

HOW HIGH-ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE MEN NEGOTIATE  
CULTURAL CHALLENGES AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this study I examine the manner in which high-achieving African American undergraduate men negotiate cultural challenges in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Cultural theory underpins the conceptual framework of this case study. Basing the study in cultural theory provided a lens through which to view the lived experiences of the twenty study participants. The site of the study was Millennial University (MU) located in the southeastern United States with a population of over 25,000 students. African American students comprise approximately 14% of all students and African American males make up approximately 6% of this population.

To date, few studies have focused on African American male high-achievers in postsecondary institutions (Bonner, 2001; Harper, 2005). Consequently, there is a dearth of information in the literature pertinent to higher education practitioners. Social, economic, political and legal barriers often relegate this subpopulation to stereotypical caricatures.

The research design used in this study supported the collection of “rich thick” descriptive data (Merriam, 1998). These data are relevant to cognitive and non-cognitive strategies used by high-achieving African American undergraduate males to successfully maneuver through an often hostile and unwelcoming campus environment. Data collection methodology included individual interviews, focus group sessions and e-journaling. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of four weeks. Constant comparative analysis was used for data coded into five thematic categories.

As society progresses toward globalization, and learning becomes more technologically influenced, cultural frames of reference will be increasingly more critical to teaching and learning across institutional types and cultures. The importance of understanding institutional culture and its impact on diverse members are to support shared goals as opposed to identifying conflicts between individuals and groups (Tierney, 1988). By assuming responsibility (an unanticipated finding in this study) for effecting positive multicultural and multiracial interactions across sectors of the MU campus, the study group modeled the concept of supporting shared goals as opposed to identifying conflicts. From the findings, several recommendations for practice emerged. Key recommendations include: (1) structured peer interaction with same race and majority race high-achievers, (2) employ more African American male role models, and (3) encourage multicultural learning and dialogue.

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Kevin and Cameron, like the exceptional young men in my study, you are also high-achieving African American men. It is my sincere wish that you will stay the course, complete your college education and know that your dreams are attainable. George and Bobby, thank you for inspiring me to examine the cultural challenges that high-achieving African American undergraduate men negotiate in a predominantly White institution.

My professional experiences with students, colleagues, friends and faculty have immeasurably enriched my life. I believe that our lives are not defined by class, gender, race or ethnicity. I believe that we are all inextricably linked through multiculturalism and multiracialism—when we embrace and celebrate our differences— these links grow stronger. With heartfelt gratitude I acknowledge the study participants who made this project come to life. I am enormously indebted to Dr. Michael Harris for chairing my dissertation committee. He has

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

*If you wish to know the road up the mountain, you must ask the man who goes back and forth on it...Zenrinkushu*

Conditions endemic to the plight of African American students have been at the forefront of attention in higher education for more than four decades (Bonner & Bailey, 2006, p. 24). Some observers argue that this plight is anchored in a deleteriously dismal history (Gordon et al., 1994). This dismal history began on the shores of West Africa in the fourteenth century. When slave ships sailed from the shores of West Africa, with human cargo, destined for countries and ways of life that could not be imagined, the plight for African Americans was born. Stripped of their dignity, and deemed sub-human, African Americans were enslaved as a means to support the building of an American system of capitalism at minimal cost.

According to Clark (1958) the manifestation of the system of slavery and all else that subsequently evolved for African Americans is linked to culture. Clark proffers that “Values, sentiments, beliefs and attitudes of a society are mirrored in the ways that its members behave in trying to realize their aspirations and needs” (p. 221). Clark further establishes that African Americans were involuntarily forced into a culture and way of life designed to benefit others. Because each group had a defined place in the social order, this system of subservience worked. Clark aptly notes that while there may have been quiet discontent on the part of African Americans, “there was relatively little conflict” (p. 222).

Slavery ultimately evolved into a two dimensional institutional system: one dimension represented a division of labor and the second dimension defined social status. Values, sentiments, beliefs and attitudes of the society were inextricably intertwined to form the culture. Over time, the triad of social, political and economic conditions significantly impacted and influenced cultural norms. As Clark (1958) contends, social institutions, of necessity, also change when cultural norms undergo change. In Colonial America, higher education institutions were established for elitist White males and were heavily rooted in sectarian orders. As the country expanded geographically, in population and industrial growth, so did demands for a stronger system of capitalism. A stronger system of capitalism required a more broadly educated citizenry.

Maintaining a narrowly established system of education proved to be unsustainable by sectarian orders. Thelin (2004) asserts that, with few exceptions, many of the early American colleges and universities struggled to operate on church related funding and student tuition support. Further, as Thelin contends, through most of the 1800s public support for higher education did not have national persuasive favor. Financial challenges, post Civil War issues, and emerging Jim Crow (separate but equal) practices were pivotal factors that influenced the status of education.

Morgan (1972), points out that the earliest school operated for African American citizens was established by a New York City Anglican order in 1704. The Society of Friends (Quakers) established as many as 20 private schools in Philadelphia for Black Children. Quaker philanthropists, abolitionists and other religious sects played key roles in providing pre and post-Civil War educational opportunities for a fortunate few African American citizens (Smith,

Altbach & Lomotey, 2002; W. E. B. Dubois, 1937). Intertwined in the issue of education for African Americans were myriad complexities. These complexities crisscrossed the ideologies of churchmen and statesmen. Overarching these mosaics was the notion held by many that “neither literary nor religious education prepared Negroes for a life of usefulness” (Woodson, 1919, p. 38).

Nevertheless, advocates for the education of African Americans were relentless in the pursuit of this outcome. In a broad historical context, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) maintain that the system of education for American citizens has been inextricably influenced by racism, and classism. These authors suggest that “The transformation of American higher education from a private, elite system to a more democratic system paralleled the triumph of White supremacy in the southern states and the emergence of institutionalized racism in northern states” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 5).

Southern states strongly opposed the use of tax dollars to support schools in the post-Civil War South (Smith et al., 2002). With few exceptions, recently freed slaves; were outright denied access to public education. Many sectarian groups deemed it their Christian charge to bring salvation to former slaves. Often the means of salvation came in the form of education provided by Freedmen Societies. Members of the Freedmen Societies were mostly White Northerners, many of whom were women. Their determination to educate the illiterate and beleaguered ex-slaves was often met with contentious suspicion by former slave owners and many economically impoverished White Southerners (Wesley, 1957).

Missionary zeal on the part of Northerners to educate African Americans, aroused suspicion on the part of Southerners; suspicions that were not entirely without merit. After all Jim Crow inequality among Whites and Blacks was a well established institution in the Northern

states long before it took hold in the Southern states. “Not until the first decade of the twentieth century did racial segregation become completely institutionalized in the South” (McPherson, 1965, p. 495). The Plessey v. Ferguson case heard by the United States Supreme Court in 1896 institutionalized “separate but equal” practices in education in both the north and south. Inequality of educational access for African Americans was as much a national issue as it was a Southern regional issue.

Federal legislation and federal funding have historically played key roles in making educational opportunities accessible to African Americans. Thelin (2004) notes that the Morrill Act of 1862, the Hatch Act of 1887 and the second Morrill Act of 1890 provided both federal legislation and federal funding to invigorate educational programs at land-grant institutions. Land-grant institutions had specific programmatic foci relevant to agricultural experiment stations, engineering, and military training. As suggested by Thelin:

The proliferation of federal programs had another impact on the growth of public higher education. It also made possible the extension of the land-grant program to two heretofore excluded groups: black colleges in the Southern states, and the historic state colleges in the Southern states that had not been eligible for land-grant program participation during the Civil War. The establishment of the black land-grant colleges... extended access and services to blacks yet did so only within the framework of racial separation (2004, pp. 135-136).

The upward mobility of African Americans through education was a matter of contention, not only among leaders in the White race, but garnered vigorous philosophical debate between two of the most noted African Americans of that era: Drs. Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. Washington, a descendant of slaves and modestly educated at Hampton Institute and DuBois, a descendent of the Black middle class and classically educated in Europe and at Harvard were at odds regarding the manner of education best suited for African Americans. The educational ethos of Dr. Washington was put forth in a historical speech given

in 1865 at the *Atlanta Exposition*. In that speech Washington intoned: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (1901, p. 240). It is this statement to which DuBois and legions of other African Americans have taken umbrage.

Contrastingly, the purported ethos of DuBois as depicted in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today* (1903, pp. 35-75) was ensconced in the culture of the elite and the educated. DuBois theorized that:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races” (p. 1).

Drs. Washington and DuBois were two great Americans dedicated to improving the quality of life for African American citizens. It is also very well known that both men viewed education as essential to advancing quality in the lives of African Americans. Equally well known is that each man viewed the path to betterment through very different philosophical lens. The more pragmatic and vocational approach espoused by Washington was viewed by DuBois supporters as conciliatory and deferential to the paternalistic views that White citizens held for dependent and disenfranchised African Americans. DuBois advocated an educational curriculum that would do more than teach men how to make a living, but also teach them the art of living. The educational approach advocated by Washington was more vocationally based.

#### *African American Access to Education*

Life transitions today are far more humane, and through education are becoming more egalitarian. Educational opportunities have opened doors to lifestyles that until a few decades ago were described by Langston Hughes as simply “dreams deferred” (Gates & McKay, 2004). In his autobiography, *Up- From-Slavery*, Booker T. Washington (1901) equated walking into the



classroom with “getting into paradise” (p.7). Since these wishful words were written by Booker T. Washington over one hundred years ago, educational opportunities for African American citizens have transformed lifestyles. The epic 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case heard in the United States Supreme Court, struck down longstanding “separate but equal” laws in public education.

Pursuant to this outcome; by the 1960s educational access barriers to public higher education for African American citizens began to crumble. Since that time, changes in educational opportunities for students of color have been far reaching; however gaps and inequities still remain. One gap that has garnered little attention from educators is that of cultural challenges faced by high-achieving African American undergraduate men attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Among the few studies conducted to date, the Hrabowski, Maton and Greif (1998) study of high-achieving African American males in a PWI identified parental involvement as a key factor in the success of these students.

In this study, 60 high-achieving African American males participating in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), were included, along with their parents. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program was initially funded by the Meyerhoff Foundation for the purpose of identifying and engaging high-achieving African American males in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses that would prepare them for baccalaureate and postbaccalaureate studies. From data collected in this study, four variables were identified and deemed critical to the success of high-achieving African American collegians. The four variables have a direct link to parental influence and academic success in the education of this seldom studied sub-population of students. The four variables include:

1. Determined and Persistent Academic Engagement
2. Strict Limit Setting and Discipline
3. Love, Support, Communication, and Modeling
4. Community Connectedness and Resources

Parental engagement and expectations were viewed by these scholars as being central to their ability to cope as high-achievers in a predominantly White institution. Themes emanating from the four variables in the Hrabowski, Maton and Grief (1998) study are integrated into the three research questions that guide this study.

#### *Research Questions*

1. How does academic engagement influence the way high-achieving African American undergraduate males experience the culture of a predominantly White institution?
2. How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males openly communicate their expectations to PWI campus administrators?
3. How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males establish campus connectedness and fulfill expectations in the culture of a PWI?

It is known that background experiences and familial interactions will vary—in some cases significantly so— among African American students at a PWI. However, the concern in this study is not so much about prior experiences as it is about what happens to these students, especially high-achievers, after they arrive at the PWI campus. Given the historical background of the PWI (exclusion of racial and ethnic minority students), this concern is especially important and relevant to the study. Examining these concerns will yield more extensive and illuminative insight into the cultural milieu of the PWI.

### *High-Achieving African American Men Defined*

The definition and characteristics of a high-achieving African American male are partly drawn from the work of Harper (2005). High-achieving African American males are defined as those with:

- Cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale
- Minimum of 30 semester credit hours completed
- Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) credits included in the 30 semester hours
- Recognized for active leadership in student organizations
- Active engagement with faculty and administrators in and out of the classroom
- Acknowledged with honors, scholarships and academic achievement awards
- Participants in undergraduate research, internships, study abroad
- Record of volunteerism (mentoring, tutoring, Big Brother, etc.)
- No record of judicial sanctions, honor code violations, or other disciplinary action
- Self-identified as an African American male based on record of enrollment

Flowers, Zhang, Moore and Flowers (2004) argue that for this understudied subpopulation there has been—and continues to be—a long standing need for more studies. These researchers further contend that, despite their achievements, academically gifted African American students experience problems that interfere with both in-school and out-of-school activities. They suggest, “African American students may experience gifted programs differently from other students...which may result in slightly different academic and social outcomes” (p. 39).

Central to any sociocultural study about African Americans, or subpopulations therein, is to know how their lives are impacted by factors such as educational inequity, limited educational

access, economic disparities, sociopolitical status, and peer influence, interactions with educators, family, community and judicial experiences. In this dissertation, using a framework of cultural theory, I examine the factors in a predominantly White institution that challenge high-achieving African American undergraduate males.

Academic, cultural, social, familial, economic, religious, and peer interactions are pivotal elements that provide a lens through which to view the highly storied lives of high-achieving African American male collegians. Chang (2001) maintains that a campus environment with diverse student enrollment enhances positive educational experiences that benefit both the students and the institution. He further suggests that to realize these benefits, campus practitioners must be knowledgeable of the different perspectives that students bring to the campus.

Rhee (2008) argues that despite years of research and institutional intervention, many students that enroll in college do not persist to graduation. Moreover, many of the students that do not persist often leave the campus feeling that the institution did not provide a supportive environment. Extant literature reveals that in many public predominantly White institutions, African American men frequently experience not only a non-supportive environment, but also a racially hostile environment (Astin, 1968; Cabrera et al., 1999; Chang, 2000; Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Ford & Whiting, 2008; Harper, 2005, 2009; Hebert, 2002; Kuh et al., 2005; Rhee, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Sedlacek, 1987; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003).

Predominantly White institutions that lack an understanding of the unique characteristics of high-achieving African American men risk fostering environments where these students feel marginalized, isolated and alienated (Cuyjet & Associates, 2006). High-achieving African American men at predominantly White institutions experience a continuum of mostly negative

encounters throughout their collegiate experience (Grantham, 2004). According to Thompson and Fretz (1991), African American students attending such institutions experience difficulty developing connectedness, feel isolated, perceive greater levels of racial tension, and are less satisfied with the institution than White students on the same campus.

Literature reflecting the cultural experiences of high-achieving African American males at predominantly White institutions is limited. Nevertheless, available research suggests that in predominantly White campus cultures where racial intolerance is experienced, students of color develop psychological and sociocultural stressors that negatively impact academic performance and over-all adjustment (Cabrera et al., 1999). Despite these challenges, many high-achieving African American men find ways to cope, persist, and “beat the odds.”

#### *Purpose of Dissertation*

This study is designed to examine the cultural factors in a predominantly White institution that challenge high-achieving African American undergraduate males. Factors such as education, socioeconomic status, family and faith, social capital, student/faculty interactions and student engagement in campus activities and organizations will be examined to determine how these facets of campus life provide meaningful opportunities for the sociocultural inclusion of high-achieving African American males.

Many studies have focused on African American men as a monolithic group (Harper & Nichols, 2008). These studies have mostly examined the negative characteristics of the general population of African American men. These negative characteristics are defined by Mizell (1999) along with Ford, Harris, Tyson and Trotman (2000) as “deficit research models.” Deficit research models identify negative social, economic, and academic preparation as factors that

place African American men at high risk for failure in school and in many other aspects of their lives.

African American men are also most at risk for social, economic and academic exclusion, whether self-selected, or institutionally imposed. Harper (2006) has conducted several studies with a focus on high-achieving African American males in higher education. Based on his findings, Harper concludes that among all racial and ethnic groups, and across gender groups, African American males have the worst college completion rate.

Studying the underlying integrative experiences of high-achieving African American males in the culture of the PWI will help to identify factors that challenge them. Examining interactions between student peers, and other members of the campus community, will serve as underpinning for this qualitative case study. Merriam (1998) maintains that a key philosophical assumption of qualitative research is how reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (p. 6).

The core of this study is to examine that reality for high-achieving African American males attending a predominantly White institution. This examination will yield opportunities to hear, through student voices, views on the cognitive and non-cognitive factors that influence their decisions to persist in the culture of a PWI. A number of researchers argue that matters of race in higher education have been an agenda of unresolved issues (Altbach et al., 2002; Cuyjet & Associates, 2006; Davis, 1994; Gordon, Gordon & Nembrand, 1994). On predominantly White campuses, variations of these unresolved issues may include cultural insensitivity, limited racially diverse interactions, and beliefs emanating from racial stereotypes, a Eurocentric legacy of dominance, power and privilege—along with narrow pedagogy.

Access to college, the inclusiveness of pedagogy, institutional support, and persistence to graduation are highly significant factors relevant to the success of high-achieving African American males attending PWIs. My goal in this dissertation is to examine— through the perspective of high-achieving African American men— how they negotiate cultural challenges in a PWI where the climate is frequently perceived to be hostile and unwelcoming.

This dissertation is based in the longstanding tradition of research on student experience in higher education. Kezar (1999) cogently argues, “A key pattern in the research on collegiate environmental factors is that there is no significant difference between students of color and Caucasians in terms of the positive benefits of the collegiate environment” (p. 26). Race notwithstanding, students in general thrive when they actively participate in the activities and organizations of the institution, have positive formal and informal interactions with members of the faculty, hold positions of leadership, and feel a kinship or connectedness to the campus.

In a culture where success is often measured by educational attainment, African American males are significantly underrepresented. Harper, (2005) asserts that the stories of high-achieving African American males are rarely told:

It is incumbent on faculty, staff, and administrators to identify high-achieving African American men on their campus— even if there are only a few— in order to understand the motivation behind their leadership involvement and active engagement, which will offer clues for appealing to other African American male students. (p. 15).

Griffin (2006) pondered the importance of knowing why, in spite of barriers to their success, African American male high-achieving students continue to strive for excellence.

### *Race and Gender Stratification*

Throughout the country, African American males face a looming crisis. The crisis results mostly from long-standing race and gender stratifications. For many African American male students, these stratifications begin in preschool and kindergarten (Ford, 1995). From this point

forward in their educational experiences, racial and gender stratifications often establish the genesis for dispiriting educational outcomes for male African American students.

As a group, African American males rarely experience mobility between social, economic and educational strata. Ogbu (1994) argued that cultural frame of reference (also identified as cultural inversion) pushes minority students in directions that are oppositional to majority group student experiences. Extending this thought, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) suggested that high-achieving African American students have social, intellectual, psychological, and cultural engagement needs that differ from majority race students.

According to Fries-Britt (2000), “High-achieving black college students face the often daunting task of blending their academic interest and racial affiliation into their sense of self” (p. 55). Sedlacek (1987) further suggests, “In addition to the usual school pressures, a Black student must typically handle cultural biases and learn how to bridge his or her Black culture with the prevailing one at the White university” (p. 539). Exploring nuances in campus culture that impact challenges among high-achieving African American males is essential to averting growing problems of high attrition within this student population.

If institutions of higher education are to be successful in educating an increasingly diverse student population, it is imperative that these institutions ensure that campus environments are welcoming (Astin, 1998; Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Brit-Fries, 1998; Cabrera et al., 1999; Cuyjet, 1997; Fleming, 2002; Harper, 2005; Hurtado, 2006; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella, et al, 1987; Tinto, 1998). The importance for institutions of the future to be truly committed to the significance that diversity brings to the higher education experience is emphasized by Chang (2002).



To achieve the outcome that Chang recommends, the scope of diversity initiatives in the academy must be less numbers driven, and more encompassing of ideologies and values that dignify and elevate human interactions. Harper and Nichols (2008) recommend that more studies be conducted to further examine the experiences of African American students within selected institutional contexts. These researchers also suggest that more within group gender specific research is needed. Examining within group differences among African American male collegians dismisses the monolithic concept. Purportedly, studies of this type will yield data essential to building collegiate communities where excellence is not bound by gender, race or socioeconomic status.

### *The Role of Culture and Culture Defined*

Culture plays an important role in how individuals experience the world around them. For the purpose of this dissertation, I define culture as particularistic beliefs, traditions, artifacts and subtle practices, common to a race, ethnic group, organization or an institution. Definitions of culture are extensive, elusive, and according to Schein (1999) exist at different levels. The frame of reference of an individual often influences views and perceptions of what culture is.

Schein maintains that cultural levels range from highly visible artifacts (the level that is easily observable) to tacit assumptions or beliefs (less easily observable). In colleges and universities, the easily observable levels of culture (artifacts) only provide images of the organization. At this level, the observer can only surmise the culture of the organization based on visual cues.

Schein (1999) also maintains that espoused values are central elements in the second level of culture. At this level the observer is less able to easily discern from observation just what the organization is, or represents. For example, in the case of a predominantly White

institution, a newly enrolled high-achieving African American man may have been told that the institution values diversity and multiculturalism. The student may also have been told that these espoused values are traditional, longstanding and rigorously central to the practices of the institution.

However, over the course of time, the high-achieving African American man may become aware that actions and behaviors at the PWI are inconsistent with spoken and written portrayals. The valuing of diversity and multiculturalism is then called into question by these students. The realization of this incongruous condition represents a crucial point of decision for many high-achieving African American men. According to Richardson and Skinner (1996):

Minority students experience frustration when they are recruited by institutions on the strength of previous achievements and cultural affiliations and then expected to behave like Anglo students with whom they may have little in common. Their frustration deepens as differences in preparation and learning preference translate into often insurmountable barriers to graduation (p. 11).

Schein (1999) asserted that it is at this point that the individual experiences level three of the culture, those shared tacit assumptions. As members of the institution experience success with “the way things are done” beliefs and values about what works gradually become the behavioral standard. Over-time these beliefs and values “become tacit assumptions about the nature of the world and how to succeed in it” (p. 19).

At this point it becomes important for high-achieving African American males to review and attempt to understand the historical context of the PWI. Doing so may lessen feelings of dissonance experienced by these men. For example, throughout the existence of the institution, how have traditional beliefs, espoused values and tacit assumptions been defined and maintained? Schein (1999) further iterated that:

The multilevel concept of culture makes it clear that culture is a complex concept that must be analyzed at every level before it can be understood. The biggest risk in working with culture is to over-simplify it and miss several basic facets that matter. (p. 25)

Adding complexity to their experiences, high-achieving African American males— in their efforts to understand and connect to the culture of a PWI— encounter behaviors, practices and rhetoric that do not reflect their own sense of identity and culture. To address this void, Tierney (1988) presented a framework to help colleges and universities address a variety of cultural problems.

In this framework, Tierney disclaimed that simple adaptations of organizational cultural models will be the longed for panacea in higher education. Tierney does suggest that there are lessons from these models that will potentially benefit practitioners in postsecondary institutions. Tierney pointed out that institutions of higher education are intertwined through “cultural webs.”

He further iterates that few administrators fully understand the significant role that culture plays in the everyday life of the organization. The consequence of not understanding the impact that culture has on the management of the institution often results in reactive crisis management. The consequences of cultural ignorance are costly for higher education institutions.

These citadels of learning cannot expect that a status quo position will hold back the “tsunami like” forces of societal changes. Key among these changes is the shift in the demographic makeup of faculty, administrator, and student populations. Predominantly White public institutions have been immersed in these shifts since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* United States Supreme Court decision. In practice, *Brown v. Board of Education* was a legal decision that constitutionally ended “separate but equal” practices in American public

education. Fifty-five years since that epic Supreme Court decision, American public institutions of higher education continue to struggle with issues of cultural and racial plurality.

Kezar (1999) contends that “the strength of an institution is its diversity and pluralism” (p. 25). In recent years a number of researchers, including Davis (1994), intimated that factors in the background of students in general, and particularly African American males, make it necessary for higher education institutions to know more and do more to support the sociocultural needs of African American males attending PWIs. Rankin and Reason (2005) informed, “Qualitative research into the experiences of students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) reinforces the importance of campus climate” (p. 47).

#### *Research Rationale*

The remarkably static postsecondary participation rate (4.3 percent) for African American men in the 18 to 24 year age range from 1976 to 2002 reflects the severity of the problem (Harper, 2005). Expanding these data, Harper maintained “two-thirds of all African American males who begin college never finish...But what about those who beat the odds, make the most of college, and achieve in multiple ways inside and outside of the classroom? Who are they and what can they teach us?” (p. 8).

Majority group expectations and the goals of high-achieving African American males are often separated by a great divide. The expectations of many majority members in the population are typically rooted in stereotypical notions about African American men (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Academic success on the part of high-achieving African American males is antithetical to stereotypical beliefs often held by many members of the majority population.

According to Schwartz and Washington (2002), “The retention of African American students, particularly African American men remains an understudied and perplexing problem”

(p. 354). Deficit behavioral issues and lack of motivation to achieve are the usual foci of research about African American males. Contrastingly, the focus of this study is to identify factors that motivate high-achieving African American males to achieve academic excellence and attain their educational goals (Griffin, 2006).

### *Gifted and Talented Students*

Ford (1995) maintained, “Abundant data suggest that gifted programs are the most segregated educational programs in the United States” (p.52). Ford argued that the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1988 is the single nationally legislated program that provides financial assistance (grants) to schools and educational agencies. The grants help to first identify gifted students. Secondly, the grants help to develop, implement, and maintain high quality gifted educational programs. These grant funded programs advance educational opportunities to gifted students without regard to race, gender or other exclusionary practices. Ford has been a stalwart supporter of education programs for gifted students. It is her contention that while the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1988 has opened opportunities for many African American students, the number of talented and gifted African American students not being served by this or any other program for the exceptionally talented remains far too high.

Expanding the knowledge base relevant to high-achieving African American males and their enrollment in a predominantly White institution of higher education is important to many sectors of society. Using data from formal studies, educators will be better informed and prepared to facilitate the educational needs of high-achieving African American males. Through the use of these data, practitioners will be equipped with techniques and strategies applicable to the sociocultural needs of this often misunderstood subpopulation of students.

Society as a whole benefits by having more highly educated African American males in the workforce, engaged in family life, and serving as participants in community initiatives. Their participation is important to all strata of life in the nation, and the world at large. Gerald and Haycock (2006) call attention to the slight gain realized in the enrollment of Black, Latino and Native American students in flagship institutions between 1992 and 2004. The gains, however, strikingly underrepresent the pool of high school graduates that are enrolling in postsecondary institutions.

These researchers suggested, “The 50 flagship universities now look less and less like America — and more like [gated communities] of higher education” (2006, p. 7). High-achieving African American males attending PWIs has garnered attention from researchers only in recent years. Parker and Flowers (2003) noted, “In recent years, researchers have begun to explore African American student development by studying three interrelated themes: academic performance, campus connectedness, and racial identity” (p. 180).

While empirical evidence about high-achieving African American male collegians is sparse, some researchers (Schwartz & Washington, 2002) suggest that the campus climate does little to support their success. As an example, Freeman (1997) concluded that many African American men with highly impressive academic ability leave the campus before graduation.

Flowers, et al. (2004) argued that:

Despite the contributions that the research literature on African American students in gifted programs has made to enhance our understanding of these and related issues, it is clear that very few studies, if any, have been conducted to specifically examine African American students’ perceptions regarding how to improve these gifted programs (p. 42).

### *Research Significance*

This study examines factors in the campus culture that influence the challenges of academically high-achieving African American men attending a predominantly White public

institution. Basing the framework of this study in institutional culture provides a backdrop to explore interracial congruence and incongruence. Further, a cultural framework provides a view of the academy from the perspective of students who live the experience.

Raw racism, harsh stereotypes, and unmitigated racial slurs are too frequently hurled into the lives of students of color attending predominantly White institutions (Hurtado, 1992, 1994; Chang, 2000). The incidents range from subtle to overt attempts to marginalize and demean students of color. Examples of these incidents include a “Halloween in the Hood” party sponsored by members of the Sigma Chi fraternity at Johns Hopkins University that featured among its decorations a plastic skeleton dressed in pirate garb hanging from a rope noose. Another Halloween party at Trinity College in Connecticut featured offensive costumes and two racial slurs that were scrawled on Whiteboards outside of student rooms. At Texas A & M University, three students created a racist video and posted it on *You Tube*. These incidents were reported by Redden (2006).

Regardless of the intent, emotional scarring from these incidents is no less painful or long-lasting. Davis (1998) underscored this point and noted, “One of the greatest challenges for American higher education is to develop a healthy campus climate where opportunities for learning include cultural appreciation and reciprocity among people of diverse backgrounds” (p. 72). Carter (2006) argued:

Race, ethnicity, culture, and identity; we can almost guarantee that these four social factors play a role in the academic well-being of all students—complexly so. Yet verifiable explanations for why and how they matter continue to elude social science researchers and educators. Racial and ethnic identities...are neither static nor one dimensional; and their meanings, as expressed in schools, neighborhoods, peer groups, and families, vary across time, space, and region. (p. 304).

### *The Role of Culture in the Student Experience*

Campus culture is a key factor in the adjustment and challenges of students in higher education. Studies relevant to postsecondary campus culture have been well documented over the past three decades. For example, Braxton, 2000; Kuh, 2001-2002; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; and Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1997 all considered factors that influence the academic and social experiences of college students.

Understanding the dynamics of race and social interactions in the culture of predominantly White institutions are essential to this study. According to Rankin and Reason (2005) extant literature establishes that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the culture of the institution and student learning outcomes. During the course of their matriculation, students experience a multitude of social and institutional elements in the culture of the college campus. Racial and ethnic diversity are perhaps the most perplexing and challenging cultural elements that students encounter during their collegiate years. The campus environment has significant influence on student experiences, and is complex and widespread in nature (Astin, 1968; Jackson and Moore, 2008; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

Integrating into the campus culture of a PWI is typically an uncomplicated process for majority race students. In part, this situation exists because majority race students— through legacy— have knowledge of the campus culture, including “artifacts (Visible organizational structures and processes), Espoused values (Strategies, goals, philosophies), and Basic Underlying Assumptions (“Unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings” (Schein, 1999, p. 16). On the other hand, students of color—most often the more recent members of the campus culture—are disadvantaged by not having legacy knowledge of



the campus “artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions” as described by Schein.

Many students of color often find it difficult to establish connectedness, “fit,” and “integration” in the campus climate of a PWI. Astin, 1968; Tinto, 1993; Pike and Kuh 2006 suggests that acculturation or connectedness to the PWI campus is dependent not only on the diversity background of students, but is importantly dependent on the commitment of campus administrators to assure that conditions needed for an inclusive and welcoming climate are present for all members of the campus enterprise.

Morgan (1986, p. 71) asserted, “Rarely is there a singular institutional culture.” Relying on this assertion, one may conclude that institutional culture cannot be generalized in a context that is specific to one campus. Viewing campus change through a cultural lens, Kezar & Eckel (2002) noted that when change strategies run counter to campus cultural norms the change results desired will not likely be achieved. Kezar and Eckel further maintained that “context” and “nuance” are crucial elements in developing campus change strategies. More importantly, change strategies that work well at one institution may not result in the same or similar outcomes for a different institution.

In this study, I define culture as particularistic beliefs, traditions, artifacts, and subtle practices common to a race, ethnic group, organization or an institution. (Geertz, 2000; Schein, 1999; Tierney, 1988, 1993). This view of culture is reflected in Schein’s typology, which highlights culture as evident through artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (p. 20). Tierney (1988) asserted that cultural influences are prevalent throughout multiple levels of an institution. Some levels are internal to the campus and some levels are external to the campus. Further, these cultural influences may exist at a system or state level and can vary

greatly. Tierney makes the point that institutional concerns should not be about cultural conflicts, but about ways to develop shared goals within the culture.

According to Kuh (2001-2002), student challenges in a campus culture/climate are contingent on a number of social, cognitive, and non-cognitive factors. These factors either singularly, or in combination, influence student decisions to either remain in the environment, or leave the campus prior to attaining a degree. Kuh (2001) further asserts that African American students enrolled in a PWI have a heightened consciousness of their minority status. Having this heightened consciousness of one's minority status creates a constancy of self protection in the culture of dominant groups, organizations and systems.

Campus culture underpins social behaviors, and belief systems that either encourage or discourage inclusiveness among multiracial student populations. As a group, high-achieving African American males at a PWI are sometimes viewed as intellectual imposters, or shunned as a matter of sociocultural custom (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Kuh et al. maintained, "What students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college" (2005, p.8).

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have provided a historical overview of issues relevant to educational access for African Americans and established the purpose and rationale for the dissertation. I discussed the significance of culture, defined culture and addressed the lack of empirical data on high-achieving African-American male students. Characteristics associated with high-achieving African American undergraduate men were identified. Additionally, a brief description of the 1998, Hrabowski, Maton and Greif Study of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at The University of Maryland Baltimore County is presented. This study closely parallels my interest in examining

cultural challenges of high-achieving African American undergraduate men at a PWI. This chapter was prefaced with the following quote by Zenrinkushu: “If you wish to know the road up the mountain, you must ask the man who goes back and forth on it.” In this dissertation, I will seek from African American high-achieving undergraduate men their views of how cultural challenges are negotiated at a PWI. In the purest sense, the students in this study know “the road up the mountain.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Review of the Literature*

Students are likely to persist when they feel connected to, and supported by, the institution in which they are enrolled. When students feel connected to the general culture of the institution they are accorded full institutional membership in cognitive and non-cognitive endeavors. Historically, African American male students have generally not experienced feelings of connectedness in predominantly White institutions (Tinto, 1975, 1987; Astin, 1968; Hurtado, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Davis 1994; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Jones, 2001; Harper, 2009).

