. The purpose of the study was discussed with Dr. French in a meeting and the college was assured that participants would be solicited individually and that they would remain anonymous. I am employed by the college as the Dean of Student Affairs. At the time of the study my duties included oversight of Housing, Student Life and Leadership, Greek Affairs, Student Health Services, and Student Activities such as Band and Choir. In this position, I am charged with many responsibilities including assessing current co-curricular programs and opportunities available to the students and determining if the activities and services meet their stated goals and objectives. I did not interview students who work in the Department of Student Affairs during the time of the study or with whom I had any prior relationship.

### Quality Assurance

Trustworthiness in this study is important because it was my goal that the findings are factual and truly reflective of the experiences of the student. In order to establish trustworthiness in research, one must ensure credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to ensure my research findings were credible, I employed the process of member checking. Member checking is a process

through which respondents verify data and the interpretations thereof (Lincoln & Guba, 1985.) After the participants were interviewed and the responses were transcribed by the researcher with assistance from a professional transcriptionist, a copy of the transcript was made available to the participants for them to review and provide any corrections or suggestions if desired. In the process of interviewing the participants, I solicited direct quotes and detailed descriptions of their emotions and feelings. The information solicited during the interviews was recorded in handwritten notes and on audio tapes. To ensure dependability and confirmability, I retained copies of all the interview notes and audio tapes. I also maintained copies of all institutional documents reviewed for the study, the interview transcripts, and the replies of the respondents. Documentation ensured that an audit of the research process reveals that the study was properly managed and the methodology was consistent. Transferability is assured because this study can be replicated. The interview protocol is the same for each subject. The process of collection and handling of the data is standard and should yield the same results each time this methodology is employed.

#### Delimitations of the Study

There are two major delimitations in this study of the influence of the freshman experiences of students at a private historically Black college on persistence. First, the results of the experiences of students at a historically Black college cannot be generalized to any other type of institution. Comparisons can only be made to other private Black colleges with similar demographics. The second delimitation of this study is that it is only analyzing the effects of first year persistence. While first year persistence is important and often serves as a strong indication that students will persist to graduation,



the “bottom line” for most institutions is the percent of graduation within a specific number of years. This study does not examine reenrollments for later years.

### Conclusion

The methods described in this chapter were necessary to explore the students’ first-year experience at a private HBCU. This qualitative study sought to discover how the experiences affect the student’s persistence at the institution. The use of an institutional case study is an effective approach in gathering information-rich insight into the typical experiences of the student. The data collection methods included document analysis, observation, and interviews. The selection of Miles College as the site of study is justified because it is a private residential HBCU with a record of student persistence to graduation that also has a defined freshman program aimed at promoting student retention. The quality assurance of this study was maintained and the ethical considerations of this study were carefully identified and taken into account. This study employed member checking to ensure trustworthiness, dependability and confirmability through the use of recorded sessions and transcriptions. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained and there were no conflicts of interest between the researcher and the student participants. While this study was conducted at a single site and there are limitations to the generalization of results to other institutional types, it still provides rich descriptive information of the experiences of students at a very specific type of institution and contributes to a body of knowledge that possesses a research void at this time.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

Miles College as the site for this study provided an opportunity to learn how the freshman experience of students at a private historically black college influenced persistence. Miles College is similar to its peer institutions in that it attracts predominantly African American students and has a large percentage of its student population from the state in which it is located. Miles College has a rich history deeply embedded in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and its traditions as a minority serving institution of historical significance are also attractive to students.

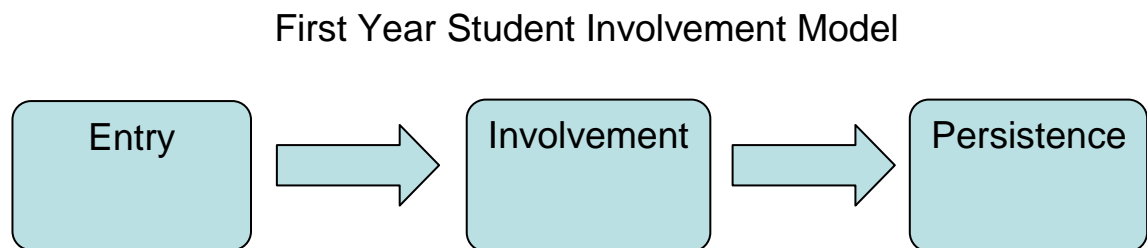
Miles College also has an “open admissions policy” that allows any student who has a high school diploma or a GED certificate an opportunity to pursue a college degree. Institutions that employ open admissions policies often enroll students who require remediation and may experience high student drop out or stop out rates. The perception of Miles College as a source of educational opportunity in spite of the pre-matriculation variables such as under preparedness for post-secondary study or exhibiting a low income background is consistent with the traditional significance of historically black colleges to assist educationally or financially disadvantaged students.

At the time of this study, Miles College exhibited an above average rate of student persistence to graduation and was an excellent choice for the exploration of freshman student involvement and the student’s perception of the freshman experience. Students who recently completed their freshman year and who were currently enrolled full-time

were interviewed. The interviews consisted of questions that engaged the participants in open and candid dialogue about specific aspects of their experience, including academics; residential life; and social interactions. Each student interviewed in this study is listed in the appendix. Fictitious names were used to conceal the identity of the participants.

The first questions focused on the student’s general background, major, and initial perception “when they first walked on the campus.” The second section of questions solicited responses on the experience with registration, meeting with academic advisors, and interacting with instructors in the classroom. The third section of questions focused on the participants’ experience in housing, if applicable, and their extracurricular activities on campus. The fourth section engaged the participants in discussion about their overall perception of the college and captured information on their use of key resources essential to informing and guiding students, especially freshman.

**Figure 4.1**



The freshman year is a rite of passage that marks the student’s entry to matriculation. According to the First Year Student Involvement Model in Figure 4.1, entry is denoted by the student separating from his or her previous existence and enrolling at the college. In the process of separating, the student experiences significant events such as the memorable “first day on campus” and integrates on campus through

the process of registering for classes and moving in campus housing. The rite of passage continues with the transition. In the First Year Model, the student becomes involved in the campus after entry. Transition is involvement as the student engages in classroom and extracurricular experiences and interacts with faculty, staff and peers. The rite of passage continues as the student is incorporated in the campus experience and persists according to the First Year Model. The student is incorporated as he or she continues to develop interpersonal relationships, declare a major, become involved in extracurricular activities and re-enroll for another year.

This chapter is organized by the following overarching themes: 1) Identifying; 2) Transitioning; 3) Separating; 4) Engaging; 5) Learning; and 6) Growing.

**Figure 4.2** Overarching Themes of this Study

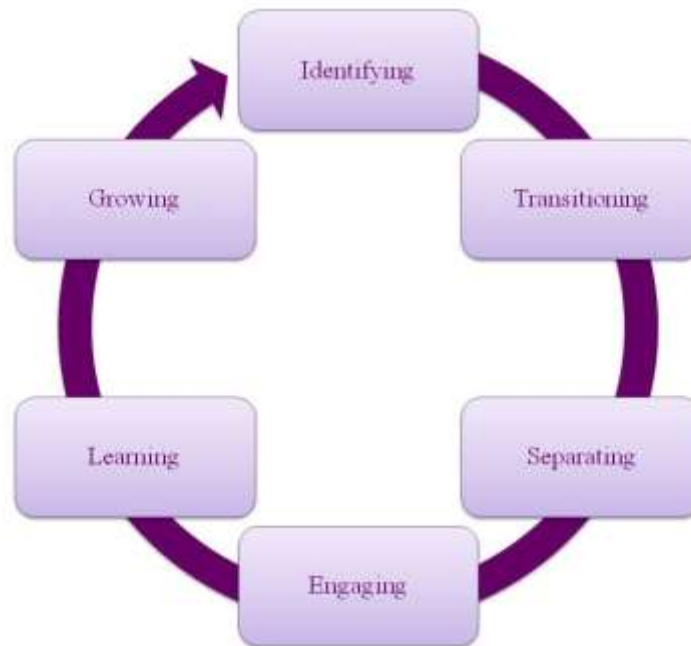


Figure 4.2 illustrates the categories explored in this study and the emergent themes. Through the analysis of the data, these distinct themes emerged.

### Identifying: Miles College as a Choice

I asked, “Why did you choose this college?” Trina from Uniontown, Alabama replied, “I wanted to keep my school colors and I thought it was a good college.”

The greatest influences on a student’s choice to attend a historically black college are the location of the institution, a student’s religious affiliation, and the reputation of the institution. Trina’s comical response on liking the school colors should not overshadow the fact that she truly believed that institution was a “good college.” Trina was also from a small town located in the state where she chose to attend college. It was important that she was “away at college” but not too far away from her hometown.

This section identifies the reasons why the participants in this study choose to attend Miles College. There were five main reasons as to why students at Miles College chose this institution for their post-secondary experience: 1) the students were affiliated with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; 2) Miles College is a Historically Black College or University; 3) the students received an academic or athletic scholarship; 4) the college was convenient; and 5) Miles College was recommended by a family member or a member of the community.

#### *Theme 1: Miles College is affiliated with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church*

Of all the participants, four expressed that they choose Miles College because of its affiliation with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. “I am a CME. Just thought it was something I needed to do,” said Leon, who is from Chicago. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church encourages young people to attend one of its four colleges

in the United States and provides financial assistance for students from their congregations to do so. Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania commented, “My godfather was... part of the CME church, so tuition was cut in half. Mom said that’s where I’m going.” When asked why she chose Miles College, Sheena, an international student from Jamaica stated, “A member of the church offered to pay my tuition. The president of the college offered to pay my room and board.” Sheena was recruited to attend Miles College because of her affiliation with the CME church and the church’s offer to fund her education. Another student, Bianca, from Los Angeles, California claimed that she chose the college because it is affiliated with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

As mentioned earlier, religious affiliation is an important factor in a student’s choice to attend a historically black college. Because of the religious affiliation of the students and the influence of the local congregations on its young members to attend one of the postsecondary institutions affiliated with the church, many of the participants in this study chose to attend Miles College because of its affiliation with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

### *Theme 2: Miles College is a Historically Black College or University*

I like that it is an HBCU and that I get to see people like myself all the time. It is just great to be around black people. (Winnifred from Selma, Alabama)

Several participants explained the appeal of attending a historically black college resulted from the opportunity to study on a campus where the majority of students were black. “I knew I wanted to go to a HBCU,” claimed Bianca from Los Angeles. In particular, students felt that such an environment would offer positive benefits for the

interactions between faculty and peers. Keisha from Birmingham commented, “I always wanted to come to an HBCU. I like the close knit atmosphere of how teachers work with the students.” Tony from Mobile, Alabama was excited during the interview while speaking about attending a Historically Black College. He stated, “I love that it’s an all-black college. That’s why I came and it’s getting better every day.”

Historically black colleges provide an environment that is affirming to people of color. They promote a supportive academic community and provide opportunities for leadership development. They have the unique ability to provide an environment that fosters achievement regardless of ethnicity. The appeal of historically black colleges among black students is the expectation to receive the extra attention they may require as a student. Black students also expect to make a cultural connection with the institution because it was established specifically for black students.