Connectedness to campus culture evokes a sense of ownership among institutional participants (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991). Disparities in the way that racial and ethnic groups experience institutional culture are fairly well documented in the literature (Lee, 2002). However, little attention has been given to the way high-achieving African American males negotiate cultural challenges in a PWI.

In this study, institutional culture is envisioned as the scaffolding that is central to examining the campus experiences of high-achieving African American males attending predominantly White institutions. In general, African American students transitioning from high school to the campus of a large PWI encounter pervasive dissonance (Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Some African American male high-achievers are resourceful and find ways to either dismiss or live with the dissonance. All too frequently, however, African American males attending PWIs

experience the culture of the campus in a manner that negatively impacts their pursuit of a baccalaureate degree.

Overlapping spheres of influence relative to school, family, community, church and educational outcomes are interwoven in this chapter (Sanders, 1998). These overlapping spheres include Identity Development, and four key components linked to the *Meyerhoff Scholars Program* that were introduced in chapter one. These components in combination provide comprehensive insight into factors that influence the ability of high-achieving African American undergraduate men to successfully negotiate cultural challenges in a PWI campus environment.

African American male high-achievers are a sub-population within a larger racial minority student group. Researchers have seldom studied African American male high-achievers. The problem as reported by Ford, Harris, Tyson and Trotman (2002) is that very few African American youths are placed in programs for the academically gifted. Harper and Nichols (2008) argue that African American men constitute one of the most stereotyped groups in higher education. These researchers further argue that far too often, African American men are perceived to be homogenous in background and experience. Within group, diversity among African American males is significant (Harper, 2005).

Empirical data relevant to factors that influence the challenges of high-achieving African American males at predominantly White institutions is scant (Antonio, 2001). Knowledge about the psychosocial developmental experiences of African American males may yield insight into factors that mitigate a potentially non-progressive path to college completion at PWIs.

To gain more insight into the experiences of high-achieving African American undergraduate men as a distinct sub-group within a minority population, this literature review will be guided by three research questions:

### *Research Questions*

1. How does academic engagement influence the way high-achieving African American undergraduate males experience the culture of a predominantly White institution?
2. How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males openly communicate their expectations to PWI campus administrators?
3. How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males establish campus connectedness and fulfill expectations in the culture of a PWI?

In this chapter, I review extant literature to better conceptualize diverse characteristics of high-achieving African American male collegians. This chapter is thematically aligned with the four variables identified in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program study conducted at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. In addition to the sections that address identity development, and community support networks, the four interrelated themes include: (1) Family Influence, (2) Faith and Religion, (3) Peer Interactions and (4) Faculty/Staff Interactions. The theoretical relevance of this study is rooted in cultural theory. As demonstrated in the study of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, high-achieving African American male collegians have a strong bond with their parents. Additionally, the parents of this group of students are appropriately engaged in the academic lives of their sons without being overly intrusive.

### *Identity Development*

In this section of chapter two, I examine psychosocial development among young African American men. Particular attention is given to the identity development of high-achieving African American male collegians and college challenges. Traditionally, students enter their first year of college at age eighteen. According to Fries-Britt (2002), students at this stage develop perceptions of self and group affiliation identity. Identity development is a product of multifaceted experiences that occur throughout the course of life. However, late adolescence and

young adulthood are considered to be highly impressionistic periods in the lives of young people (Casazza & Silverman, 2000).

Researchers seeking to understand identity development frequently rely on the work of Erikson (1959) and Chickering (1969). In their citation of this work, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) assert:

Psychosocial theories of development fall into two categories. The first group, which deals with overall development, has been dominated by Arthur Chickering's seven vectors model since it first appeared [Chickering, 1969]. The second cluster of psychosocial theories deals specifically with identity formation overall or with specific aspects of identity, such as those relating to gender, race-ethnicity, or sexual orientation. (p. 20)

### *Identity Formation*

One crucial domain of psychosocial development among African American males is racial identity formation. "Researchers increasingly have focused on racial identity, or the ways that individuals view themselves in relation to their group, as a way of understanding how youth interpret and respond to their social, academic and other societal contexts" according to Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, and Zimmerman (2003, p. 1078). Racial identity is but one element, albeit a crucial one, in the developmental stages that adolescents and young adults negotiate as they progress through higher education.

Several approaches to understanding racial identity have emerged in recent decades, including the Model of Nigrescence (Cross, 1971, 1980, 1991 and 1995), People of Color Racial Identity Model (Helms, 1990, 1995) White Racial Identity Model, and the Ethnic Identity Model (Phinney, 1990). These models are commonly structured as stages. For example, the Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS) is comprised of distinct stages: (1) Pre-Encounter, pro-White and anti-Black, defined through self-hatred; and (2) Immersion-Emersion, where immersion is a

complete obsession with Black identity. The emersion aspect of this cluster is anti-White race and culture.

In the final stage, Internalization, the individual acknowledges and values the cultural/racial heritage of non-African Americans, while maintaining a wholesome sense of self-acceptance as an African American (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross & Worrell 2001). Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005, pp. 26-27) describe Helms' six status model as having these stages: (1) Conformity, dominant race identity acceptance, (2) Dissonance, distancing from dominant race, (3) Immersion, seeking non-White racial identity, (4) Emersion, accepting values and beliefs of own race, (5) Internalization, racial attributes distinct within oneself, and (6) Integrated Perception, or positive racial identity within own group.

The three stage model of Ethnic Identity Development by Phinney (1989, 1990) includes an initial stage of Diffusion-Foreclosure. During this stage, individuals are subject to the influence of racial/ethnic attitudes and behaviors to which they are environmentally exposed. Minority adolescents impacted by negative encounters with dominant race members may internalize these behaviors in a manner that jeopardizes positive self-identity development and self-esteem.

Phinney contends that the Diffusion-Foreclosure stage is mostly a period of disinterest in ethnicity. In stage two, Moratorium, adolescents are more responsive to environmental stimuli. It is during this stage that adolescents begin to seek a more defined understanding of their own ethnicity.

Conflicting emotions of anger toward members of the dominant race and guilt for lack of knowledge and connection to one's own ethnic group are common elements in the Moratorium



stage. In stage three, Identity Achievement, individuals exhibit an acceptance of one's own ethnic identity and are able to maintain positive relationships with dissimilar ethnic groups.

### *Developing a Sense of Self*

According to Mercer and Cunningham (2003), "the construction of identity, through self-definition and commitment to this definition, is one of the major tasks faced in adolescence" (p.217). Racial and cultural dissimilarities among student groups at a PWI often create challenges that disarm the self-confidence and self-esteem of high-achieving African American male students. Over time, erosions in self-confidence and self-esteem may intensely magnify self-doubt and feelings of marginality.

A crucial aspect of racial/ethnic identity development is the extent to which adolescents develop a sense of self that does not isolate or alienate them from different race groups. In addition, students' benefit when neither their personal nor academic pursuits are suppressed due to negative stigma, whether real or perceived as real. Awad (2007) asserts that views of racial identity among African American adolescents are "an important variable that may be related to academic achievement" (p. 189).

Academic dimensions of the impact of racial and ethnic identity relevant to student achievement among African Americans are far ranging and highly contentious. The literature is replete with arguments regarding inherent educational disadvantages for students of color, especially African Americans (Chavous, et al., 2003; Cokley, 2002; Gurin, 2007; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Sedlacek, 1999). For example, according to Sedlacek:

An early study by Bradley in 1967 of [Negro] undergraduate students in predominantly White colleges in Tennessee showed that they had not achieved a feeling of belonging. This aspect of self-concept, that of seeing oneself as part of a school, or identified with it, is a common thread running through the literature on Black students' self-concept for several decades (p. 539).

Racial identity theories provide a tool to grasp and better understand individual and group psychosocial development relevant to self perceptions, self-efficacy, and self esteem. “Perhaps no other topic in the multicultural counseling and psychology literature has been as heavily researched with African Americans as that of racial identity” (Cokley, 2002, p. 476).

Researchers are now exploring the development of African American students by studying three interrelated themes: academic performance, campus connectedness and racial identity (Parker & Flowers, 2003). Theorists tend to agree that physiological, sociocultural and psychological phenomena are a common thread within the dynamics of student development and learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, some investigators question whether or not a relationship exists between student academic achievement and racial identity development. It is important to note that within these broad categories, a number of questions are advanced regarding the relationship between student cognition and racial identity development. Parker and Flowers (2003) acknowledge that recent research on racial identity development has been epistemologically useful in the academy.

However, gaps remain in the knowledge base relative to the manner in which racial identity development impacts academic achievement. It is known that environmental factors such as racial isolation, alienation, marginalization and racial stereotyping influence decisions made by some students to either stay in, or flee from an environment perceived as hostile.

Similarly, Parker and Flowers contend that negative environmental factors can have a devastating impact on the college adjustment and ultimate success, or lack thereof for some African American students. “Specifically, research that examines how African American students’ racial identity status impacts their grades in college, which also takes into account that

African American students' sense of belonging on campus may mediate this effect is needed," they note (2003, p. 184).

### *Defining Values*

Pizzolato, Chaudhari, Murrell, Podobnik, and Schaffer (2008) call attention to the many perplexities and uncertainties that students of color experience in predominantly White campus settings. It is during this period in their lives that students of color are defining values, questioning their status as an ethnic minority member, and exploring within race and external race support systems. Cogently, these researchers caution observers and practitioners to not view ethnicity and race as synonymous with academic underachievement or risk. These students may simply be in a complex exploratory period that has to be resolved over time and maturation.

High-achieving African American males attending PWIs face complex challenges relevant to engaging in intellectual pursuits and social relationships that help establish connectedness to the campus. Cokley (1999) posits that traditional psychosocial theories have not provided empirical insight into racial identity and psychosocial development with salience to African American students. Further confounding the notion of identity development are symbolic and actual encounters of racial stereotypes that can and do negatively impact intellectual identity (Steele, 1997, (1999)).

According to Moore (2001) aside from race and gender, students at PWIs are generally the same. "What distinguish African American students from their Caucasian counterparts are the added burdens of racism, discrimination, and negative stereotypes" (p. 77). When faced with relentlessly hostile cultural challenges, African American students attending PWIs seldom have recourse against these vitriolic messages.

Messages of degradation intended to rob and negate one's spirit of humanity, and strip away self-esteem. Moore goes on to state that: "These oppressive forces constantly convey messages of intellectual incompetence, which at times have debilitating effects on the academic identity and achievement of African American students" (p. 77).

The extent to which African American identity development positively impacts cognitive and intellectual functioning has not been empirically confirmed. However, it is maintained by some researchers (Sedlacek, 1987; Smith, 1981; Parker & Flowers, 2003) that racial identity development directly impacts self-esteem. Self-esteem impacts the manner in which some African American students view themselves in relationship to their White counterparts. The impact of self-esteem on African American student achievement has often been examined from a deficit perspective (Carter, 2006). Mizell (1999) argues that:

To date, most research has provided a deficit model regarding the outcomes of African Americans in general, and African American males, specifically... many traditional models [Blau and Duncan, 1967; Bluestone, 1970; Kohn, 1969; Moynihan, 1965] explain negative adult outcomes for African Americans as vestiges of chronic poverty...such deficit models do little to tell us how African Americans have and continue to negotiate successfully their lives despite inequality and discrimination (p. 211).

Harper (2004) asserts that a commonality within identity development research for 18 to 24 year old African American males is the influence of "conflict-free" identity. According to Harper, "conflict-free" identity formations have a positive impact on masculine self-concept among African American males. However, lacking a sense of belonging in the culture of the PWI may prolong adjusting to the campus culture and may ultimately lead to attrition (Davis, 1994).

### *Stereotype Threat*

Social interactions, the perceptions of individuals and groups form a composite concept of how people view the world in which they live. These factors have implications for the way

students' perform in school and the way that people generally experience life. Gaps in educational achievement between racial and ethnic minority students have been issues of concern among parents and educators for many decades (Ogbu, 1986; Sanders, 1998; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Steele, 1997). Sociocultural barriers that inhibit and suppress academic performance and other life functions impact individuals and groups differentially.

According to Steele (1997) social expectations (assumptions/stereotypes) formed by dominant race members affect African Americans as a racial group and women as a gender group. Steele writes:

The theory assumes that sustained school success requires identification with school and its subdomains; that societal pressures on these groups (e.g., economic disadvantage, gender roles) can frustrate this identification; and that in school domains where these groups are negatively stereotyped, those who have become domain identified face the further barrier of stereotype threat, the threat that others' judgments or their own actions will negatively stereotype them in the domain. (p. 613)

A single phenomenon cannot be attributed to the array of behaviors and perceptions of behavior relative to school performance gaps between racial groups or differential performance by females in specific academic disciplines. In regard to gaps in the school performance of some African American students, multiple assertions about causality have been advanced (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002; Link & Phelan, 2001; Sanders, 1998).

The assertions most frequently advanced to explain differential academic performance between African American students and their Caucasian peers include (1) Limited intellectual abilities: a cognitive deficit and (2) Unbalanced socioeconomic status: a non-cognitive outcome .

Steele (1997) calls attention to the inconsistency in the applicability of socioeconomic differentials to explain academic performance gaps based on either race or gender. Racial and gender stereotypes become commonplace after being sustained over long periods of time. In fact

they become so commonplace that targeted individuals and groups have been known to give them credence. Steele points to the research of Howard and Hammonds (1985) who argue that when stereotypes about the intellectual inferiority of African Americans pervade the environment for lengthy periods; “they can intimidate Black students; become internalized by them and in turn lead to a low sense of self-efficacy, demotivation, and underperformance in school” (p. 617).

Steele further asserts that stereotype threat is situational and has relevance to individuals and groups that self-define themselves for the domain of a given stereotype. Stereotype threat is potentially most impactful on high-achieving African American students. Steele offers this rationale for the impact:

This means that stereotype threat should have its greatest effect on the better, more confident students in stereotyped groups, those who have not internalized the group stereotype to the point of doubting their own ability and have thus remained identified with the domain—those who are in the academic vanguard of their group. (p. 617)

Link and Phelan (2001) write that Goffman (1963) is credited with inspiring a profusion of research relative to stereotype threat and the effect of stigma. According to Link and Phelan, term definition in the early stages of research in this area was problematic. However, these authors maintain that the definition developed by Goffman is the one most often cited by researchers from varying disciplines. Link and Phelan (2001, p. 364) state: “When stigma is explicitly defined, many authors quote the Goffman definition of stigma as an [attribute that is deeply discrediting] and that reduces the bearer [from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one] (Goffman 1963, p. 3). The core of stereotype threat is that people—usually in dominant cultural groups— establish categories of beliefs about individuals and groups and link these categories to stereotyped beliefs. According to Lewis, Chester and Forman (2000):

Much of the recent literature on higher education agrees that racial problems exist on the nation's college campuses. Some articulate the problem as a racial crisis [Altbach and Lomotey, 1991; Chester and Crowfoot, 1991]. How students of color feel about their personal encounters with racism—about having racially coded characteristics ascribed to them, of being excluded from mainstream activities and struggling with having self-perceptions that do not match the expectations of the majority group and others, and so forth—provides critical insights to the discussion (pp. 1-2).

Stereotype threat is a reality for women as a gender group and for minorities as a racial group. The threats are pervasive and can be debilitating. Steele (1997) suggests that stereotype threat is so powerful that even persons who are cognitively aware that the descriptor is not applicable to them will in given situations respond to the characterization. For example, when an African American male steps into an elevator and the only other person in the elevator is a Caucasian female, the African American male who has no intent to harm the White female, internally assumes that she feels threatened by his presence. The African American male is responding to long-term social and psychological stereotype threat. High-achieving African American undergraduate males in a PWI often experience similar situations of stereotype threat, both in the classroom and in the general environment of the PWI (Aronson, 2004; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Link & Phelan, 2001).

### *Culture and Campus Connectedness*

Over the years a number of researchers have argued that students who become actively engaged in campus life are more likely to persist (Astin, 1984; Braxton, 2000; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzi, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987, and 1993). Researchers also contend that the culture of a given campus influence students' decisions to persist or leave the institution. According to Chang (2000) the essence of campus culture is often embedded in ideologies; ideologies that are racially and ethnically disparate.

More often than not, these factors prove to be a complex labyrinth of social, psychological and intellectual pathways requiring highly skilled individual and interpersonal negotiations. According to Kezar and Eckel (2002), campus culture is highly nuanced. Customs, traditions, practices, values and artifacts distinguish and particularize institutional identity. As traditionally all White institutions have become more racially diverse, the acculturation of ethnic minorities (particularly, African American males) into the dominant culture has been problematic.

Students transitioning to college face a number of cognitive, social, and interpersonal developmental changes in their lives. Many aspects of the transition to college are socially, culturally and intellectually daunting for some African American male high-achievers. In such environments high-achieving African American males often resort to within group coping strategies (Scott, 2003; Porter & Washington, 1993; Harper 2004, 2005). These coping strategies act as a buffer between social isolation, alienation and loneliness.

African American males experience the culture of a PWI in ways that are contextually different from other racial minority and gender groups (Davis, 1994). A primary basis for the contextual difference is the manner in which dominant race students, faculty and staff view African American males. According to Davis (1994), this subpopulation of students often face two distinct levels of scrutiny by majority group members: level one is linked purely to race and gender, and level two is linked to race, gender and academic achievement.

Griffin (2006) points out that “although the literature discusses barriers that Black high-achievers face and the role that social support plays in mitigating the impact of these factors, there is less understanding of what pushes these students to continue to strive for academic excellence and pursue their goals despite these challenges” (p. 385). Regardless of proven levels



of academic achievement, social and racial stereotypes remain prevalent and influential in the way African American males are perceived (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Misguided assumptions from dominant group members (students, faculty and staff) create personal and intergroup uncertainties for this population. These uncertainties occur while many African American male collegians are still grappling with identity development. These environmentally induced uncertainties that often grow out of racism can potentially erode self-esteem and derail the academic achievement and social adjustment of these high-achievers.

When feelings of marginality and alienation become severe enough to impact self-confidence and self-esteem, high-achieving African American males may begin to question why they have placed themselves in the environment of the PWI. At best these students question their belongingness, and at worst they simply disengage and walk away (Harper, 2005; Scott, 2003; Steele, 1997).

Dominant race campus constituents tend to expect students of color to assimilate into the majority Eurocentric culture, giving little to no attention to minority group cultural identities, their values, interests and aspirations. “While the extant literature sheds light on several important aspects of the black college experience, conspicuously absent are the voices of black students themselves” observe Davis, et al., (2004, p. 422). These students are subject to the same negative racial and gender stressors as their non-high-achieving counterparts.

Bonner and Bailey (2006) shed light on little known positive environmental experiences that small groups of African American males experience at PWIs. These researchers contend that specific factors play a pivotal role in the success of this student group. These specific factors include: “peer group influence, family influence and support, faculty relationships, identity development and self perception, and institutional environment” (p. 25).

Hrabowski, Maton and Greif (1998) found that high-achieving African American males develop bonds with parents that have positive impact on their collegiate life. Parental and family influence play a central role, not only in character development, but in other developmental areas important to being a productive, informed and contributing member of society in general. In their book, *Beating The Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males*, these authors maintain that: “A major purpose of the book is to identify strategies that parents, educators, and other professionals may wish to consider as they work with young males in general and seek to understand more about the success of young African American males” (p. 7).

### *Family Influence*

A review of the literature reveals that few empirical studies have been conducted depicting the role and significance of family in the lives of high-achieving African American males attending predominantly White institutions. However, there is a fairly robust body of literature that speaks to familial relationships of college students in general, but only a few address relationships between families and students of color (Herndon and Hirt, 2004, p. 489). Herndon (2003) also contends that most studies about African American college students and their families tend to be aligned with Caucasian American populations.

Post-emancipation African American families (nuclear, extended and fictive) have long associated education with social mobility and economic stability. Tierney and Venegas (2006) suggest that African American family structures differ from the structure of Euro-American families. Euro-American family structures tend to include members with direct biological lineage. Often this includes parents and children independently reliant on their own educational, social and economic resources.

Further, Tierney and Venegas (2006) suggest that African American family structure may include core biological members (mother, father and children) and members that extend beyond this core. For example, the notion of “fictive kin” as described by Hirt and Herndon (2004) likely has roots that extend to the period prior to emancipation from slavery. According to Herndon, “fictive kin” may include neighbors, church members, and friends. Extended family members, such as aunts, uncles and grandparents have traditionally played pivotal roles in sustaining the African American family.

A commonality in the literature about the African American family is the framework of a deficit model. Moynihan (1965) penned perhaps the most noted deficit model thesis in which he assailed the dysfunctional status of the African American family. Giving little attention to historical deprivations beyond their control, Moynihan authoritatively asserts that the African American demands for civil rights were achieved in one miraculous decade between 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education) and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Moynihan goes on to express—with reckless confidence—his belief that all the travails of the African American citizen resulted from a “crumbling” and “pathological” family structure. Moynihan audaciously raised the ire of many by stating:

The harsh fact is that as a group, at the present time, in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of life, they are not equal to most of those groups with which they will be competing. Individually, Negro Americans reach the highest peaks of achievement. But collectively, in the spectrum of American ethnic and religious and regional groups, where some get plenty and some get none, where some send eighty percent of their children to college and others pull them out of school at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Negroes are among the weakest...The fundamental problem, in which this is most clearly the case, is that of the family structure (1965, p. 1).

Other researchers (Bauman, 1998; Gutman & Midgley, 1999) argue that African American family structure—nuclear or otherwise— is not the primary factor that impedes

academic participation of African American youth. These researchers assert that a number of social structures and “environmental variables” negatively impact the sustained academic engagement of many African American youths. According to Allen (1968), “Since achievement orientation is a multidimensional construct which results from a multiplicity of causes, it makes little sense to assign Black families—or any families for that matter—total responsibility for the achievement attitudes and behaviors of their members (pp. 241-242). Herndon and Hirt (2004) argue that research confirms that families play a significant role during the precollege years in motivating African American students to aspire to enroll in college education. Bonner and Bailey (2006) attest that family support to African American males in college is particularly relevant to their psychosocial development, academic success and their racial identity.

Moreover, these researchers suggest that in order for families to play a central role in the lives of African American male college students, collegiate institutions must create conditions that encourage their participation. According to Williams, Davis, Cribbs, Saunders and Williams (2002), African American students who have a network of support from peers and family members are influenced by “direct teaching or observation” (p. 413). Fries-Britt (1997) also contends that familial engagement in the academic life of students at all levels is known to influence academic achievement. This is particularly the case for students who come from households where one or both parents have a college degree (Kean-Davis, 2005).

Hrabowski, Maton and Greif (1998) argue that family structure is a significant entity in the academic, social, and identity development of gifted African American male students. “Familial support structures for African American male college students develop during their pre-collegiate matriculation and these structures are carried forth into their postsecondary

experiences” (p. 29). The fabric of the African American family is a patchwork of multifaceted support structures and a diverse array of educational achievements.

Having the ability to negotiate social, political and economic systems and structures are the tools that African American parents want for their children. Often these achievements are realized from multiple support systems. Since “emancipation” from slavery the mantra of many African American families has been the belief that education is the bedrock upon which to build a life of literacy, economic stability and social justice. Referencing the extensive research of Coleman (1961), Tierney and Venegas (2006) assert that tenets of that research have continued to hold true. African American student college going rates are largely contingent on “parents’ level of education, access to adequate information, access to adequate preparation, mentoring and good counseling” (p. 1688).

### *Social Capital*

Portes (1998) contends “The concept of social capital has become one of the most popular exports from sociological theory into everyday language” (p. 2). Bourdieu (1977) and Coleman (1988) portray social capital as equivalent to nonmonetary value from which individuals, communities and even nations accrue negotiable benefits. Social capital as purported by Portes is a non-monetary entity of power and influence. In recent years researchers (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999; Putnam, 1995) have expanded the body of literature relevant to the valuation of social capital among citizens of color and their educational pursuits. Researchers suggest that social capital is highly stratified and differentially benefits groups based on class, socioeconomic status, levels of education, and racial affiliation. In pluralistic organizations such as postsecondary institutions, minority students, particularly African Americans, vie for prestige and power based on perceived social capital.

Coleman (1988) proclaims that social capital is not a single entity, but a variety of entities. Collectively, the possession of these entities positions individuals and groups for more positive interactions. Coleman further asserts that these positive interactions often result in higher educational achievement, better quality of life and economic stability. Students who perceive themselves as having little to no social capital often feel marginalized. Additionally, these students tend to disengage from activities known to promote group and institutional affiliation. Hence, the valuation of social capital is generally theorized to be negligible for ethnic minorities, especially African American males (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Kao (2004) affirms that researchers do associate social capital with socioeconomic status. There is a general view that students from ethnic minority backgrounds and recent immigrants to the United States have low socioeconomic status and therefore less social capital (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). The hinge that connects the core of social capital is embedded in the stratification of individuals and groups. Structures and lines of demarcation as defined by the ruling class are used to ensure that these stratifications are maintained. Lareau and Horvat (1999) state that:

One of Bourdieu's major insights on educational inequality is that students with more valuable social and cultural capital fare better in school than do their otherwise-comparable peers with less valuable social and cultural capital. The social reproduction perspective has proved especially useful in attempts to gain a better understanding of how race and class influence the transmission of educational inequality (p. 37).

The involvement of parents in promoting the educational achievement of their children is as diverse among African American families as with any other racial or ethnic group (Yan, 1999). Yan asserts that several factors are thought to contribute to the educational attainment of students; these factors include ethnicity, socioeconomic status and family structure. Findings from a study conducted by Yan (1999) supports the notion of "parental involvement in the

academic success of African American students and challenges the stereotype of traditional Black-White comparisons” (p.18).

The relevancy of research regarding the role and structure of family units and how they impact the educational outcome of students is central to the empiricism that substantiates family relationships and educational attainment. These and other studies form pathways for educators, policymakers and parents to better understand and appropriately respond to students. Empirical studies are especially central to reaching a better understanding of understudied and underrepresented student groups. Particularly important is the need to address the gaping hole relevant to high-achieving African American males. Mandara (2006) suggests that “lack of attention is unfortunate because policy and interventions are more likely to succeed if they target family functioning as opposed to demographic factors” (p.206).

### *Spirituality and Religion*

Religion and spirituality have played varying and significant roles in the African American community for almost four centuries (Herndon & Hirt, (2004); Walker & Dixon, 2002; Sherkat, 2002; Mattis & Jagers, 2001). Calhoun-Brown (1996) stated, “The Black church has traditionally been a power base politically, socially and religiously within the black community” (p. 935).

A fairly robust field of literature documents general religious practices and beliefs within many African American communities—dating back to the days of slavery. However, extant literature provides little empiricism that addresses spirituality, religiosity and academic performance/outcomes of high-achieving African American males. During the past two decades some investigators have begun to address the dearth of data relevant to the influence of spirituality and religion and the ways these beliefs impact general academic performance of

African American students (Bryant, 2007; Kuh & Gonyea, 2005). Underscoring the problem of limited empirical data, Herndon (2003) confirms, “Few studies have viewed spirituality and religious practices in the arena of the academy” (p. 75). The church in this instance is used to universally represent the connection of an individual or group to spiritual and/or religious practices.

Herndon (2003) further maintains that a missing element for many African American males attending PWIs is emotional support. The kind of emotional support that connects African American males to religion and spirituality is not often available at PWIs. Referencing the research of Walker and Dixon (2002), Herndon asserts that African American students at PWIs desire a higher level of spirituality and religiousness than White students at the same campus. This assertion is confirmed by Kuh and Gonyea (2005). Using data from the (2004) National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), these researchers analyzed student responses to items specific to religion and spirituality. The sample included 150,000 first year and senior year students from 461 institutions. Kuh and Gonyea report that:

Students from different racial and ethnic groups vary in their frequency of spirituality-enhancing activities, African Americans leading the pack and White students being less engaged and benefiting less in terms of spirituality. (2005. p. ii)

Walker and Dixon (2002) conducted a study to identify variables with a causal relationship to religiosity, spirituality and academic performance of African Americans attending a PWI. They contend, “Studies of spirituality with college populations have illustrated that spirituality and religious participation facilitate coping and overall college adjustment” (2000, p. 11). Watson (2006) explains that “spirituality and the notion of freedom are tightly intertwined for African Americans” (p. 114).



A review of the limited body of literature indicates that college students do not shift away from their religious beliefs as was thought to be the case in research prior to 1990 (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). More recent studies suggest that college students generally maintain their religious beliefs, but as they progress from the freshman to senior year in their education career, their beliefs become more refined.

Another perspective on spirituality, identity, and the college experience can be obtained from Erikson's [1964] research, which identified religion (spirituality) as an important domain of identity in the process of self discovery...Erikson defined spirituality and religion as a belief system that provides the internal person with a framework for moral reasoning, values, and sense of purpose (Watson, 2006, p. 115).

Religion and spirituality are central in the lives of many African Americans. The church has served as an institution for sociopolitical, economic, educational and other essential life events in many African American communities. However, few of these roles are more significant to the faith based belief system in African Americans communities than religion and spirituality. Religious practices and affiliations are salient factors in African American culture (Mattis et al., 2000).

In their investigation, Walker and Dixon conducted one, among a very few studies to determine if religious participation and spiritual beliefs were relational to the academic performance of African American students. It was the contention of these researchers that African American students would report higher levels of spirituality than students from European American backgrounds (2002, p. 111). In summary the investigators focused on three key variables:

Spirituality versus religious participation assessed spiritual differences between African American and European Americans and measured the relationship with academic performance. In addition to operationalizing spirituality, this study distinguished between spiritual beliefs, which represent the worldview of spirituality, and religious participation, which represents behaviors, practices, or the manifestation of spiritual beliefs. (2002, pp. 114- 116)

They further conclude:

The results of the study are encouraging because they are quite consistent with previous research in which African Americans report higher levels of spiritual beliefs and religious participation than European Americans do. Results also illustrate encouraging findings regarding spirituality and religion in an area that had never been addressed—academic performance. (pp. 116-118)

As referenced in previous sections of this chapter, spirituality and religion are strongly salient factors in many— if not most— African American communities (Brown, 1991; Mattis, 2001; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Sherkat, 2002). A common theme noted throughout the literature is the manner in which many African American students use spirituality and religion as a buffer between themselves and the harsh realities of hegemony.

#### *Peer Interactions*

Astin (1998) refers to student involvement as a simple construct. Actions indicative of student involvement include attending class, participating in extracurricular events, allocating appropriate time for studying, interacting with peers, faculty and staff. According to Astin, involved students are those who invest both physical and psychological energy in the collegiate experience.

In this section of chapter two, I examine extant literature pertinent to interaction with peers and how these interactions impact the challenges of high-achieving African American males attending a PWI. Theoretically, involvement is a predictor of how well students' manage challenges in the collegiate environment. As described by Astin, "psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite" (1998, p. 523). Thus educators are competing with other factors of involvement that are not directly related to the college experience, but do have direct bearing on the academic outcome and overall development of students. These non-academic factors may include job duties, engagement with family and friends and other out of class/school activities.

The core premise of student involvement is that school related extracurricular involvement, when not overly engaged in, promotes academic and social success of students. The corollary of this premise is that over-involvement in extracurricular activities may lead to the undesired result of poor academic performance, and perhaps ultimately to school drop-out. Tinto (1998) calls attention to issues relevant to student retention challenges and suggests that these have been given considerably more attention than few other issues in higher education.

Tinto posits that:

We also know that academic and social integration influence challenges in separate ways for different students and that the two interact in ways that also foster challenges. Individuals are more likely to persist when they are either academically or socially integrated and even more likely to persist when both forms of integration occur (1998, p. 168).

Extant literature supports the theoretical notion that students who are active in campus organizations and participate in sports and leadership roles tend to be more socially and academically inclined to persist to degree attainment (Astin, 1998; Bryant, 2007; Kuh & Gonyea, 2005; Kuh, 1995). Astin further notes that one factor in particular—living in campus residence halls—is a consistently pervasive predictor of student persistence regardless of gender, race or institutional type (1999).

Guiffrida (2003) found that African American student organizations at PWIs serve as some of the more positive agents of social integration. Guiffrida contends, “For many students, African American student organizations provided the first opportunity to connect with peers whom they perceived as like them” (p. 309). These organizations ranged from Greek societies, religious groups, political organizations, to student government. Participation in these organizations provided African American students’ opportunities to engage in out-of-class connections. These connections influence student views relevant to institutional affiliation.

The Guiffrida (2003) study is representative of a body of literature that is slowly emerging. This literature addresses an array of issues with salience to the integration of African American students into the campus culture of predominantly White institutions. However, the body of literature pertinent to successfully facilitating institutional affiliation for high-achieving African American males is scant (Antonio, 2001).

Against the backdrop of institutional culture, students are likely to experience interactions that positively shape and influence their individual and interpersonal development. To achieve institutional inclusiveness that is a natural part of the campus experience is an effortful undertaking. It cannot be achieved without intentional planning that involves students, faculty, and staff across the spectrum of diversity.

Some researchers place the burden of cultural challenges faced by African American students at PWIs on the students themselves. Researchers who take this stance are often those who view the issue through the lens of a deficit model. They either do not realize, or fail to acknowledge that many students of color, including high-achieving African American males arrive at the PWI campus competently prepared to succeed, especially when all other factors are equal. However, the culture of the PWI campus, particularly if it is hostile to minorities will likely have a direct negative impact on cognitive performance and social engagement (Griffin, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Cabrera, et al., 1999; and Kuh, 1995).

Little is known about activities that mediate specific outcomes for diverse student groups. According to Pascarella and Terenzini, “The precise nature of peer influence remains ambiguous” (2005, p. 418). Harper (2005) identifies a number of core activities central to achieving positive campus interactions for high-achieving African American males at PWIs. Harper conducted a study to examine the impact of participation in out-of-class activities on

high-achieving African American male students at six large research PWIs in the Midwestern region of the United States. Views of the thirty-two study participants may be instructive for higher education practitioners:

1. The high achievers initially chose to join particular campus organizations because older African American male student leaders reached out to them when they were first year students.
2. High achievers chose to seek leadership positions that would allow them to address the issues that plagued African Americans and other racial or ethnic minorities.
3. These students' positive feelings toward their undergraduate institution are important to note because the voices of African American students who have similarly positive experiences are rarely heard, (Harper, 2005, pp. 8-15).

According to Harper (2006) limitations are still evident in regard to the role of peer interaction and the collegiate achievement of African American students at PWIs. Data are conflicting in regard to the peer support that high-achieving African American students (male and female) receive at predominantly White institutions. While unconditional support may be available at some institutions; this type of unconditional support is not available to students of color at all institutions.

#### *Influence of Greek Organizations*

For just over a century, Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) sometimes, referred to as the "Divine Nine" have symbolized social, cultural, political and esteemed scholarship in African American communities since the founding of Alpha Kappa Alpha as the first fraternity with an Afrocentric focus. Brown, Parks and Phillips (2005) suggests that the emergence of BGLOS represent an expression of racial pride and historical connection to African cultural and spiritual mores. Denied participation in White fraternities and sororities, African American students are said by these authors to have formed their own fraternal groups with missions of community service and the intent of elevating Black Americans from the status of second class citizenship.

These fraternal groups aligned themselves and their core civic and educational endeavors with the most noted “Black Intelligentsia” of the nineteenth and twentieth century’s. “Current studies of secret societies and title associations in the parts of West Africa where most black North Americans originated reveal that many U. S. religious and secular groups were—albeit unknowingly, perpetuating African organizational models and values” (Brown, Parks and Phillips, 2005, p.14). So strong were their values to racial uplift, community pride and social activism, that many early fraternity members aligned themselves with the most prestigious individuals and activities of their time.

The energetic debate between Washington and DuBois were fodder for these groups, as was the Niagara Movement initiated by DuBois. Ritualized activities such as branding (tattooing), call songs, stepping, secret handshakes and other activities particularly peculiar to fraternities are purported to have roots in African religious systems and direct ties to Greek deities and Egyptian ritual (Brown, Parks and Phillips, 2005).

Racial pride and a thirst for formal education notwithstanding, members of African American fraternal organizations, like their less fortunate brothers, were often subjected to the sting of Jim Crow practices, and the stigmatization of limited cognition and low standards of morality. Though committed through mission and practice to elevate African Americans to prominence and stations of respect from less inclined Caucasian counterparts, there existed within these fraternal orders elements of racial elitism.

Examples of exclusionary practices included restricting leadership to the educated elite black citizens. Washington and Nunez (2005) report for example that the most influential black women’s clubs developed in major urban centers and gravitated to black college campuses (pp. 167-168).

The umbrella organization providing oversight to the nine nationally recognized sorority and fraternity groups on campuses (Predominantly White and Historically Black Colleges and Universities) is the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Incorporated (NPHC). Three distinct historical periods are significant to the nine Greek letter organizations that today are present on many Black and White campuses across the country. The three periods of historical significance are reported by NPHC as Post World War I, Post World War II, and Post Civil Rights Act 1964.

Post World War I is significant because it was during this period that NPHC affiliate groups began to expand to the campuses of major research universities and colleges throughout the country. These organizations provided social connections for African American students in general and particularly African American students at PWIs. Graduate chapters were started during this period, mostly in response to oppressive racism that disallowed African American participation in civic organization in communities where they lived.

Post World War II was a period of emergence for African American students seeking opportunities for cultural expression in context with their backgrounds. Cultural expressions that were noticeably different from PWIs gave rise to customs and traditions that have become both embedded and refined. Activities associated with pledging are the most highly recognized customs unique to NPHC affiliate sororities and fraternities.

Post Civil Rights Act 1964 was a period when the enrollment of African Americans mushroomed at PWIs where their admission had long been denied. As the enrollment numbers of African American students increased at these PWIs, so did the number of NPHC affiliate sororities and fraternities increase. According to NPHC, affiliate organizations swelled to over 400 undergraduate chapters and just as many graduate chapters.

NPHC asserts that the traditions of African American sororities and fraternities must continue on college and university campuses. NPHC gives this rationale:

To understand the need for and concept of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc., one must first consider, understand and familiarize oneself with the historical accounts and significance of predominantly Black Greek-letter organizations. While having their own distinct heritages, the nine (9) member organizations of NPHC offer insight and a unique perspective into this understanding and the development of Black socioeconomic and cultural life. (Retrieved November 18, 2009 from: <http://www.nphc.org/about.htm>)

Continuing with historical context, the first Black Greek Organization (BGLO) was a fraternity established at Cornell University in 1906. As of 2006 NPHC reported a membership of more than 1.5 million. McClure (2006) confirms that “Early research does reveal that the history and structure of the Black Greek system serve a very different purpose than that of the predominantly White Greek system” (p. 1038).

A review of the literature reveals consistency with the assessment made by McClure. However there is little consensus among researchers relevant to “value added” experiences emanating from the BGLOs of today (Fox, 1987; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Pike, 2003). These researchers generally agree that the service orientation and commitment to community support and valuing African American culture are still current themes of importance to BGLOs. The issue of concern as recorded in the research is the recent negative attention that has been focused on African American fraternities.

Incidents of hazing at some campuses have been so severe that students have died, and some African American fraternities have been banned from campuses where incidents of this nature have occurred. Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) argue that African American fraternities are significantly important to student leadership development and student involvement on campus. Kimbrough (1997) acknowledges that the pledge process associated



with African American fraternities have been harsh, but he counters this by pointing out that White fraternities have similar hazing practices embedded in their fraternity pledge process. The implication by Kimbrough that the end justifies the means in hazing incidents is incongruous and counter to positive student development and campus adjustment.

In an effort to counteract violence and other antisocial behaviors associated with hazing during the pledge process, The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) in concert with NPHC instituted a Membership Intake Process (MIP) to lessen engagement in these severe and dangerous membership processes. The unfortunate outcome is that incidents of hazing have gone underground and is purported to be even harsher. Kimbrough (1997) argues that the balance that is needed must take place through teaching and modeling provided by student personnel professionals and the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc.

Harper, et al. (2005) identify four key characteristics significant in the collegiate experiences of student BGLOS. The four noteworthy characteristics include: academic achievement and cognitive development, leadership development, racial identity development and practical competence. These researchers argue that:

BGLO membership indisputably enhances the college adjustment experience and offers an array of important outcomes to African American undergraduate students, although the impact may be slightly different, depending on whether they attend HBCUs or PWIs (pp. 401-409).

#### *Out of Class Peer Interactions*

Peer interactions are often a manifestation of the culture of a given collegiate institution. Given the culture of the campus, high-achieving African American students may experience either support or alienation from same race peers, as well as majority race peers. The balance is very delicate. Kuh (1995) refers to student peer interactions as “the other curriculum” (p. 123). Kuh further contends that as the societal shifts become more diverse, the importance of social

and interpersonal interactions will become increasingly important. The challenge for educators will be to find a balanced mix between in-class and out-of-class learning that is in concert with holistic student development. As a result of unsettled racial tension at many PWIs, high-achieving African American males and other students of color often resort to in-group interactions and social activities (Sedlacek, 1987; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Interacting with diverse peers in a positive campus environment is viewed as a microcosm of life beyond the boundary of the institution (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002). High-achieving African American male college students represent a minority within a minority. Because so few colleges and universities have maintained empirical data about the within group experiences of high-achieving African American males, little is known about campus cultural factors that influence their challenges.

In the environment of predominantly White institutions, high-achieving African American males are often treated with suspicion, have their intellectual abilities questioned, and are thought to have received special privileges simply because of their race. Sadly, these accusations come not only from peers, but too often they come from educators as well (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Stereotypical thinking and actions tend to suppress the confidence level of high-achieving African American male students at PWIs. When faced with stereotypical behaviors in the academy, some high-achieving African American male students—as well as students in general—tend to over-assert their confidence. Over-assertion of confidence is believed by these students to counter balance the stereotypical thinking of peers, educators, and practitioners. However, attempting overachievement to disprove stereotypes is not now, nor has it ever been a solution with positive consequences. Attempts to overachieve often lead to additional forms of stereotyping (Ogbu, 1999).

## *Acting White*

Fryer and Torelli (2006) write extensively about the peer influenced concept of “Acting White.” According to these researchers, the term came into use in the 1970s and initially had no connection to academic performance. Most frequently, the “acting White” term was used to describe patterns of linguistic usage, musical tastes, and styles of clothing associated with characteristics of particular African American youths (Bergin & Cooks, 2002).

According to these authors, “acting White” was not associated with academic performance until the 1980s. The term evolved from African American student peer culture and was used to characterize particular behaviors that were deemed to be outside the traditional cultural milieu. “Acting White is a slippery and politically loaded phrase, with little consensus on a precise definition” (Fryer & Torelli, 2006, p. 6).

Acting White is a social phenomenon that is tangentially linked to adolescent peer pressure. Harper (2006) intimates, “Studies regarding the experiences of gifted and academically talented African American youth are fraught with descriptions of negative peer interactions” (p. 340). Acting White implies denying ones’ ethnic culture and identity. To date, few empirical studies have been conducted that examine the “acting White” phenomenon at the undergraduate collegiate level. Much of what is known about the acting White phenomenon is based in the environment of middle and secondary schools.

According to Bergin and Cooks (2002), “Probably the most widely known work on the issue of acting White is by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who described fear of [acting White] as a significant factor that influenced the attitudes and undermined achievement of African-American students at [Capital Heights] in Washington, D. C.” (p. 114). Findings in the study conducted by Bergin and Cooks vary noticeably from the findings of Fordham and Ogbu (1986).

Fordham and Ogbu conducted an in depth ethnographic study at one school (Capital Heights) in the capitol of the nation. The study conducted by Bergin and Cooks (2002) took place in multiple schools where the researchers collected data in “relatively brief interviews.” Another factor as pointed to by the researchers is that the sites for their study were multiple schools in the American Midwest. A region of the country that is decidedly different from the blighted urban core of Washington, D. C.

Data analyzed in the Fordham and Ogbu study revealed that students’ academic achievement or under-performance had a direct relationship to the peer induced unpopularity of “acting White.” Contrarily, Bergin and Cooks did not find that African American students underperformed as a direct result of peer induced unpopularity based on the “acting White” phenomenon. In more recent qualitative study conducted by Harper (2006) at six higher education institutions in the American Midwest; students self-reported positive peer influence and support for African American male high-achievers. Harper (2006) asserts that “Although the participants had fostered meaningful relationships with students outside the African American race, they repeatedly reported that their African American peers had been most encouraging and validating” (p. 347). Fryer and Torelli (2006) report that the ongoing debate about peer influence relative to acting White, particularly at the collegiate level remains unsettled.

#### *Faculty and Administrative Staff Interactions*

Institutional commitments to provide inclusive learning experiences must go beyond the mission statement and the Internet home page of college or university Web sites. College and university campuses have become and continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse than at any time in the history of higher education (Kurlaender & Flores, 2005). Twenty-first

century college and university campus populations will mirror the population and characteristics of the country.

“Institutions of higher education are a part of a global culture that maintains the racial divide and highlights the constant clashes between the ideals America espouses and what Americans practice in fact” (Hale, 2004, p. 3). Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to “teach” and “model” multiculturalism across the curriculum and ultimately position students to influence the marketplace, communities, social and political organizations and American lifestyles in general

Academic achievement on the part of African American men is impacted not only by the racial climate of the campus, but also by faculty-student interactions, both in and out of the classroom (Dawson-Threat, 1997). Institutions are accountable for classroom pedagogy that is diverse and inclusive. “Cognitive development, perspective-taking, critical thinking skills, academic achievement, and problem-solving skills are among the outcomes that researchers have consistently noted in studies about the effects of inclusive pedagogy and curricula” (Harper & Quaye, 2007, p. 34).

Ethnicity and racial diversity throughout all aspects of the collegiate experience enhance educational benefits for all students. This sentiment of “cultural competency” is often acknowledged as being important, but is not universally accepted among educators as being essential (Orfield, 2005). Current accountability assessment models do not include this concept as a required institutional learning outcome. Most often a catch-all ambiguous concept of multicultural competency is touted (Pike and Kuh, 2006).

Dougherty (2007) contends that advising high-achieving African Americans males requires skill sets that are not usually needed with other advisees. High-achieving African

American students often experience performance anxiety. These students may endure ongoing expectations from family and peers that exacerbate performance anxiety. Dougherty argues:

Potential issues include peer relationships, expectation of others, early career foreclosure, early questioning of values, career development, coping with setting future goals that may not pay off for years to come and the need for guidance in long-term educational plans. (2007, p. 68)

Cultural and climate issues necessitate nurturing needs for African American males that are not required for other students (Cuyjet, 1997). Central to the successful adjustment of African American male collegians are these two nurturing needs: (1) African American males are saddled with long-standing stereotypes that portray them as menacing social misfits. Overcoming the burden of this label requires support and understanding from the entire campus community. Providing a non-hostile campus environment is an important first step that campus administrators can take to ease the anxiety of high-achieving African American males attending a PWI. (2) A daunting challenge for campus administrators is to reverse views held by many across the university environment that African American males are to be feared. After all, how successful will teaching, advising and mentoring be if those delivering these services are not comfortable interacting with collegians of color, especially African American male collegians?

Many studies have examined the positive impact that student-teacher interactions have on challenges, academic attainment, and minority students' perception of affiliation with the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Compositely, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) find the correlation between student out-of-class interactions with faculty to have strong influence on most measurable college outcome domains for all students. Students who view faculty members as being available to them, responsive to inquiries, and generally demonstrate a classroom atmosphere of respect and interest in all student learning are generally inspired to persist. These

researchers emphasize, “Several studies suggest that students’ perception of faculty members’ availability and interest in them may be enough to promote challenges” (p. 417).

This point of view is reminiscent of the Kezar (1999) assertion that given a positive and supportive environment, most students, regardless of race or ethnicity, will persist. Not only will they persist, but they will usually attain their educational goals at the institution of choice. Additionally, positive interactions with faculty, positive peer interaction, and active engagement in campus extracurricular activities positions African American male high-achievers to experience developmentally supportive and self-affirming college life at PWIs.

Another important dimension of student faculty interaction is based in collaborative learning models. “Collaborative forms of learning break down the power distinctions between teacher and student. Teachers are active co-learners, and they attempt to share their expertise without eclipsing the student’s beginning attempts to develop their own ideas” (Kezar, 1999, p. 28).

According to Ladson-Billings, to begin to address racial issues in the academy, it is necessary, to begin with teacher preparation programs and “make pedagogy a central area of investigation” (1995, p. 465). Quaye and Harper (2007) extend this argument by calling for faculty to be responsible for culturally inclusive pedagogy. Gurin et al. (2002) suggests that students, who learn in multicultural settings where studies of race and ethnicity are woven into the fabric of the curriculum, are destined to achieve more positive educational outcomes.

Formal and informal learning experiences foster attitudes of inclusiveness among multicultural student groups (Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). Inclusive learning environments also engender positive views among students about academic achievement, and sociocultural acceptance (Orfield, 2005). African American male high-achievers, as well as students in

general develop a sense of agency that empowers them to be active participants in the culture of PWIs. In other words, these students most importantly have voice.

The academy knows so little about high-achieving African American male college students that their academic, social, and interpersonal needs are like so many pieces of an unsolved puzzle (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). As a result of long-term negative labeling, and institutional marginalization, high-achieving African American male collegians are often viewed as an anomaly in the culture of many PWIs.

After all, high-academic achievement is not a characteristic usually associated with African American male students. To reverse some of the stereotypical labeling, Flowers, et al., (2004) suggest that educators and counselors along the continuum from elementary school to college must be better prepared to teach and counsel high-achieving African American male students.

Cuyjet and Associates (2006) contend that to better understand how to facilitate the challenges of high-achieving African American males; educators need to know more about the sociocultural characteristics of this group of college students. To this outcome, Cuyjet has identified three specific sociocultural characteristics of African American male students about which educators must have knowledge. The sociocultural characteristics identified by Cuyjet include:

- (1). First and foremost it is important to view African American males as a non-monolithic group. African American male college students have within group distinctions and diversity. Their backgrounds may vary from high to low socioeconomic status; they may as easily have come from high quality suburban school backgrounds as from inner-city urban backgrounds; and they may often be high-achievers as opposed to underachievers.



(2) To the extent that African American male cultural characteristics can be identified as different from comparable groups, i.e., White males, it is important to view these cultural values and behaviors as beneficial to the group. Subsequently it is important to [not label] this student group, but to find ways to advance their successful matriculation.

(3). It is important to understand the “self-esteem issues” that these students grapple with on a daily basis. In this regard, Cuyjet (2006) informs that many of these students are “numerically frail” and as a result of environmental encounters, they are also “psychologically and emotionally frail.” Armed with this knowledge educators and other practitioners are positioned to facilitate rather than derail educational opportunities for the academic and social success of high-achieving African American male students (2006, pp.).

*A Summary of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program Study*

Hrabowski, Maton and Greif, (1998) told the stories of sixty high-achieving African American males and sought answers to why—in spite of the odds—these students continued to strive for academic excellence. Focusing attention on the role of family in the success of high-achieving African American males Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif conducted a qualitative study of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program (1989- 1995).

Included in this study were sixty African American males who participated in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) between 1989 and 1995. The parents of the students also participated in the study. The students were high academic performers in high school with a mean GPA of 3.5, SAT Math score mean of 643 and an SAT mean verbal score of 564. The students collectively had career interests in mathematics, engineering and science.

The mean SAT math and mean SAT verbal scores placed the students respectively in the top 3% and 4% of African American students nationally who were SAT test takers during this time period. Just over half of the sample population (55%) had grown up with their biological parents. Slightly more than half the parents (55%) had some college education and at least one parent had an advanced degree beyond the bachelors' level. Within the parent group, 51.7% of mothers and 53.5% of fathers had college educational backgrounds. Parents in the sample with no college education included mothers at 19% and fathers at 25.1%. The remainder of the parent group had some college background but did not have an earned degree (two-year or four-year). Parental employment ranged from executive professional to semi-skilled and unskilled service employees.

Parents and students were mostly from urban settings. Only three percent of students and their parents reported living in a rural setting. Exploratory interviews were conducted with the students, prior to the formal second round of interviews that were conducted with the students. The mean age of students at the second interview was 20.1 years. At the time of the parent interviews the mean age of the mothers was 47.3 and the mean age of fathers was 50.4 years.

The parents (33 mothers, and 24 fathers) were interviewed in single gender groups. The mothers were interviewed by the female director of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program and the fathers were interviewed by the male assistant director. Both interviewers were African American. Prior to participating in the semi-structured interviews which were audio and videotaped, the parents completed questionnaires providing demographic data and information on parenting styles.

Two sets of interviews were conducted with the sons in the program. The first set of semi-structured taped interviews was conducted with male students attending a required six week

precollege summer bridge experience at UMBC. The second set of interviews was conducted after the students were enrolled in year two of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program. From the qualitative data analysis, four variables deemed central to parental involvement and the academic success of high-achieving African American males were identified. The four variables included:

1. Determined and Persistent Academic Engagement
  2. Strict Limit Setting and Discipline
  3. Love, Support, Communication, and Modeling
  4. Community Connectedness and Resources
- Determined and Persistent Academic Engagement included at least two of these characteristics: emphasis on education, high performance, high expectations and parental involvement in homework and school events.
  - Strict Limit Setting and Discipline, based on a single index of evidence for strict limit setting and discipline and consistently strong consequences for stepping out of bounds.
  - Love, Support, Communication, and Modeling this variable was based on a single index from the interviews which the sons described as feelings of nurture, support, love and parental guidance.
  - Community Connectedness and Resources variable based on the contribution to achievement relevant to at least two of the following: extended family, religion, peers, teachers, and parental support for out of school activities.

Using the results from this study, Hrabowski, Maton and Greif jointly wrote the book: *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males*. At the time of publication (1989) this was described as the only book produced that was based on empirically specific data that addressed in a comprehensive manner, the relationship between family

structure and academic outcomes for high-achieving African American males. The study reinforces the spirit of family that has a strong and storied place in African American homes, communities and churches.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I examined extant literature relevant to the manner in which high-achieving African American undergraduate men negotiate cultural challenges in a predominantly White institution. Drawing from key interrelated themes identified in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County the literature review examines the educational and developmental impact of racial identity that encompasses identity formation, developing a sense of self, and a definition of values. High-achieving African American male students have garnered little attention in higher education research. Limited research narrows the knowledge base in regard to this population of students.

To gain some insight into the needs, aspirations and views of high-achieving African American male undergraduates attending a PWI, I reviewed literature with relevance to parental influence, peer interactions, family and religious involvement, out-of-class interactions with faculty and university administrative staff members. Particularly significant in this literature review was an examination of cultural factors specifically linked to race and group affiliations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Methods*

This dissertation uses a qualitative case study methodology to examine the impact of campus culture on African American undergraduate male students at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Using Qualitative case study methodology I examine the manner in which high-achieving African American undergraduate males negotiate cultural challenges in a PWI. African American male high-achievers have rarely been the topic of research in higher education. However, a number of factors in campus cultures—especially in PWIs, either directly or indirectly impact educational outcomes of this population of students.

I use five thematic categories and subcategories to examine data with relevancy to the three research question guiding this study. The three research questions are:

1. How does academic engagement influence the way high-achieving African American undergraduate males experience the culture of a predominantly White institution?
2. How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males openly communicate their expectations to PWI campus administrators?
3. How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males establish campus connectedness and fulfill expectations in the culture of a PWI?

The five thematic categories and subcategories that constitute the core of this study include: (1) Peer Interaction, Same and Majority Race Peer Interactions, Acting White and Stereotype Threat, Leadership and Organizational Affiliations; (2) Family and Community Support Networks, Parental Expectations; (3) Religion; (4) Faculty and Staff Interactions, and (5) Exclusionary Campus Politics.

Previous studies (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003) document the need to conduct research that substantiates the importance of institutional fit, student challenges, and student satisfaction. Transitioning to college can be a challenge for most students. However, for many racial and ethnic minority students in particular; their integration into the culture of a predominantly White institution is often fraught with uncertainty and negativity. From this perspective, race and ethnicity becomes yet another layer in the complex social fabric of institutional culture. In this complex culture of uncertainty and negativity, students of color must find paths through which they can effectively negotiate and navigate cultural challenges that will either sustain them or impair their progression.

Multiple data collection protocols are used as compass points in this bounded qualitative case study. The intent of this study is to examine the lived experiences of the study group. Collected data is central to the examination of multiple cultural factors specific to the institution and specific to the study participants. It is anticipated that by examining the lived experiences of high-achieving African American males attending a PWI that is strongly steeped in tradition, and where cultural artifacts are deemed sacrosanct will expand the knowledge base of this little studied population.

#### *Study Rationale*

This qualitative case study is based in the field of higher education and has relevancy to issues of access, diversity, campus culture, gender, race, social integration, support networks and institutional connectedness (Britt-Fries, 1998). One strength of case study as a research methodology is its use in an array of disciplines. The goal of a case study is to describe, interpret, or examine a phenomenon, a single entity, or a social unit. Accordingly, case studies focus on a bounded system, and may be particularistic, descriptive, or heuristic in nature (Merriam, 1998).

For this dissertation, descriptive and exploratory aspects of case studies are used to uncover experiences important to high-achieving African American undergraduate males attending a PWI. By exploring a variety of cultural influences from the perspective of this student population, I sought to document the dynamics that impact student satisfaction, engagement, perceptions, and experiences encountered, both in the classroom and out-of-class.

Experiences and ideologies are moving forces; hence, this case study design is well suited to these dynamics. Making meaning from the social context of cultural interactions between racial groups continues to challenge researchers from multiple disciplines. My intent is to examine the lived experiences among and within this student population, and gain an insiders' view of this unit of analysis in a higher education setting.

Merriam (1998) identifies the insiders' view, or the perspectives of study participants, as being central to qualitative research. Additional characteristics of qualitative research include: 1) the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection; 2) commonly, field work or naturalistic inquiry is required to collect data; and 3) an inductive strategy as a means to collecting and analyzing data to explore a phenomenon in depth. A hallmark of qualitative research is the use of language rather than numeric values, and a research design that is emergent, flexible, and responsive to changing conditions.

Qualitative research explores a phenomenon about which new information is sought, or understanding is pursued. Merriam (1998) asserts that a core feature of qualitative research is that the resulting product "is richly descriptive." Accordingly, interpretive case study permits the researcher to collect, analyze and richly describe data relevant to a phenomenon about which little is known.

*Research Design*

Interpretive case study frames the lens of this research design. The collection of primary data was accomplished from conducting individual interviews with twenty high-achieving African American males included in this study. Additional data collection methodologies used with primary study participants included four focus group sessions and e-journaling. The protocols used for these activities are included in appendices (B, F, and G). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved protocols for each methodology. One hour long individual interview was conducted with each study participant (see Qualitative Interview Protocol Appendix B). Additionally, one hour long interviews were conducted with five secondary study participants (see appendix D for faculty and appendix E for administrators). Secondary study participants with three or more years of work experience at Millennial University are listed in the research design by race and role on campus. Additional details about secondary study participants are included in the Sampling section of the study. The research design is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: *Research Design*

| Methodology                           | Students                  | Faculty   | Staff   | Contact Frequency  |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|---|--|
| Semi-structured Individual interviews | 20 African American Males | 1 White male<br>1 African American male<br>January 27, 2010 and February 11, 2010 | 1 White male<br>2 African American males<br>January 26-27, 2010 and February 16, 2010 | 1 hour ea. contact with students February 3, 2010 to February 28, 2010.<br><br>Only one hour long interview was conducted with faculty and staff members |
| Focus Group I                         | 5 African American males  |   |   | 2 one hour sessions over the study period February 3-28, 2010  |
| Focus Group II                        | 4 African American males  |   |   | 2 one hour sessions over study period February 3-28, 2010  |
| E-Journaling                          | 3 African American males  |   |   | Individual student campus cultural observations reported via email as encountered.   |



From individual interviews, focus group interactions, and student journaling the data I collected and analyzed during this study, has potential to inform practices in higher education. The lived experiences and environmental observations from the twenty-five study participants are detailed in chapter four: Findings.

### *Sampling*

As indicated in Chapter I, the definition and characteristics of high-achieving African American undergraduate males are partly drawn from Harper (2005). In this study, high-achieving African American undergraduate males were selected for the study based on the following characterizations:

- Cumulative grade point average of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale
- Minimum of 30 semester credit hours (with sophomore through senior year status)
- Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) credits are included in the 30 semester hours
- Recognized for active leadership in student organizations
- Active engagement with faculty and administrators; in and out of the classroom
- Acknowledged with honors, scholarships and academic achievement awards
- Participant in undergraduate research, internships, study abroad
- Record of volunteerism (mentoring, tutoring, Big Brother, etc.)
- No record of judicial sanctions, honor code violations, or other disciplinary action
- Self-identified as African American male based on record of enrollment

Individual hour long interviews were conducted with each research participant. A Summary profile of academic and residency status appears in Table 2 on the following page.

Table 2: *Academic and Residency Profile of Primary Study Participants*

| Pseudonym | GPA | Class     | Major/Minor                  | Scholarship Status | Fraternity Affiliation | Residence Status |
|-----------|-----|-----------|------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Jerry     | 3.7 | Sophomore | Management/Marketing         | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Bob       | 3.6 | Sophomore | Management/Marketing         | Yes                | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Jim       | 3.2 | Sophomore | General Business             | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Casey     | 3.7 | Junior    | Journalism                   | Yes                | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Cameron   | 3.0 | Senior    | Chemical Engineering         | No                 | Greek                  | In-state         |
| Sean      | 3.3 | Junior    | Interdisciplinary            | Yes                | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Fred      | 3.0 | Junior    | Biology                      | Yes                | Greek                  | In-state         |
| Joel      | 3.4 | Sophomore | Political Science            | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Larry     | 3.0 | Senior    | Interdisciplinary            | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Charles   | 3.4 | Junior    | Political Sci. Foreign Lang. | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Otis      | 3.1 | Senior    | Education                    | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Mitchell  | 3.2 | Senior    | Operations Management        | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-State         |
| John      | 3.2 | Senior    | Chemical Engineering         | Yes                | Greek                  | In-state         |
| Ben       | 3.9 | Sophomore | Computer Tech Applications   | Yes                | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Jesse     | 3.0 | Sophomore | Pre-Business                 | Yes                | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Roy       | 3.4 | Senior    | Computer Sci. Mathematics    | Yes                | Greek                  | Out-of-state     |
| Jeff      | 3.7 | Sophomore | Mechanical Engineering       | Yes                | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Roger     | 3.3 | Sophomore | Accounting                   | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Leo       | 3.3 | Sophomore | Health Care Mgmt             | No                 | Non-Greek              | In-state         |
| Rob       | 3.6 | Sophomore | Pre-Criminal Justice         | No                 | Greek                  | In-state         |

Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that the process of conceptualizing, framing and focusing a study is a complex process (p. 29). One factor of complexity is sample selection. In this study purposeful and snowball sampling were used to guide the discovery process. Purposeful sampling is a common approach used by qualitative researchers (Merriam, 1998). Researchers seeking insight into a phenomenon, rely on sampling that will yield the most relevant and rich data. In a field study the qualitative researcher is seeking in depth information that is descriptive and directly linked to the study purpose (Patton, 1990).

Descriptive information about primary study participants as reflected in Table 2 is indicative of the probability that collected data are linked to the study purpose. The Millennial University (a pseudonym) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research design January 2010. After obtaining IRB approval I employed the use of single stage sampling by requesting from the Office of Records and the Association of African American Faculty and Staff (AAAFS, a pseudonym) rosters with the names, cumulative grade point average, number of credit hours earned and contact information for enrolled African American male undergraduates with the aforementioned characteristics. Contact information included telephone numbers, campus email addresses and United Postal Service mailing addresses.

A roster with 159 students with matching criteria was received from the Millennial University Office of Records. Also, a roster with names of 48 students was received from the Association of African American Faculty and Staff. Since there was overlap between the two rosters, I elected to use student data from Millennial University Office of Records. Letters of invitation (see Appendix A) to participate in the research study were mailed to the entire pool of 159 perspective participants. It is important to point out that within my professional role, I know and have personally worked with several of the perspective study participants—however, I relied

on official records before extending an invitation to students personally known by me. In turn, many of the students with whom I made personal contact; encouraged friends, and in some cases fraternity brothers to participate in the study, thus achieving snowball sampling.

Another point of importance to note is that for more than twenty years the Association of African American Faculty and Staff has conducted an annual Academic Honors' Award ceremony for approximately 700 to 800 African American students with a 3.0 or higher cumulative grade point average. This organization has extensive archival data about Millennial University African American high-achievers (male and female). Over the years, thousands of African American students who otherwise did not receive high-achiever recognition from Millennial University have been recognized for their academic success by the Association of African American Faculty and Staff. This annual recognition ceremony is attended by top ranking university officials, parents, extended family members, neighbors, friends and fictive kin.

Using roster information from the Office of Records, which contained 159 names, I mailed personalized letters of invitation to each student. The letters were mailed January, 2010 to the address of record as maintained by the Office of Records. After the letters were mailed, I later learned that few students file their local address (the place where they live while enrolled in school) as the official point of contact. In most cases students submit to the Office of Records, their permanent address (the place where they live with parents or guardians when not enrolled in school). As a result, most of the letters of invitation were received by parents and or guardians.

Since my telephone and email contact information was included in the letter, a number of parents relayed the information to their sons who then followed up with me. Two parents made direct email contact with me and provided local mailing addresses for their sons. Fewer than

twelve of the 159 letters were returned as undeliverable. In the letter of invitation, students were invited to attend one of two information sessions. The two sessions were scheduled February 3-4, 2010. Fifteen students attended the research study information session one conducted February 3, 2010. Eight students attended research information session two conducted February 4, 2010.