### *Theme 3: Athletic or Academic Scholarship Recipient*

Five of the students were either academic or athletic scholarship recipients. These connections offered personal, financial, and academic benefits for the students, and made them feel like an important part of the campus community. Teela from Opelika, Alabama received a full academic scholarship to attend Miles and Cindy Ann from Atlanta, Georgia was recruited to play basketball by the coach. Other students received football scholarships, including Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia, Taurus from Birmingham and Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi. Because of the rising expense to attend a college or university, the award of a scholarship is a major influence in college choice.

Many of the students would not have been able to attend a four-year institution without financial assistance. Financial assistance through athletic or academic scholarships is a very strong influence in college choice. Many of the participants who received scholarships to attend Miles College spoke proudly of their achievement. Students who did not have academic or athletic scholarships received federal financial aid or assistance from the CME church to attend college.

*Theme 4: The College was a Convenient Choice*

Because of the expense to attend college, students consider choices that are financially feasible and may choose to reside at home and commute or stay on campus and forego purchasing an automobile for transportation. Taurus, from Birmingham, shared, “It was closer to home. I didn’t want to go out of state,” while Victoria, also from Birmingham stated, “It was an HBCU and it was somewhere I could go with lack of transportation.” Several students expressed that the college was a convenient choice either due to lack of transportation or to the campus proximity to home. Carl from Hueytown, Alabama which is a small town west of the Metro-Birmingham area stated when asked why he chose to attend Miles College: “I wanted to be closer to home. It was more convenient for me.” Being from a different state but having family in Birmingham influenced Vinnie to choose Miles College. It was important to Vinnie that his family was accessible while he was in college.

Geography is an important factor in college choice. 43% of the participants in this study were from the state of Alabama and 44% of the students from Alabama were from the Metro-Birmingham area. The presence in the local community made Miles



College a convenient choice. The students did not just choose the college because of its proximity to their hometown. The geography of the college was considered in relation to the expense of attending college, the desire to be close to family, or the idea that they could get the HBCU experience without going far away.

*Theme 5: Miles College was recommended by Family or Others in the Community*

Numerous participants shared personal, professional, and family connections that made Miles College their college of choice. “My dad referred me here and he said that he would pay for Miles because he’s a big Miles fan,” offered Mary from Decatur, Georgia. Alumni are often proud and strong supporters of Miles College and serve as recruiters. John from the Bronx in New York said that Miles College was “recommended by a neighbor who attended the college.” As stated earlier, Oscar from Philadelphia was influenced by his godfather who was an alumnus to attend Miles College.

The influence of relatives is a strong factor in student choice to attend college or a particular HBCU. While many minority students who attend college may be the first of their family to pursue a higher education, other students who attend HBCUs may do so because of familial ties to a particular institution. It may be the family’s wish that a student attend a particular college because a grandparent or parent attended that school. Multigenerational families are often strong supporters of historically black colleges. Students often have strong influences from role models in their communities to attend a HBCU. Recommendations from family, alumni, or role models are often cited with financial support from these aforementioned entities as reasons why a student chose to attend Miles College.

While these aforementioned were the five most prevalent themes in the responses regarding college choice, it is important to note that there were several unique responses that are consistent with popular reasons why students choose their colleges. Often students are pondering several institutions. “It was my second choice but after I visited the campus, I enjoyed myself and my visit here,” explained Winifred from Selma, Alabama. Some students do their research or attend campus tours and make informed decisions based on their opinions. “When I came on tour, I love how the teachers knew everyone’s name,” shared Sam from Brooklyn, New York. Sam was inspired to attend the college because of the perception that the campus offered a close knit atmosphere. Teela not only received a full academic scholarship, but stated “I felt very welcomed when I came to visit.” As with many students who are eligible for academic scholarships, the choice can be between which institution is offering the most money or based on if this is where a student actually wants to matriculate. Julie from Decatur, Alabama claimed that she did her research and in reference to attending Miles College commented that she “thought this would be a good choice.” Like many students who want a different venue, Alana from Miami, Florida responded, “I wanted a different experience from city life.” Alana perceived the campus as being in a small town as compared to her hometown which is a larger urban area. Some students expressed the desire to get away from home. “I didn’t want to go to school in Mobile. I liked Miles College so I stayed,” replied Tony, when asked about his choice to attend Miles College.

These students’ reported choices were consistent with the research that suggests the HBCU experience can provide an affirming community of opportunity for academic achievement and leadership. These responses also suggest that the students perceived

that there would be an “institutional fit” or that the college was the best choice for their desires and needs.

#### Transitioning: Being a freshman in College is Different from High School

I thought it was a regular day. I mean, there wasn't anything grand that stood out. I understand that fact that I was in college but it hadn't hit me like other students that I was in college. You know you get the freedom and the responsibility...it didn't hit me because I guess I had already experienced it. (Leon from Chicago, Illinois)

Leon was not the typical student at Miles in that he had attended a private boarding school and felt as though attending a private residential college was no different from his high school experience. This section explores the responses to three questions which asked about the student's perception of the transition from high school to college that is denoted by the first year experience. The transition begins with entry, often remembered as the first day of college. The participants in this study were asked about the difference between their first year experience in college and their experiences in high school. They were also asked to reflect on their experiences going home on break to visit with family and friends.

#### *Theme 6: The Excitement of the First Day of College*

It was exciting, but it was a little overwhelming and I had a little fear. But once I realized that there were like a hundred other new people here too, it became a little easier. (Winifred from Selma, Alabama)

What Winifred recalls is the recurring theme of the descriptions provided by the students when asked “Describe for me the first day when you stepped on campus and realized you were a student at the college.” Many of the students responded that they

were excited. As Sheena from Jamaica explained, “I was shocked at the same time I was happy and overwhelmed because I didn’t know how I was going to be able to go to college.” Along with feeling overwhelmed, some students stated that they were scared, nervous, or confused. “We were confused. Me and my mother was trying to find out which dorm was best so I could move in,” said Bianca from Los Angeles. “I’m happy and I don’t care because I’m in college and I’m away from home and she wasn’t going to be here much longer. I was going to have my day,” Bianca concluded.

Other students recalled feelings of loneliness, isolation, and fear. Julie from Decatur, Alabama stated, “I was nervous” while John from Bronx, New York recalled the realization that he would have “to fend for” himself. Sam shared a story from the moment he was called down to the first organized activity for freshman. “They did an “all call” for all freshmen. I was so scared to go downstairs because I didn’t know if it was an initiation thing or something like that. It wasn’t. They were telling us that we had orientation,” he reflected.

In addition to these feelings, other students noted that they felt sad and homesick. Tony from Mobile, Alabama stated, “I was sad when my folks left me.” Cindy Ann from Atlanta, Georgia was ready to go back home and missed her mother. “I felt out of place being out of state, by myself, a long way from home,” said Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi.

Among those who were excited and optimistic about the first day, were those students who felt a sense of pride. Cindy from Atlanta, Georgia stated that when she stepped on campus and realized that she was a student at the college, she felt “grown” and as if she was out on her own. “I thought I would never be here but I’m here,” stated

Carl from Hueytown, Alabama. “I am the first person in my family to go to college. It was a big accomplishment. It was once a dream but it’s real now,” concluded Oscar from Philadelphia.

The first day of college is the breaking of past ties in order to begin the experience of college life. This new experience is bittersweet in that it is exciting but it can also be overwhelming and full of mixed emotions of happiness and sadness. The students’ responses are typical of those who undergo a rite of passage such as the first year of college where they separate themselves from their former lives and transition into matriculation as college students. The reports of pride are consistent with the feelings of accomplishment. Historically, black colleges were designed to provide an opportunity for students who otherwise may not have been able to pursue a higher education a chance to fulfill their dreams. For many of the students, just getting to the campus was a major accomplishment.

*Theme 7: College Allows for More Freedom and Requires Responsibility*

It was freer in college. In high school, you really got a lot of people over you but here you make your own decisions. (Carl from Hueytown, Alabama)

When asked about how the college experience of the freshman year was different from the high school experience, several students stated that there was no difference while many expressed that they had more freedom. Some of the responses relayed differences in the types of activities that were available in college or the expectation for them to be self-motivated. “In high school, teachers babied you more. In college you have freedom to go to class or not go to class and do as you please,” shared Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia. In a similar statement, Sam from Bronx, New York said, “In high

school teachers babied you and made sure you came to class. But here, teachers don't have to call you but they still do.”

Both Vinnie and Sam realized that they were responsible for insuring that they took advantage of their own education and it was much different from their high school experiences where they were compelled to go to class. Bianca from Los Angeles, California was very forthcoming with her perspective on the difference between her college experience and high school in her statement: “I had a lot more freedom [at Miles]. I didn't necessarily have anybody telling me what to do or where I had to be. I could go to my classes if I wanted to. It was just a lot more freedom than I was originally used to than being at home.” Other students added the importance of quickly learning new study habits. Cindy from Atlanta, Georgia replied, “In college, you have to learn on your own.” Sheena from Jamaica stated that she changed her study habits. “I had to grow up quick. I had to do everything on my own,” stated Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi. Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania best summarized it in his comment that college requires more self-discipline.

Two of the students expressed the difference in the fact that they were attending a historically Black college. Teela, from Opelika, Alabama, graduated from a majority high school. She said that she first experienced “culture shock” as a freshman. John from Bronx, New York stated that he “got to meet more black people.” Julie from Decatur, Alabama noted that there was “a lot more variety of people” at the college than what she experienced in high school.

Taurus, a student athlete, stated that the difference in his college experience from high school was “on campus housing, morning practices, events on campus and party

life.” Keisha noted that Greek Life was a difference between the college experience and high school. These are traditional expectations of campus life for most freshmen who enter a residential college campus. Mary from Atlanta, Georgia recognized that students are more mature and some were “more open-minded and knowledgeable about certain aspects of life.” Keisha from Bessemer, Alabama and Alana from Miami, Florida both noticed a difference in the interaction between instructors in college and students from teachers in high school with students. “Teachers actually work with you compared to how it is in high school,” said Mary. Alana recognized that instructors were able to relate to students on a personal level in college.

The freedom expressed by the participants in this study is the result of the maturity and responsibility experienced and assumed through matriculation. The students are aware that they are in control of their actions. Their educational experience is not compulsory but based on their choices. Students relayed the experiences of a transition from childhood to adulthood.

#### *Theme 8: Hometown versus Home Away from Home*

When asked to describe what it was like going home on break or to visit family and friends, I received a variety of responses. Sheena was unable to go back home because she was from Jamaica and it was not financially possible for her to go return home for holidays and breaks. Mary from Decatur, Georgia lived with a relative off campus and was a commuter student. Taurus was from the local area and lived on campus but stated that he saw his family everyday so there was no different experience in going home on break.

*Sub-Theme 8a: Freedom on Campus*

Visiting family and friends was fun. Everybody wanted to know, “How’s freshman year? Are you in college? How is it going? Who have you met? Have you come up with any kids?” It was nice to see my mom because she could tell by winter break that I had grown up, more independent. It was different just being home. That’s when I realized I knew I couldn’t live with her again. I went from having a place where I could pretty much do what I wanted and then coming back and saying, “Ma, can I do this or that?” (Bianca from Los Angeles, California)

Several of the participants in this study responded that they preferred to be on campus. Bianca’s response above best described the transformation from being a child who is dependent on parents to being an independent college student with freedom. “At first I enjoyed it because I missed my family. In two or three days I was ready to come back because I missed the freedom of being on campus. Being at home you have to follow the rules,” concluded Teela from Opelika, Alabama.

*Sub-Theme 8b: New Friends on Campus*

Vinnie from Atlanta replied, “When you got there, you were glad you were there and two days later, you were ready to come back. You get bored and you’re ready to go back.” The students relayed that they had grown accustomed to the activities of campus life and to being with the new friends and acquaintances on campus. “The first time I came home was very exciting. The second time I knew I didn’t want to stay home because I had met a new group of friends down here that I just couldn’t leave,” stated Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Tony from Mobile, Alabama reported that going home on break or to visit family and friends was a bittersweet experience. “It was sad.



All of your closest friends from high school are never home.” He said that short breaks were good and that he was ready to go back to Birmingham to be with his “other friends.”

*Sub-Theme 8c: Something to Do on Campus*

Several respondents stated that going home was boring. Julie from Decatur, Alabama responded, “I was bored. I didn’t have anything to do there. I didn’t have a job so I didn’t have anything to occupy my time.” Sam from Brooklyn, New York also stated that going home was boring. He also emphatically replied, “I couldn’t wait to come back.” According to Cindy Ann from Atlanta, Georgia, “When I was at home for a little while, I was ready to go back to school because I guess I was so used to being at school all the time.” The college experience offered the respondents something to do. When some students visited home for breaks, they were restless and anxious to return to campus.

*Sub-Theme 8d: Responsibility While Away from Home*

Several respondents relayed very interesting stories about their experiences going home as a freshman. Mary from Atlanta, Georgia exhibited her realization of growth and responsibility: “It was different. I realize that I am moving on and some of the things that I used to do with my friends, I can’t do anymore because I have to say focused.” Keisha from Bessemer, Alabama stated, “When you come home, they make it seem like you are a different person than everyone else because you are actually going out and leaving on your own.” Entrenched in responses with the theme of freedom is also evidence of the

realization of increased responsibility. This responsibility was either for one's personal well-being and educational attainment or to his or her community.

It was nice to get away from home. I didn't forget where I came from and I know everybody was riding on me to do good. So it felt good to be in college and go home when in fact all my friends would be home selling drugs and stuff. They always looked at me and said, "Keep doing what you're doing." They said, "Go back to school. Go back to school...back to Miles." (John from Bronx, New York)

According to Alana from Miami, Florida, "I went back to my high school to share my experience as a freshman in college with them." Alana's statement demonstrates the feeling of responsibility to give back to her community by telling younger students about her experience and encouraging them to pursue a higher education. Vincent also relayed his sense of responsibility in encouraging others in his hometown in his statement, "They always wanted to know about what was going on at school because most of them didn't get a chance to go." A sense of pride was evident in the students as they spoke about how they were perceived by family and friends as college students.

Some respondents reported that they loved going home. Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama claimed it was "very peaceful" and that "you appreciate more stuff when it is gone." Trina from Uniontown, Alabama claimed that she was "more excited to go home than stay up here." As expected, some students admitted to being homesick. Alana from Miami, Florida said that she missed her family and friends while Cindy from Atlanta said she enjoyed going home because she missed some of the activities that she was involved in at home. Winifred from Selma, Alabama stated it best when she said, "Just no place like home."

It is interesting to note that the students did not separate themselves from their past support while in college but maintained their home life and college life as

appropriate. Most integrated into the college experience and preferred it as a result to “being at home” because of the freedom, the new friends, the drive to achieve their personal goals, or the activities that they pursued on campus. This was more appealing to them as students who have transitioned to the college life as a first year student. It is also interesting to note that many students were assuming roles as role models for others “back home.” They were the new local celebrities at their former high schools or hometown congregations that could relay stories about what college life is about and that would inspire the next generation to consider going to college. The stories of the participants in this study about their preference to their college life over being back at home is consistent with research that shows that a student’s interaction or involvement in the life of the college aids in student persistence.

### Separating: Integration into Campus Life

I think that the freshman experience is something that everyone should go through. It is an awesome experience and those that are pursuing college should go away and actually experience the “on campus” experience. (Leon from Chicago, Illinois)

### *Theme 9: Living in Housing*

I like it because of the fact that it’s kinda like I have my own personal apartment. I get along with my roommate quite well. (Keisha from Bessemer, Alabama)

All of the participants in this study except one student (Mary from Decatur, Georgia) lived on campus in one of four residence halls. The campus has two residence halls for women and two for men. There are no co-ed residence halls. When asked to describe their living arrangements, the respondents relayed stories of enjoying being away from

home. The participants in this study also had all the common amenities a college student would have in their room to include televisions, stereos, computers, and microwave ovens. Many also had items to remind them of home. Alana from Miami, Florida kept a Haitian flag and lots of pictures of her family in her room to as she reports, “remind me of home.”

Sam from Brooklyn, New York had interesting memories of living on campus:

We had good times! You may see someone passed out in the halls (laughing) or others eating pizza and playing cards in the hallway. Someone would break the lights in the halls all the time and you had the “no snitch rule” so you could not tell who did it, even if you knew who did it. Sometimes you may find vomit in the shower. Some guys were pretty dirty. We had fun when the alumni would barbecue for us or have a dance for the students on campus. Overall it was pretty good in the dorm.

Sam’s recollection of life in housing was very colorful and resembled scenes from a comedy, but as he recalled what he observed and experienced his first year, he smiled and laughed. Later, he would recall how boring it was for him to go home on break and how anxious he was to return to campus where he had new friends and good times.

Integration in the campus community aids in student persistence. Being able to adapt to the college experience is important. Adaptation would also include living on campus in a residence hall, away from home. Campus housing is a community within the campus community. Residential students maintain a distinct identity from the commuter students. Residential students also have additional standards by which they live to include the maintenance of a clean and comfortable living space and the respect of roommates and neighbors.

Many of the students reported that they were neat or that their room was clean. “I made it look like an apartment. I had lamps and curtains and stuff in there. It was the

nicest room in New Men's Dorm," said Tony from Mobile, Alabama. According to Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi, "We had periodic room inspection so if you weren't neat you had no other choice but to be unless you wanted to get a fine." Bianca from Los Angeles, California said that the living arrangements were too structured and stated, "As far as room inspections, those sucked."

While some students emphatically proclaimed that their rooms were neat and clean, other students admitted to being messy or having a messy roommate. When asked, "If I were to walk into your dorm room, what would I see?" Teela from Opelika, Alabama reported, "A room split in half." She continued by stating that her side was neat but her roommate's side was messy. Carl from Hueytown, Alabama and Julie from Decatur, Alabama also reported that their side of the room was clean but not the roommate. Carl stated, "The roommate thing didn't work out." Cindy from Atlanta, Georgia said that you would have seen clothes on the bed from "changing clothes plenty of times a day." Cindy was not the only student who admitted to having clothes everywhere. Bianca from Los Angeles, California, CindyAnn from Atlanta, Georgia and Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia all admitted to having a lot of clothing throughout their rooms in the residence halls. CindyAnn reported, "I had my roommate. It was somebody I knew so I can just kick my stuff out and in the open without worry about any problems."

Roommate issues were not a prevalent theme in this study. Only one participant (Carl from Hueytown, Alabama) as mentioned earlier stated that they did not enjoy having a roommate. Carl cited the reason that the "roommate thing" did not work for him was that he did not choose his roommate. His roommate was assigned by the college.

Julie from Decatur, Alabama said that “sometimes you still want your own room” and that you get “tired of sharing.” Julie stated that having a roommate was fun sometimes but not all the time. Mary from Atlanta, Georgia who was the only participant in this study that did not live on campus said, “I enjoy my personal space so that was kind of good not staying on campus.”

Reports on the experience of living in housing as a first year student included insight on the social interaction of the residential students. Most of the participants in the study reported that the overall experience in campus housing was enjoyable or fun.

When asked about their living arrangements on campus, most students reported that they enjoyed being on campus or that they had fun. Teela replied, “I enjoyed it because you’re around all your friends all the time.” Bianca felt that living on campus was cool. She stated, “It was fun because you’re in the dorm, just getting used to dorm life.”

While some students enjoyed residence life, Tony reported, “It was a very, very bad experience.” Tony, who as mentioned earlier made his room look and feel like an apartment, moved out of on campus housing at the beginning of his sophomore year. Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia and Winifred from Selma, Alabama described the residence halls as being loud. Vinnie also stated that it was “pretty hard to study sometimes.”

The student must be proactive in adjusting to the communal experience during the first year. Residential life can enhance student persistence. A positive residential experience on a college campus can increase a student’s sense of identity and stimulate positive interaction with others. A negative residential experience can aid in a student’s

ability to learn how to adjust and grow in new or difficult situations. It does not imply that a student will not return after the first year.

*Theme 10: Most Students Worked on Campus or Not at All*

I worked at Rave Move Theatre, German Shoes, Auntie Annie's Pretzels, Lane Bryant, and Taco Bell. The summer after my freshman year, I had three jobs. (Bianca from Los Angeles)

It was assumed that the participants in this study would have a job when the question was asked, "How did you balance your job and school work?" More than half of the participants in this study (61%) reported that they did not have a job during their freshman year. Only two of the participants had employment off campus. The other participants had federal work study positions in various departments across campus. "I had work study the first semester. My mom is taking care of me," said Teela from Opelika, Alabama.

Sam from Brooklyn, New York did not work. He responded, "I relied on my mother." Students who did not work but participated in work study such as Trina from Uniontown, Alabama practiced time management. She stated, "I went to work study in between the time that I had from classes." Leon from Chicago, Illinois reported, "I put myself on a schedule and told myself what I couldn't do, for example, more work than do my school work." During the interviews, Tony from Mobile, Alabama, "I wish I had a job then. I could have bought more clothes and gone out more. I spent a lot of days in the dorm because I didn't have any money. I didn't have gas money."

All of the participants in the study received some form of financial assistance to attend college. This financial assistance included athletic or academic scholarships and

federal financial aid. Many of the students in this study were able to become more involved integrated in the campus because they were not distracted by the need to work off campus to finance their education. Students who have financial assistance and who can interact with others more on campus are more likely to persist than students who have limited financial resources, work off campus, and who have no interaction with others on campus.

### *Theme 11: Participation in Campus Activities*

I asked two questions to capture data on the participants' involvement in campus life. Campus programming during the first year can positively impact the social integration of a student which positively impacts persistence. The first question stated, "Tell me about your free time activities." The second question asked, "What activities did you get involved in on campus?"

I wasn't involved that much...trying to balance class and football and still keep my grades up. Wasn't much room for me to be involved in too much more than that. Didn't have much free time between class, football practice, and studying but the little time I did have was mostly with the players on the football team. (Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi)

Vincent and CindyAnn from Atlanta, Georgia reported that they were too busy with sports to get involved in other organizations on campus or mentioned their sport or spending time with fellow athletes as their free time activity. CindyAnn, who played on the Women's Basketball team, stated that in her free time, she played basketball and went to the gym to lift weights. Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia stated, "I played football so my free time included football and maybe study hall." He was not involved in any other student organizations. Taurus response to the question was, "Free from what? Sports?"