As word about the study spread through student communities, I received several telephone calls and emails from students who wanted to participate in the study. To accommodate students who could not attend the earlier information sessions, a third information session was conducted February 8<sup>th</sup> for additional students. Due to scheduling and other conflicts, many students who wanted to participate in the study were unable to do so.

#### *Secondary Study Participants*

Secondary study participants included two members of the faculty and three administrative staff members with three or more years of experience at Millennial University. The selected secondary participants were also known to be actively engaged in promoting the success of all students. More importantly—for this study, the secondary participants were known for their extraordinary support and service to students of color at Millennial University. In addition to their teaching and service duties, each secondary study participant is well known for being a mentor, an advisor, or simply a friend to fellow Millennial University students. By race and campus roles, the secondary study participants included two male faculty members, one African American and one Caucasian, and three administrative male staff members; one Caucasian, and two African Americans. Criteria for the secondary study participants included:

- Three or more years of continuous employment at Millennial University
- Record of service as an advisor or mentor to African American male students
- Record of service as a volunteer in support of African American male undergraduates

Using purposeful sampling, secondary study participants well known by the researcher for their active support of student learning and student success were requested to participate in the study by way of a letter of invitation (see Appendix C). Prior to participating in a one hour interview, each secondary study participant was asked to sign either a Faculty Research Participant Audio Taping Consent Form or an Administrator Research Participant Audio Taping Consent Form (see Appendices H and J).

Qualitative interview protocols specific to roles at Millennial University were used with faculty and staff members (see Appendices G and I). Individual one hour interviews were conducted with each secondary research participant between January 26, 2010 and February 16, 2010. In gratitude for participation in the research study, all primary student participants were given a \$10.00 movie pass. Secondary study participants received a thank you letter.

#### *Researcher Perspective*

Wilson (1999) argued, “The qualitative researcher is charged with the task of telling someone’s story in that person’s voice” (p. 119). In this study the story being told is that of high-achieving African American males attending a Predominantly White Institution. The study of this student subpopulation is viewed through a cultural lens. In a cultural context individuals and groups are particularistic in their beliefs, rituals, and traditions. These elements of culture are embodied in nuanced practices and artifacts common to the frame of reference of racial and ethnic minority populations, as well as groups, organizations and institutions.

The frame of reference of an individual functions as a compass that directs behaviors and affiliations. In this regard high-achieving African American males attending predominantly White institutions often arrive on the campus of a PWI with a cultural compass that emanates from their frame of reference. In many instances this frame of reference is incongruent with that

of majority race students (Davis, 1994). The challenge of relating and connecting to the PWI campus culture may or may not be mitigated by the students' frame of reference.

The cultural lens through which male African American high-achievers view themselves and their world often requires recalibration of the metaphorical cultural compass when they arrive at a PWI. Economic, educational, social and familial disparities within and across racial backgrounds are inescapable and indelible. Cabrera, et al., (1999) contend that race notwithstanding; students adjust to college in ways that are more similar than dissimilar. According to these researchers the thread of commonality supportive of college student adjustment is academic preparation, positive academic experiences, strong parental encouragement, and strong academic performance.

Having several years of personal and professional experience working in multicultural and multiracial settings has given me opportunities to interact with members of this study group. The motivation to conduct this study emerged from firsthand knowledge and experience working with high-achieving African American males at a PWI. An encounter with two angry African American male students stands out in my memory.

The experiences of these students in the culture and climate of the PWI sensitized them to always be on guard against incidents of perceived marginalization. So bitter were they that their distrust extended beyond encounters with members of the majority race. With few exceptions, it was a certainty that their interactions with White peers, faculty and staff were negative. These students believed that the culture of the campus had forced African American staff, faculty and administrators to positions of subservience.

It was the perspective of these students that the culture of the campus was unwelcoming and non-supportive. In their view, African American students in general and particularly African

American male students were tolerated in limited manner, but not respected. I met these students at the beginning of their junior year. After a very intense initial meeting, the students gradually let down their guard and began seeking opportunities to interact with me. Over the course of their final two years on campus we became conversant about many issues. Reflecting back on these conversations, I recall how often the two young men spoke of the sustaining value of parental support. The value of parental support to the success of college students is well established in the literature and is one of five core themes in this study (Cabera, et al., 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Hrabowski, Maton & Greif, 1998).

After the two students graduated, periodic contact through email exchanges was maintained for approximately one year. I often reflect on my experiences with these two students. My reflections lead me to be curious about the experiences of other high achieving African American males at a PWI. It is that curiosity that influenced the selection of my dissertation study. I want to explore the stories and lived experiences of high-achieving African American undergraduate students in the culture of Millennial University—a PWI.

Central to any research is the validity or trustworthiness of the study. Hence, it is essential that the researcher authenticate the credibility of findings (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). To achieve this outcome, multiple validation strategies as identified by Creswell (2003, p. 196) and Merriam (1998, p. 204-208) are used in this study. These strategies include triangulation (evident in the multiple research methods, including interviews: students/faculty/staff/ focus groups, and journal notations analyses) and thick description (narrative conveyance of a study phenomena).



### *Researcher Ethics*

My aim in this study is to thoroughly and accurately collect data, analyze data and report findings that are “rich and thick.” Because I am a woman of color and share racial characteristics with the study population, I have conscientiously attempted to maintain neutrality (Moore, 1987). “The new interest in subjectivity, as we see it, is considerably less with whether or not our work is trustworthy—and considerably more with how self and subject have intersected and with what effects,” notes LeCompte, Millroy and Preissle (1992, p. 117).

My proximity to study participants in terms of racial background, social experiences, and cultural realities places me in an advocacy position. To enhance objectivity, participants assisted with data collection through self-disclosure of information. At the outset of the study, I informed participants that no monetary remuneration was included in this research initiative. However, for each participant completing the entire data collection phase of the study, a modest reward of a \$10.00 movie pass will be issued to each participant (Creswell, 2003).

Critical to the validity of this research was the need for the researcher to establish a strong bond of trust with the participants at all levels. Establishing a bond of trust with this student population was in many ways effortless. It is acknowledged that the effortlessness of establishing this bond of trust may have resulted from my status as an African American.

Additionally, many elements of the stories told by the study participants revealed a pattern of positive connections with maternal entities in their lives. In some instances these maternal entities were teachers, counselors, affiliates in home church families, fictive kin and members of community social networks. It is speculative on my part, but plausible that there may have been an element of transference on the part of the study participants in viewing me— an African American female— as a maternal entity with whom they felt a bond of trust.

An additional element of importance relative establishing trust in qualitative research as noted by Merriam (1998) is capacity of the researcher to show empathy. According to Merriam, this can be achieved through the use of effective communication tools such as “listening intently” and asking questions with relevancy to the study participants. My African American heritage and cultural linkage positioned me to understand expressions that emanated from a cultural frame of reference.

Being a same race researcher in the environment of the study participants heightened my awareness of a dual responsibility. The duality that I had to achieve was to accurately portray the stories of the high-achieving African American collegians and conscientiously maintain objectivity. Ethical standards that are the hallmark of a good researcher are foundational to accurately representing the voice of the storyteller. Throughout this study, my focus was on the stories being told. Merriam argues that central to the notion of objectivity in qualitative research is that “The philosophical assumptions underlying this type of research is that reality is not an objective entity; rather there are multiple interpretations of reality” (p. 22).

My many years of experience in higher education positioned me to use “multiple interpretations of reality” as these realities were presented by the study participants. As an African American educator, I had not only substantial knowledge and understanding about student development, but I also had first hand awareness of challenges that African American students in general, and specifically African American males face in predominantly White institutions. More importantly, I was aware of the need to bring forth authentic stories with potential for impacting practice and expanding the higher education knowledge base.

Providing relevant details about Institutional Review Board requirements for the protection of human subjects in a research study was very important to the process of establishing a bond of trust. *Human Research Protection Program Consent to Take Part in a Research Study* as required by the Institutional Review Board (Exhibit 1) provided in clear language exactly what the participants were being asked to do. Students were also told in clear language how to opt out of the study without penalty.

My review of literature and my professional experiences relevant to high-achieving African American undergraduate males at a PWI cemented my view of the need for this study. However, I was not prepared for the intense level of interest the students' had in this research topic. They expressed honor for having been invited to participate in the study. They were proud to have been identified as high-achieving African American males.

It was also my observation that these young men were experiencing personal and academic validation in an environment where they were often treated with suspicion and hostility. In their own words the students indicated: "this study is too important to go unnoticed." My invitation to the participants in this study seemed to open a door of opportunity that had been long awaited.

#### *Site Selection*

The site for this study is Millennial University, a Predominantly White four year public institution located in the southeastern United States with an enrollment of over 26,000 students. Undergraduate enrollment is slightly over 24,000 students. Students from every region of the United States and several foreign countries comprise the undergraduate population. The student population in general is predominantly White and affluent.

Within the total population of students at Millennial University, approximately 3000 are African American. African American female students make up slightly more than two thirds, of the total African American student enrollment. African American undergraduate males constitute 700 to 1000 members of this population. Based on study criteria relevant to African American undergraduate male high-achiever characteristics, and data provided from the Office of Records at Millennial University, fewer than 200 (159) students were identified as academically high-achieving. I sought 20 participants from the population of 159 students that met the high-achiever criteria.

Millennial University is more than a century old and many Caucasian students have generational legacies with the institution. Millennial University has a long heritage that is steeped in tradition and embraces cultural artifacts that are sacrosanct. Student leadership and organizational activities are for the most part dominated by the White majority.

Prior to the 1960s Millennial University was a segregated institution that enrolled only Caucasian students. Few minority students attempted to cross lines of traditional student engagement. Hence, the dominance by White students has been maintained long after integration. Millennial University is primarily a residential campus where first year students are required to live on campus. At Millennial University, the largest percentage of minority students (about 13 percent) is African American. The African American student population is five percent male and eight percent female.

After IRB approval for the research was received January 11, 2010, purposeful sampling to identify perspective study participants began. During research information sessions conducted February 3-4, 2010, perspective participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and the importance of their role in the study. Participants were provided details relevant to

confidentiality, data collection and data analyses. Participants were also assured that data management was the sole responsibility of me as the researcher. I stored all collected student data in a locked storage file, accessible only to me. Additionally, I provided assurance to the study participants that third party release of collected data was not a part of my research design approved by the Institutional Review Board. I also informed study participants that data in the study will only be used in a manner where their identities are protected. Hence, participants will not be singularly identifiable and confidentiality will be enhanced.

Silence and untruths are enemies to liberation. African American men in general have an extensive history of alienation and exclusion. Consequently, it was incumbent that I, the researcher provide full and accurate disclosure relevant to the role of the participants and the intended use of collected data. Participation in the study was fully voluntary and without mandate to remain in the study group if individual circumstances dictated otherwise.

Perspective participants were selected from the student database at Millennial University. Selection criteria consistent with the purpose of the study were used. Millennial University was the single site for this study. As such, signature characteristics included: predominantly White institution, high-achieving African American Males with limited visibility in campus activities, also with limited to unknown affiliation with high profile campus organizations, and infrequently included in prominent honorary societies.

#### *Data Collection*

Central to deriving a rich descriptive narrative from the research, multiple data collection methods were used. Specific data collection methodologies used in this study included: semi-structured individual interviews, focus group sessions, and E-Journaling. The semi-structured individual hour long interviews were mechanically recorded. A digital voice operated device was

used to record individual interviews and focus group sessions. A second voice operated digital recording device with similar features was used to ensure the availability of a back-up data source. A transcriptionist was employed to accurately and precisely transcribe recorded data.

The transcriptionist was required to sign a Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement (see Appendix H). The transcriptionist worked independently from routine work assignments and was compensated by the researcher. Initial transcriptions were reviewed and edited by me for corrections. To edit and correct the transcriptions, I listened to each recorded individual interview and the recorded focus group sessions as I read each transcript. Transcripts were submitted to me for review as they were completed. The ongoing review of the transcripts over the course of the fieldwork enabled the use of constant comparative analyses of collected data.

Multiple data collection methods enrich findings in this study. Semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions are often used in qualitative case study research (Creswell, 2003). Journaling is an additional case study methodology that enriches the narrative relevant to the phenomenon being examined. Journaling student participants were given the option to maintain written commentaries about events, observations, activities, verbal exchanges and reaction to encounters deemed reflective of the culture and climate of Millennial University.

Journaling was intentionally loosely structured. Unfiltered journal comments were expected to be impactful and to enhance the rich descriptive factors of the study. These methods of data collection are deemed to be complementary and to have relevancy to examination of the phenomenon. In this study, my goal was to use methodologies that contributed to the limited body of knowledge relevant to high-achieving African American men in the academy. At the conclusion of the data collection period, an individual e-message was sent to each primary study participant. In the message I thanked them for participating in the study and provided

instructions for picking up the \$10.00 movie pass. I gave the participants the option of having the movie pass mailed to the address of their choice. To date, all but two of the movie passes have been distributed to the students. An additional attempt will be made to distribute the remaining movie passes.

### *IRB Recommendations and Research Documents*

The IRB recommends that in those cases where the researcher has personal knowledge of perspective study participants; having a colleague assist with the research study information sessions reduces the likelihood of having students feel compelled to participate in the study. I followed the IRB recommendation and asked a colleague to assist in conducting the research study information sessions. The information sessions, individual interviews, and focus group sessions were conducted in a neutral site. At the conclusion of each information session, students who elected to participate in the study signed the following documents: Consent to participate in the Research Study (Exhibit 1) and Student Record Release Consent Form (Appendix B). Student Self Disclosure Information Consent Form (Appendix C), Student Interview Audiotape Consent Form (Appendix E). E-Journaling Student Participant Agreement (Appendix M). The forms, signed by both the student participants and the researcher served the purpose of protecting student identity and maintaining confidentiality.

Secondary study participants included two faculty members who each signed a Faculty Research Participant Audio Taping Consent Form (Appendix H). The three administrator secondary study participants signed an Administrative Research Participant Audio Taping Consent Form (see Appendix J). Individual interviews were audio taped and then transcribed. The transcriptionist signed a Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement (Appendix N) that was approved by the IRB prior to commencement of the study. To enhance “rich thick” narrative,

two one hour focus group sessions were also conducted during the data collection period in the month of February 2010. For a copy of the Student Focus Group Participant Audiotape Consent Form (see Appendix L).

To ensure that participants were given ample opportunity to give voice to their views, the two focus groups were comprised of five students. Due to scheduling conflicts, one member of focus group II had to discontinue his participation. Hence, five students participated in two one hour focus group sessions and four students participated in the two one hour focus group sessions. Sessions were held at either five o'clock or six o'clock in the evening. Since these times were near the dinner hour I provided food and beverages for the students in focus groups one and two. Food was also provided at the information session. Food was not provided during the individual interview sessions; however a cold beverage (usually water) was made available to interviewees. E-Journaling, the third data collection methodology was intended to capture candid verbal portraits of daily experiences of high-achieving African American students at a PWI. Five students signed up for E-Journaling, however, only three students consistently sent E-Journal observations.

### *Data Analysis*

For qualitative researchers, data analysis is non-linear and an on-going component of the research process (Merriam, 1998). A narrative analysis was used to capture the lived experiences and real life stories of the research study participants. Organizationally, the research questions and purpose of the study were aligned with field observations, transcribed interviews, journaling observations and focus group interactions.

Constant comparative methodology was used to support categorical relevancy to the research questions. Specific to this process was limited researcher participation in eliciting



information through the use of semi structured interview questions. As researcher I attempted to be unobtrusive in maintaining a natural conversational flow as participants shared their stories.

Merriam (1998) maintains that the data analyses component of qualitative research is the only one with a “right way and wrong way” process. The right way is to analyze data simultaneously as it is collected. Using the initial data set of research questions served as a directional compass. Central themes pertinent to the culture of Millennial University were identified and coded into relational themes. As noted by Tierney (1993) the culture of any institution or workplace has many verbal and non-verbal symbols that portray traditions, ideological views and thoughts about the community. These narratives, when thematically coded and analyzed, contributed to the rich and thick description of the study.

The verbal narratives portrayed the cultural and environmental perspectives of twenty high-achieving African American male undergraduate students and five members of the faculty and staff at Millennial University. Study participants were able to tell their own stories in their own voices and from their perspectives and perceptions of the culture. I read each transcription twice and made notations relevant to themes in the study. Prior to data collection several themes were pre-identified based on interview question content and themes relevant to the three research questions.

As the transcripts were read, I used post-it notes to mark themes in the documents and also made notations on the transcribed documents. After all documents were segmented into categorical codes, I again reviewed the documents for particularly poignant comments to be quoted in the analyzed text or findings. The final step involved establishing five separate word files matched to the following categories and sub-categories: (1) Peer Interactions with sub-categories (a) Majority and Same-Race Peer Interactions, (b) Acting White and Stereotype

Threat, (c) Leadership and Organizational Affiliations, (2) Family and Community Support Networks and sub-category (a) Parental Expectations, (3) Religion, (4) Faculty and Staff Interactions, and (5) Campus Exclusionary Politics.

During a final review of the transcribed documents, the five core themes in the study were setup in separate Word files. From the twenty transcriptions, relational themes were recorded in each Word file. This step was taken to ensure that the lived experience of each participant was represented in the findings. Study results are deemed to have value and importance to policy decisions and practice guidelines at Millennial University. Using applicable study results to inform practice will support ongoing efforts to achieve more racially, ethnically diverse, and inclusive experiences for all students at Millennial University, and particularly African American male undergraduate high-achievers.

#### *Study Limitations*

Merriam (1998) argues that qualitative studies are flexible, emergent and conducted under changing conditions. Hence, generalizability is not an anticipated outcome for this bounded study. Moreover, human behavior is not static. Merriam (1998) further argues that rich thick description enables a reader of a qualitative case study to determine if study findings can be transferred to a different research circumstance (p. 211). The sample size of 20 students in this study possibly narrows the extent to which inferences about similarly situated students can be drawn.

Additionally, limiting the site of the study to one institution precludes impactful considerations relevant to geographical and other factors that may vary racially, culturally and environmentally. A third limitation is the relatively short time-line during which the fieldwork was conducted; four weeks during the shortest month of the year. A more extensive

ethnographic study has potential for identifying illuminating data for practice. The data collection methodology least effective in this study was E-Journaling. I believe there is tremendous potential to gather very meaningful data by using this method. However, I caution that more than four weeks will be needed to gain greater benefit from this methodology. An additional limitation was the short time span between extending invitations to participate in the research and the commencement of the fieldwork.

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter I have identified research methodologies that were in this case study. Additionally I provided a rationale for using case study which is consistent with many qualitative research studies conducted in the discipline of education. Based in the field of higher education, this study has relevancy to issues of student access, diversity, campus cultures, gender, ethnicity, race, social integration, social networks and general institutional support systems. The primary and secondary study participants jointly enriched the narratives and added depth and breadth to the study. The phenomenon of importance in this study was a bounded group of African American undergraduate males negotiating cultural challenges in a predominantly White institution.

This chapter also includes the research design for the study and a profile of study participants. Also included in this chapter are details relevant to data collection and analyses. As recommended by Merriam (1998), a constant comparative analysis of data was used. Sampling type, the perspective of the researcher, matters of researcher ethics that are essential to trustworthiness and site selection are included in this chapter. I concluded chapter three with a statement on study limitations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

#### *Introduction*

In chapter I examine five thematic categories: (1) Peer Interactions (2) Family and Community Support Networks, (3) Religion, (4) Faculty and Staff Interactions, and (5) Exclusionary Politics. Subthemes were included in three of the five major thematic categories. The twenty high-achieving African American undergraduate male students in this study are enrolled at Millennial University, which like many other PWIs across the country, and particularly those located in the southeastern United States; espouse an institutional commitment to multiculturalism, diversity and inclusiveness.

The evocative and sometimes sober reflections of the study participants portray a cultural mural that distinguishes espoused values from everyday practices at Millennial University. Often these everyday practices become cultural challenges for high-achieving African American male collegians. Throughout the data collection period, stereotype threat emerged as a particularly bitter challenge for study participants. Students in the study viewed African American males to be more maligned with pseudo-characterizations than any other racial minority and/or gender group on campus. The verbal canvasses depicted in the stories of the study participants are symbolic of the ebb and flow of daily experiences in the campus culture of Millennial University. A campus culture that is at times daunting, and often unwelcoming to the

extraordinary group of high-achieving African American collegians who discuss their lived experiences in this study.

Features that attracted this group of high-achievers to Millennial University are its reputation as an institution with rigorous academic standards, an extensive range of academic programs, opportunities to conduct undergraduate research, opportunities for cultural enrichment, options to engage in volunteerism, community service, study abroad programs, the reputation of specific programs of study, future plans to enroll in graduate or professional study at Millennial, recommendations from family, friends and high school teachers and its reputation in high profile sports such as football and basketball.

The study participants mostly agreed that Millennial University provides many and varied opportunities to grow, yet also acknowledged that the racial climate of the campus—in many ways, inhibits the growth of students of color. The students suggests that in many instances race related cultural challenges in the Millennial University environment exacerbate the experiences of African American males in general, and particularly high-achieving African American males. Further, the hostile racial climate of the campus tends to repress positive multicultural experiences across and among the general student population.

#### *Peer Interactions*

Peer interactions and the manner in which these interactions contribute to, or impede the success of high-achieving African American males at Millennial University frequently arose from the data. Cameron, a senior engineering major stated:

Being in the environment with a cohort of diverse Black men...you learn a lot about yourself. You learn how you can be easily influenced by others, if you put yourself in certain surroundings with the good or the bad. And so I learned a lot of vital lessons...Not that some of my fraternity brothers are not like-minded as I am, but you know ...I just got a better feel for who I was as a person.

These features are indicative of the diversity and heterogeneity that are common to within group high-achieving African American males. On one hand, diversity for these high-achievers tends to vary from those of African American males in the general student population. However, there were also similarities between the study group of high-achieving African American males and the general population of African American students.

This concept will be examined further in the section on same race peer interactions.

Noticeably, African American male high-achievers frequently discussed the difficulty of being able to easily associate with same race high-achievers in the campus population. In regard to associating with other high-achieving African American males, Ben, a sophomore stated:

There are so few of us that to accomplish a lot as an African American here is big. So I would say that I have kind of a drive to actually make a name, I don't want to say actually make a name for myself, to be successful because that would help the image of African Americans and help provide opportunities for people...The more positive things I can do here, I guess the better.

The importance of acknowledging within group differences and exploring the complexities of peer relationships and interactions among undergraduate African American male high-achievers is sometimes difficult to understand.

Group heterogeneity is particularly perplexing for those who view African American males as uniform in intellect, and psychosocial characteristics. Examining within group diversity and the critical matter of self-identity are foundational to understanding and valuing both the cognitive and non-cognitive developmental needs that emanate from peer interactions.

These high-achievers were seeking diverse collegiate experiences upon which to build opportunities for further education, future careers and self-edification. Institutional failure to support high-achieving African American undergraduate males in their quest to reach these goals limits experiential learning and multifaceted educational outcomes. Finding these integrative

opportunities can be frustrating and challenging for many high-achieving African American males attending Millennial University.

Senior, Cameron comments about the complexities that high-achieving African American males face when seeking to find a niche in the culture of Millennial University: He states:

One issue I think most high-achieving African American males face at Millennial University I think is finding identity... how do I bridge the gap between this cultural group and that cultural group and so on? Trying to find, trying to find a balance in the sense of immersing yourself in cultural infusion with your White counterparts, but staying true to your African American identity.

Cameron continues this thought by suggesting:

It's all about; it's all about just being genuine... I'm the same genuine person within my own cultural subset and outside of my cultural subset and you know, just doing the little things, being respectful all the time, speaking openly and honestly with people and just working hard at whatever you do.

Study participants frequently spoke with dismay about the negative status of race relation at Millennial University. However, they also acknowledged that if given the opportunity to make their college choice all over again, Millennial University is likely the choice they would make.

The rationale the students gave for choosing Millennial University a second time was embedded in their perception of growth opportunities. In this regard, third year student Fred remarked:

If I had to do it all over again, I would say, no, I'd still come to Millennial University just because of all the experiences. I feel like I've grown so much from coming here, I wouldn't want to risk, you know, if I went to someplace else, maybe I wouldn't have grown, maybe I wouldn't have done so well academically, socially, and you know, things like that, so I'm pretty satisfied with my choice.

Jim, a sophomore stated:

I had a lot of scholarship offers to other places...they weren't as prestigious as this school...so I decided to come here because this is, I mean, to get the opportunity to graduate from this college and have that name on the degree; I believe it will open up more jobs than a degree from another school.

Charles, a junior gave a qualified response by commenting:

It's been okay, I think I have a pretty good college career as of right now, but I would like for it to be better because I would like to get involved in particular organizations...without having to have a certain background.

In view of the ongoing cultural and racially negative challenges experienced by many of the high achievers, it was noteworthy that they still spoke with tremendous pride about being a Millennial University student. This point is illustrated by Mitchell, a senior who stated:

The Business School that they have here is what I was looking for, one of the top in the nation...hey you can't beat that.

This point is also underscored in the statement by Sean, a junior. He comments:

One thing that sold me on this university, it seemed like the professors here—more so than any other university that I have visited—had a reputation of if you show the initiative they will connect you in whatever way they can...I feel like I actually have a relationship with a lot of the people that I need to have relationships with; faculty and staff wise.

Viewing their current challenges in a futuristic mindset, the students anticipated that personal and professional benefits were more certain because of the institutional name on their degree. Additionally, the study participants were in one accord in thinking that the strength of their academic performance may ultimately have a positive impact on the culture and climate of Millennial University. To successfully realize this outcome; the high-achievers were willing to make what they viewed to be short-term individual and group sacrifices. In this regard, Jerry a sophomore student with a 3.7 grade point average gave the following rationale:

Not too many 20 year old African American's have had the success I've had where I'm from, so if nobody, if we don't have anybody to carry the torch for the other kids, then they'll never know the way to go. So I kind of feel like it is my responsibility and no matter how tough it seems sometimes; it needs to be done, somebody has to do it. Why not me?

#### *Same Race and Majority Race Peer Interactions*

The study participants appeared eager to have to have a platform from which to tell their stories and to feel that at least one time during their years at Millennial University their stories



mattered. Prior dormancy of their points of view was relevant only because they had never before been asked to discuss their lived experiences at Millennial University. When asked how they now viewed their decisions to enroll at Millennial, with only one exception, the students were generally very pleased.

However, when asked about peer relationships with same race and majority race peers, views were mixed and sometimes tinged with negative emotions. All but one of the twenty students reported having experienced slights, feelings of being ignored, and hostility. Adding personal context to these encounters, Jerry, a sophomore commented:

A couple of times I've wanted to go home...you get looks, people start looking at you the wrong way or somebody bumps into you or you just try to be courteous to somebody and you don't get it back...some days it just rubs you the wrong way, and some days you just don't want to deal with it.

In some cases, students reported visually observing racial epithets on walls and sidewalks, or actually hearing the N-word used in their presence. None of the study participants reported ever hearing the N-word personally directed to them. However, some; described being in situations where the N-word was openly used in their presence. Mitchell, the only junior college transfer student in the study suggested that when this type of incident happens:

It is better to take the cool approach, turn the other cheek and walk away. I mean it's hard...you gonna get called names by your own peers...but at the end of the day, what's gonna matter most? Them and their pride, you know how they made you feel, or you and yours...cause you're the one that's gotta sleep at night.

Mitchell points out that being harshly denigrated simply because of one's gender or race is extremely difficult. The deeper meaning in the comment made by Mitchell is that African Americans, who find themselves in such encounters, often do not expect the stereotypes to be where they are. There are some places where you just do not expect to hear a racial slur, and when it occurs, you tend to feel "sucker punched." If you are the target of such an incident, you

instinctively want to retaliate. Mitchell suggests that fighting back is just not worth relinquishing personal pride. Viewing racial slights and hostility from a different perspective, Otis, a senior stated:

I don't know how they view me, I don't know how this is gonna sound, but I really don't care how they view me. Because you know, I'm here for a reason, I'm here to succeed and so if you hate me because I'm trying to progress, then I guess I can only be glad that you're motivating me to keep going forward.

Incidents of racial disharmony among peers at Millennial University were not casually dismissed by the high-achievers. However, the willingness of the study participants to place the burden for changing the racial climate on their own shoulders was an unanticipated result. An example of the desire on the part of study participants to effect positive change in the racial climate at Millennial University is evident in study participant Cameron's Ghandi quote: "Be the change you want to see in the world."

During his enrollment at Millennial University, Cameron a senior first generation student, only a few weeks away from spring graduation, actually experienced the words he quoted from Ghandi. To date, Cameron is one of only a few African American male undergraduate students to have been inducted into one of the highly elite all White Honorary Societies at Millennial University. Cameron is but one example of what might be described as quiet sociocultural and political activism. In regard to effecting change at Millennial University, the high-achievers discussed pockets of structured and unstructured activism already underway.

Coming from a very small rural hometown, Cameron enrolled at Millennial University as a first generation freshman with a composite ACT score of 28 and a determination to effect change. His achievement represents a significant challenge to at least one long standing cultural tradition and ritual. During 2010 Honors' Week events, Cameron successfully tapped another African American male into the elite all White honorary society that he obtained membership in

during his junior year. Many of the high-achieving African American undergraduate males in this study identified several cultural traditions and rituals at Millennial University that have been specifically targeted for change. In another example: Journalism major, Casey expects to become editor of the school newspaper when new officers are named in the spring.

Study group members perceived themselves as being targets for marginalization because restrictive limits denied them participation in a range of campus activities and organizations. From the perspective of the study group, Caucasian peers did not appear to have the same or similar restrictions. Many African American male high-achievers tended to think that Caucasian students had the option to freely participate in any campus activity or organization of their choice. The students observed that it seemed that their Caucasian peers did not have to abide by campus rules in the same manner as African American students.

Fred, a junior enrolled at Millennial University with a 29 ACT composite score. Both of his parents are college graduates. His father, having earned an MBA has the highest level of education in the household. Fred contends that his views in regard to multiculturalism and multiracialism are different. About this outcome he states:

I guess it would be different because of a different outlook... I'm generally...an easy going guy, try to get to know people...not really be hostile...If you come in and try to be hostile or feel like...the world's trying to get you...just come here and say this is a good opportunity to prove myself.

When study participants were asked to describe interactions with same race and majority race peers at Millennial University many reported having had a combination of experiences that were sometimes positive and at other times, ranged from mildly negative to extremely negative. Interactions between African American and Caucasian students were described by the group as having “an upside and a downside.” A few comments from participants illuminate their points of view:

Roy, a senior with a 3.4 grade point average is an honors scholarship student. Roy enrolled at Millennial University with a 1300 SAT score and reports that since his enrollment he has experienced only good times and good friendships. He also indicated that his good times and good friendships involved mostly Caucasian peers. Roy's experiences at Millennial are in the category of the "upside" that the students described as positive peer interactions. Sentiments expressed by Roy are reflected in the following statement:

It's been nothing but positive, like there's not that many problems, all the people I know are really good people, really diverse, even though you don't particularly think of that for this school. But, so far, nothing but good times with the teachers and also the students.

Even though Roy expressed that his experiences at Millennial were all positive and that peer interactions were primarily with White students, by no means was Roy alone in having experienced positive peer interactions with Caucasian students. Other students in the study also reported having positive interactions with Caucasian peers. However, in contrast to the experiences described by Roy, other students also reported having had many harshly negative encounters with Caucasian peers at Millennial University. A few of their stories give insight into these "upside and downside" interactions. Bob, a first generation sophomore with a 3.6 grade point average observed:

It's been up and down...it's truly been an experience...I give you my trust and respect until you lose it, but other than that, my experiences with my peers have been great cause I feel like with the different organizations I'm a part of, I can actually work with them and they listen and yeah, I can't complain.

Casey, a junior with a 3.7 grade point average stated:

I'm really involved on campus, I was a reporter for the student newspaper and I started my own publication this year, it's like a focus on different campus issues. We did one about race last year and we did one about the social impact of football here, and we're doing one on religion this month. So I guess mainly my journalism is the way I found my biggest connection to this school.

Jesse, a sophomore with a 3.0 grade point average commented:

I hang out with whoever I hang out with...I have Caucasian friends, I have Asian friends, I build a network...I do have some African Americans who helped me through times.

The range of experiences described in the stories of these students' reflect the "upside and downside" of Millennial University as viewed by the study group. By acknowledging both the positive and the negative interactions participants found ways to cope with the cultural challenges of being marginalized, viewed suspiciously, or being ignored, made to feel invisible and treated as an imposter. As an institution steeped in long-standing cultural traditions and rituals, considered by many to be sacrosanct; Millennial University is not an institution viewed by many as welcoming to students of color.