He laughed and continued by claiming that outside of football he “chilled on the yard.” To chill on the yard means to casually spend time with friends. Only 19% of the participants reported that they were involved in no activities. The other participants mentioned active participation in organizations such as the Student Government Association, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, the Pep Squad, Honors Curriculum, NAACP, the UNCF Pre-Alumni Council, the Peer Network, and Student Support Services.

“I didn’t do nothing but talk on the phone. It’s nothing to do here but sit on the porch,” said Trina from Uniontown, Alabama. While Trina’s comment sound as if sitting on the porch was boring, many of the participants (38%) stated that sitting on the porch and talking to people was their free time activity. Known for being a scenic campus, Miles College offers a traditional landscape for leisure and students can be observed sitting at benches in front of the residence halls or on the steps of buildings engaging in conversation with each other. Tony from Mobile, Alabama stated that he spent his free time outside sitting on the steps of Pitts and Bass Halls. Pitts Hall and Bass Hall are women’s residence halls. Mary from Atlanta, Georgia smiled as she reported that her free time was spent sitting outside talking to people. Although she did not live on campus, she recalled not only being outside but spending time in the student union building playing pool and watching television.

When asked to recall her free time activities, Winifred from Selma, Alabama replied, “Hanging out on the yard, movie night, stepshows, and fashion shows.” Other participants mentioned campus events such as parties and sporting events as their free

time activities. Only two participants listed spending time with the opposite sex as a free time activity and three reported that they “stayed to themselves” or in their rooms.

According to student involvement theory, the greater the amount of involvement in student activities, the greater will be the amount of personal development. Students who positively development and mature socially and intellectually will have clarified goals, a healthy philosophy of life, relationships with other students, faculty, and staff, and will persist beyond the first year. Structured activities that engage the students while on campus enables the student to resist outside forces that may reduce the amount of time a student devotes to educational development. Students who are involved are less likely to drop out of college.

“I didn’t get to participate in a lot of activities. When I wasn’t in class, I was working in the Admissions Office...after that I went home,” said Sheena from Jamaica. Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama attended campus events, but reported, “I would attend that for a very brief moment then I would go back to my room.” Bianca from Los Angeles, California was cautious about her involvement in free time activities on campus. She explained, “I tried to stay to myself. It was too many upperclassmen that was trying to sleep with everyone. Miles College is really not that big, so if you do anything, everybody’s going to know by the end of the week. I refused to have my name on the list of things that people did.” Because students were not heavily involved in extracurricular activities or in social organizations does not imply that they were not involved or engaged in campus life. Being on campus in constant contact with the academic environment of other students and college personnel reduced the opportunity for a student to be engaged in a competing pursuit that would reduce the likelihood of persistence. A residential

campus creates a safe and structured environment for the students where they can focus on living the college experience.

Some students did venture beyond the campus grounds into the surrounding community. Other participants in the study such as Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania enjoyed going off campus during their free time. “I did a lot of just seeing the sights around Birmingham,” reported Oscar. He and students such as Julie from Decatur, Alabama also enjoyed going to local venues such as the movies.

The majority of the participants in the study spent their free time engaged in social activities. Only 24% of the participants reported that they spent their free time either reading or studying. The other 76% of the participants in the study mentioned non-academic activities.

#### *Theme 12: Spending Time with Peers*

The campus environment offers a new student the opportunity to become involved with new people. These new friends and experiences with new faculty and staff contribute to outcomes such as academic achievement, overall satisfaction of the first year experience and the decision to re-enroll. I asked the participants to tell me about their friends or associates on campus. I also asked the question, “Who did you interact with on campus outside of the classroom?” These two questions were devised to explore the participants’ involvement with other people on campus. More than half of the participants responded that they interacted with people who were friends, including the opposite sex, or who shared similar activities, either sports or campus organizations such as the Student Government Association, Band, or the Honors Curriculum. Tony from

Mobile, Alabama claimed, “I was in a clique. I was with them a lot of times.” Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi reported, “We met up, talked, laughed, ate lunch. Most of our social time was between classes.” Vincent, along with Taurus from Birmingham, Alabama, CindyAnn from Atlanta, Georgia and Vinnie also from Atlanta, Georgia all reported that they interacted with teammates outside of the classroom.

Both Bianca from Los Angeles, California and Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama noted that they developed close friendships with others on campus. Victoria emphasized that trust was important in her friendships and Bianca stated that she has “close knit friends” that she is “cool with.” Bianca also interacted with upperclassmen that she knew before enrolling at the college. Both Winifred from Selma, Alabama and Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania mentioned that they interacted with people that they knew before attending Miles College who were enrolled at the college. Oscar stated that he associated with “a couple of people from the church that I know.” Winifred spent time with people that she knew from her hometown. Sam from Brooklyn, New York said that he interacted with upperclassmen for guidance in decisions on how to register for classes. He stated, “I really wanted to know who to take and what not to take.” Integration in the campus life and social connectedness has a significant impact on educational gains and the student’s commitment to the goal of graduation. Students at HBCUs have a more supportive social environment in which more positive interactions with other students can occur. Students who have positive interactions with peers are more likely to persist.

The campus setting for Miles College is small with an average of 1600 to 1800 undergraduate students. As a small residential campus, students benefit from small class

size and the opportunity to interact with staff and administrators. Leon from Chicago, Illinois reported, “I had a chance to interact with everybody from students all the way up the Administration of the school.” Mary from Atlanta, Georgia noted that professors speak to students outside of the classroom setting. Sheena from Jamaica stated that she interacts with students, teachers and deans. The supportive environment of the HBCU allows for positive interactions with faculty and staff. Through the support of faculty and staff a student develops greater academic self-confidence and is further integrated into the academic and social culture of the institution. This enables the student to maintain a commitment to the institution, to persist, and to attain his or her goal of graduation.

Friends and associates were described with adjectives such as nice, fun, or “cool.” “The people I associated with are very nice people...influenced you to do good things,” responded Cindy from Atlanta, Georgia when asked to tell me more about her friends and associates on campus. Some participants used more interesting adjectives to describe their friends. Alana from Miami, Florida was a member of the band and described her friends as “party-goers, wild and crazy, and ambitious.” Teela from Opelika, Alabama stated, “They were presidential scholars like me and we were trouble makers because we liked to party.” Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania described his friends as “very mature, very calm, and boring.” Research has shown that Black students at HBCUs persist when they have realistic expectations and when they find a balance among their network of friends. The participants in the study were able to recognize that many individuals may not have shared their same level of commitment to achieving their goals. They were able to master the ability to manage time and resist peer pressure to engage in activities that may distract them from adjusting to college life. Bianca from Los Angeles

claimed that most of her friends were the exact opposite of herself and that they were “just out there” or promiscuous.

Some of them were good students. If I didn’t want to go to class, they would push me along and others were partying students. They always wanted me to go out and I was the fool to go out. (Trina from Uniontown, Alabama)

It is important to note comments from the participants on their perception that their friends or associates were people who helped them or guided them. Sam from Brooklyn, New York reported that he had a real good friend who “looked out” for him that this same person treated him like a little brother. He also reported that another friend gave him money to help buy books. John from Bronx, New York stated, “My friends are the ones who help me and guide me when I have problems.”

It is also important to note that the participants reported that they associated with others on campus that they assumed were like them or who shared a similar interest. Taurus from Birmingham, Alabama stated, “I socialize with people that have the same mindset and who have the same common goals like me.” “A lot of them you felt like was on your level or was doing what you do,” reported Carl from Hueytown, Alabama. Keisha from Birmingham, Alabama replied, “I get along with them so well because we are so much alike.” HBCUs provide an opportunity for an institutional fit for Black students. These students can find like-minded peers and role models with whom they can identify. The more a student believes that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the more the student will become positively integrated into that campus community. HBCUs have historically had a mission of service for the well-being and advancement of any student who desired to achieve a higher education.

## Engaging: The Academic Experience

To capture insight on the participants' academic experiences, I asked several questions about the classroom experience, choice of major, and the registration process.

### *Theme 13: Overcoming the Registration Process*

Miles College has long struggled with long lines during Fall Registration. The institution works every year to devise strategies to prevent the bottleneck that occurs in the offices of the registrar, the financial aid advisors, or the cashier. All efforts seem to yield few positive results as registration continues to be an overwhelming experience for the first year student.

When I engaged the participants in this study in a discussion about the registration process, I received a variety of responses that either indicated it was the most difficult, frustrating and stressful experience or that it was an easy experience.

Registering for classes wasn't too difficult because I just figured I would just go down the list of those required 101 classes. Nobody really helped me too much, but there were just this group of people telling me you were supposed to take the 101 classes since you're a freshman. (Bianca from Los Angeles, California)

All of the students who reported that the registration process was easy cited the reason as being because they received assistance. Cindy from Atlanta, Georgia who was a student athlete noted that her basketball coach assisted her with registration so the task was not too difficult for her complete. Students such as Teela from Opelika, Alabama and Mary from Decatur, Georgia responded that the coordinator of the Honors Program assisted them in preparing their paperwork for registration. "It was easy because my aunt was with me and she was a college graduate," replied Alana from Miami, Florida.

CindyAnn from Atlanta, Georgia recalled, "I didn't know how to do it at first and I

needed some assistance from an adult who works here.” John from Bronx, New York stated that the process was not difficult because “they explained everything the right way.” According to John, the advisors provided adequate instructions on the registration process which made the task easy for him to accomplish.

Miles College employed a deliberate strategy to alleviate the stress as much as possible during the registration process for the first year student. Institutions that have structured intentional programs and services for the first year student to maximize the student’s potential to adjust to collegiate life have higher persistence rates. Peer advisors, counseling and advising center staff and instructors are hired to work specifically with first year students to aid in their familiarization with the services, resources and facilities to aid them during the registration process.

As mentioned earlier, some participants did not recount a pleasant registration experience. “That was hard. It was a little confusing because I didn’t understand, but it was pretty easy once they broke everything down,” said Winifred from Selma, Alabama. Some of the participants recalled the experience of registering for classes as being hard, hectic, difficult, and even horrible. Some students had special circumstances to overcome such as Sheena from Jamaica who stated that the process was hard because she had to produce documents as an international student. Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania experienced issues with financial aid that prevented him from being able to register for classes on time. “I had to redo my schedule twice and it was frustrating at first,” stated Julie from Decatur, Alabama. “Horrible. It is like the most difficult thing to do. Makes me feel frustrated because it’s something I don’t want to do but I have to do in order to take my classes,” said Leon from Chicago. According to Sam, registering for



classes was simply “stressful.” Keisha from Birmingham, Alabama remembers the process as being overpowering, but stated, “I started asking older students and they finally told me what would be best.” Stressors such as long lines, unfamiliarity with the process, and going from building to building were reported by some of the participants. “Hectic. We did a lot of running around,” said Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama. Taurus from Birmingham, Alabama said, “Registration in Pearson took all day and they had us in a long line.” Trina from Uniontown, Alabama reported that the process was difficult because in her opinion it appeared as if all the students were attempting to register for classes at the same time. According to Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia: “It was terrible. Long line, long waits. It was just a lot of running around.” Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi remembers the process of registration being frightening and frustrating because he did not understand it.

While the participants may have had unpleasant experiences during the registration process, it did not decrease their likelihood to persist. This implies that the institution must have something that is enabling the student to adjust to the individual and interpersonal challenges that he or she may endure as a first year student or that the student has increased personal life skills or some other internal quality that is enabling him or her to persist. The comments from students about the registration process are used in assessment of the services provided and for process improvement.

#### *Theme 14: Small Class Size*

As I continued to engage the participants in dialogue about their academic experience during the freshman year, I asked them to recall their classroom experiences.

“The classroom experience is different than what I’m used to. The most that I have had in the class is probably ten at most. Some people actually want to learn and are focused,” said Leon from Chicago.

Private colleges tend to be smaller than public institutions. It is assumed that the smaller size of the campus would allow for more interaction among the students and the faculty and staff. This interaction reduces the likelihood of isolation where a student has not integrated among a peer group and may feel like an outsider. In instances of isolation, a student has not adjusted and without integration in the campus community the student will not transition intellectually. As a result, the student is more likely to drop out.

Smaller class sizes were perceived as a good experience for many of the participants in this study. Through the many opportunities to form close peer learning groups and to interact with the faculty, the participants in this study transitioned intellectually into engaged students. Mary from Decatur, Georgia felt that the small class size made the academic experience more personable. CindyAnn from Atlanta, Georgia and Keisha from Birmingham, Alabama both noted that their classes were not as crowded as in high school. “I was nervous the first few days we met but the classroom wasn’t big in number so it was more like a teacher to student learning experience. It was easier to learn. It was comfortable for the most part,” said Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi.

*Theme 15: Personal Attention from Instructors*

I asked, “What was your classroom experience like?” Several of the participants reported that the instructors were helpful or attentive. Often the personal attention from the instructors was due to the above noted small class size. “No big classes. It was a good learning environment. Teachers can actually help you when it’s not a lot of students. It worked for me...for my benefit,” said Tony from Mobile, Alabama. Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia stated, “Teachers give you individual attention if you needed it so it was quite pleasant.” John from Bronx, New York also recalled that students received personal attention from instructors in his response. He noted that instructors would give you opportunities to make a good grade and that students had “a lot of business hours to meet with your teacher.”

It was also mentioned that instructors were nice and welcoming. Students such as Sheena from Jamaica experienced special circumstances that required individualized attention. Sheena reported, “The teachers were warm and they helped me to stay focused and to keep up with the class because I actually came in late.” Winifred from Selma, Alabama recalls her instructors as being “great” stating, “They were really nice and understanding.” Carl from Hueytown, Alabama responded, “The teachers were nice making you feel welcome.” He continued by stating that it is different from high school.

Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Bianca from Los Angeles, California relayed colorful images of the instructor to student experiences during the freshman year. Bianca said, “All of us were eighteen, seventeen years old and we were all free for the first time. People were coming to class. They’re talking. They would fall asleep. Phones are going off. Nobody really wanted to listen to the teacher too much. If you

have your mind right, you could get your work done.” Bianca’s statement portrays the classroom as one filled with immature students who were disconnected to the learning experience, however she does remind me that if a student was focused, they would become engaged in the academic process. This was evident in her comment of having one’s “mind right.” Oscar recalls the freshman classroom experience being one of the professors attempting to maintain control of the class because the students were “new and very excited.”

Because Miles College has a liberal or open admissions policy, often academically gifted students may matriculate alongside students who are underprepared. Students who are not focused and immature are enrolled with students who have clearly defined goals and are motivated to succeed in college. No student is denied a chance to participate in the pursuit of a higher education. This often creates a challenge to instructors during classroom management. Early research has shown that the experience post-enrollment influences persistence, not pre-matriculation factors. Involvement in the classroom and participation in structured programs and activities aids in academic success and first year persistence. Instructors who are socially positive and personally engaging can help the new and excited unfocused or immature student get his or her “mind right.”

*Theme 16: Declaring a major and having goals*

Students with high aspirations are more likely to complete college. They possess an individual disposition with intention and commitment. Studies have shown

that Black students at HBCUs have demonstrated high levels of motivation to pursue education when they have clearly defined goals.

All of the participants in this study had chosen a major. The responses as to why a particular major was selected ranged in the desire to have a career that can serve others to the dream of having a job to make money. Some of the majors were congruent with the participants' perception of their traits or abilities. "I just thought about something I thought I would be good at...speaking to people and being heard," said Carl from Hueytown, Alabama. Carl reported that he wanted to major in Communications. He along with Winifred from Selma, Alabama and Sheena from Jamaica all expressed their belief that they had abilities that could be best utilized with a degree in Communications. John from Bronx, New York claimed, "I am more of a people person," when asked why he chose to major in Communications.

Tony from Mobile, Alabama majored in Biology. When asked what influenced his decision to major in Biology he replied, "I want to be rich and I want to be a doctor. I don't want a regular life." Keisha from Bessemer, Alabama was also a Biology major, who wanted to live up to her family's expectations of her to achieve. She stated that her motivation to pursue a medical career is to carry out the dreams of her mother who was unable to achieve her goal of being a doctor because she had to care for her children. "I previously did the study on it before I came to college. It is one of the best money making careers. Business and Accounting is something that we are going to always need," said Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama.

The participants in this study expressed goals that included going to graduate school to study medicine, law or pharmacy; becoming a teacher; going to the seminary;

serving as a social worker; and even owning a funeral home. Choosing a major and having goals are important factors in student persistence. According to research, students with goals possess drive and motivation to achieve those goals. HBCUs have success stories of many alumni who have overcome many odds to achieve their goals. These stories are inspirational to the students and attract many of them to attend college. Many of the students may not have been able to attend college anywhere else. HBCUs have been attributed to inspiring many students to pursue careers in ambitious fields of study. Studies have shown that if a student has clarified goals, a supportive environment, access to resources and services designed to aid in their achievement, and is actively engaged in his or her academic experience, he or she will persist to graduation.

#### Learning: Use and Familiarity with Campus Resources

##### *Theme 17: Meeting with Advisors*

It was like another parent telling you what you need to do with your part...keep you on your feet. I visited my advisor when I'm registering for my classes or when I drop a class or add a class. It was good knowing somebody is right there behind you trying to push you. (Carl from Hueytown, Alabama)

I asked the participants the question "How many times did you visit with your advisor and what was the experience like?" Carl like approximately one third of the participants responded that they utilized their advisors for registration or degree planning. Keisha from Bessemer, Alabama recalls that meeting with her advisor approximately twice a semester was a good experience. She stated, "It was helpful because she helped me get my class schedule together." Keisha also reported that she gave her advisor updates for the semester on her progress. "They just basically told me the classes I

needed to take and to be on course to graduate in four or five years, “recalled Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia.

90% of the participants replied that they met with advisors. Two participants responded that they changed their assigned advisors. Teela from Opelika, Alabama stated that she changed advisors because her first advisor made her angry. After she received a new advisor, she mentioned that it was a good experience. “I didn’t see my advisor at all. I started going to Dr. Woods,” replied Tony from Mobile, Alabama. Dr. Woods is the chairperson of the department who typically does not advise students but is willing to assist students if requested.

More than 20% of the participants expressed satisfaction in the guidance, advice or support given by their advisor. Mary from Atlanta, Georgia met with her advisor every week. She said her experience was “pleasant and very supportive.” Leon from Chicago, Illinois recalls meeting with his advisor about four times as a freshman and stated that the advisor was very helpful. “We talked about a lot of things concerning my major and my personal life as well,” he claimed. More than half of the participants expressed that their advisors were great or that the experience was helpful. Cindy from Atlanta, Georgia stated that she met with her advisor “plenty of times and it was a very helpful experience.” Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who met with his advisor once a month said that he had a good advisor and that “it was great.” Sam from Brooklyn said, “My advisor was real cool. She was real nice. My counselor was always nice when I went to her.”

Not all responses recalled the experience with the advisor being helpful, nice, or pleasant. Taurus from Birmingham, Alabama reported that he only met his advisor once

and could not remember who the person was. Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama never met with her advisor.

I think I visited twice. We really didn't know who our advisor was supposed to be so we were just going to our teachers asking "Can you help me with this? Can you help me with that?" So, it wasn't that good. Some teachers would help you but there were others who said, "Well, I'm not your advisor." I was lost. (Bianca from Los Angeles, California)

### *Theme 18: Handbook and Catalog*

During the interviews with the participants, I asked if they were familiar with the College Catalog, the Freshman Orientation Guide and the Student Handbook. These are three publications that are given to the students during Freshman Orientation.

The College Catalog, the Freshman Orientation Guide, and the Student Handbook are important resources for the first year student. The College Catalog is the most concise document published by Miles College. It is divided into seven major sections: 1) General Overview of the College with the Mission Statement and Historical Sketch of Miles College; 2) Explanation of Expenses and Fees to Attend Miles College including information on Financial Aid and Scholarships; 3) A General Overview on Student Life, Organizations, and Student Services; 4) General Academic Policies and Regulations; 5) A Complete Listing of Curricula and Course Descriptions; 6) A Complete Listing of the College's Current Administration, Faculty, and Staff; and 7) The Academic Calendar. The College Catalog is published every three years.

The Freshman Orientation Guide is a publication designed to aid the new student during Freshman Orientation. Freshman Orientation is also referred to as New Student Orientation at Miles College and is published annually. The Freshman Orientation Guide



contains greetings from the administration; a checklist of important tasks a new student must complete during the first few days on campus; the schedule of events during the New Student Orientation; information on topics such as scholarships, housing, student health, and financial aid; and other resources such as the campus map and a directory of frequently called numbers.

The third resource given to first year students is the Student Handbook. Updated annually, the Handbook contains information on student activities and services. The Student Handbook is divided into four major sections: the first section provides more detail on the history of the college, its expectations, and its traditions, to include the college's alma mater; the second section contains policies such as the sexual harassment policy, student complaint policy and the drug and alcohol abuse prevention policy; the third section provides detail on student involvement to include the Student Government Association, the Student Union Building and student organizations; and the fourth section outlines the College Regulations and Code of Ethics and Student Discipline.

Fifteen participants responded that they were familiar with the above mentioned reference materials. One participant, Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia, stated that he had seen the Student Handbook but not the College Catalog or the Freshman Orientation Guide. Taurus from Birmingham, Alabama stated: "I read this one (College Catalog) because my mother made me read it. I read that (Freshman Orientation Guide) because it was a class activity. I barely read that (Student Handbook)." When asked if they had read the above mentioned reference materials, six of the participants responded yes. Three responded that they had not read the College Catalog, Student Handbook, or the Freshman Orientation Guide. Five participants stated that they read some of each

reference. “I used the catalog a lot but I didn’t read too much of the handbook and the orientation guide, “claimed Alana from Miami, Florida. Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama recalled only reading the College Catalog and the Freshman Orientation Guide during her freshman year.