High-achieving African American males who were frequently subjected to the "downside" of campus life tenaciously believed in their ability to endure the cultural challenges at Millennial University. A thread consistently woven into the stories of the students' was an individual and collective determination to be winners. This point of view was reflected in a statement made by Joel, a first generation student with sophomore status: He states:

I wanna succeed, I want to be successful and I have a path, well the path that I have...and the foundation that I'm laying for myself...this is a university, people tell you you're gonna get all types of personalities, all types of ideas, all types of everything when you come to a university this size. And you should be ready and prepared for this type of stuff.

Few topics engender more heated debate than those of racial/ethnic diversity and multiculturalism. In more recent years, gender orientation has reached par with the aforementioned contentious issues. As the students in the study openly shared their lived experiences, discussions included all of the social structures referenced here. Another statement by student Joel is indicative of the openness that students' feel to express themselves when they perceive the environment to be positive—the upside. Student Joel, a 3.4 grade point average sophomore remarks:

First, I think we should cater to a more diverse surrounding...in the southeast most everything is race based...since you asked about the cultural thing, there's always this stigma, or in the African American community about homosexuals...Yeah, I'm gay. You're always constantly judged...some of my friends know and some don't, and some are curious, but they won't ask me...let's not discriminate about something so trivial...people do what they want to do, it's their life, let them live it.

Many study participants often talked about their success in spite of the gender, social and racial barriers they encountered. These barriers were found to be burdensome and at times hindered opportunities for the high-achieving African American undergraduate males to enjoy a typical collegiate experience. Study participants described a typical collegiate experience as being free of gender, race and class barriers. Socioeconomic class barriers were deemed to be especially challenging for the study participants. A few of their stories give insight into how these barriers were viewed and sometimes challenged:

Many of the African American high-achievers viewed the campus as being controlled by a clique of wealthy Greek affiliated Caucasian students with longstanding legacy at Millennial University. The following statement by Casey, a junior illustrates this point:

People are really segregated, and there's a lot of tension and divisions. I think the Greek system is a big part of it... it seems like a lot of rich White privileged people...control the Student Government and stuff like that. I just think this situation engenders a lot of division and resentment among lots of people... I've seen a lot of really sharp divisions here.

Sean, a junior with a 3.3 grade point average and is non-Greek affiliated made this observation:

I feel like we defacto segregate ourselves in...in a lot of ways, in a lot of situations. And also there's the thing where people, you know most people aren't really overly outgoing so to say...there's sometimes people are in these groups and they don't mix the groups and I don't know why that doesn't happen a lot but, that is very true. I see a lot of clusters of groups.

Through engaging dialogue members of the study group revealed a keen awareness of the sociocultural, socioeconomic and sociopolitical value that potentially comes from multiracial and multicultural interactions. However, this group contended that the burden of bridging gaps in

peer interaction at Millennial University rests mostly on the shoulders of African American students. Participants in the study acknowledged a common belief that it is the responsibility of high-achieving African American males to bridge and build more positive multiracial interactions between students of color—particularly African Americans, and their Caucasian collegiate peers. A couple of their comments confirm this point of view:

Cameron, a senior Greek affiliated 3.0 grade point average engineering major had this to say:

I grew up in a rural small town and been faced with the same issues all of my life...I saw deceit so much and I saw unacceptance of Black people so much...the first thing clicking in my little head is racism...but you know, it's gonna take people like me who were raised differently to venture out and that's what I'm doing. I'm doing it slowly but surely, but I'm doing it.

Fred, a 3.0 grade point average junior science major commented:

You know, we can't expect them to make the first move...sometimes we have to go sit at the table. I think in order for there to be change there has to be a lot of individual effort. Just help people, go over and say "hey, can I sit here with you guys, and hey do you guys want to come to this thing?" I think the more that we do that and create like a dialogue, the easier it will be.

In addition to thinking that to achieve positive interracial peer interactions, many of the high-achieving African American males suggested that they must lead the way. Views expressed by most of the students in the study group support the notion that before meaningful diverse interactions might be achieved; African American males must first prove themselves to be academically and socially viable in the culture of Millennial University. Toward achieving this outcome, student Fred made the following point:

You kind of have to make your academic presence known, especially at Millennial to get your respect factor, and once you get that respect factor you can venture off amongst the races...once they see a Black man with a mind and a Black man who is hard working that's different than your cultural norm. And so there's more, how do you say? I guess they are more accepting of that individual; they're more willing to listen at that point.

In some cases, students readily acknowledged that progress, in terms of race relations, has been slow in coming to Millennial University, but progress was indeed being made. Willingness on the part of study participants to assume the burden of responsibility to improve multiracial relations is a component of identity development among high-achieving African American males. These high-achievers view their academic success and their wholesome characteristics as individual traits that invalidate many commonly held stereotypes about African American people—particularly African American males.

In this regard, the students detailed their thoughts about what Millennial University is now, and how authentic diversity will impact Millennial University in the future. Some of their thoughts are reflected in the following statements: Student Bob, a sophomore observed:

I just feel like in our everyday lives...we need cohesiveness from all parties involved. If you have Black White, Latino and all these races going to one institution, you need all of their inputs to get a valid output for I guess the group as a whole.

Cameron, a senior studying chemical engineering interjected:

We're a student population, groups who are seeking out diversity...and that are at the table of discussion right now...that's on the university's agenda... how do we achieve diversity? So we're bringing in different students from this realm of campus...we're putting them all at the same table and they're interchanging ideas...and we're going to formulate them into a way so it's presentable to administration to make change.

Fred, a junior Biology major followed up Cameron's statement with this thought.

The university may not be actively pursuing diversity, but the more people who are diverse who come to the campus...they'll go back and say 'hey this place isn't so bad after all' ...and I think the more we branch out ...out of ourselves, out of what we're used to, you know the diversity issue on campus is kind of on its own.

John, a senior chemical engineering major stated:

Disregarding the racial tension...we're all trying to get that "A"...we're all trying to go to grad school or med school or find a job. I've always said I wonder what it would be like to come back...as a White male and just see how the college experience could be like.



Shifting his thoughts away from a personal context, John remarked:

I feel like this is not the end all, be all...Millennial University is not the most prestigious, so it doesn't carry that much weight outside of our region...I'm not gonna stop here, I'm going out into the world, maybe get a graduate degree...from a more prestigious university that is more open-minded. And then you know, I can start affecting the world on a mass scale, and even come back here, because that school will carry more weight than Millennial in our region.

### *Summary*

Peer interactions are a critical component in the developmental processes that college students experience as undergraduates. Among high-achieving African American males attending a predominantly White institution, these interactions are often complex. The high-achievers often face cultural challenges that blur the path between same race peer interactions, majority race peer interactions and a desire to maintain their own personal and cultural identities.

Peer interactions among high-achieving African American males were further complicated due to lack of a critical mass of African American students in the general population. This coupled with an even smaller sub-population of same race male high-achievers added another layer of cultural challenges. The high-achieving African American males at Millennial University usually found themselves interacting in varying ways between multiracial peer and gender groups. For most of the high-achievers, peer interactions were in a state of frequent change. The students generally viewed these changes as opportunities to learn about themselves and grow into a better understanding of others.

### *Acting White and Stereotype Threat*

As they seek to obtain a higher education, many high-achieving African American male undergraduates face formidable obstacles. Frequently, these obstacles are the products of racial intolerance, incivility and discriminatory practices that often emanate from fear and ignorance.

“Acting White” is a moniker associated with academically talented African American students who either sabotage or hide their accomplishments to maintain social acceptance.

To say that a high-achieving African American student is “Acting White” constitutes a form of taunting relevant to a perceived denial of one’s heritage. It is important to examine this concept in light of its bearings on the current study group. After all, theoretically, it is this group that is most often faced with the accusation.

Study participants dismissed the claim of “Acting White” from collegiate level endeavors. Some students acknowledged having been dubbed as “acting white” during their middle and early high school years. Most study participants were familiar with the term and its meaning. Few acknowledged having had direct encounters with being personally described in this manner since middle school and perhaps during their high school years. Some comments from the study participants exemplify their points of view: Jesse, a pre-Business sophomore stated:

It really helps me to see Obama in power simply because it’s always a negative stereotype for African Americans, particularly males to be intelligent...When I was growing up I was always told I was “acting white” or either betraying my race...because I like diverse things. I spoke with a proper accent, etc. and I got a bad rap for it growing up.

Ben, a sophomore, Computer Technology major, with a 3.9 grade point average noted:

That stuff, I don’t hear that anymore, I think people, especially at this age have gotten over that...now that I think back to middle school...I went to an all Black middle school...it’s not the cool thing to do to other peers in those lower level grades...I guess a lot of people would try to be a certain way to fit in with peers...you don’t want to change who you are because of something that immature.

Study participants mostly dismissed the phenomenon of “acting white” from any aspects of their current collegiate lives. They contended that this phenomenon most often occurred

during pre and early adolescent stages in their school years. Jim, a sophomore provides this perspective:

I see another group who are...who seem like they're very focused, but it seems like they're being, they're trying too hard, to not only break the stereotype of African Americans but to fit in with the Caucasians. Like they're trying to be just like them and I see that as a problem because I feel like you can't forget where you came from...there's nothing wrong with the way we are, you know, we're just different.

Perhaps over time behavior modifications among some high-achieving African American students in a PWI lead them to subconsciously think that their interactions with Caucasian peers were not equivalent to the phenomenon of "acting white." It is interesting to note that study group thoughts about the "acting white" phenomenon were slightly mixed. Regarding this phenomenon of "acting white" a White male faculty member stated:

I know a student from an urban area in the state who is distinctly comfortable in interracial settings. I see this student actively making an effort to be around people of like interests. I see a guy who I think is every bit as able as other students to talk positively about his African American identity, his African American heritage. He has every bit as much interest in pursuing from a scholarly angle those aspects of his identity. I suspect in a wholly African American group this is a kid to never be accused of "acting white."

Acting White, as viewed by many study participants was not a current issue of consequential concern.

### *Stereotype Threat*

Stereotype threat, on the other hand, was an issue with stinging presence in the current lives of high-achieving African American undergraduate males at Millennial University. Study participants spoke with emotion filled descriptions about having to deal with stereotypes and the threat of stereotypes on a daily basis. Students described their reactions to stereotyping in a manner that indicated a compelling desire to single-handedly over-achieve to disprove the stereotypes. This point is exemplified in comments by Jerry, a sophomore with a 3.7 cumulative grade point average. He states:

That's been my number one thing since I was a little kid. I always, my mom always told me to be the best, I have to work the hardest and there was always going to be somebody working harder than me, so I have to. I feel like with the academics, it goes back to the whole pride thing, I feel like if as African American students at this university, if we do not excel, if we're not meeting the expectations then we are living up to the stereotypes I guess of not being able to finish and not taking it serious, and I just want, I guess something inside of me that wants to prove that wrong, prove that stereotype wrong...that we are not all quitters, or we are all not going to give up on something and I think that's kind of what I try to share with my friends is that when, especially, as young African Americans we have opportunities like this we have to make the most of them.

Mitchell, a senior who transferred from a junior college to Millennial University had this to say about stereotype threat:

Oh yes, most definitely, they're not going anywhere...no matter how hard we fight. It's too big of a part of our history for it just to be up and gone like that. This world wouldn't know how to handle it...I mean as much as we push for it to be zero absolute non-tolerance, it's gonna be around. It's a sad state, it's becoming the norm. We don't expect it...if you're the minority; you're going to feel like an outcast.

Otis, a senior Secondary Education major with a 3.1 grade point average stated:

I came in as a freshman...I didn't experience any racial backlash or anything, but just the stereotypes...I got a lot of comments about being an athlete and I wasn't involved in anything on campus involving athletics...just stereotype, but hey, if a guy, a Black guy, he's here to play basketball, football, etc., if not, I don't know why he is here.

These stories about stereotypes and stereotype threats are alarmingly reminiscent of times when the lives of African American males were often in peril. The perilous conditions for these men existed simply because of their race and their gender. Oftentimes the unfortunate circumstance of being a convenient target of someone's folly or someone's hatred cost many African American males their lives.

Experiences relevant to racial interactions, learning and the entire collegiate experience influence the lives of high-achieving African American males in myriad ways. Stereotypes and stereotype threats have painfully impacted the lives of African Americans in general, and particularly African American males. When faced with a racial stereotype threat, African

American males—as the target of such threats—are often compelled to make a decision relative to behavioral responses.

The following comment by Jesse, regarding an invitation to a fraternity party helps illustrate this point. Jesse, a sophomore non-Greek affiliated 3.0 grade point average business major tells a story that demonstrates concern for personal safety resulting from perceived stereotype threat: He comments:

I was hanging out with some Caucasian friends...playing video games and one of the girl's I knew, her boyfriend comes in and tells us we're gonna go to a party on Old Row... I was a little nervous, and she kind of looks up and says 'are you sure you wanna take him with us?'...He explains that he had to get...permission first, but they would indeed let me in...I went and even though I went, I texted two of my African American friends and explained to them, 'hey guys, I'm going to a party on Old Row, if I don't show up tomorrow to where I'm supposed to be, call someone, I may be in trouble.

Unfortunately, Jesse's story is fairly common among African American males attending Millennial University. The action taken by Jesse to call and place two of his African American friends on alert that he may be in danger if he did not return from a party at a White fraternity house is indicative of the prevalence of racial stereotyping. Further, Jesse's story substantiates why many African American males attending Millennial University must often decide to initiate, engage in or withdraw from social interactions based on the perceived level of threat that stems from these horribly misguided beliefs. In some measure, an underlying rationale for high-achieving African American undergraduate males to seek out relationships with similarly high-achieving same race peers may simply be that these relationships; though sometimes difficult to establish in a PWI; are less intimidating and far more self affirming.

Several students described racial stereotype encounters experienced either on the campus or in the community near the campus of Millennial University. Bob, a first generation full scholarship sophomore shared this story:

Recently I was in a conversation with just a random Caucasian woman. I forgot where I was, but I told her I went to Millennial University and she was like, “Oh, so you play football.” And I kind of looked at her and chuckled and I didn’t get mad, but I was like no mam, I’m actually on academic scholarship. She looked at me, and that’s when she caught herself and ...said, “Well you know what, you know that is good, you know I’m proud of you, you keep this up.” But it was funny that the first thing she assumed was I gotta be playing ball...out hitting somebody in football or something.

By expressing his concern for having been stereotyped, Bob was exhibiting an element of stereotype threat. Depending on the individual, the impact of stereotype threat will vary.

Potentially, an individual may react by questioning their identity. A stereotype threat encounter may cause one to question self-esteem, or in more extreme cases students may completely withdraw from social interactions with majority race peers. The emotional and mentally exacting toll that racial and gender stereotyping has on students of color potentially leads to more debilitating forms of maladaptive behavior.

An example of the psychological impact of stereotype threat is reflected in the following statement made by Journalism major Casey:

I feel like if the administration wanted to address the issue, then they could, but, I feel like sort of the psychological problems with that...it creates a lot of issues beyond the scope of what it is.

A student more positively confident about his personhood and intellectual abilities will likely feel less threatened by such encounters. However, even among students who are less threatened by encounters with stereotypes and stereotype threat, there are still ramifications that negatively impact a variety of coping skills. First generation high-achieving student Kyle had this to say about stereotypes:

There are a lot of positives, but there are also the negatives. Being when you walk around certain places like the dining halls and stuff and you see these stereotypes that you’re at a predominantly White university and people already have this preconceived notion of you...it shouldn’t be stressful, but you shouldn’t let a stereotype define you and you shouldn’t let trying to avoid being the stereotypical image define you either.

Among this vanguard group of high-achieving African American males at predominantly White Millennial University, the over-riding push for achievement seemed to have some alignment with stereotype threat. However, more significant for this group was their ongoing push to be treated as respected, successful, and contributing citizens in the campus community. The resiliency and the strength of this subpopulation were strongly grounded in family, and community support networks. The emotional fervor of this perspective is reflected in Jim's comment:

The reason why I find myself...pushing harder and harder is because I don't wanna be a statistic, and in my neighborhood a lot of people don't make it to college; let alone a top college. And for me to be here it's a great opportunity, and I don't wanna let people down...So when people talk to me I wanna show them...African Americans' just as smart as you are...we can do what you can do the same or better.

Religion was also frequently cited as a sustaining force for many study participants. These support networks provoked within the students a steel willed drive to overcome racial stereotype threat, as well as gender inequities that may jeopardize their zeal to achieve. In regard to students of color, particularly African Americans, the participants were highly cognizant that Millennial University does not have a history of being a welcoming institution. A few comments from the study group reflect their thoughts about the Millennial University environment and its impact on African Americans.

Ben, a senior computer technology major with a 3.9 grade point average remarked:

Well I think they are making a really good stride in the right direction to get rid of the negative stuff from their past, so I think it's kind of hard to define the culture.

Cameron, a senior chemical engineering major with Greek Affiliation concluded:

I wasn't so centered on the cultural identity of Millennial University more than I was the academic pull of the university...they supplemented my decision with scholarship aid...recently I feel somewhat disenfranchised...and to me Millennial is focused on a superficial image...you have to be the cultural norm here to get...proper recognition.

Jerry, a 3.7 grade point average sophomore, Management and Marketing major said:

You hear a lot of stories about how it was in the 60s and 70s and my mom and all my family still tell me stories...I went to a predominantly White high school...my mom used to always tell me...you're one of the few Black kids here and they're not gonna expect you to do well, and if you're not doing well, they're not going to help you...you have to be smarter than everybody.

Jerry continued his story with this comment:

I did that...made all "A's" ... and I was the first African American male to graduate valedictorian from my high school. And that day for me was probably— except for being accepted here, I think it was one of the best days of my life because I got to stand up and say, I made it, I worked hard, I beat the odds.

Viewing Millennial University in a historical context seemed to bring about a tone of disappointment among many study participants. Admittedly, some of that history has carried forth to the present day. It seemed that when students verbalized the historical context of racism and the relevance of this phenomenon to their present day circumstances, it was painfully clear that racism at Millennial University is still having an eroding effect on the lives of African Americans

#### *Caucasian Male and African American Male Peer Interactions*

The lived experiences of this group of high achieving African American male collegians represent a quest for self-identity, a quest to give voice to their concerns, a quest for true diversity and inclusiveness, a quest for equanimity, a quest for recognition, and a quest to maintain interactions with "like-minded" African American males and other high-achievers at Millennial University. When asked to describe Caucasian male and African American male peer interactions, many study participants mostly considered their interactions to be generally diverse. For example, Ben a sophomore with a 3.9 grade point average remarked:

I meet more African Americans every day, or every semester, I guess. I have met some that are just as driven as me. But, I would say it's the majority that is not as outward going as I am.



Roy, a full scholarship Greek affiliated senior observed: “They’re trying to be more diverse, to get a more cultural melting pot.”

Many of the study participants described racial diversity, and social interactions with Caucasian males to be limited in scope. Roger recounts a couple of incidents depicting negative social interactions between some Caucasian males and African American males. Roger, a sophomore studying accounting described incidents that took place at a Greek fraternity party:

At some parties you’ll go to...that are not a colored fraternity or sorority; they won’t tell you when you come through the door...But your White friends that you’re with, they’ll probably come up to them... “Hey, we don’t want Black people in our party.” And then our friends get offended about it...and they’ll come up and tell us, “Hey man, let’s go ahead and go.”...They don’t wanna tell you.

Roger continues to describe another incident that took place at a White fraternity event:

Another incident...on campus...one non-Black fraternity got upset and...they started getting into it with football team players...and called one of them, just called him the N word out of the blue...I don’t know about anybody else, but when I hear it coming from another culture...it’s really offensive...it gets my blood boiling. The football player was offended too, and he just knocked him out, like cold...right out there in the street.

About this situation, Jeff, a 3.7 sophomore studying Mechanical Engineering interjected:

Know what to expect, like don’t go in an area where conflict could arise...interacting with a White person. Don’t put yourself in an environment where you could be in danger. And pretty much just think smart, like because I mean, I’ve seen examples of people being profiled and I know, alright if something’s going on here, I don’t want to be in that area...So pretty much try to keep myself out of harm’s way.

Pursuant to interactions with Caucasian males, Mitchell a Business major stated:

I work in bars...I do security, so I see a lot of different people, mostly White. White boys, you know... they’re gonna interact with me for privileged reasons...try to get in or something, but if they see me in class or in the recreation center...you know they are with their friends, they try to shade me out.

Jerry, a 3.7 grade point average sophomore gives another perspective relative to interactions with Caucasian males at Millennial University. He states:

It is challenging especially when... like friends I knew from high school that came here. They're all Caucasian and they're older than me...I hang out with them...and sometimes I run into situations and people just looking at you funny or you can tell people are making comments behind your back.

Jerry somberly concludes:

They're cool guys...they wouldn't put me in that situation...I guess you just have to deal with it. Cause violence is a banter and I react with violence, then I'll hit another stereotype...so I just have to be level headed and remember what the ultimate goal is.

Not all encounters with Caucasian males were so intensely negative. For example, John a senior studying chemical engineering described what he believes to be a life-long friendship with a fellow Christian Caucasian brother. According to John this friendship extends beyond campus life and into personal life experiences—experiences such as vacationing together, trading holiday visits between their families, and just engaging in activities that friends who respect each other usually do. About his friendship, John stated:

The guy I was roommates' with my freshman year, we're not roommates anymore, but we still hang out. We're still really good great friends.

About interactions with African American males, many of the high-achievers indicated that they most often interacted with other African American males when working out in the recreation center. Jerry stated:

I see a lot of guys when I go to the weight room and work out, stuff like that, so that's usually how I associate or interact with other African American men.

Bob, a first generation full scholarship student followed up with this comment:

Many African American males not in the high-achiever category often get really caught up with the Greek lifestyle. I just wonder if it is really worth it; it just depends on the organization and the friends you get within that organization.

Students in the study group expressed a desire to have a structured way to meet and interact with same race high-achieving African American males whom they referred to as “like-minded students.” They suggested that Millennial University is so large and there are so few

African American males in attendance that it is difficult to meet fellow high-achievers. Many students indicated that being involved in this study provided them a bonus. The bonus was getting to know other high-achieving African American students that until now, they did not know. Sean, a junior commented:

I run into other high-achieving African American males, but we don't get to hang out a whole lot... There's so few of us...we're all in different fields, so it feels like we're the islands in this big field. But...I do find myself around these people a lot. And that brings up another problem, another perception issue that once upon a time was an identity issue, but what's now kind of a self-esteem related issue.

Participant comments suggest a strong desire to interact more frequently with other high-achieving African American males. The problem is in finding a way to get these students together. When not in class or working on class assignments or special projects, most students are highly engaged, in campus, community service and other volunteer activities. In regard to having a place for minority student interaction, Leo, a sophomore non-Greek affiliated student made this observation:

I think one of the major things I've seen...at one of our rival universities is...minorities have a place, and I'm talking about a building, not just an office, I'm talking about a building that says, 'Hey this is your minority center' and not necessarily segregated...because to an extent that has...gives and takes. ...A building shows effort that...we're trying to have somewhere where you can get things you need.

#### *Campus Leadership and Organizational Affiliations*

A consistent theme discussed throughout this study was the exclusion of African American students from high profile student leadership positions at Millennial University. With few exceptions, most of the organizations were primarily made up of Caucasian students. It is important to note that some of the African American male high-achievers cited a financial need to work as their reason for not being more involved in student organizations, and seeking organizational leadership roles. The following comment by Jim, a sophomore illustrates this point:

I'm always working, like I have two jobs and that is really stressful and I am struggling in school still at this point, so if I could change one thing it'd be...that some kind of way, the university would be able to get me better financial help.

Jim continues:

And that would lead to me making my second point, which means I would be able to branch out more, do more things, you know, go to little community service events and stuff, or when they have little things like jazz night, do different things that I've never really experienced before and be able to go and experience that and I think that would help me grow culturally.

Before crossing the bridge into active participation in leadership roles, and membership in fraternal organizations at PWIs, students of color— particularly African American males— must carefully consider how well anchored they are with their own identity and self-confidence. Having a high-profile presence in a predominantly White institution can be either socially and culturally affirming or bitterly disappointing. The specter of rejection, based simply on matters of race and gender may prove to be emotionally, mentally and psychologically damaging. A constant barrage of “in your face” racism may induce long-term traumatic stress that has been known to lead to debilitating emotional and physical illnesses.

The lack of a critical mass of African American students at Millennial University limits important support networks that are central to same race peer involvement. About this need for same race peer interaction Casey, a junior with a 3.7 grade point average commented:

I think they should do more to reach out to high-achieving minorities, or maybe create a system for them to ... like meet each other, cause this is a really big school, so I think it is hard for high-achieving minorities to cross paths...I'm the only Black person in my whole program, there's about 60 people now...I think it would be difficult for them to want to engage in that environment. More networking or community for high-achieving minorities would be really good.

Larry, a senior non-Greek affiliated Interdisciplinary Studies student observed:

If there were more successful...Black leaders...in the university and in the community, and cities around here that could definitely change people's outlooks...it's just that the

scale isn't large enough to counterbalance our 200 or so years of history of White male leadership.

Charles, a non-Greek affiliated junior with a 3.4 grade point average remarked:

I felt like... I wasn't selected for the position or to join a certain organization in the SGA...because of my background. I think it's common, I really do believe that it's common. Because the SGA is one of those more...selective organizations on campus, so I feel like basically if you're not Greek, then you're not gonna be in one of those higher positions.

Prior to enrolling at Millennial University, many study participants discussed how they were active leaders and maintained membership in a number of organizations while in high school. From their perspective it was completely reasonable to expect to continue these activities in college. In this regard Joel stated:

I would like to be able to feel like I could get involved in, in a lot, in particular organizations...without having to have a certain background...at this university, I actually can't do that. I was involved a lot at high school...I knew immediately that coming to college I would want to be involved in as much as possible. But also, I will want to select particular organizations that would complement my interests.

The disappointment for many high-achieving African American males enrolled at Millennial University is that racial and gender barriers often deny them opportunities to have a voice at the table. According to Cameron, a senior, "You have to establish yourself in the academic realm in order to be a voice at the table... One gentleman told me before, if you don't sit at the head table, you don't have a voice."

In many cases these high-achievers did not expect to have to navigate racial and gender barriers to realize their dreams of being active leaders and affiliates in many of the prestigious campus organizations at Millennial University. Addressing this concern, Fred a junior stated:

I've thought about it, you know pursuing leadership positions on campus, nothing as high as, you know the president or anything, but just something that you know I can use my experiences and some of my knowledge to better the campus. So whatever forms of leadership I can do...I'd like to do that.

Heart wrenching disappointments were expressed when study participants talked about having worked long and hard for campus representation, only to have their hopes dashed. In typical form the students took on the role of finding a solution. To this outcome, Joel suggested:

Get more reputable organizations geared toward the minority population...with some of these groups it's not that big of a number of African American students trying out for those organizations because they already have this preconceived notion that I'm not gonna make it because of my skin color and it is not based on my merit, it's based on what color I am.

Many students in the study group expressed frustration with not being able to be involved in what they perceived to be prestigious leadership roles in highly visible campus organizations.

Calling more attention to the perceived problem, Charles, a political science major stated:

A huge thing that I want them to understand is that a lot of the more selective organizations need to be more diverse. Because those, those organizations are the organizations that represent the campus the most...okay, and I just feel like it's unfair for these organizations to look like this when the campus doesn't exactly look like that. So that's one thing that I stress.

In an effort to address longstanding racial and gender barriers, study participants devised a plan to orient and groom younger African American students. The core of the plan requires teaching younger students how to develop credentials that will give them a competitive edge when seeking campus leadership roles and participation in prestigious campus organizations. To achieve this outcome, Roy stated:

We're trying to bring a connection with the younger students who may not know about certain stuff on campus and certain stuff about their major. So if I could do it over, I would try to get more involved and try to be more in a leadership position.

The high-achievers have begun discussions among within group organizations that give them opportunities to express themselves by providing service to others. Additionally, these within group alliances enhance personal growth, development and identity confirmation. The study participants believe that through a network of support from strong mentors, and campus

administrators they will achieve two outcomes frequently discussed in their stories: (1) be an on-campus resource and mentoring group to incoming freshmen, (2) continue their current efforts to work with campus administrators to reduce— if not eradicate campus politics of exclusion.

According to the study group, exclusionary politics practiced by a small minority of elite White Greek Organizations preclude the participation of students of color.

The students lamented conditions that allow this much control by a selective group of Caucasian students. Cameron, a senior, indicated that a small group of multiracial students were already engaged in discussions with campus administrators to directly address the issue of minority student exclusion from leadership roles in high profile campus organizations. Regarding preparation and support for leadership opportunities, some members of the study group discussed approaches they are using. For example, student Rob, a Greek affiliated sophomore with a 3.6 grade point average stated:

I'm actually in the process of working into a leadership role for possibly next semester, it's called Discipleship Class. All the members have to go through that class if they want to establish a leadership role.

Cameron, a Greek affiliated senior stated:

Recently we've been having a lot of round table discussions, with the administrators here. They take the best and brightest from every realm of campus and every ethnic background and kind of put them together in one room, we share ideas and we talk about these things openly. And I think that's the first step.

### *Summary*

In this section I examined peer interactions as experienced by high-achieving African American male undergraduates at Millennial University; a PWI located in the southeastern United States. Caucasian Americans constitute the majority student population of over 25,000. In this section, peer interaction themes included: general peer interactions, peer interactions in regard to “Acting White” and “Stereotype Threat” and in the final section peer interactions from

the perspective of Leadership and Organizational Affiliations were addressed. Stories from the study group members enriched and made real the many cultural challenges faced by high-achieving African American males in a predominantly White institution.

### *Family and Community Support Networks*

Many African American families, and indeed the communities in which they live, often form interconnected bonds of support for African American college students. When the students in this study talked about their families and communities, their words echoed a spirit of reverence. Their voices also echoed a spirit of solace for all who had touched their lives in a positive way. Few of the students in the study were from nuclear families. In many cases, extended family members— aunts, uncles, grandparents, and single mothers— formed the family foundation. When asked to identify their strongest personal network of support, every student identified a female relative. For example, with a quick and easy smile, study participant Mitchell, a senior, non-Greek affiliated operations management major stated:

I am a momma's boy and I was raised by my mom. My dad, you know was in and out of the jail system, hardly ever seen him, hardly even knew him. When he was around, he wasn't around—it was him and the bottle; not ever him...My mom is such a strong individual and if one person is to look like a model...it would be my mom. I look back ...when she worked 12 hours here, 18 hours here and never complained.

Often the mother was deemed to be the most vital person in the lives of the students—even when the father was present in the home. Secondarily, students indicated that aunts and grandmothers were the most stabilizing and supportive forces in their lives. In some cases, students had out-of-home relationships with their fathers. Others had positive relationships with the father in the home, but the maternal entity in the family was clearly central in the lives of this group of high-achieving African American males.



Some study participants described the main risk factor in their lives as the absent father figure. Often students without the consistent presence of a father in the home looked to uncles, neighbors and school personnel to ground them in personal and academic development during their early years. Cameron, a Greek affiliated senior passionately stated:

A lot of us take on the roles of men in the house at age three and four...that plays into it a lot. I've always had the mindset that I need to work, I need to help my mother, she can't pay for school... You know, you really never had anyone to teach you how to be a man...so you found other examples. I found examples in my uncle, my next door neighbors...I had a father every now and then... my father was not always there.

Many students cited the absolute necessity for them to excel in school so that scholarships were not lost. The dire outcome of losing a scholarship meant that an already overly burdened single mother must now find the means to pay for school. Among this exceptionally talented study group there were many stories of personal struggle. Bob, a first generation full scholarship student stated:

My motivation came from my mother who worked for Chrysler and I'm sure you're well aware of all that stuff that was going on with cars...And so, seeing that I don't want to be stuck in that kind of position at any point in my life and I feel like with a higher education, not only can I prevent myself from going through that. Hopefully if I had a company or have a say so, I can help restructure things.

He goes on to say:

“You know, my mom can't pay for school so I need to get this 3.5 or higher to keep my scholarships.”

Losing a scholarship also meant that the student— if not already working one or more jobs—must now seek additional employment. Failure was deemed to not be an option for the study participants. Failure meant not only letting down oneself, but not fulfilling the expectations of a mother, an aunt, an uncle, grandparents, and in many cases former teachers who invested so

heavily in the success of the student. Exemplifying this point, Roger, a sophomore accounting major with a 3.3 grade point average stated:

Where I'm from not too many Blacks go too far in college...I never heard a positive story. Me graduating like at the top of my high school class, I was still kind of nervous, even though my classmates chose me as the most successful...I just didn't want to let my neighborhood down and I didn't wanna let down my family and my high school, so I always try to do good and try to stay on top of my work.

Many of the students expressed concern about deplorable circumstances in their hometowns where jobs were few and many friends were either unemployed, underemployed or already on a fast track to social degradation. Being a student at Millennial University—even with its shortcomings, was unquestionably a better alternative than losing a scholarship and not having the funds to remain in school. Joel, a first generation student enrolled at Millennial on full scholarship stated:

Small town, small ideas; people still think the same way. I've always lived there until last year when my mom got remarried, we moved...I was like yes, we're moving, but the place we moved to is the same as my hometown...I've already had the conversation with my mom...I will not be coming back here to live.

Jeff, a sophomore with a 3.7 grade point average commented:

When I was growing up my family was pretty poor and we actually ate government cheese, but my mom went back to school, ended up getting her degree in Child Psychology...recently she got a promotion and we all started to get healthcare so my mom actually had to pay out of her pocket to get us...dental and all that...sometimes she would be like...the promotion like put me further in debt.

For many high-achieving African American male students, the family, the extended family and the community serve as foundational support systems. Cameron eloquently described the strength of his mother, and talked about the influence of his neighbors, along with guidance from teachers and counselors that helped sustain him.

Cameron discusses the self-affirming benefit of having an African American male staff member pass him in the hallway, gently tap him on the shoulder and say "I'm proud of you

young man.” According to Cameron, interactions of this nature go a long way in helping high-achieving African American males not lose sight of their goals; even when faced with daunting odds and lonely paths.

When students experience inviting opportunities for leadership and engagement in out-of-class interactions on campus and in the local community they will likely successfully negotiate developmental stages that move them through adolescence and into adulthood. Student Cameron illustrates this point in the following statement:

I wasn't initially so forth going in reaching out, I was kind of quiet...sophomore year I joined a fraternity...that had an adverse effect on me...just being in the environment with a cohort of diverse Black men...you learn a lot about yourself...so I learned a lot of vital lessons...I started going back to diverse groups, and reconnecting with some of those individuals...I just got a better feel for who I was as a person...I like to be a positive individual, one who's driven, career focused, about helping others.

Another point of view relative to student development was expressed by student Roy, a 3.4 senior. He observes:

Class work is great and all, but besides class work you need to get out more, try to know the campus, get to know the community, get to know the administration, just a general working feeling of the campus and that's really necessary...to have success in college...make friends, try to be social, just don't try to do it by yourself and that's the biggest thing to be successful.

To facilitate this outcome, it is necessary for the PWI to establish an inclusive environment that is genuinely committed to diversity and multiculturalism. A genuinely supportive campus network helps to mitigate much of the alienation and isolation that high-achieving African American males experience at PWIs. Having such a network on campus is akin to having an extended family away from home. Regarding the extended family, sophomore Bob said:

From back home, my parents always call and check on me. My sister, we'll talk once or twice a week... both my grandfather and grandmother...Then I have God-parents and they always check on me...then I still have an older cousin...we'll do anything for each

other. So as far as ties with my family back home just talking, that's very strong, but the financial support from my family is still minimum. Basically, I pay my own way.

In a campus environment where high-achieving African American males struggle to find a niche, racial stereotypes, racial slurs and the daily slights become like sharp shards of glass that shred self-esteem, and reduce identity formation into miniscule ribbons of self doubt. In these circumstances the veneer of stamina needed to stay the course, and model the role of "man of the house" is often eroded. African American high-achievers in this type of environment lean more closely toward family and community support networks. Illustrative of the strength of community support networks is this story told by student Sean, a 3.3 non-Greek affiliated sophomore: He comments:

Community wise, it starts again with a lot of people really believing in me. That's definitely...been the most important to me because it kind of gives me some motivation. Maybe kind of feel like I'm not just working for myself...I'm working for this person who believes in me, and may not have had the opportunities that I had, or may have squandered the opportunities and see in me a person to avoid making...the same mistake.

As Sean is telling this story, he stops momentarily, and says, "Maybe I could explain this better with an example."

I have an internship in France at the Cannes Film Festival...and I definitely need a little bit of money to go...the people know that and they basically told me to just send them a letter and they would send the money...there's a willingness to support me monetarily...I feel like a lot of these people know that I'm gonna give back...I've expressed clearly that I want to...that community support is so emotional, its spiritual.

As it relates to family and community support networks, Sean's statement is emblematically linked to influential factors that are woven into the daily lives of many high-achieving African American males. These motivational factors that often drive this student population are directly tied to family and community networks in a manner that influences their achievement.

### *High-Achieving African American Males and Parental Expectations*

In matters relevant to higher education, it is not atypical for students and parents to have dissimilar views about the path to take. Whether they are high-achievers or not, students from time to time have to grapple with incongruous issues between what their parents expect them to do, as compared to what they want to do. The ultimate resolution is usually embedded in the educational goals of the student.

Throughout this study comments about parental and extended family support were frequently expressed. Even though many members in the family structure were not savvy in regard to collegiate experiences, they were however; exceedingly astute in understanding their desire to simply see their sons succeed. Casey commented:

My dad was always about, I guess, just like not...settling or being complacent cause sometimes when I would be, I guess in elementary school or middle school...I thought the coursework would be pretty easy and sometimes it would be so easy that I wouldn't try. I'd get bad grades...so he had pushed me really hard back then...it was more about, not necessarily...getting an "A" but just...put in your best effort...you know that's now a good thing.

Sean makes this statement about parental support:

Family wise I come from a broken home, not a broken home, but divorced parents, but both of them, when my mom and dad were married they determined to make sure that they brought me up in as positive a manner as possible...I have a really diverse family with a lot of...grass roots successful people in it.

Jeff, currently studying engineering at Millennial University, explained that his father had no understanding about his course of study—Jeff told the following story about a conversation with his father:

My dad...didn't know what an engineer did, he thought he drove the trains...And when I started going to school and said I'm majoring in that and he looked at what it was, he was like, 'oh man, I've been loving this my entire life...this would've been the job for me.' But instead he chose to go to the military cause he realized if he went to college he would have no interest in learning a foreign language or a liberal arts and all that.

Jeff spoke with tremendous pride about his conversation with his father—a father who does not have a college education, but one who is fully supportive of his son’s educational goals.

In ways that are frequently similar, fathers and mothers—often single mothers— make life-changing sacrifices to help their sons get a college education. Many of them do so with little understanding about the collegiate process. Hence, in many African American families the focus is not so much on education as it is on getting a college degree. There is rarely conflict about the course of study that the student pursues. Roy, a 3.4 Greek affiliated senior who is exploring graduate study states:

I am the first one in my immediate family to go to a four year university. My mom calls me every other day...I talk to my dad about once a week. I’m applying to grad school right now, I’m having a tough choice to decide which school I want to go to...they give me advice, but ultimately it’s your decision and we’ll support you whatever you decide to do.

Jeff, a 3.7 sophomore whose parents are not college graduates—discusses family support and how difficult it is to talk to his parents about some of his school experiences,

My parents...it’s kind of weird, because like it’s hard to talk to them about struggling in a class because it’s like, oh well, you need to study and buckle down and whatever. It’s hard because they are used to me from high school just acing every class, doing well...it’s kind of hard for them to kind of understand me not getting material and it’s not from me being lazy, it’s just me actually not getting it.

Often, students pressure themselves to maintain childhood promises to parents and other relatives. An example is noted in a story told by Leo: According to Leo, a friend confides in him that both his parents died when he was very young. The friend stated:

Before she died, I promised my mother that I would be an engineer, and now that I’m in school, that profession no longer appeals to me. I really like business and would like to change my major.

In an attempt to help his friend, Leo responded, “I’m sure that your mother would be pleased that you are disciplined enough to be in college getting any degree.”

As reported by Leo, a sophomore his self-perceived encouraging words were not persuasive. His friend continued to study engineering and during his spare time, he developed business plans. He may one day honor the dream of his mother and find his own happiness in the integrated domains of engineering and business. The following statement from an African American male administrator clarifies the focus of this latter point:

You know many of the programs we have, are created specifically to engage students and give them some ownership at the institution, however, those leadership opportunities are not viewed as critical to their academic success. They see things like employment, student organizations outside of Greek opportunities; all of those and their parents see those as distractions from the goal, and the goal is the stage—you know in May, you're going to walk across that stage and get that president to shake your hand. You know and not realize that the journey itself— as you talked about earlier—that it should not be a blank slate, it should not be an endurance run, it should not be weathering the storm and walking away, and going away broken and bitter.

Family networks for high-achieving African American male collegians are often complex. Family units on the one hand are very supportive and want nothing more than to have their sons achieve success. On the other hand, some family units—especially from first generation households tend to rely on the student to maintain a semblance of financial viability. In these circumstances, the diversion of student financial aid to the family back at home often necessitates the need for the student to take on two or more jobs to supplement their own financial needs.

While it is not the intent of the family to deter the education of the students; they unwittingly place them in situations of double jeopardy. In their attempt to help their economically struggling family, some first generation students in particular, become financially overextended. In many of these circumstances, academically promising students are often unable to maintain standards of academic progress. Additionally, because of work demands, many of these students miss vital opportunities to fully participate in the collegiate experience. High-

achiever Mitchell who works security detail in a local bar describes the struggles of his mother and his commitment to support her. He commented:

Yes, she does a lot, I mean, really, it's amazing for me to have been through what I've been through... but I've seen a lot through my life, just looking back at hers. I'm still thinking wow, how does she do it? I thought I had it all understood, how you could make it work, but I don't. She's still doing it and I don't know how, I really don't. All these ailments and sicknesses for her... And I'm like what will stop you, besides the obvious...what will slow you down? But she just goes on living, she just keeps pushing. She push, I'm gonna push.

In the comment that follows an African American Male Administrator at Millennial University adds a very real life perspective to the story told by Mitchell.

Many of these high-achieving African American males are from single parent homes and being men, you know, we are protectors, and you do what you have to do. And I think it does the student, especially males; a disservice, it puts them in a vulnerable position, because now they are having to carry the burden of the home life; the bread winner, when really what they want is to just be a kid.

Another perspective is provided by Bob, a sophomore full scholarship, first generation scholar. He states:

I think my mother would try to give to me if I ever asked her. She would take some shortcuts for herself...but I would never ask her, I would just try to handle it myself...I need to try to make my mother's life as stress free as possible. So I'll save money for her just in case something comes up...And then with my sister going to another university starting in fall, so that will be another bill for my parents.

### *Summary*

The focal point of this section is the importance of family and community as networks of support for high-achieving African American males. Comments made by most students in the study, indicate that they relied heavily upon their mothers as a pillar of strength and motivation. Even in cases where both parents were present in the home and positive relationships exist, the mother is often the dominant force.



Many study participants discussed the values that were instilled in them by parents, extended family members and supportive neighbors, as well as teachers and other school personnel. This inclusive array of support is reminiscent of the “village concept” in regard to raising a child. In the next section of chapter four the extent and manner in which religion plays a role in the lives of the participants are examined.

### *Religion*

A topic that is seldom discussed or researched in the circles of academe is the rich and dynamic heterogeneity that exists within the population of African American male collegians. Religious dimensions in the lives of these high-achievers were often extensive and intriguing. Study group members discussed the role that parents played in their early exposure to religion. Some students continue to actively participate in what they mostly described as Christianity. In some cases study participants integrated religion into their academic experiences at Millennial University and continued religious practices learned during childhood and early adolescence.

In other cases many students have moved away from the intense levels of religious involvement they were exposed to in their home life before college. Leo, a non-Greek affiliated sophomore with a 3.3 grade point average commented:

The role it plays is just keeping me focused...I have a strong faith support system...all my friends are Christians...I met some people of other religious faith and we just have open discussions. We talk about things we wish to overcome...that leads to a better...relationship with God and then God aiding us when we need Him...my faith keeps me safe...keeps me in when I should be studying and that's how it aides me in my experiences here at Millennial.

Some participants talked about childhood religious experiences that solidified a faith connection that is still important to them. However, there were others who expressed resentment relative to early childhood religious participation. In the latter case the students resented religious participation that was mandated by either their parents or guardians. This point is demonstrated

in the statement by study participant Jeff, a sophomore mechanical engineering student with a 3.7 grade point average. He comments:

My grandfather would take me to church every Sunday...church was a good hour...from where we lived...my relatives stayed...near the church...when we got out of church around 1:00-2:00, we'd visit them...I was kind of angry about that...now I kind... of act out against it..I read the Bible at times, but I don't really like going to church...I pretty much lost a day of my weekend...maybe I will grow out of it, I don't know.

In this study, when students were asked to identify personal support networks; their most consistent responses included: family, church and community. In a historical context, the church has played multiple roles in the lives of African Americans. In a contrasting manner the influence of religion may have at times been controlling, and at other times, liberating. The religious outcome in terms of influence was often contingent on the source in which the faith practice was grounded.

Religious practices among collegians from multiracial backgrounds at times serve as conduits for interracial interactions. An observation about religion and interracial interactions among high-achieving African American males and small clusters of Caucasian students was made by a White male faculty member. He states:

One thing that is interesting to me here at Millennial University is that occasionally one of the positive sites of interracial affirmation seems to be a certain evangelical cohort of non-denominational churches of one kind or another.

At least one student in the current study provided confirmation that his most positive interracial interactions at Millennial University have been experienced in multiracial Campus Crusade for Christ events. Study participant John who is heavily engaged in religious activities, including weekly and bi-weekly Bible study sessions told this story:

In my dorm, there were several organizations that held Bible studies each week. So I actually started going to one sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ and the leader noticed me and pitched the idea of me leading my own Bible Study; kind of leading under him. He gave me discipleship tools, and leader's guides and the second semester of

my freshman year he told me about an organization called the Impact Group, which is I guess an offspring of Campus Crusade for Christ but geared more toward African Americans, and I became a leader.

For some study participants the connection to their home church and church family remains very strong. In this regard, Fred commented:

My church, my church family back home is extremely supportive. They, call...one of my best friend's from church, his father called just out of the blue...I just wanna pray for you...with your studies and things like that. And I get things like that, you know from around finals times, I'll get three and four phone calls, people saying, can we pray with you for finals?...I welcome it.

The diverse manner in which this group of high-achievers views religion and its impact in their lives is seen in the statement by first generation student Bob. He remarks:

Church and family is minimum cause I have a cousin that goes to this Millennial University, but we know we're cousins but we don't see each other. And so as far as church, I just go to churches with my friends or you know, when I feel like I need to go, and I go randomly, but as far as these being support systems...they're very minimum if any.

A few study participants pointed to their early protestant church life as character building experiences. Some students also acknowledged feelings of resentment they harbored against church and church related activities. Their resentment in some cases was anchored in parentally required religious participation during early childhood and adolescent years. Yet, for other students, parentally encouraged religious participation during early stages of youth was viewed as being a positive influence. An influence now considered to be important during current collegiate experiences. To this end, Jerry, a 3.7 sophomore Business major had this to say:

I have come through my religion and my belief in God and I think that my parents having me in church from a young age...helped develop me into the man I am...the character, and the work ethic and things like that that I have...so I've been in church since I was a little kid.

### *Summary*

The historical significance of religion in the lives of many African Americans and the present day legitimacy that religion infuses in their lives can be critical elements in social and intellectual growth. For many students, this period may encompass exploratory developmental issues that over time will either be resolved by the individual; or the resolution may require assistance from a campus student support service.

What is critical in this process is that students' understand and know that support systems are available to them. It is also important for students to have the space that is needed while they are on this journey of religious uncertainty and exploration.

### *High-Achieving African American Males and Faculty/Staff Interaction*

Many students described the reluctance they felt; especially during their freshmen year, to engage in dialogue with members of the faculty under any circumstances. Even in classroom settings students' mentioned how they seldom made an attempt to participate in discussions unless called upon to do so. As illuminated by participants, there was often uncertainty on their part about reactions that may have cast them in a negative light. Members of the study group often described feelings of distance between themselves, the classroom instructor, and from peers that were— in most cases— all White, or not same race students. In the few instances where there was more than one African American student in a class, it was not likely that that person was someone known to the high-achiever.

Many of the high-achieving African American males were enrolled in honors; classes and this further reduced the likelihood of having a same race peer enrolled in the class. Study group members acknowledged that their perceptions about some faculty members and administrators were off the mark. Junior Biology major Fred illustrates this point. He comments:

My freshman year, it was kind of, you know, professors are way up on this pedestal...I didn't feel too comfortable approaching them, but as time progressed, I found myself more willing to seek out help from professors...just having small conversations and general social interactions.

Some professors deemed by the high-achievers to be unapproachable, were actually quite interested in the success of the students and were willing to assist as needed in-class and during office hours. The following comment made by a White male faculty member illustrates this point:

I do wonder if students make connections to all of these things that we have talked about, and I certainly do not know how to teach this, but I do wonder if there is some continuity in folk's ability to skillfully read the true nature of social situations. Because obviously there are good reasons when a student walks into a certain classroom and can accurately pick up hostility and accurately pick up that this person does not have my best interest at heart and have the good sense to drop that class and get out of there.

Jim, a sophomore shares a story that is in concert with the statement made by the White male faculty member.

They were being real short when I asked him a question...that was just in class, like after class I'd walk up to him and ask him a question and he was being really short with me, and so I decided it would be better if I just go on and drop the class, so I can take another teacher.

Much has been written about the importance of student and faculty interactions in the classroom and in out-of-class activities. The following story about a decision to enroll at Millennial University illustrates the importance of student and faculty/staff interactions. Casey, a 3.7 grade point average junior came to Millennial University from an exceptional high school magnet program. During his high school years, Casey made the decision that he would attend a small prestigious private college. He was not interested in attending a really large public state university.

That all changed after Casey participated in a weekend recruitment visit to Millennial University. During his weekend visit, Casey discovered that there were smaller living and

learning communities at Millennial. In these smaller academic communities he had the option to become immersed in literary pursuits and also work closely with a faculty mentor in his area of interest. The importance of positive interactive relationships between students, faculty and staff were exemplified in this statement by Casey:

I actually have a mentor, that's part of the program; we get a faculty mentor... He's really been helpful to me, my whole time here. He took me bowling one time last year, he takes me to lunch a lot and just helps me. He helped me set up like certain internships and stuff that will like advance professionals.

The academic success of students is often contingent on interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom. From the perspective of these high-achievers, positive interactions with members of the faculty and campus administrators are foundational to their success. Examples of how positive faculty interactions impact students are reflected in student comments listed here.

Jeff, a sophomore engineering major observes:

Last semester was the first time I really had to talk to one of my professors, cause he made it mandatory that you come by and pick up your test and look over it, so I guess that kind of got me over my fear of talking to professors...before I use to think of them as like really busy in their research work and don't care to talk to students.

The fear that Jeff described does not imply that his reluctance to approach his professor was based on racial differences. As Jeff continues his story more evidence is revealed about the positive benefits students' derive from helpful interactions with faculty members. He continues his story by stating:

That really got me to talking to my professors and then one of my professors, my math professor this semester, I've been to his office three times already, and he's, he's just really cool, he's pretty entertaining.

Bob, a sophomore describes positive experiences he has had with faculty members. He states:

There have been a few classes where it's always foreign for me to have to struggle in any class and not be able to understand the concepts right away. But in all those classes where I've had that happen, the faculty at Millennial University they've told me, they have office hours and then when I talk to them one on one they make me feel welcome.

The downside to these classroom encounters for African American male high-achievers is the insensitivity to racial differences that White students sometimes display in the classroom. One student, for example, described a situation where a Caucasian student displayed behavior that he perceived to be racist. According to Bob the following exchange took place between a female Caucasian student and other Caucasian students in the class.

She... said her parents raised her to know that Caucasians were different from African Americans—just that bluntly. But it seemed like she was holding back to say that her parents raised her to know that they were better than us. And all the African Americans looked around the room; we all kind of set our...pencils down and just looked at her.

Bob continues his story by describing how the other Caucasian students responded to the comments made by the Caucasian female. He notes:

The Caucasians in the room made it a point to say, “Well I’m Caucasian and I’m American, and I went to a school like that, but my parents didn’t raise me to say that.

As described by Bob, the exchange took place only between the Caucasian students in the class. There was no intervention by the classroom instructor. Even though these incidents were described by the study participants as infrequent; it was clear that exposure to these acts of incivility inflicted emotional scarring.

Jesse, a sophomore, cited a classroom incident where he was singled out to be a spokesperson for all African Americans.

I was in law class and we were discussing the power of interest groups and he speaks up and says that the gay rights history was really taking off. For example, are you aware there is a homosexual Episcopalian Bishop in New Hampshire? I wasn’t aware either. And he goes on to say that the African and the Latin American Episcopalians are very upset about it...And he stops the class and looks at me, ‘So tell me sir, why do you...Do you think you could tell us why that is?’...I explained I could tell him why I personally wouldn’t support that, I couldn’t speak for the entire group of African American Episcopalians...He’s like... ‘Well, why would only, why would only Africans and Latin Americans be so upset about it?’ I was like, I can’t tell you sir...What ended up happening is he continued to ask me and I told him I couldn’t provide him with an answer.

A few students described incidents where faculty members sometimes used inappropriate humor that was demeaning and insulting to the few (often one or two) African American students in the classroom. John comments on the type of racially insensitive statements and jokes that one faculty member inflicted on the students for an entire semester. It was not a class that could be dropped. Hence, the five African American students (an unusually high number for a required course in engineering) endured the offenses. A few of these incidents were reported by John as he said, One time we were leaving class and he tapped us on the shoulder, “Oh yeah the brothers have to stick together.”

In follow-up to John’s comments; Cameron stated:

I’ve interacted with faculty that ranged in scope of diverse individuals. I’ve learned from some faculty members how someone can seem, how do I say—motivational and encouraging, but yet they’re very divisive at the same time.

Students’ openly debated whether their educational experiences at Millennial University might be different (meaning better) if more African American male faculty and administrative staff were employed at Millennial. Based on his interactive campus experiences, Cameron, a senior commented that maybe, “there is one African American male faculty member per one hundred black males at Millennial University. That’s a long ratio; an alarming ratio.” Bob followed up with this statement, “I don’t know any of the professors he’s talking about, just like he said, they’re so few and far between that I don’t know any of them.”

Responding to the notion of having more African American male professors at Millennial University, Charles, a junior observed:

It could be the selection process, it could be the reason we have so few, but also it could be, well I really think the, the university tries to push to have as many professors of minority status as possible. So... with the African American male situation, I just think there’s probably a lack of candidates that are applying for positions here.



John, a senior, reasoned that few African American students want to pursue higher education degrees and become college professors. The pay is not attractive. John stated: "I only know two of my peers who want to get that Ph.D. to be a professor." John further reasoned that Millennial University had so few African American professors because they were just not available in the market pool. Students' were unified in wanting to have more African American males as members of the faculty and staff. However views regarding best practices for the recruitment and hiring of African American males were mixed.

Cameron, a senior engineering student disagreed with John. Cameron stated:

Look at institutions like other state universities, where are they getting their African American male professors from? Are they really branching out to that particular subset of individuals to hire senior faculty? That could be a problem too, possibly.

Mitchell, a senior, added an additional perspective by positing:

It could be you know, I guess it would depend on what type of person you are. Are you that person that ... just looks for advice in the best places, or do you look for advice in the most comfortable places?

Study participants offered suggestions or possible solutions to make the campus environment more accepting and appreciative of racial diversity. Sometimes students assessed the classroom environment to be the results of a teacher just not having a good day. This latter assessment is found in the statement made by Jerry, a sophomore non-Greek affiliated student with a 3.7 grade point average. He remarked:

I usually keep to myself a lot...the only time I usually deal with faculty is if I'm turning something in or I'm handling something. A lot of times those faculty aren't necessarily the nicest people; but then again you have to look at their situation, some of them don't have the best job or some of them are not necessarily having a good day...I haven't had all good experiences with faculty...but I haven't had all bad ones either.

As discussed earlier, study participants often tended to shift the burden of responsibility for acts of racial insensitivity onto themselves. Many of the high-achievers surmised that such

situations might be mitigated by improvement on the part of African American students.

Additionally, the high-achievers asserted that there was a need for the African American students to be more proactive in situations that denied them fair participation in class simply because of their race and gender. An example is noted in the comment made by senior John. He posits:

I think we as a community, we point the finger...at the White people on this campus, but what I find is that we don't try...we may try to be diversified in a sense of let me try to join this top organization, but we're not diversified in a sense of let me just go and sit next to this person and have a friend.

Cameron, a senior engineering major commented:

I've learned that I have to advocate, because those people won't speak up for themselves, so I have to speak up for them. And you know, being as blessed as I've been here and being surrounded by the people I have been surrounded by, I have a range and an area of influence, and so I'm using it now.

Perplexingly, many of the students' advocated a "turn the other cheek" response to racial incivility in the classroom. This philosophy was a consistent thread woven throughout the study.

As an example Roger, a sophomore notes:

I grew up in this state and it's always been like a dream school to me. I've never seen it as a black/white kind of thing until I got older and starting taking state history. And I started figuring out how things were back then, but it never changed my view on the university at all.

As might be imagined, not all of the study participants held the same point of view. Regarding negative classroom experiences with faculty and on some occasions with Caucasian peers—study participant Cameron, suggested that faculty often know when problems negatively impact the climate in the classroom, but choose to ignore these issues. To this outcome Cameron, a senior stated:

I've learned that some see problems but choose to turn a blind eye...they're scared of what their peers might think...fear of losing something that's near and dear to them, which is their job...And then, I've interacted with other faculty members who are...I think problem solvers, not afraid to question and those might be people who have tenure, I don't know.

Students discussed a range of differences observed during their interactions with faculty. In the case of some participants there were positive and reassuring interactions with faculty, even with faculty members they once perceived to be indifferent. Study participant Jerry observed that the little things mean so much. Just a few words such as, “let me know if you need my help” eased student tension and made them feel that they were in a good place where fair treatment was not an unrealistic expectation.

An example of this type of positive faculty interaction was described by Jerry, a sophomore with a 3.7 grade point average. He states:

The other day, I took a test, and I turned my test in and the teacher said, “Have a nice weekend, if there’s anything you want to know about the test, send me an email and just have a nice weekend.” And I think something as small as that can make a student study better especially a young African American student who gets up in the class and is probably nervous about taking these tests anyway.

A few students talked about the need to have a comfort level with classroom professors. Clarifying his statement, Jerry suggested that having a comfort level with the classroom professor made it easier to approach that person and ask for help. Insight into the rationale often used for either interacting or not interacting with faculty is given in a few participant comments listed here. Larry, 3.0 Interdisciplinary senior states:

I’m not really sure when it clicked with my applied professor. Because...I remember being afraid of him...he’s very intimidating...and coupled with the fact that I really wasn’t doing what I was supposed to be doing... as far as playing and getting my lessons...and practice hours...I think he learned something about me...where he pretty much told me the truth...and it hurt me back then, but I can say that I’ve gotten a better view of myself because of it.

Fred reflects on his experiences with faculty and comments:

Looking back I can definitely say that in classes where I actually had dialogue with the professors’, I did a lot better than in classes that I did not...I had to do a lot more effort on my part, personally as opposed to if I had...dialogue with the professors...they could point me in the right direction.

Relevant to being socially savvy, a White male faculty member acknowledged that not all professors will demonstrate racial equanimity in their classroom. When this occurs, students will need to exercise or make a judgment call. Dropping a class may not be a viable option for the student who is close to graduation and needs this course to complete degree requirements. Nevertheless, it is important for students to know how to reach out for the assistance they need. If they come to us, we usually are able to help them. An African American male administrator asserts that:

There are many missed opportunities to address issues of importance to students of color at Millennial University. The students want to know that we care and that we are here for them and they can rely on us to address their social, academic, and personal development needs. Somehow we have not given minority students at Millennial University the impression that we are invested in their future. They need to know that who they are and what they achieve matters to us. They need to know that our jobs are not just about a paycheck.

This administrator discussed how he often talks to students about how much time it takes to be an African American. A lot of time is used questioning the outcome of a test or the outcome of a grade. Students may ask themselves, “Was the assessment based strictly on my intellectual ability, or to what extent did my race or my gender play a role in the outcome?” African American students at Millennial University also spend an enormous amount of time in reflective doubt. Students are faced with classroom situations where they must decide between acting with their head and reacting to their heart. In this regard, Leo, a non-Greek affiliated sophomore made the following observation:

Go sit in the front of that classroom and you look at that teacher...They'll know you and if you have a question about anything...they will say well, “I don't know your name, but I've seen you in class everyday...you do what you can...life happens, but you plan for it and...you have to find a way to build yourself back up and keep moving. Cause the things that happen to you in life, build your character.

### *Summary*

In this section I examined the lived experiences of African American high-achievers and their interactions with members of the faculty and administrative staff at Millennial University. The views of study participants as well as the views of faculty and staff inform the findings. Many aspects of faculty/staff, and student interactions were examined. Examined interactions included: active participation in class discussions, engaging in dialogue with faculty in class and out-of-class, perceptions of racism, inaccurate perceptions about some White faculty members, the need for African American male role models in classrooms and in key administrative positions, student fears about approaching faculty and the interactions of Caucasian peers in situations of stereotype threat.

Study group participants mostly agreed that they experienced more positive interactions with White faculty members than anticipated. These positive interactions hinged primarily on preconceived notions about how White faculty members might respond to classroom and out-of-class engagement with high-achieving African American males. Aside from the matter of race; which factored heavily into the views of the African American high achievers, were concerns about academic skill sets, feelings of isolation (often being the only African American student in many classes) fear of rejection, fear of public ridicule and uncertainty about the level of concern White faculty members may have for African American students.

In some cases, students eagerly sought opportunities to interact with members of the faculty and staff. In other cases students were sometimes reluctant to approach faculty because of their perceived belief that faculty members had more important things to do, or that White faculty members—in particular—disdained African American students. Interestingly, students'

sometimes found that the faculty members they thought to be most intimidating were the ones who reached out to them and in the words of the students, “eased their tensions.”

Sadly, there were occasions when students ran into an impenetrable wall of racism. In these situations the high-achievers described being singled out in a class to be the spokesperson for all African Americans, encountering faculty that told inappropriate jokes about African Americans, faculty that shunned interactions with African American students, and faculty members that singled out African American students by making inappropriate comments that in some ways negated African American culture.

As reported by the high-achievers, at times racism was offensively displayed by Caucasian student peers in the classroom. Study participants also expressed concern that the environment of Millennial University and the limited number of African American faculty and staff precludes opportunities to engage in meaningful same race mentoring relationships. From the perspective of many study participants; the lack of opportunity to have meaningful interactions with African American faculty and staff was deemed to be an experiential deficit.

#### *Exclusionary Politics*

Concern on the part of African American high-achievers in regard to exclusionary political activities practiced by a small elite group of majority race students was a contentious issue among most of the study participants. Opportunities to participate in prestigious campus organizations and to hold membership in academic honorary societies, as well as receive prestigious awards for outstanding scholarship were primary areas that many African American undergraduate male high-achievers believed were not open to them. The two issues perceived by members of the study group to be the most contentious were the heavily politicized Student Government Association (SGA) and the highly privileged all White Greek organizations. In

regard to perceived practices of exclusionary politics by majority race student leaders, study participant Jeff, a mechanical engineering major asserted that exclusionary politics is the one boundary that limits minority students at Millennial University:

In most other areas of the university you can compete and expect to be rewarded for your competitiveness; especially if you are the best at what you do. However, it does not matter what your credentials are, even if you have the best platform you cannot compete for and win the position of SGA president at Millennial University if you come from a minority background. With the politics at this university you will not win, and it will be simply because you are a minority person.

The most common belief among the high-achievers was that the SGA at Millennial University is a closed political organization controlled mostly by influential and affluent White Greek fraternities and sororities. Study participants described the SGA at Millennial University as a corrupt political entity representing a small minority of well-connected White students. Cameron, a senior who worked his way into membership in a highly prestigious and traditionally all White honorary society had this to say:

I think it's easier for White students to advance...minority students have to struggle...not because I want to play that card or anything, but it's just reality. I see more positive things and more things involving leaders in the community in White fraternities...I don't know, maybe double standards.

Regarding top level administrative support, Sean, a non-Greek affiliated junior stated:

I feel like in a sense the President or the Provost are kind of doing the role of a dad that's not emotionally there does. I feel like the Provost and President play that card a lot as far as supporting things and running off to allow them to happen.

Presenting another point of view relevant to top level administrators, Casey, a 3.7 junior stated:

They need to adjust the fact that it's like a secret organization...a secret racist organization that controls the student government, and I feel like if the administration wanted to address the issue...then they could.

Leo, a non-Greek affiliated sophomore commented:

The culture of this campus is... very diverse, but I think...I try to deny it over the years, but it's very Greek oriented...and that means White Greeks. There are organizations in the White fraternities that do have a lot of power.

Jesse states:

They're only in the power that they're in cause they've been doing this for years. They stick together...If the independents...were to really pay attention and get involved they wouldn't be in power. But due to tradition, no one really does anything...and they continue to win these elections through their own campaigns...the control and how they run things...I don't want to be anywhere near that.

Study participants viewed changing the structure of the SGA as a daunting task, but believed with fervor, that with team effort and strong leadership; especially from Millennial University administrators—this ominous task will be accomplished. The students exemplified a “can do” spirit and talked about preliminary strategies now being considered in regard to future efforts to break through the SGA glass ceiling. Toward achieving this outcome independent student lead initiatives have already begun.