*Theme 19: Peer Resources/Word of Mouth*

To assess the usefulness of the College Catalog, Freshman Orientation Guide, and the Student Handbook, I asked the participants, “Were they of any use to you?” Bianca from Los Angeles, California claimed, “I used them to keep my window up because nobody stressed how important they were.” Teela from Opelika, Alabama said, “I went through them and decided, nope.” Carl from Hueytown added, “My first year, I didn’t read. I’ll say the beginning of my second year is when I started reading them.” Some students reported that they learned what they needed through participation in the Freshman Orientation Class which is required of all incoming freshman. According to Victoria of Birmingham, Alabama:

They made us take a freshman orientation class the first semester. I took the class and it helped me to be aware of the history of the school and the catalog helped me to stay on track with what classes I need to take and what classes were not as important.

John from Bronx, New York stated, “I never really opened the guide because I had an orientation class.” The Freshman Orientation Class as well as information from peers and other resources on campus were of more use to the participants in this study than the printed materials such as the Freshman Orientation Guide and the Student Handbook. Mary from Decatur, Georgia recalls that she perused the College Catalog, Freshman Orientation Guide, and the Student Handbook so that she would be familiar

with its contents. She claims, “The students helped me out and some of the faculty with the questions I had concerning whatever.”

The catalog helped me to decide the classes I should take. I really didn’t use the handbook or orientation guide because it was like I just found out from a lot of people here what was really going on. What to do and what not to do. (Julie from Decatur, Alabama)

The reference materials are important resources but their use is not a determinant factor in student persistence. The active engagement with upperclassmen and faculty and staff influenced the students which is consistent with research that the more a student is involved in a beneficial activity the more the benefits of that experience will be realized by the student. Therefore, the more a student is active in a positive peer experience where he or she can increase his or her knowledge, the more knowledge that student will gain. As a student interacts with individuals who can increase his or her familiarity with information, the more that student will be informed.

#### Growing: Overall Perception of the College

##### *Theme 20: Miles College is a Good Place*

I’ve just grown to really love Miles College because of the whole family atmosphere, small classrooms and the administration. It’s a great place to be. (Vincent from Atlanta, Georgia)

The participants in this study reported that they enjoyed matriculating at Miles College for many reasons. It is important to note that the students expressed satisfaction with the overall Miles College experience.

Smaller classroom sizes and one-one-one time with your teachers. You’re not a number. The school provides a lot of resources. (Sam from Brooklyn, New York)

When I asked the participants to tell me what they liked about the college, Keisha from Bessemer, Alabama replied, “The teachers actually know me by my name and I’m not just a number.” Keisha also stated that the college was a “close knit school.” Victoria from Birmingham, Alabama agreed that Miles College fostered “close knit student teacher relationships.” She also stated, “It is not a large campus where you have to walk three or four block to one class. Everything is right there together.”

Other comments illustrated the perception that Miles College is a good place. Sheena from Jamaica spoke about the opportunities and resources: “I like the classroom settings and the different opportunities you get to really help yourself academically such as the writing lab, tutoring, and access to the library.” Mary from Decatur, Georgia shared Sheena’s sentiments when she replied;” I like the opportunities that I’m able to achieve because of the networks that I’ve gained here.” Other comments of satisfaction with Miles College included the reply from Julie from Decatur, Alabama: “It has a good program. The academics are really good here. That’s really why I came.” Carl from Hueytown, Alabama noted that the “food is good” and instructors are helpful. Bianca from Los Angeles, California best summarized the perception that the college was a “close knit,” saying “I like the way that people tend to look out for each other. It’s a lot of camaraderie.”

*Theme 21: The College Cares about Them*

It’s like a family. It’s like whatever problems you have, all you have to do is open up so it’s a family away from home. Most schools you go to you can’t do that. (Vincent from Yazoo, Mississippi)

Vinnie from Atlanta, Georgia echoed Vincent's sentiment in his response, "I like...the family atmosphere and the administrators because they make you feel like you are family and you had a sense of belonging." He also expressed his feelings about the faculty when he stated, "No one was hard on you and they didn't feel like it would be a burden to help you with anything." The participants in this study shared the belief that the College cared about them as students.

The faculty members here at Miles actually want to see the students succeed in that class and to really understand the lesson or class or course that they take. There is so much academic help that there is really no reason for you to fail or get a bad grade. (Leon from Chicago, Illinois)

Oscar from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania stated, "I like the faculty and staff. I also like that they are always willing to help." When asked what she liked about Miles College, Teela from Opelika, Alabama commented, "I like the friendliness of Miles College. People open their arms to try and accept you. They try their best to make sure everything is going well for you."

#### *Theme 22: Maturity as a result of the Freshman Experience*

Maturity as a result of the freshman experience is expressed by a number of the participants in this study. John from Bronx, New York best summarized a popular view of young immature freshmen in college when he stated, "A lot of kids are coming up here playing around like it's a game but it's not a game. I was not as serious. I'm more serious now." Alana from Miami said, "I sort of have a better perspective on what to expect as far as college goals. I like to just go to my classes, go to work, and do my homework. I'm trying to leave. I don't want to be a professional student." While engaged in discussion about what he would change about his freshman experience, Leon

from Chicago, Illinois stated, “I don’t really think I would change anything because everything I experienced, I experienced it for a reason and I’ve learned from those experiences.” John from Bronx, New York shared the same sentiment when he replied, “Everything happens for a reason. I wouldn’t change anything.”

Bianca from Los Angeles, California was the most reflective when speaking of her overall perception of her freshman experience:

Overall my freshman year was fun. It was beneficial. That was the time when I really started to grow up...I had enough of a solid background having my parents and my friends, and my family but not everybody has that. So the freshman experience is going to be different for everyone. If you're going to be a freshman, you should come in ready to work. Have fun, yeah, but that should be secondary to getting your education. It took me getting horrible grades freshman year to figure that out. So that's when I stepped back on the working. I had to re-prioritize my life.

Bianca, along with many of the other participants, could engage the next freshman cohort in interesting discourse about their overall perception of the college.

While the majority of the participants expressed that they felt the college cared about their well-being or experienced growth and maturity during their first year, some participants shared some significant insight to note about their first year experience.

When asked , “Tell me about what you would change about your freshman experience,”

Bianca from Los Angeles, California and one of the most outspoken of the participants in this study shared this interesting response:

(I would change) some of my teachers and how they would talk to us and act. They looked down on us a lot. We’re adults. We should be able to talk to each other on that same level. I understand you’re the teacher and I have to give you respect, but I should at least get some respect back.

Bianca’s comments suggest that while some faculty and staff are supportive and engaging, some may be condescending, disengaged, and atypical of the overall

perception of “good” faculty and staff. Bianca was a student who was able to adapt and overcome obstacles such as non-supportive or disrespectful faculty. It was because of Bianca’s determination and high aspirations that she persisted. While the ability to establish relationships with faculty members is an important factor in student persistence, it is not the only factor. All variables discussed such as participation in campus activities, utilization and familiarization of campus resources and services, interaction with peers, living on campus, and an individual disposition of intention and commitment contribute to student persistence.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research questions, discuss the implications of this study, and suggest recommendations for future research. My intent in this study was to engage the participants in dialogue through which simultaneous data collection and constant comparative analysis would provide insight on their perception of the freshman experience. Themes emerged from the responses to the open-ended questions yielding an understanding of the first year experience at a private residential HBCU.

The first section of this chapter discusses the answers to the three primary research questions that guided this study. The next section explores the interconnectedness of the themes and subthemes that emerged during this study and how they provided an understanding of the experiences of the participants. The third section discusses the delimitations of this study. This chapter's fourth section details the implications of this study and suggests recommendations for future research. The final section of this chapter provides concluding thoughts to this study.

#### The Research Questions

*How do students define the freshman experience?*

The first research question is answered by the dialogue with the participants during the interviews. The interview was constructed to enable the students to tell his or



her individual story about the freshman year. There were five sections to the interview. The first section established rapport with the students and gathered background information. The second section asked the student about his or her academic experience during the first year. These questions asked the student to recall the registration process, interaction with the advisors and experience in the classroom. The third section explored the student's living experience if they lived on campus. These questions solicited responses about residence life. The fourth section engaged the student in discussion about his or her social integration on campus. Questions during this part of the interview asked about the participants' free time activities, friends, and extracurricular activities. The final section of the interview explored the student's overall perception of the college and also asked if they would change anything about their freshman experience. The foundational idea in this study is that the freshman experience is unique to each student and his or her individual response reflected this unique quality. However, overall themes emerged from the individual narratives. These themes formed the definition of each participant's freshman experience

In this study, the majority of the participants defined the freshman experience as an exciting time of freedom which was different from their high school years. The overall responses of the individuals are consistent with research that indicates minority students who persist are able to adapt to college and are committed to educational goals. The narratives of the students in this study did not recall the freshman experience as being one without obstacles or frustrations. Those students who could adapt to stress and who formed relationships that supported them in achieving their goals persisted to the sophomore year. The narratives also indicate that the participants worked hard, spent

comparatively little time engaging in social activities, and aspired to graduate study. This conclusion is evident in the fact that these students had clearly defined career goals that required post-baccalaureate study. These students also did not report partying as their number one pastime.

Understanding what the student is experiencing during his or her first year is important in the efforts of institutions to remain supportive to their student body. As trends, likes and dislikes, interests, and needs change, the institution is challenged to remain relevant to the student. While it is important to explore the academic preparedness of the incoming class as indicated by the grade point average, the type of courses taken in high school, or the scores on standardized tests, it is equally important to examine the reason why a student chose to attend college. Existing research has shown that socioeconomic factors or academic preparedness alone do not indicate if a student persists or not (i.e., Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). The unique student experience academically and socially strongly influences persistence.

#### *How do students articulate social integration?*

The participants articulated social integration through their stories of everyday involvement with peers, faculty or staff, and new experiences. The participants were actively involved and engaged in campus life either academically or socially, capitalizing on opportunities designed to enable them to succeed.

The conceptual framework for this study incorporated the theories of student involvement and student interaction. The majority of the questions in the interviews with the participants in this study aimed to capture responses that demonstrated the student's

involvement in campus life and his or her interaction with peers and the campus faculty and staff. This study aimed to demonstrate that the traditional-aged student entering college as a freshman undergoes an experience that influences persistence.

The narratives of the students interviewed during this study supported the five basic postulates of student involvement theory. The first postulate states that a student invests physical and psychological energy into his or her college experience. The students were actively involved on campus in and out of the classroom and had become psychologically attached to peers, mentors, and other people on campus whom they deemed as positive or as supportive. They also articulated an attachment to the institution and believed in it as being a good place for them. The second postulate states that students are involved on campus with a greater degree of intensity when it is perceived that the opportunity is advantageous or desirable. Many of the students reported that they took advantage of resources once they realized that it would help them achieve their goals through the narratives about the level of their involvement in class. The narratives also revealed that the majority of the students preferred the freedom and the interaction with peers on campus over the restrictive environments at home under the rules of parents. This study support the third postulate of the theory of student involvement that proposes that involvement can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively. The participants of this study were not asked how often they went to class or participated in an on campus activity. This study wanted to assess the perception of the student's involvement and how it impacted the decision to persist.