The study group described round table discussions that are now underway to engage Millennial University senior administrators in dialogue to effect change in the campus culture. The anticipated cultural changes that the students want to ultimately achieve will bring authentic diversity and multiculturalism to the campus. Recently the spirits of African American students have been buoyed by the increase in the number of students of color now enrolling at Millennial.

Cameron, a senior observed:

In Texas, in New York, they're in Florida, California and ...they're getting diverse students.... we're a student population, a group who's seeking out diversity... That's on the university's agenda right now, how do we achieve diversity? ... We're bringing in different students...interchanging ideas...and we're gonna formulate them into a way so it's presentable to administration to make a change.

Participants did express concerns about the level of support that may or may not come from senior administrators. Their concerns were based in the belief that much of the exclusivity



of campus events and SGA upper level structure is in the hands of controlling, and well connected alumni of Millennial University. Describing the current state of race relations at Millennial University, senior Cameron remarked:

You know, they just can't acknowledge the highest achievers. And I think they're making some good strides as far as curriculum, as far as getting good faculty...but it's still a problem of recognizing students ... I don't want to have to be of a particular race or a particular subset in order to be something of worth to Millennial. They...want a token African American or a token Asian on a poster, but if it came down to picking between the cultural norm and that same token African American, they are going to go with the cultural norm to please a group of alumni.

### *Summary*

The literature is replete with research affirming the value of interactions between students, faculty and staff members. Students are generally successful when their collegiate experiences include: a supportive environment with accessibility to faculty and staff, and actionable institutional behavior that demonstrates interest in student achievement. In this section, the voices of the study participants reflected the importance of faculty student interactions in class and out-of-class. Engaging and positive interactions among students, faculty and staff are essential to the quality of the educational experiences. Among high-achieving African American males in predominantly White campus settings; especially where the climate may be unwelcoming, faculty interactions are foundational to wholesome intellectual and psychosocial development (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005).

### *Giving Back*

Throughout the study a recurring theme was the need for currently enrolled high-achieving African Americans males at Millennial University to identify ways, and engage in practices to give back. Giving back was deemed by study participants to be not just important, but essential to the success of future generations of high-achieving African American males.

Categorically, members of the study group committed to giving back to families, communities, schools, and churches.

One essential need identified by the students is the activation of programs to serve as informational launching points for future generations of African American males in general and particularly, high-achieving African American males. Study participants discussed the benefits they realized as students at Millennial because older students and mentors once reached out to give them assistance. While the students expressed appreciation for the assistance they received; they also discussed how that assistance fell short.

A few specific areas of shortfalls identified by the study group included: lack of institutional commitment to diversity issues, limited financial resources, limited opportunities for participation in prestigious campus organizations and honorary associations, and limited opportunities to interact with African American male role models.

Jerry, a sophomore observed:

There are some people who come here...and they'll have new experiences and it would change them and they'll start to see the world more openly, but then again...the vast majority...they'll still have those biases and might express them in the same way...I do think if there was a way the university could just teach...you don't have to like me, you don't have to accept what I'm doing, just respect what I'm doing.

Students in the study identified issues and discussed ways that these issues might be addressed to improve educational opportunities for future generations of high-achieving African American males and mitigate negative racial and gender encounters. Frequently discussed throughout the study was the need for more college preparation information to be made available to students at least by the time they enroll in middle school if not earlier. A couple of participant comments speak to this concern. Fred, a junior observed:

It's important to be preemptive in the beginning instead of waiting until there's an issue...once you know, they've already messed up that foundation, and they have to fight harder to get back up.

Cameron, a senior stated:

You have to reach out to these groups early, point them in the right direction, put them in contact with... those people who are gonna be mentors and advisors and motivate them.

The high-achievers offered ideas that may be implemented to better prepare incoming African American students for the collegiate experience. Central in their message of early preparation for the collegiate experience was their own commitment to "give back." Giving back was discussed in terms of current and future endeavors.

Even though currently enrolled high-achieving African American males were grateful for whatever assistance they were receiving, they mostly felt disadvantaged because few had the benefit of legacy at Millennial University or for that matter, any other institution of higher education. While they had the support of their families, in many cases, family members had little, to no knowledge about the college process. As a result, many high-achievers in the study felt disadvantaged due to having insufficient information prior to enrolling at Millennial.

To mitigate negative experiences for future African American male high-achievers, the study participants detailed a series of initiatives—some already implemented—others to be implemented in the near and distant future. In terms of breaking lingering cycles of crippling racism, Sean, a non-Greek affiliated junior commented:

When we come out of something that might be predominantly Black or all Black...I feel like that mindset is crippling a lot of people...if you're around a certain demographic constantly then you realistically are always gonna have some kind of stifling opinion about other demographics...and really hinder your progress in relations with those people.

Jerry, a 3.7 sophomore shared this perspective on the future. He stated:

Small things... have helped me be able to carry through and know that the odds are gonna be stacked against me. And I'm not always gonna have it easy, but when I get the chance, if I do the right things, I can make the most of them. You can hear about somebody getting shot, but there are a lot of African Americans out there benefitting... an entire culture, not just Blacks. And I think it does need to be put out there so young men like myself and young men younger than me can have hope.

Several study participants identified giving back to the community as their most satisfying experience as a Millennial University student. Cameron, a senior studying chemical engineering stated:

I started tutoring two African American young men who were in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, taught them strategic math techniques to help them in their course work. And we also had a mentoring aspect and we would teach them life lessons and goal setting...I enjoyed that...and those little guys looked up to me so much that when you come to school and passed ...them in the hallway, he'd look at his little buddy, "That's my mentor, yeah."

When Cameron was asked if he were recruiting high school students who were making a decision about college enrollment, how he might advise them, he commented:

Like any institution, Millennial University has its problems, but you will get a world class education...I would tell them to come...Because it's not only the education that matters when you're in college, it's the personal growth that sustains you later in life...being in these diverse situations...teaches you a lot about being a person, it teaches you survival,...networking and self identity...you gotta learn about yourself, you gotta know the person you are and you gotta be comfortable with that.

Mitchell, a senior commented:

I see myself as breaking the mold and just being there for the community...I'm part of different programs with kids...I volunteer in local cities, I just see the impact that I have on a daily basis with those kids and how it lightens their days...a positive male, not just African American, just a positive male, something they're not accustomed to seeing, can have such impact...so I figure that I could pass that on to the next generation.

Otis, a senior majoring in education indicates that in his graduating class of approximately three hundred students he has seen—including himself—three African American males. For Otis and the other study participants these numbers were disturbing. Because these students interacted with few—if any—African American role models during their secondary

school years, and very few during their postsecondary years they want to change the trend.

Roger, a sophomore studying accounting states:

I see myself giving back to my community, like showing them there's a better way out...People trying to look for a quicker way to get easy cash...they don't see the point of trying to work a whole two weeks for a paycheck when they know they can just steal something, and sell it to get some quick money. The consequences are so high, but they see people getting away with it so they think they can get away with it too.

Cameron, a senior made the following observation:

I see a lot of White groups do what African American groups don't...they get to their kids earlier...They start working with them as freshmen...that's something that we as Black people don't do. We don't reach out to freshmen African American students... and we don't ...tell them about informed experiences. We wait until they become sophomores and juniors to start telling all the valuable information.

In the following statement, Cameron cites an example:

We're dealing with issues now where African American students had no idea about senior honoraries, and had no idea about the deadlines for applications. Because it was just within this certain group and certain circles, it wasn't well publicized. And so one group had no minority applicants, why? They didn't know about it.

Cameron goes on to say:

Knowledge is power at Millennial, but most importantly connections are, I think it's all about relationships, it goes back to the element of relationships, building those key relationships, once you establish that networking you establish those connections; it's easier to become successful at Millennial.

This list is not inclusive of all the ways that this group of high-achievers identified for establishing a legacy and building a foundation for future generations of high-achieving African American males at Millennial University. It does however; represent core initiatives identified as essential to the early and sustained success of future generations of high-achieving African American males at Millennial University.

It is important to note that currently enrolled high-achieving African American males at Millennial University are strongly committed to the initiatives listed here. They are so strongly

committed to these initiatives that many have already begun to do volunteer work in local schools. They are tutoring students in mathematics, and working with Millennial University senior administrators to explore ways to make the campus environment more inclusive for all students.

To extend their reach beyond the campus many of the high-achieving African American males are working to establish campus student organizations affiliated with local, regional and national organizations. The intent is to focus on preparing larger groups of highly educated, civic minded African American male leaders for the future. It is a future in which these current study participants expect to have a participative sociocultural influence.

### *Conclusion*

To explore the scope and depth of the ways that high-achieving African American male undergraduates negotiate cultural challenges at a PWI, it was deemed important to examine more extensively the daily lived experiences of the twenty students in this study. This outcome was achieved through discussion in formats that included: individual interviews, focus group sessions and e-journaling.

In this chapter high-achieving African American males recounted some of the many ways that negotiating cultural challenges in a predominantly White institution can be daunting. A key dimension of cultural challenge for many high-achieving African American males in a PWI is their search for identity. Study participants described the lonely paths they often travel. Along these paths they find one aspect of themselves comfortably ensconced in the culture of their heritage. Also along this path they discover that other aspects of their collegiate lives are incongruous to the predominantly White culture of Millennial University.

The high-achievers often found themselves seeking social linkages to bridge the cultural divide. This cultural divide often placed students between their own cultural heritage and the marginality of a predominantly White institution. The high-achievers were often negotiating cultural challenges in a hostile environment anchored in traditions and practices not inclusive of African American males. The high-achievers in this study were challenged in their attempts to interact with White peers, with same race peers, and with predominantly White faculty and administrators. Interactions in this predominantly White collegiate setting were described by participants as having “an upside and a down side.”

The upside included racial and gender interactions typically considered ubiquitous during one’s collegiate years. The downside of the cultural challenges experienced by this extraordinary group was the “glass ceiling” effect. In other words, interactions between high-achieving African American males and their White peers—as well as many White faculty and administrators—were tolerated to the point where institutionally espoused values, practices, and traditions became nuanced “glass ceilings.”

Through exemplary academic achievement, the study group conveyed a steel-willed determination to penetrate the cultural “glass ceiling.” The students believed that their academic achievements gave them the potential to open doors to prestigious honor societies, allow participation in all White honorary recognition ceremonies, and place them on equal footing to compete for high-achiever awards in their senior year of college. Additionally, the students believed that their exemplary academic achievement may negate long-standing stereotypes about African American males.

Bolstered by family, community and church support, this group of high-achievers were sometimes dismayed by the cultural challenges in this predominantly White university setting,

but they maintained gritty determination to break through marginal barriers. Seldom did the high-achievers speak of personal disappointments if goals were not achieved, but they frequently and passionately talked about not disappointing home/family, community and church. Cultural challenges notwithstanding; these support systems were the bridges that allowed them to be at this place of learning. Their experiences—though often difficult, were considered by them to be special opportunities.

Using this time of special opportunity allowed the high-achievers to prepare for a future of giving back to those not fortunate enough to be a college student at Millennial University or other institutions of higher education. This time of special opportunity was used to mentor and tutor elementary school students in the nearby community. Additionally, using this special opportunity illuminated new paths for leadership, new paths for dismantling exclusionary politics that denied students of color the opportunity to be campus leaders in the student government association and other prestigious campus organization.

As described by the study group, their special opportunity—though not without cultural challenges—made it possible for them to receive a college education. For many in this group this was an opportunity their parents never had. In their expressions of gratitude, this exceptionally engaging group of high-achieving African American males expressed a burning desire to give back to their support networks and Millennial University. These students also want to pay forward by leaving a path that is far less lonely for future high-achieving African American males who will someday enroll in a predominantly White institution. The twenty study participants were proud to be Millennial University students, and they aspired to have Millennial University be proud of the diversity and multiculturalism they contribute to the campus community. It was the belief of these high-achievers that initiatives they have begun, and



dialogues engaged in with Millennial University administrators are building blocks. Prior generations of African American students faced cultural and racial challenges at Millennial University that were far harsher than the experiences of the current study group.

An unanticipated finding was the willingness of high-achievers to assume responsibility for changing the inhospitable racial climate of the PWI. Another key finding was the expectation that some White faculty members have for a single African American male to be the spokesperson for the entire African American race. Students took on the challenge of engaging administrators to not only talk diversity, but to influence campus culture to embrace diversity and multiculturalism. Students established campus connectedness by engaging themselves in organizations and associating with fellow White and same race high-achievers at Millennial University.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Implications and Recommendations

*If you wish to know the road up the mountain, you must ask the man who goes back and forth on it...Zenrinkushu*

#### *Introduction*

For many students of color, and particularly African American males, a college education has been viewed as a pathway to upward social mobility and economic stability. In this study I examined the manner in which high-achieving African American undergraduate males negotiate cultural challenges in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Historical and present day relevancies of this topic are embedded in issues of college access, enrollment, and college student persistence, culture as social and identity constructs multiculturalism, higher education diversity and inclusiveness.

During the almost six decades since *Brown v. Board of Education* and the legal end of segregation in public education in America, many triumphs and disappointments have pervaded the landscape of higher education. The triumphs have allowed expanded educational opportunity to many previously disenfranchised citizens of color, especially African Americans. The disappointments have been realized through efforts to resist change. In the case of African American males, educational opportunities have been unsettlingly disparate (Altbach, et al., 2002; Fries-Britt, 2000; & Fleming, 1984).

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program study conducted by Hrabowski, Maton and Greif (1998) at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) was discussed in chapter three. This study called attention to the pivotal role that parents play in the education of high-achieving

African American males. In the Meyerhoff Scholars Program study four critical themes were determined to be foundational to the success of African American male high-achievers. Parental involvement in the school experiences of this group from secondary through postsecondary matriculation had persuasive bearing on the success of the students. As presented in chapter three, those critical themes included:

1. Determined and Persistent Academic Engagement
2. Strict Limit Setting and Discipline
3. Love Support, Communication, and Modeling
4. Community Connectedness and Resources

These themes have direct relevance to the current case. As presented here the themes are relational to the interpretive “end product” of the research questions that guided this study.

#### *Research Questions and Interpretive Implication*

According to Merriam (1998) “the uniqueness of case study lies not so much in the methods employed (although these are important) as in the questions asked and their relationship to the end product” (p. 31). In this section a relationship is drawn between the three research questions that guided this study and resulting interpretive implications. The interpretive implications are considered to be “end products.”

#### *Research Question One*

How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males experience the culture of a predominantly White institution?

Extant literature confirms that inequities in educational opportunities have had a more deleterious impact on African American citizens in general, and especially African American males (Fleming, 1984). In this study, I focused on the highly storied and little studied lives of academically high-achieving African American undergraduate males attending a predominantly

White institution (Bonner, (2010); Harper, 2005, Harper & Hurtado, 2007, Harper & Nichols, 2008). The unevenness of educational opportunity is a product of the culture. Cultural inclusion and exclusion are most often determined by the dominant group in the population; in this case Caucasian Americans. Subordinate or subcultures often exist in the shadow of the dominant culture (Scheurich & Young, 1997).

High-achieving African American undergraduate males in a PWI constitute a subpopulation within a subculture—a subculture whose members are seeking individual identity as well as cultural identity. Significant in their search is a need to reconcile and understand the integrative impact of multiple cultural influences; some that they have never before experienced. This group sought ways to survive and thrive in a campus climate that was often hostile, alienating and unwelcoming to the study group.

Often the sub-cultural placement of African American males in a predominantly White college environment; negatively impacts interpersonal and psychosocial developments, political orientations and at times; views of their own cultural identity have been called into question (Fleming, 1984). Historical and ongoing litigious decisions contribute to a cornucopia of multicultural and multiracial challenges for many high-achieving African American males at predominantly White institutions.

A racially restrictive campus environment that denies full participation of selective groups of students' subjects excluded members to intellectual, social and cultural segregation. Not only are high-achieving African American undergraduate males missing the value that comes from a variety of collegiate experiences; especially leadership opportunities, but so too are White students. The rationale for ensuring diversity in the postsecondary environment is to

expose the collective student population to enriching opportunities important to integrative intellectual, social, and cultural learning (Gurin, et al., 2002).

During the past two decades, researchers have begun to give more attention to the lived experiences of high-achieving African American undergraduate male collegians (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Parker & Flowers, 2003). The intent of this study is to add to this limited body of knowledge. On the one hand, a plethora of research has been conducted with respect to deficit factors associated with African American males in all levels of education (Griffin, 2006; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1998). However; on the other hand, very little research has been conducted with specific relevancy to high-achieving African American male collegians attending PWIs (Harper, 2005).

#### African American Male High-Achievers at Millennial University

African American male high-achievers constitute a minority within a minority. These students are defying the odds and achieving higher education success that is on par with non-African American peers (Hrabowski, Maton & Greif, 1998; Harper, 2005; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Bonner, 2010). Using culture as the theoretical framework, this study examined the lived experiences of twenty high-achieving African American males attending a large predominantly White public university in the Southeastern United States.

Socioeconomic and racial hurdles have for centuries destined an untold number of African American men to social immobility and economic instability. In this study, the goal has been to listen to voices that are often not heard in matters important to their own well-being. The voices of the twenty students in this study speak not only to issues of educational equity and access for themselves, but through their own achievements, they seek to improve opportunities for those who will one day follow the paths they have trod.

By way of summer and special programs designed to provide pre-college experiences to minority students, two students in the study had exposure to Millennial University prior to enrolling as freshmen. Nine study participants were attracted to Millennial University as a result of either full or partial scholarship offers. The nine remaining students elected to attend the Millennial for a variety of reasons.

A review of current literature reveals that many research models depict African American males as a monolithic group (Harper, 2005). The defined group in this study was richly diverse with many distinctive features. The students were highly alert to individual factors such as family background, types of high school experiences; first generation status, second and third generation college students, and community support were a few of the many distinctions within this same race peer group (Harper & Nichols, 2008).

A challenge of tremendous significance to the study participants was the need to maintain individual identity and a connection to their own cultural heritage while simultaneously integrating in the dominant culture of the PWI. Enduring stereotype threats and racial slights on a daily basis was a particularly difficult cultural challenge for the high-achievers. Because the challenges were often unwarily encountered, the participants viewed the challenges as extremely hurtful and unexpected in this campus setting.

#### *Institutional Culture*

Racial, gender, and ethnic groups are viewed as either inside or outside a given cultural norm or institutional norm based on dominant group determinations. Tierney (1991) asserts, “Colleges and universities operate in cultural spheres rooted in an ideological framework” (p. 52). So strong are these cultural spheres that colleges and universities have been known to staunchly resist making changes that will noticeably impact the culture as they know it.

Minority groups—such as African American male high-achievers—are often viewed as marginal institutional actors. However, depending on the will of the group, marginality may or may not be a deterrent to cultural inclusion. The genesis of current day cultural challenges for high-achieving African American males (a marginal group) in predominantly White institutions is their lack of voice. At Millennial University these students were not pursuing a mandate to change the prevailing culture. The students were however, seeking to be included as respected and contributing members in the campus culture.

The travails of high-achieving African American undergraduate males attending PWIs are likened to growing roots in the institutional culture and affiliating with organizational identity (Tierney, 1991). According to Kezar & Eckel (2002), the core of many issues in higher education emanates in the culture of the organization. Quoting Fraser (1997), in *Justice Interruptus*, North (2006, p.508) points to yet another cultural perspective that suggests the following:

The most salient social movements are no longer economically defined classes' who are struggling to defend their 'interests,' end 'exploitation,' and win 'redistribution.' Instead, they are culturally defined 'groups' or 'communities of value' who are struggling to defend their 'identities,' end 'cultural domination,' and win 'recognition.'

Cultural challenges tend to disrupt root systems of ideology that represent long established traditions and practices in institutions. Institutional culture (s) and ideology evolve over the life of the institution (Tierney, 1991). This peer group sought changes not intended to dishonor cultural traditions and rituals at Millennial University. The intended objective of these high-achieving African American males was to infuse authentic multicultural and multiracial peer interactions into the campus culture. In this case, a campus culture where students of color; particularly African American males participate from the margins. Identity recognition and shared cultural experiences were end goals for these high-achievers.

### *Research Question Two*

How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males openly communicate their expectations to PWI campus administrators?

Students of color who challenge institutional culture or seek ways to negotiate challenges within that culture must be able to discern differences between masked rhetoric and actionable rhetoric. In this study I examined through the lived experiences of the participants their perception of the culture and how they negotiate their way through cultural traditions, practices and espoused values that are often communicated in mixed messages.

With respect to the culture of a PWI, it is conceivable and highly likely that African American male high achievers will not have familiarity with long established institutionally characterized ethos and ideology. The few exceptions may include students who are not first generation college students. Also included are those having experienced multicultural, and or multiracial backgrounds prior to their college enrollment. Regardless of their varied backgrounds, the high-achieving African American males in this study expected opportunities for full engagement in the collegiate experience at MU.

In the campus climate of the PWI it is essential that administrators fully understand the culture of their own institution. Secondly, it is important, if not imperative—that campus administrators have some knowledge and appreciation for the heterogeneity existing across and within student groups. Having knowledge of and appreciation for the heterogeneity of high-achieving African American undergraduate men in a PWI is highly important.

Historically, African American citizens and especially African American men have been monolithically characterized. Critical to establishing positive administrator responses to this population of students, is to know and value the extensive range of abilities, talents, interests and experiences this group brings to the cultural environment of the PWI. On the part of students,



there is an expectation that their collegiate experiences will extend far beyond stereotypical beliefs about their racial and gender identities.

The high-achieving African American undergraduate males in this study expected opportunities at Millennial University for engagement in a wide spectrum of in-class and out-of-class activities. Harper (2009) contends that:

Effective educators avoid asking, what's wrong with these students, why aren't they getting engaged? Instead, they aggressively explore the institution's shortcomings and ponder how faculty members and administrators could alter their practices to distribute the benefits of engagement more equitably. Accepting institutional responsibility for minority student engagement and success is the first step to race-conscious educational practices (p. 42).

From the perspective of the high-achievers at Millennial University there was frequently a lack of continuity on the part of campus administrators. Administrator rhetorical messages of diversity and inclusiveness were juxtaposed to the non-diverse and exclusive behavioral display in the campus culture. High-achieving African American males frequently experienced abhorrently offensive racial slurs, slights, and marginal treatment.

Many of the high-achievers in this study came to the campus of Millennial University with the expectation that opportunities to be active participants in usual collegiate activities. These activities included but were not limited to: campus leadership, honorary societies (based on academic achievement) and recognition for outstanding scholarship. A review of a study conducted by Bradley (1967) reveals that the expectations of African American students enrolled in a PWI are remarkably consistent with those of [Negro] students enrolled in public colleges and universities in the state of Tennessee forty-three years ago. Bradley reported that:

When the Negro undergraduate students were asked to give the single most satisfactory aspect of their interracial college experience, most of them (69.1%) gave four main answers: (1) meeting, understanding, accepting, and learning about different races; (2) being accepted as a person by helpful instructors and/or friendly students; (3) meeting the

challenge of competition, or coping with whites; and (4) gaining knowledge, learning, and receiving a good education (p. 18).

Determined to improve the campus environment across racial and gender categories the students in the current study had aspirations that were remarkably similar to those of the students in the 1967 study conducted by Bradley. The students in this current study have assertively made known to administrators their concerns and expectations. The students have requested and opportunities to meet and engage in dialogue with campus administrators. Dialogue that the high-achievers believe to be foundational to building open communication with campus administrators empowered to effect equanimity in the campus culture.

From 1636 when Harvard was founded through all of the nineteenth and into the first half of the twentieth century, shifts in the composition of student populations seemed to move at glacial speed. However, beyond the mid-twentieth century, a tidal wave of changes in the composition of college student populations occurred. Many of these changes have been the direct result of social and educational reforms (Orfield, Marin, & Horn, (2005); Altbach, Lomotey & Smith, (2002); Fleming, 1984; Cabrera, et al., (1999); Davis, (1994); Kuh, (1995); Pascarella & Terenzini, (1998); Williamson, 1999).

These social and educational reforms have impacted the organizational culture of colleges and universities in myriad ways. Embedded sub-cultures in institutions of higher education are multidimensional, and impact people, programs and services in a variety of ways. These impacts may be simultaneously similar and dissimilar. Often variations between the dominant culture and multiple subcultures influence strategies for actions (Swidler, 1986). People who form organizations and institutions make observations and decisions for action on the basis of their cultural frame of reference. Vast social reforms that occurred in higher

education in the latter half of the twentieth century and continued into the twenty-first century have intersected with institutional culture and institutional identity.

Significant changes in the makeup of student populations invariably impact both the transitioning students and the institution. It is particularly challenging for transitioning high-achieving African American males to perceive themselves as members of the culture of a PWI when particularistic and nuanced practices are interpreted by them to be non-inclusive. Even more perplexing and challenging to the transitioning high-achieving African American male is a perceived social disconnect.

Schein (1999) stratifies levels of organizational culture and calls attention to understanding the impact of each level of culture on members in the organization. The three levels of culture identified by Schein (1999) range from (1) visible artifacts: a level that is easily observable, (2) espoused values: not easily observed and (3) tacit beliefs and assumptions: also not easily observable, but may be widely embraced as the way the organization works.

In my definition of culture the particularistic beliefs, traditions, artifacts and subtle practices are the commonalities that bind a race, ethnic group, social group, organization or institution into a multicultural entity. A significant cultural challenge for high-achieving African American males attending a PWI has often been an unwelcoming campus climate. These high-achievers not only face cultural disintegration; but have often been treated as cultural and intellectual charlatans.

### *Cultural Challenges*

High-achieving African American males face cultural challenges in a PWI when they encounter majority constituents in the organization who perceive and act on the basis of their understanding of the culture of the organization. As participants unfamiliar with these elements

of the culture, African American males—often the newcomers to the organization— are experiencing particularistic beliefs, traditions, artifacts and subtle practices as cultural elements about which they have little to no knowledge. Additionally, these high-achievers are challenged to reconcile elements of their own cultural frame of reference with the culture of the PWI.

Cultural dissonance is likely to occur when high-achievers perceive the verbal portrayal of the institutional culture as radically different from the behavioral encounters they have with majority race constituents. In ideal situations, institutional administrators and majority race students collaboratively and intentionally seek opportunities to engage students of color in a manner that is positive and welcoming.

When the cultural climate is welcoming, dissonance is lessened. African American high-achieving males will less likely perceive the campus culture as challenging beyond the usual adjustments common to the collegiate experience. These students will also likely feel connected (they belong) to the institution. According to the African American high-achieving males in this study, Millennial University fails to inclusively engage them in the campus culture.

Seldom do members in this group feel that their views or their voices matter. Many participants were often chafed by the incongruous spoken commitment to diversity, and the often visible evidence of racism throughout the campus community. The pretense of racial tolerance was considered to be disingenuous and offensive.

In fact, it was not racial tolerance that the high-achievers expected — they were seeking respect and equanimity. Respect for their cultural heritage, achievements, intellectual abilities, civic-mindedness, contributions, and for their race and gender. However, with few exceptions, matters of gender and racial equanimity were seldom issues of institutional priority at Millennial University.

Racial diversity at Millennial University is often more about head count than head quality. A racially restrictive campus environment that denies full participation of selective groups of students, subjects excluded members to intellectual, social and cultural segregation. In this case, not only do high-achieving African American male students miss the educational value that comes from a variety of collegiate experiences, especially leadership opportunities, but so do majority race students.

Ensuring racial/gender diversity and inclusiveness in the collegiate experiences for the collective student population increase the likelihood that all students will be equally exposed to enriching multicultural learning. Racial pluralism constitutes the students' world. Consequently, during their collegiate experiences it is not only important, but necessary that students be taught to move beyond intellectual, social and cultural segregation.

Far too often, collegiate opportunities to participate in cross-cultural learning in PWIs are missed. Students miss these opportunities because of their proclivity for engaging and interacting with same race peers. Antonio (2001) substantiates that much of the race related hostility in the campus climate results from student self-segregation.

Multicultural collegiate experiences allow and support many forms of student growth and development. For example, interactions with peers and faculty in the classroom and during out-of-class time are known to enhance well-rounded learning outcomes (Chang, 2001). A central thesis relevant to student learning and personal development is involvement in leadership, service, and organizational activities. Participation in extra-curricular activities is pivotal to the successful outcomes of all collegians (Astin, 1993; Kuh, et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The majority of high-achieving African American undergraduate males at

Millennial University find themselves in a complex and often unfriendly institutional setting. For these students the climate is usually hostile and unwelcoming. Transitioning from a highly structured high school environment to an environment where the individual creates the structure can pose adjustment issues across the general student population. In addition to the usual transitional issues that students' face, African American males often face an additional layer of transitional issues not directly related to their educational purpose. Commonly, these issues pertain to racial and gender stereotyping that has been foundational in Millennial University culture for more than a century.

The manner in which African American male high achievers successfully transition to PWIs is dependent on a variety of factors. Study findings suggest that three of the more critical factors that impact successful transitions of this student group to postsecondary education include: (1) campus culture/climate, (2) institutional commitment to diversity and multiculturalism, and (3) the tenacity and engagement of the students in transition.

Rarely do African American undergraduate males experience Millennial University culture in a manner that does not engender marginalization and isolation. Consequently, these newcomers are challenged to find ways to negotiate cultural challenges. Regardless of their academic achievement status, campus mainstream activities, organizations, and premier honor societies seldom include African American males.

The views that many Millennial University White constituents hold about African American males are often distorted and rooted in stereotypical beliefs. The literature confirms that occurrences of isolation and marginalization are fairly consistent encounters for African American males attending PWIs (Britt-Fries & Griffin, 2007); Harper, 2004, 2005, 2006; Porter & Washington, 1993; Scott, 2003). In these circumstances learning is stifled. Hence, educators in

the classrooms, administrators and all constituents of the academic enterprise are duty bound to democratize the learning environment for an increasingly diverse student population.

### *Research Question Three*

How do high-achieving African American Undergraduate males establish campus connectedness and fulfill expectations in the culture of a PWI?

### *Agents of Change*

At its core, this study sought to understand how high-achieving African American undergraduate males at a PWI make decisions for action based on their cultural frame of reference. Equally important was to know how Millennial University supports the educational and social endeavors of high-achieving African American males. A third factor was to know how the engagement of African American male high-achievers influenced their efforts to make a connection to the institution.

From the perspective of the twenty high-achieving African American collegians in this study, they often travel a very lonely path at Millennial University. Traveling this lonely path often requires daily demonstrations of exceptional intellectual ability. The students reported that on a day-to-day basis they must exercise extraordinary psychosocial coping skills. A consistent theme among the study participants was their desire to associate with “like minded” same race students. However, finding and relating to “like minded” (high-achieving) African American undergraduate males has proved to be, yet another cultural challenge at Millennial University.

Students in the study often spoke of having to mediate their way through a maze of racial, gender, social and class elitism. It was through their determined and persistent academic engagement that high-achieving African American undergraduate males experienced the culture of this PWI. Determined and persistent academic engagement (Hrabowski, et al., 1998) is a common thread that appears to be woven into the daily experiences of high-achieving African

American undergraduate males at this PWI. Their quiet strength and steel-willed resolve to carry high the banner of success is exemplified in their support to the campus community, their hometown communities and this research endeavor. As noted in chapter three, the participants described this research endeavor as being “too important to go unnoticed.”

Study participant discourse relevant to improving conditions for racial and gender inclusion at Millennial University was indicative of the responsible role they perceive for themselves as agents of change. Many students expressed the belief that mediation and self-help may be the best offense to survive the unwelcoming and often racially hostile environment at Millennial University. Statements from the study group reflected willingness to accept responsibility for much of the change they think is needed to advance campus multiculturalism.

The perceived need for changes is not only important, but necessary to achieve wholesome majority race peer interactions, and interactions with members of the faculty and administrative staff (Britt-Fries, 1998; Britt-Fries, & Griffin, 2007; Cabrera, et al., 1999; Chang, 2000; Kuh, et al., 2005). The willingness of study participants to assume the burden of responsibility for changing the racial climate at Millennial University was an unexpected finding in this study. In the literature, Fries-Britt (2000) establishes a rationale for this phenomenon. She contends:

High-achieving black students must master a baffling balancing act that they experience as they manage their intellectual ability. On the one hand they find it necessary to conceal their intelligence, yet on the other hand, they feel that they have to go out of their way to prove they are smart (p. 57).

Study participants readily acknowledged the cultural odds against their efforts to become more inclusive members in the Millennial University experience. Nevertheless, their resolve to improve the racial climate for all students was not weakened. Encountering racism was a daily reality for these African American male high-achievers. However, it was their belief that



through successful academic achievement and active campus engagement a positive change in the hostile climate was possible. The history of the struggle against segregation in public education inspired these collegians to seek resolutions that will mitigate campus racial hostility.

In this regard, some study participants made the observation that the dominant culture of Millennial University was nothing more than a testing ground for real world experiences. It was their contention that these experiences existed just beyond the boundaries of the campus. An observation from a faculty study participant informs that Millennial University has established a public persona and will not entertain any concerns that are not in concert with that public persona. In a 2007 study by Harper and Hurtado, these researchers write:

Put simply, race remained an unpopular topic and was generally considered taboo in most spaces, including classes other than ethnic studies. At one institution, a mid-level staff member shared: “We don’t talk about race on this campus because this state has long struggled with racial issues that trace back to slavery” (p. 16).