The fourth postulate states that the more a student is involved in an activity or service, the more the benefits of that program can be experienced by the student. The

more the student was involved with peers through class or extracurricular activities, the more the intended outcome of the activity or service was realized. Students, who went to class and were actively engaged, learned the course material and passed the class. Successful completion of courses enables the student to re-enroll for another term. Students that were active in structured activities or who lived in campus housing further developed their interpersonal skills. The fifth postulate holds that the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of the practice to increase student involvement. Miles College has programs and services that are intentional in efforts to support and engage freshmen students. It is through the deliberate efforts of the institution to provide an environment that allows opportunity for involvement that the students are able to become integrated into the campus life. The narratives of the students recall instances that they interacted with peers, staff, and faculty and formed their identity as a freshman in college. Integration into campus life is consistent with research that shows that involvement in the institutional environment with new ideas, people and experiences contribute not only the outcome of student learning but also persistence.

*How did the first-year experience define a student's identity as a member of the campus community?*

The Freshman Student Involvement Model suggested that through involvement the student persists. The Freshman Student Involvement Model is based on Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model. The I-E-O Model suggests that the college experience has an effect on a student. Input is the students' characteristics at the time he or she begins

college as a freshman. These characteristics would include individual features such as hometown, religious affiliation, gender, high school GPA, test scores, income, or parental educational background. Inputs also include aspiration or the desire to achieve a college education. The environment is the college experience during the freshman year. The environment includes living in housing, interaction with others on campus, participation in activities, and any other conceivable educational experience as a college student. The outcome is the impact on the student as a result of the environment. The effect on the student in this study is persistence.

In the Freshmen Student Involvement Model, the entering student, the freshman, becomes involved. He or she has separated from his or her previous existence as a high school student and has transitioned into the campus community. The student is involved in the environment. The environment is the college campus. Involvement is demonstrated through the students' use of institutional resources and participation in institutional opportunities. Involvement also depends on student effort. The effort is influenced by the aspiration of the student and his or her participation in the environment. Interview questions explored why a student chose to attend college and the use and knowledge of institutional resources. The questions also specifically assessed the participants' goals and perception of the institution. The students' involvement on campus, utilization of campus resources, and clarification of goals contributed to the outcome of persistence which is demonstrated through re-enrollment for the sophomore year. According to researchers such as Bean (1980, 1985) and Barefoot (2000), a student's background, which can be considered an input, is not the absolute indicator of his or her outcome. While HBCUs may have a high percentage of students from low

socioeconomic backgrounds or with low standardized test scores, they are still successful in graduating a greater percentage of minority students compared to predominantly white institutions (Brower & Kettenhagen, 2004). Based on the narratives of the participants in this study, it is the supportive and engaging environment that contributed to their decision to persist. Because the participants in this study were pleased with their freshman experience, which included activities and services consistent with variables that have been shown to positively influence students, they decided to enroll for the sophomore year. The students are integrated into the campus community.

#### Interconnectedness of Themes

Each theme that emerged during this study fits into one of the following categories: Identifying, Transitioning, Separating, Engaging, Learning, and Growing. The interview questions from this study are linked to the categories and each category tells a piece of the story of the students' accounts of their experiences. By applying the conceptual framework which guided this study to the constant comparative analysis of the interview questions, the emergent themes answered the research questions. As the participants in this study tell his or her story about the first-year experience, you can observe the processes of separation, transition and incorporation occurring. The students undergo the rite of passage where he or she leaves home and begins a process of transitioning into a new environment. This environment is the college campus with new relationships, opportunities, and values. As the students continue to learn this new environment, he or she becomes fully connected academically and socially. The categories individually could not lead to an understanding of any one research question.

Each category is connected and all themes work together to provide an answer to all three research questions.

Understanding that the participants choose to attend college for various reasons was important because these factors will influence their decisions to re-enroll at the conclusion of the freshman year. The analysis of the entry of the students lays the foundation for the definition of the freshman experience. Choosing to attend a HBCU is significant because Black students are not restricted to attending minority serving institutions. While HBCUs are available to students who do not have a choice to attend any other institution because of pre-matriculation factors such as under preparedness for post-secondary study, it is important to understand why a student who does have a choice would chose to attend a HBCU. Tobolowsky, Outcalt, and McDonough (2005) noted that students choose to attend a HBCU because of family, academic, institutional or interpersonal reasons. This study confirmed this conclusion. It was important to the students to attend the college either because of its convenience, a recommendation from someone they respected in their family or the community, their affiliation with the church, the history of the institution, or an academic or athletic scholarship. College choice enables the students to identify or find a fit with the institution which provides opportunities for involvement. College choice according to Tatum (2005) is a reflection of identity. The students in this study were drawn to the institution not only because of academic or athletic opportunity, but also because they identified with role models who inspired them to attend an institution that would help them fulfill their goals.

The themes in this study flow from category to category relaying the story of the freshman year from choice, to entry, and to integration into campus life. The student's

accounts of the freshman experience being different from high school especially through stories of the first day of college and having new friends, more freedom and more responsibility also provided a deeper understanding of their definition of the freshman experience and their articulation of social interaction. The narratives in this study confirmed research that examined the attitudes and characteristics of college freshmen at HBCUs. The participants in this study were focused. They enjoyed their college experience as a freshman, but they also realized their responsibility to achieve their goal. Many of the participants saw themselves as a role model for others in their community or their families. They dispelled negative racial stereotypes as Blacks being unreliable with a disposition to engage in criminal behavior. They did not want to partake in activities to shame their families or prohibit their success. It was important to them to make their families proud. They enjoyed being away from home and on their own.

Students indicated that they preferred being on their own and away from home because they quickly became integrated into campus life. Their integration into the campus life through social and academic involvement is examined under the analytical lens of this study and provides the answer to the research question which asks if the freshman experience influences the decision to re-enroll. The freshman experience is the students' interaction in campus life as defined by their involvement with peers, faculty and staff. The themes of choice are connected to the themes focused on campus life because the students choose to be in the unique environment that a HBCU provides. As a result, they are engaged in an experience that they preferred and choose to re-enroll to continue that experience as a sophomore.



The majority of the participants in this study lived on campus which facilitated the ability to become integrated into campus life. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon's revision of Tinto's Interactionist Theory specifically examined the involvement of students in a private residential college. Miles College as a private residential college and the narratives of the participants in this study confirmed the factors that aid in student persistence according to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004). The conceptual framework that guided this study incorporated this theory that addressed student involvement. The majority of the participants did not work and were involved in an activity on campus. Being residential students enabled the participants to spend time with peers and form bonds and friendships. The students found a community at Miles College in which to belong as a residential student.

While social interaction of students is important, most important in the freshman experience is the academic experience. The flow of the interrelationship among the themes is further revealed in the narrative as the students recount their academic experiences at a HBCU. Students' accounts of navigating the registration process and their experience in the classroom were very important. Most students reported that the registration process was not a pleasant experience, but they were able to overcome the challenges through support and advisement provided by peers or faculty mentors. The participants in this study had academic goals. The students had declared majors and professional aspirations. The conceptual framework of this study also incorporated theories that addressed student interaction and integration. The participants in this study found a community through which to belong by enrolling at the college and had adjusted to campus life. These students relayed accounts of feeling comfortable in the classroom

and that instructors were attentive to their needs. The participants also indicated that they had familiarity with the resources of the college such as advisors, the handbook, and the catalog. As a result of the analysis of the narratives about the academic experiences of the participants, based on the emergent themes, a deeper understanding is gained on the student's perception of the commitment of the institution to the welfare of the student. According to extant research, this perception is an important factor in student persistence.

As a result of the experiences and perceptions of the student from entry, through the first day and registration and through experiences in and out of the classroom, participants expressed that overall the college was a good place that cared about them as students. Many of the students relayed concluding thoughts that indicated that their freshman experience resulted in growth and maturity. Interactionist theory suggests that if the student feels that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, he or she will be more integrated in the campus community. Communal potential exhibited through living in residence halls, going to class, and interacting with peers, faculty and staff contributes to persistence. It is through the analysis of all of the themes as they are interconnected that the study can suggest that the participants' experiences influenced the decision to re-enroll for the sophomore year. All of the themes in concert provide a deeper understanding of how the freshman student defined his or her first year and most important how that experience influenced persistence.

#### Discussion on the Delimitations of this Study

There were two delimitations anticipated before this study was conducted. First, the results of the experiences of students at a Historically Black college cannot be

generalized to any other type of institution. The second anticipated delimitation of this study is that it only analyzed the effects of first year persistence, not the persistence to graduation.

Upon answering the research question on how students defined their freshman experience, it became evident that the definition of each participant in the study is relevant to his or her unique story. As a result, not only could experiences not be generalized to students at other types of institutions, these experiences cannot be generalized to any other group of students even in the same institution. Most important are the recurring themes that were consistent with the theoretical framework which served as a guide to this study. Because the stories of the students' experiences once analyzed were consistent with the theories of student involvement and integration, it confirmed that the postulates of both theories were evident during the comparative analysis of this study.

A second delimitation of this study that precludes the generalizations of the results is that not all second year students at the research site were interviewed. During this study, data saturation was reached as the same themes emerged from the analysis of the responses of each participant in the study. Only those students who returned for the sophomore year were interviewed. This study cannot assess the experiences of freshmen students who did not return, but who may have re-enrolled at another institution. Persistence in this study is defined as re-enrollment for the sophomore year. This study cannot explore if the experiences of the participants at the research site had an effect on his or her experience as a sophomore at another institution.

As proposed, this study only focused on the phenomenon of the freshman experience. This study, as discussed in chapter three, did not address the “bottom line” which is cohort graduation. Therefore, this study is limited to understanding the significance of the experiences of a student in his or her earliest phase of matriculation. It cannot be generalized that favorable or unfavorable experiences during the freshman year has any effect on persistence to graduation.

#### Implications of this Study and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

The implications of this study far outweigh the noted delimitations. The most important finding in this study is that it confirms that the practices related to freshman retention can be successful in contributing to persistence. This study aimed to explore how the student defined his or her unique freshman experience, but within that definition, and most important, this study sought to uncover what practices employed by the institution contributed to his or her success. While pre-matriculation variables such as what influenced the student to enroll as a freshman and his or her ability to undertake post-secondary studies are very important to questions of student success, what was revealed as equally important to the student’s success is an engaging and caring institutional environment where resources are readily available. The college campus creates this environment by employing the best practices based on existing literature through its academic programs and student services.

At the time of this study, the research site was experiencing an above average rate of student persistence to graduation as compared to its cohort institutions. As discussed in chapter three, the research site was chosen because of its success in freshman

persistence and because it had structured academic experiences specifically designed for freshmen students. Results from this study can confirm that the intentional methods employed by the research site impacted the students' experiences. It is recommended that the institution continue to explore ways to strengthen its programs and services for freshmen.

The second implication of this study is that it identified an avenue through which the institution could better use its financial resources. Participants revealed that they were knowledgeable of the printed resources provided to freshmen students but that they rarely referred to them. The printing of catalogs, handbooks, and orientation guides cost money that could potentially be better spent on other institutional needs. While it is important that the college publishes the catalog and handbooks, the recommendation is that these items be made available to students electronically instead of being mass produced. As students use electronic devices to read textbooks and to submit assignments, they can also access these important resources as needed through the institutional website at any time if they are published "on-line." Funds expended on printing costs can be redirected to student services proven to be effective such as peer mentoring programs and residence life activities.

The third implication of this study is that it revealed deficiencies in the research site's student services. The students relayed frustration and confusion during the registration process. Essential to matriculation is registration. Therefore, it is crucial that the students are registered for classes. It is recommended that the colleges employ better practices to improve its services during the registration process. The participants in this study revealed during their stories the ways in which the research site can improve its

registration process. Many students identified faculty or staff members who assisted them. The research site should be certain that there is a sufficient number of faculty and staff members present to work with freshmen students during this process. Many students also noted that they found other students who could assist them with registration. The research site should also be certain that they utilize the services of peer mentors to engage freshmen students in this process.

There are three suggestions for further research as a result of this study. The first suggestion is that the institution conducts a study of students who do not complete the freshman year. In this study, an exit interview would be administered for students who wish to leave during the freshman year or who dropped out during the freshman year. The interview would attempt to get open ended responses on the students' opinions and experiences. Not only would this information provide insight on how these students may have defined their freshman experience, but this information would also identify areas of improvement for the institution.

The second suggestion for further research is on the study of the sophomore year experience. The goal of such a study would be to ascertain what services or support are significant in enabling students as they transition to increased academic, financial and social responsibility. Often students in the first two years are completing required pre-requisite interdisciplinary coursework that is perceived as less challenging or demanding as coursework specific to their chosen major. While a student may persist through the presumptive "easy" courses, they may drop out after assuming more challenging academic responsibility. Upperclassmen also undertake more financial and social responsibility as they become more invested in campus life. Understanding the

sophomore experience may assist the institution in identifying what variables are necessary for success of upperclassmen.

The third suggestion for further research is to replicate this study, but specifically examine the experiences of commuter or non-traditional students. It would be important to note if the commuter students have a unique set of pre-matriculation variables in respect to factors such as age, marital status, or academic ability. This study did not limit its focus to residential students; it focused on a residential institution. During the study, the overwhelming majority of the participants lived on campus. A future study would have to be deliberate in studying only commuter students at a residential institution to note if these students define their freshman experience differently.

#### Concluding Thoughts

I chose to do this study because of my interest in student success, but also to attempt to tell a story of what a Historically Black College is doing well. Often, the question is asked, “Why do HBCUs still exist when a black man or black woman can go to any school?” I often answer that question with a question and ask, “Can a person attend any school of choice?” Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities exist today not because access to higher education is not available to minorities at other institutions, but because they provide access to any person regardless of race to a college education when that person may not be able to go to another institution. HBCUs take the risks that many institutions are not willing to take. Historically Black Colleges and Universities have countless success stories in taking “lumps of coal” and producing diamonds by admitting students denied by other institutions who succeed as students. HBCUs also exist because of their rich history and legacy of producing college graduates

in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. Many of the students identify with role models who are alumni and alumnae of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and are children of a long lineage of proud graduates of these institutions.

I am employed at a Historically Black College and I understand that often the institutional focus is on teaching instead of research. While assessment is infused in the culture of the institution, that assessment is more on contributing to the cycle of setting goals, devising a plan, implementing the plan, and assessing if the outcome was or was not met. Sometimes the assessment is more focused on quantifiable data. Qualitative data is often in the form of open ended questions on a survey. Conducting one-on-one interviews to gather anecdotal data is time consuming. However, the combination of qualitative and quantitative data is the best way to tell the HBCU story. I wanted to provide the qualitative perspective to the analysis of the numbers reported by my institution. I wanted to assist them in further understanding why the students were successful. I also wanted to contribute to the efforts of the college in strengthening its services to the students. By employing a data driven approach, rooted in theory and retaining the best practices, I wanted to ensure that I was informed on how to contribute to the success of our first year students.

It is my hope that the findings in this study open the doors for continued discourse within higher education on the significance and impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. I also hope that this study challenges HBCUs to come to a deeper understanding on its services and practices so that they can remain relevant and beneficial to students.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval

Office for Research  
Office of the Chair,  
Institutional Review Board for the  
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**ALABAMA**  
R E S E A R C H

January 28, 2008

Griena Hermaine Knight  
ELPTS  
College of Education

Re: IRB # 08-OR-008 "The First-Year Experience of Students at a  
Historically Black College"

Dear Ms. Knight:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your protocol has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number. Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpafato T. Myles, MSM, CIM  
Director of Research Compliance & Research Compliance Officer  
Office of Research Compliance  
The University of Alabama

152 Rose Administration Building  
Box 870104  
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0104  
(205) 348-5152  
Fax (205) 348-8862

IRB# \_\_\_\_\_

**University of Alabama**

**Individual's Consent to be in a Research Study**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This research study is entitled "*The First-Year Experience of Students at a Private Historically Black College*." The study is being conducted by Griena Knight who is a doctoral student at the University of Alabama. She is being supervised by Dr. Michael Harris.

**What is this study about?**

This study is interested in your experiences as a first year student. The researcher will ask you questions about the Freshman Orientation Program; the registration process; classroom interactions; advising; dormitory life; and extra-curricular activities. The knowledge gained from this study is useful because it will provide insight on what a first year student experiences at the college from the perspective of the student. This study will help educators learn how to better develop retention programs and services for students.

**Why have I been asked to take part in this study?**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a sophomore at Miles College who recently completed the first year. Your experience as a first year student is the primary focus of this study.

**How many other people will be in this study?**

Approximately 25-40 sophomore students and 10 faculty, staff, and administrators who work with first year students will be asked to participate in this study. If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview session that will be recorded to aid the researcher in data preservation and analysis. Being in this study will take no more than one hour of your time. Your confidentiality will be protected as much as possible.

**What will it cost to participate in this study?**

There will be no cost to you except for your time in completing the interview.

**What are the risks of participating in this study?**

There are no physical, emotional, psychological risks to the participants in this study.

**Will I be paid to participate in this study?**

You will not be paid to participate in this study. The researcher may take you out of this study if it is deemed necessary because you are unable to answer the questions or you appear to become upset by participating in this study.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 1-10-08  
EXPIRATION DATE: 1-10-09

6

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to you from being in this study.

**What are my rights as a participant in this study?**

Taking part in this study is voluntary—it is your free choice. You may choose not to take part at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of any benefits you would otherwise receive.

**Will I be able to be identified as a participant in this study?**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Participants will be identified with false names only and records will be kept in locked files. No one will be able to recognize participants in any reports or publications that result from this study.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

If you have questions about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions about the study later on, please call the investigator, Griena Knight at (205) 923-7347 or her advisor, Dr. Michael Harris at (205) 348-1731. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205)-348-5152.

I have read this consent form. The study has been explained to me. I understand what I will be asked to do. I freely agree to take part in it. I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep. I am at least 19 years of age and my signature below indicates that I meet this requirement.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 1-10-08  
EXPIRATION DATE: 1-10-09 7

## Appendix B

### **UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA Informed Consent for a Research Study**

You are being asked to take part in a research study because last year you were a freshman student at the college and you have returned to continue as a sophomore. This research study is entitled “*The First-Year Experiences of Students at a Private Historically Black College.*” The study is being done by Griena Knight who is a doctoral student at the University of Alabama. She is being supervised by Dr. Michael Harris.

This study is interested in your experiences as a freshman student. The researcher will ask you questions about the Freshman Orientation Program; the registration process; classroom interactions; advising; dormitory life; and extra-curricular activities. The knowledge gained from this study is useful because it will provide insight on what a freshman student experiences at the college from the perspective of the student. This study will help educators learn how to better develop retention programs and services for students.

Approximately 40-50 sophomore students will be asked to participate in this study. If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview session. Being in this study will take no more than two hours of your time. Your confidentiality will be protected as much as possible.

You will not be paid to participate in this study and there will be no cost to you except for your time in completing the interview. The researcher may take you out of this study if it is deemed necessary. There are no direct benefits to you from being in this study and the risks for participating in this study are minimal.

Taking part in this study is voluntary—it is your free choice. You may choose not to take part at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of any benefits you would otherwise receive.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

If you have questions about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions about the study later on, please call the investigator, Griena Knight at (205) 923-7347. If

you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205)-348-5152.

I have read this consent form. The study has been explained to me. I understand what I will be asked to do. I freely agree to take part in it. I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

---

Signature of Research Participant

---

Date

---

Investigator

---

Date

## Appendix C

### Student Interview Questions

#### Background

- \* Tell me a little about where you are from.
- \* Why did you choose this college?
- \* Was the institution what you expected based on recruitment materials?
- \* Was this college your first college choice? Are you satisfied with the cost of attendance?
- \* How was your college experience this past year different from your high school experiences?

#### Academic Experience

- \* Describe for me your first day when you stepped onto the campus and realized you were a student at the college.
- \* Tell me about your experience registering for classes.
- \* How many times did you visit with your advisor and what was that experience like?
- \* Have you chosen a major? What influenced you to choose your major?
- \* What was your classroom experience like?
- \* Do you feel like the college cares about your academic achievement?

#### Living Experiences

- \* Where did you live during your freshman year?
- \* (*If at home or off campus*) Describe for me your living arrangements.
- \* (*If on campus*) If I were to walk into your dorm room, what would I see?

#### Social Activities

- \* Tell me about your free time activities. How often were you involved in activities outside of the classroom?
- \* Who did you interact with on campus outside of the classroom? How often did you spend time with friends?
- \* (*If they worked*) How did you balance your job and school work?
- \* What activities did you get involved in on campus? (*If the answer is "yes."*) Why did you chose that activity?
- \* How did you learn about activities offered on campus?
- \* Were the campus activities "beneficial or useful" to you? Did they influence your decision to re-enroll for a second year?
- \* (*If they lived on campus*) Describe what it was like going home on break or to visit family and friends.

### General Questions

- \* Tell me about your friends or associates on campus.
  - \* Tell me about what you like about the college?
  - \* Tell me about what you would change about your freshman experience.
  - \* How has your opinion changed about the college since you entered as a freshman?
  - \* (*Show them handbook, catalog, promotional materials, orientation manual, etc.*)
- Are you familiar with these publications? Were they useful to you? Do you feel as though they are accurate?



## Appendix D

### Listing of the Participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Other Information</b>
Tony	Mobile, Alabama	Male	
Trina	Uniontown, Alabama	Female	
Teela	Opelika, Alabama	Female	Presidential Scholar
Taurus	Birmingham, Alabama	Male	Athlete
Sam	Brooklyn, New York	Male	
Cindy	Atlanta, Georgia	Male	Athlete
Oscar	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Male	CME Church Support
Leon	Chicago, Illinois	Male	CME Church Support
Keisha	Bessemer, Alabama	Female	
Mary	Decatur, Georgia	Female	Second Generation
Sheena	Jamaica	Female	CME Church Support
Carl	Hueytown, Alabama	Male	
Cindy Ann	Atlanta, Georgia	Female	Athlete
Julie	Decatur, Alabama	Female	
John	Bronx, New York	Male	
Vincent	Yazoo, Mississippi	Male	Athlete
Victoria	Birmingham, Alabama	Female	
Bianca	Los Angeles, California	Female	CME Church Support
Alana	Miami, Florida	Female	

Winnifred

Selma, Alabama

Female

Vinnie

Atlanta, Georgia

Male

Athlete