Relevant to the sentiments expressed in the foregoing statement, Millennial University study participants perceived reluctance on the part of institutional administrators to forthrightly address issues of race and racism. These issues—when unaddressed—continuously erode rhetorical notions of diversity and multiculturalism touted by administrators. Expressions of heartfelt pain were observed when study participants discussed having to endure behaviors on the part of some majority race students, faculty and staff members that emanated from obvious racial stereotypes.

Many study participants embraced the belief that academic prowess on their part overshadowed abounding stereotypes. From their perspective a strong academic reputation garners respect in a culture that often excludes, ignores, or moves away from the presence of African American males. In their stories, the study group frequently talked about building a

solidly strong academic foundation in order to gain some measure of respect in the classroom and in extracurricular endeavors.

Students in the study group did not believe that gender bias, racial stereotypes and incidents of racial profiling and insensitivity might magically disappear because of their academic achievements. The students did however; express a belief that having a strong academic record and being active in what they perceived to be high-profile campus organizations was essential to experiencing the culture of Millennial University in a more positive way.

The “social reality” for this student group was their belief that a reputation for academic excellence was foundational to achieving some measure of cultural synergy at Millennial University. In their stories the students strongly thought that a direct causal outcome existed between their level of academic achievement and their acceptance in the culture of Millennial University. The idea that academic achievement equates to cultural acceptance in the PWI is a coping strategy—a phenomenon known as “John Henryism.”

In the literature, this method of coping was first identified by James, Hartnett and Kalsbeek, (1983). It is defined as over-achievement exerted by African American men in an effort to nullify racial stereotypes. This coping strategy is mostly used during prolonged periods of subjection to extreme social and psychological stressors associated with racism. In the minds of the study participants, academic success equated to respect, respect equated to access, and access equated to membership—with limitations—into the mainstream culture at Millennial University. In an effort to refute prevailing racial and gender stereotypes, the students’ committed themselves to lofty goals of academic success.

It is likely that in their effort to prove themselves worthy through academic over-achievement that; this group failed to make this subtle distinction. The difference between

perceived cultural reality and actual cultural reality is akin to the glass ceiling effect. In this situation, the high-achievers were only permitted to gain partial access to high profile prestigious organizations and activities. On the part of African American males, the perception of inclusion in the mainstream culture of Millennial University was often different from reality as structured by majority race members in that culture.

Dominant members of the culture have pre-established levels that allow high-achieving African American males partial access into selected sectors of the culture. To many of the African American male high-achievers this marginal acceptance was analogous to grabbing the brass ring on a merry-go-round. In this case, the brass ring represented membership in prestigious honorary societies, or perhaps a leadership opportunity in a high profile student organization.

As agents of change, it was the goal of this group of high-achieving African American undergraduate males at Millennial University to influence the way they experience the culture of the institution. The high-achievers maintained a strong conviction that determined and persistent academic engagement will give them entrée into cultural experiences that under different circumstances may otherwise be denied them.

A critical component of the cultural challenges brought forth by African American undergraduate males in this PWI was their need for egalitarian participation in the campus culture. The students were cognizant of the value derived from not losing touch with their own culture and heritage while seeking equal footing in the dominant culture. The way things work at a given college or university is contingent on culture and voice. Traditions and symbolism are elements of institutional *culture* and *voice* is relevant to who really makes the decisions (Tierney, 1991).

In an egalitarian environment successful cultural changes are dependent on collective and collaborative engagement through the diverse representation of institutional constituents. In this context, constituents of the institution will have knowledge of its culture. Having this knowledge will guide their understanding of the importance of being loyal to that culture while working together to integrate multiculturalism as an espoused cultural value that is based in reality.

*Knowledge Is Power and So Are Connections*

Connecting to and interacting with Millennial University faculty and administrative staff members were viewed by the study participants as (a) positive ways to better understand the culture of the university, (b) establish an appreciation for institutional traditions and nuanced practices, and (c) communicate group concerns about perceived exclusionary practices that are gender and race based. The study participants viewed interaction with Millennial University faculty and staff as opportunities to build relationships and in their words “establish a respect factor.” The students appeared to be undeterred by the challenges, but buoyed by the possibilities for relationship building.

Cognizant of the fragile thread that connects them to Millennial University, study group members expressed energetic beliefs that over time the cultural challenges will lessen. Currently, positive interactions with individuals in positions to make recommendations for an award, a scholarship, or simply being known for outstanding academic achievement are actions highly regarded as successes. In the minds of the students, outstanding academic achievement was significant not only for their recognition as top scholars, but was also viewed as a way to abate stereotype threat. Study participants described some of their cultural interactions with majority

race student peers, faculty and staff members as being genuinely supportive and not at all superficial, but very limited.

As reported by the students, White peers seemed to be more involved in high profile campus activities, and they also appeared to have more same race peers with whom to engage in positive interactions. Two primary concerns identified by the study group are relevant to all African American students at Millennial University, and particularly high-achieving African American males. These concerns include: (1) fewer “like minded” students of color, especially African American students with whom to have positive interactions and (2) a campus environment that does not feel like a multiracial and multicultural community. Students at Millennial tended to self-segregate in same race clusters around the campus. In other words, it was the perception of the study group that Millennial University’s claim in regard to supporting and encouraging multiracial and multicultural interactions lacked substance.

Institutions that evasively tip-toe around issues deemed to be culturally sensitive tend to develop a system of avoidance language. Euphemisms often replace the real names of people, places and things. Addressing this point is the following example: For a number of years’ students of color at Millennial University have been asking for a multicultural center for the purpose of enhancing opportunities for cross cultural learning.

The students were so sincere in their desire for such a facility that they developed proposals, and met countless times with campus administrators. When administrators decided to make an attempt to respond to the students, they did not establish a Multicultural Center as the students’ requested; instead they selected a small obscure corner space in an existing facility and gave it a euphemistic name. This action was certain to please Board members, members of the state legislature, and many alumni.

To the dismay of students, university administrators proudly announced that a small corner section of an existing facility had been provided for multicultural purposes. This small corner space does not bear the student requested name— “Multicultural Center.” Because of the limited space provided, the location of the space and the euphemistic name administrators elected to use to identify what they deemed to be a Multicultural Center; students viewed these actions to be politically influenced and insincere. Even more disappointing to the students, is that this corner space does not function in the inclusive multicultural manner they envisioned.

Study participants revealed that early in their matriculation at Millennial University, they determined that there were ways to work around the cultural and racist roadblocks that threatened their success. These students maintained an allegiance to success and a commitment to fulfill personal dreams and the dreams of family and community supporters. For these students, the realization of educational goals was a force much stronger than social isolation and racial alienation. Their savvy approach to beating the odds was to stay focused on their goals and not the distractions. Cultural rigidity and stereotype threat at Millennial University tended to galvanize the determination of this group of high-achieving African American undergraduate male collegians.

#### *Connecting With Millennial University Administrators*

A few study participants reported that they are already independently engaged in dialogue with selected Millennial University administrators. The intent of the students is straight forward and uncomplicated. The initial goal is to get MU administrators proactively engaged in joint efforts with students to address racial disharmony. The students asserted that before these issues can be forthrightly addressed, administrators must acknowledge that the racial climate is highly

toxic. Secondly, the goal is to get MU administrators to commit to making meaningful changes that are representative of real diversity and inclusiveness.

Students no longer wanted to live with the perception of equality; they wanted to experience the reality of equality and respect. Several students in the study were of the opinion that top-level campus administrators were deliberately choosing to ignore the toxicity of the racial climate on campus. The study participants surmised that if university administrators did not act, perhaps they were not empowered to do so. Students cited, as an example, the rogue election activities that take place each year when candidates seek leadership roles in the student government association.

The hope that gives rise to continuing efforts by high-achieving African American undergraduate male collegians lies within administrator lead initiatives. Reality based leadership will make possible a breakthrough in the log-jam of politics and racism that now engulfs the campus. Ensuring equanimity across racial and gender lines is achievable if campus administrators—in concert with diverse student groups, actively pursue this outcome.

Study participants tended to acknowledge that Millennial University administrators have the necessary tools to at least reduce the toxicity of the racially hostile campus climate. The real problem, as perceived by the study group, is a lack of courage—or willingness—on the part of administrators. In the view of the study group, an administrator not willing to go against the will of powerful and influential alumni, members of the institutional governing board, and state legislators is analogous to lack of leadership power.

Members of the study group observed that the majority of top-level administrators at Millennial University, including academic deans, department heads and student affairs administrators were Caucasian males. The students suggested that more racial and gender

diversity is needed in senior level administrative positions. Modeling diversity at this level potentially enhances cross-cultural interactions that impacts multiracial student learning, discourages stereotyping and actively demonstrates institutional commitment to diversity.

In regard to managing racist acts (in the classroom and out of the classroom) that erode emotional, social, intellectual and psychological well being, students in positive mentoring relationships, or those in relationships with a positive role model usually find wholesome and socially healthy coping strategies that mitigate the psychological and emotional stress of racism. Environmental and cultural challenges—mostly rooted in racism— posed extreme barriers for the twenty high-achievers in this study. Somehow the students’ either because of early parental socializations, or by their own sheer will, made the decision that cultural challenges and racism notwithstanding, success was theirs’ to be achieved—no matter the odds against them.

#### Lack of African American Male Role Models

Study participants spoke with fervor about the extremely limited number of African American male role models at Millennial University. Their comments ranged from not thinking the institution was positioned to competitively attract African American male professors and administrators; to their belief that not many African American males want to be a lowly paid university professor in a hostile racial climate.

Contextualizing the issue, one study participant noted that among his many friends there were only two who expressed an interest in becoming a university professor. Some study participants believed that the geographic location of Millennial University was also a deterrent in attracting minority professors and administrators. Also, students felt that Millennial was not likely the type of place where an African American male might aspire to work and live.



These high-achieving collegians wanted role models, mentors, and a “go to” person to help them address issues of racial, gender and cultural concern. At Millennial University the number of African American undergraduate male high-achievers constitutes fewer than two hundred (see Chapter Three for high-achiever definition). Also significant in experiencing the campus culture of Millennial University was the lack of a critical mass of African American students in the general population.

Because of the extremely limited number of same race peers, it was very difficult to establish cultural bonds. This situation also made it challenging to interact with other high-achieving African American male undergraduates at Millennial University. Lacking these interactions, the study group often experienced a cultural, intellectual, social, and peer relationship void (Britt-Fries & Griffin, 2007).

Positive relationships with peers, faculty and staff, as well as upper level administrators go a long way in mitigating the isolation experienced by high-achieving African American male collegians attending a PWI. Often, feelings of isolation endure over the course of the four years that students are enrolled at Millennial University.

Establishing outlets for positive social interaction and out-of-class engagement with faculty, along with opening opportunities for students in this group to participate in the usual campus activities and organizations are fundamental steps that Millennial University can take with little effort. However, support and interest in the needs of this group must be known, understood and respected by university personnel. Especially personnel empowered to make positive responses to the needs of this frequently ignored and often maligned population of students.

### *Campus Connectedness*

Problems of racial polarization and self-imposed segregation among groups of students are prevalent on many predominantly White campuses (Altbach, et al., 2002). Despite national survey data that reflects more liberal views on the part of majority race students; their proclivity to interact mostly with same race peers poses a significant problem. Caucasian students at Millennial University seldom interact with students of color. African American students, including male high- achievers, usually retreat to their own small enclaves of segregated social groups. Most of the students in this study reported that they rarely mingle with Caucasian peers.

Study participants cite the example of the Student Center where on a daily basis African American students can be observed sitting with small groups of same race peers. Some researchers (Altbach, et al., 2002; Fleming, 1984) attribute self segregating among Caucasian students to lingering racial stereotyping. There is a growing shift toward conservative American values that support assumptions on the part of many Caucasian Americans that as a group, African Americans generally consider themselves entitled to benefits that others must work to acquire. The fact that it was mostly African American servitude that built the base for acquisitions enjoyed by many Caucasian Americans is a fact often conveniently overlooked.

Conditions such as these make it more perplexing to understand why many of the students in this study were so yielding in terms of taking ownership for enhancing race relations at Millennial University. While this sentiment was prevalent among many of the study participants, it was not unanimous across the entire study population. On campus encounters with racism were so fresh in the minds of some students that they expressed a need to mentally and emotionally distance themselves from White students in order to just get through each day.

Students in this study readily acknowledged that racial tensions and inequities at Millennial University are grating issues. Moreover, they acknowledged that there is a role they must play to help improve the quality of student experiences across racial and gender lines. A particular role the study participants identified as critical; is the need for older high-achieving African American students to connect with incoming freshmen and transfer students as soon as these new students arrive on campus.

Knowing how to connect with a mentor or role model will likely mitigate many racially hostile encounters and positively impact the transitioning of incoming high-achievers. Helping incoming high-achievers build a support network among same race peers will also aid in their successful adjustment to the Millennial University experience. Reflecting back to their days as freshmen at Millennial University, the study group recalled social, identity, academic, multicultural and multiracial minefields they had to negotiate without guidance. According to the study participants, guidance from someone who knows the landscape, or has already traversed the minefields can provide invaluable assistance to newcomers.

Study group members pointed out that they experienced many missed opportunities due to a lack of knowledge about campus resources. They were often uninformed about steps that needed to be taken in the freshmen year in order to later become eligible to participate in high profile campus organization and premier honor societies. The students also cautioned that many high-achieving newcomers are first generation college students and have no one at home to guide them through preparation for the collegiate experience.

Some students have already become involved in establishing social and information networks designed to address the needs of incoming African American undergraduate male high-achievers at Millennial University. It is intended that the early intervention plan will assist

newcomers with four essential information items as identified by study participants to be relevant to college preparation: (1) know what to do, (2) know how to do what is needed, (3) know when to do what is needed, and (4) know how to seek assistance.

Many high-achieving African American males often move quietly through the halls of PWIs; almost unnoticed. They are mostly unnoticed because their faces are seen before their voices are heard. Nevertheless, they maintain their resolve to realize a dream of academic success. Consequently, this group of high-achieving African American undergraduate males continues the often lonely journey—because they know there is a debt to pay forward.

### *Study Implications*

The twenty high-achieving African American undergraduate males participating in this case study were seriously dedicated to realizing a number of outcomes. First and foremost, it was made clear by these young collegians that they were proud to be a Millennial University student. The participants' openly and candidly talked about weaknesses relevant to matters of race, gender diversity, inclusiveness and multiculturalism; they also demonstrated a strong desire to help improve the campus climate for students of color. The students were actively seeking a role in resolving racial disharmony.

More than anything else; it seemed that the participants wanted to tell their stories and have their voices heard. The implications from these desired outcomes are that PWIs must engage in actionable rhetoric that yields ongoing opportunities for dialogue across cultural boundaries. They wanted to do these things without fear of retribution. The students also wanted to know that their voices will be listened to and negative judgments will not be assessed against them. Often the students talked about the lack of continuity in messages they receive from MU administrators and other majority race constituents of the university.

This lack of continuity was evident in the way African-American male high-achievers described their experiences in the Millennial University culture. Sending mixed messages that negatively impact the collegiate experiences of high-achieving African American males can be avoided by developing a message that is sincere and one that will not be perceived as disingenuous toward multiculturalism.

On the one hand, students were—in some cases, strongly recruited to enroll at MU. Some of the students were awarded partial or full scholarships as an incentive to attract them to the campus. However, once these collegians were enrolled; they became keenly aware of sharp lines of racial divisions, and frequently encountered racial stereotypes.

Many Caucasian students, and sadly a number of Millennial University White faculty and staff members seemed to question the legitimacy of high-achieving African American undergraduate males. In this regard, Jesse, a National Achievement full scholarship recipient commented: “Being in this study lifted my spirits greatly. Every achievement I get is another notch in my belt...I’ll admit I have a little bit of a chip on my shoulder, feel like I need to prove myself here...I had a particularly racist guy I knew make a comment that if he was Black he could pull off a minority scholarship.”

Situational experiences with racism were highly disconcerting and disappointment was pervasive among the study participants. These feelings occurred mostly because the high-achievers did not expect to experience racism and stereotypes in classrooms and among their peers. Unfortunately, these high-achievers were experiencing an institutional culture where diversity and inclusiveness were touted, but where very little was being done to effect cultural change in regard to issues of racial diversity (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

Little information is available in the literature about high-achieving African American undergraduate males as a subpopulation in a PWI. Nevertheless, much is known about the needs of college students in general. Armed with this knowledge and with respect and appreciation for multiculturalism; PWIs like Millennial University are positioned to advance teaching and learning to build a wholesome non-hostile campus climate.

American higher education is continuing to transition through periods of growth that infuse different needs for varying student populations. A significant element of the change that is taking place in American Higher Education is the shift in student demography. With these shifts come variations in cultural frames of reference, and students experience the environment in particularistic ways, based on their cultural heritage.

Critical to the adjustment of minority students enrolled in a PWI is the need to have “a go to person” on these campuses. This person must be prepared to help subpopulation groups’ transition successfully into the culture of the campus without sacrificing their own cultural identity. This notion presupposes that campus administrators are familiar with the culture and climate of their institutions. As noted by Lee (2002), “The relationship between culture and climate is an important one because it sets the stage for future progress toward diversity in higher education” (p. 360).

### *Recommendations for Practice*

At the outset of this study three research questions guided the process. In this section I align recommendations for practice with each of the three research questions.

#### Research Question One:

How does academic engagement influence the way high-achieving African American undergraduate males experience the culture of a predominantly White institution?

### *Recommendations*

Peer interactions across race, ethnicity and gender lines were of compelling interest and concern among the study participants. Predominantly White institutions seeking to enhance the collegiate experience of high-achieving African American males may support their determination, and persistence, and their academic engagement by ensuring that these students' have institutionally structured ways, to connect with high-achieving same race peers, as well as Caucasian male undergraduate high-achievers, and students across the general population.

Within the PWI, it is important to establish institutional mechanisms designed to identify high-achieving African American undergraduate males upon their initial enrollment, introduce the students to possible mentors, and role models within the ranks of African American faculty and staff members. Similarly structured mentoring relationships and out-of-class interactions with faculty and staff members across racial and ethnic groups are critical to campus adjustment.

It was suggested by study participants that as a part of new student orientation, institutional arrangements be made for high-achieving African American undergraduate males to meet members of and advisors to, campus honorary societies. Inform incoming high-achieving African American undergraduate males about activities and organizations they must be active in to establish eligibility to be nominated for premier awards. This is especially important for premier awards given to junior and senior level students based on activities and memberships that begin during the freshman year.

#### Research Question Two:

How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males openly communicate their expectations to PWI campus administrators?

### *Recommendations*

It is recommended that an institutionally supported fund be established to award financial incentives to high-achieving African American first generation students. Additionally this fund will provide direct financial support to high-achieving African American undergraduate males not receiving financial aid assistance equivalent to the full cost of attendance. Priority eligibility for receiving these funds will be high-achieving African American male undergraduates, currently enrolled in good standing and who are working one or more jobs to remain in school. This group of students is considered to have the highest probability for attrition.

For high-achieving African American males working to remain in school; it is recommended that institutionally based financial assistance be provided to enhance opportunities for these students to take full advantage of the collegiate experience. Critical to this experience is improved academic performance and expanded engagement in undergraduate research along with more time to interact with faculty and peers. Essentially, students will have opportunities to explore their creativity and perhaps make notable contributions relevant to learning outcomes.

Enhancing faculty diversity through strategic employment decisions is recommended for Millennial University and similarly situated PWIs. Study group members stressed the importance of employing more African American tenure track faculty. Embedded in this recommendation is the need to establish junior faculty development and mentoring support. It was proffered by study participants that this type of institutional support will facilitate progression to tenure and retention. Additionally, it was recommended that Millennial University employ more African Americans to work in top-level administrative positions with high visibility.



Establish a non-punitive process for students to report and have addressed overt racist behavior on the part of teaching faculty. Perhaps a 911-DEAN anonymous line is a possibility. Students must be assured of identity protection and strongly discouraged from making false or frivolous complaints. All students, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender will have access to the 911-Dean anonymous reporting line.

Study group members believed that if all students had access to a readily available resource to report incidents of racial and or gender harassment, as well as general acts of racial incivility, actions may be taken to reduce such behavior and generally improve the climate of the campus for a diverse student population. Study participants cautioned that the manner in which this resource is introduced to the campus will have either a negative or positive outcome. Hence, careful consideration with input from students is essential to effecting campus climate change through the use of this medium.

Collaborate with the Association of African American Faculty and Staff to develop an enhanced mentoring and outreach program for high-achieving African American undergraduate male students and for students' in general. Cross-racial and cross-gender interactions are important to creating a true multicultural experience for the entire student population. An action oriented faculty and administrative staff network committed to the institutional goal of enhancing diversity and inclusiveness is an immediate necessity at Millennial University. Additionally, it is important for all students to see and know that a diverse pool of faculty and staff are available to enrich their learning and personal development in multiple ways.

Acknowledge the long-standing issue of "rogue" elections to premier student organizations and campus leadership positions. Eliminate de facto segregation activities that deny the participation of all students regardless of race, gender, and/or membership affiliation.

The high-achieving African American males in this study emphasized a desire to have realistic opportunities to compete for leadership roles and membership in prestigious campus organization without favoritism.

Members of the study group frequently expressed how little they knew and understood about nuanced cultural practices that benefitted the privileged majority race students and essentially ignored students of color. To address this situation it was recommended by study participants that at new student orientation, all students be informed about the full array of extracurricular activities.

Opportunities and experiential exposure were viewed by members in the study group as tools that help build a stronger resume. Further, initiation into majority race Greek sororities and fraternities was considered by study members to explicitly establish racial and gender divisiveness before many of these students ever attend their first class at Millennial University. Consequently, the study group recommends that the institution address Greek organization issues that continue to be viewed by many students as a tradition that has outlived its time.

Determine ways to honor longstanding Millennial University cultural traditions, espoused values, nuanced practices and particularistic beliefs without overtly offending non-White racial/ethnic or gender groups. Monitor programs and services that cater to a particular student subculture at the risk of marginalizing other students. Find ways to make programs and services more diverse and inclusive. Much of what is suggested here can be achieved by simply making information available across racial and gender lines. A lack of information often precludes minority student participation more so than exclusive practices.

Maintain ongoing dialogue with student representatives across the spectrum of campus subcultures. Central to assessing educational outcomes for students is the extent to which they

demonstrate through action and words what they have been taught and what they have learned in college. A core element of this learning is exposure to diverse subcultures, racial and ethnic groups and diverse gender orientations. Intolerance and disregard for these subcultures suggests a narrowly focused educational experience. Antonio 2001 contends:

Whether the issue under contention is hate speech, an ethnic studies requirement, or faculty hiring practices, the education and development of students lies in the resolution of these issues. Consequently, alongside these important dialogues stands a continuing deliberation over the outcomes of a college education, particularly as they relate to demographic realities (p.64).

Establish and fund a position to employ a Dean for Diversity and Multicultural Initiatives. A number of highly reputable peer institutions already have models that are yielding positive outcomes. Review existing models from peer institutions and emulate best practices. This new position will be responsible for establishing campus-wide initiatives to effect diversity and inclusiveness beyond politically influenced rhetoric. Politically influenced rhetoric tends to prohibit action oriented decision making.

Additionally, African American male high-achievers expressed concern that the work they are attempting to engage in with administrators to improve the campus climate will not benefit the campus community unless: (1) administrators are willing to acknowledge that campus race relations are generally poor, (2) unless and until administrators acknowledge that a race relations problem at Millennial University is a reality, it is unlikely that definitive and sustained actions will be taken (3) implement meaningful actions that structure opportunities for multiracial and multicultural interactions across student, faculty, staff and administrative entities. The high-achievers recognize and appreciate current endeavors; however, it is their view that these endeavors are too few and lack enthusiastic support.

For more than two decades American colleges and universities have employed multiple approaches to address the rapidly changing demographic makeup of student populations across institutional types. Central to this effort are a number of factors. These factors run the gamut from the articulation of educational benefits students accrue from higher education diversity initiatives (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002) to impacting student educational outcomes relative to an institutional diversity mission. Some assert that the role of a Diversity Officer is essential and clearly defined in terms of responding to evolving demography.

The real challenge in postsecondary education is discerning the difference from perceived reality and actual reality regarding the effectiveness of the chief diversity officer. During initial legal challenges to affirmative action, the benefits of diversity in the higher education experience were touted as essential to holistic learning. Writing in *Academe Online* published by the American Association of University Professors, Butler (2002, p. 1) asserted: “Colleges and universities must find ways to prepare students for responsible citizenship in a diverse democracy and to help faculty members develop and use knowledge to improve communities.”

Questions about the intrinsic values diversity officers bring to institutions of higher education still abound. In more recent years the role of the diversity administrator (often reporting directly to the institutional provost or president) has expanded beyond issues of racial disharmony to include matters of equanimity relevant to gender issues, the establishment of student multicultural centers, facilitating the search for faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds. Butler (2000) purports that: “Recent debates on campus about diversity have confirmed the need to increase civic participation and address issues of equity and social justice” (p. 3).

Since the early days of these fledgling positions questions hinted that “minority affairs directors” were merely window dressing. No longer viewed in such a narrow perspective, the profession has evolved into the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. Hence, for the immediate future, it appears that postsecondary institutions will continue to employ “Chief Diversity Officers” to mitigate issues of racial intolerance, acts of incivility and enhance the social justice knowledge agenda.

Research Question Three:

How do high-achieving African American undergraduate males establish campus connectedness and fulfill expectations in the culture of a PWI?

*Recommendations*

Study participants recommended that high-achieving African American undergraduate males must move beyond racial comfort zones and interact with peers from across multiracial and multicultural backgrounds. The students inferred that these interactions enhance learning for all students and expands opportunities for high-achievers. Additionally, it was recommended that high-achieving African American men at Millennial University deliberately engage in dialogue with members of the faculty and administrative support staff.

Determine ways to establish mentoring relationships with Millennial University faculty and staff. Identify individuals with whom interactions have been positive and pursue out-of-class opportunities to have that person be a mentor. Study participants strongly encouraged High-achieving African American males to research information about Millennial University student support resources and use these resources to advance their academic success. Enhance opportunities to expand engagement with peers, faculty and staff members through participation in networks with other high-achieving multiracial student groups. In the spirit of “giving back”

the students recommended that currently enrolled high-achievers become peer mentors to incoming students adjusting to campus life.

### *Future Research*

Limitations associated with this study include: small sample size, a single institutional site, short term field work (four weeks), and the inclusion of only one geographic region. It is believed that multi-institutional sites across geographic regions and institutional types and varied demographic representation may have enriched the findings.

Perhaps an ethnographic study spanning a much longer time frame with more diverse sampling across student populations, geographic regions and institutional types may have enhanced knowledge for practice. Ascertaining data from non-high-achieving African American undergraduate males and White male high-achievers may have broadened the dimensions of the study and thereby yielded more extensive findings to inform practice. Additionally, sampling a group of non-high-achieving African American males at Millennial University may have given insight into experiences that may have been similar or dissimilar from the study group. Additionally, expanding the sample population to include high-achieving White males in the study may have more expansively informed findings.

Another dimension that may be considered for future study is the impact of culture in a PWI for high-achieving African American women. How similar or dissimilar are their experiences at Millennial University. Identifying cultural challenges that are unique to African American males may have provided insight into unique social and or perhaps gender issues that impact males differently than African American females.

In the academy, much of what is known about African American males is based on what Ford (1993) and Mizell (1999) describe as deficit model research. Using deficit research models

that focus on negative characteristics and outcomes subsumes that African American college age students are not high-achievers. Operationally, deficit research models do not reveal the untold stories of excellence, outstanding abilities, and phenomenal intellectual gifts, embedded in the subpopulation of high-achieving African American male students.

Their excellence, their outstanding abilities and their intellectual gifts have often been ignored or thought not to exist. Deficit research models have cast long shadows of negativity about African American male students. Through expanded research, it is now, both important and necessary to enrich the field of knowledge about this understudied and long ignored group of male collegians.

Multicultural and multiracial diversity in the academy is a reality that is now woven into the fabric of American higher education. Many forms of diversity impact and influence the culture and climate of postsecondary institutions across the country. However, as Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) suggests, the stories and experience of successful African American collegians attending predominantly White institutions are uneven. This unevenness suggests that much more research is needed across institutional types and cultures.

Concomitantly, there is a need to integrate studies of institutional culture and climate with well researched factors known to be essential to student development and student adjustment during the college years. Addressing this latter point, Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) stated: “Major shifts in the kinds of students populating American colleges and universities may mean that we need to rethink or expand our concepts about the outcomes of postsecondary education” (p. 153).

Diversity issues relevant to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural influences play pivotal roles in the frames of reference that students bring to the collegiate

experience. Multiculturalism and multiracialism, along with shifts in sexual orientation impact the ways that students learn and experience college. The convergence of these entities has not been sufficiently or even marginally examined in the literature. Subpopulations within the broader populations add different needs and dimensions to teaching and learning paradigms. Kezar and Eckel (2002) contend that: “The current change literature in higher education provides mostly generalized strategies about what is effective” (p. 435).

Based on limited prior research, (Davis, 1994; Griffin, 2006; Lee, 2002; Bonner, 2010); and Harper, 2005), it is evident that future research is needed to enhance the knowledge base in the academy. To this outcome, the focus of future studies may address the manner in which high-achieving African American males negotiate campus culture in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Also to what extent does the acclaimed “nurturing influence” in HBCUs impact learning outcomes for high-achieving African American males?

Additional research may examine interactive relationships between high-achieving African American males and other same race males and females in predominantly White institutions (PWI). A more narrowly focused study might examine interactive peer relationships between high-achieving African American males and high-achieving African American females attending a PWI. Yet, another dimension may examine peer interactions and educational outcomes for high-achieving African-American females and high-achieving White females.

Research examining interactive peer relationships between high-achieving African American males and high-achieving White males in a PWI outside the region of the southeastern United States may also be illuminating for practice. The knowledge base may also be expanded by examining peer interaction between high-achieving White males and high-achieving African American males attending an HBCU. Across institutional types, so little is known about high-



achieving African American males that the knowledge gap will not be narrowed in the short-term. Consequently, myriad opportunities abound for more research.

Since many students in this study were from single parent low income families or were supported by grandparents, it is my contention that practitioners may be well served to have access to research examining these phenomena. Pairing such a study with classism, sexism and homophobic views may yield insight into an array of issues that in some way influence peer interactions and oftentimes limit meaningful intercultural, multiracial and gender neutral learning. At least one participant in this study expressed concern about what he perceived to be life altering homophobic behavior within segments of the African American culture. Herein is another characteristic about high-achieving African American males for future research.

### *Conclusion*

Orfield, Marin and Horn, (2005) contend that the rapidly changing demographic pipeline of college going students has begun and will continue to usher in compelling needs to address issues of access, equity, college preparation, economic resources and degree attainment among an increasingly diverse student population. Across all racial/ethnic groups, African American male students and Native Americans are least likely to attain education beyond the high school diploma or certificate level (Kurlaender & Flores, 2005).

The travails of African American males, across the social spectrum have garnered national attention in recent years. Much of that attention has been focused on a range of educational, cultural, economic, political and psychosocial issues that imperil this subpopulation of students (Gordon, Gordon & Nembhard (1994). Beyond vacuous rhetoric at Millennial University, limited investments have been made toward achieving diversity and inclusiveness across multiracial and multicultural groups.

For the most part, institutions simply opened the doors and allowed in those students of color who met admissions criteria and made exceptions to enroll; some marginally prepared students. When institutions of higher education fail to define and shape multiculturalism the outcome is likely to be undesired by all. To this end, Tierney (1993) suggests: “The power of the norm is also reinforced in an organization’s culture through a structure that develops policies that privilege some and make others invisible” (p. 53).

At Millennial University the norm of the culture is so strongly reinforced that multiculturalism and multiracialism are reduced to a number factor. When queried about the multicultural profile of the institution, these numbers are “speed dialed” by administrators and spewed forth in an effort to convince a listening audience that diversity and inclusiveness are not only important in the espoused mission of the institution, but are actively embraced in the cultural behavior of the institution.

When institutional foci and actions are primarily directed towards privileging a few and making others invisible; achieving a true multicultural environment is unlikely to occur. This study concludes that at Millennial University the focus is primarily on the privileged, and students of color, particularly high-achieving African American male undergraduates are mostly invisible.

The goal in this study was to examine the manner in which high-achieving African American undergraduate males negotiate cultural challenges in a predominantly White institution. The findings indicate that many answers to achieving multiculturalism exist within the student population about which this study was designed. Beyond their numerical addition to institutional representation, high-achieving African American males add much to the richness of

collegial experiences in the campus community. However, they do so at tremendous social, emotional, psychological and personal cost.

They view themselves as members of a global community—a community that is more intrigued with their talents and intellect than the color of their skin and their gender. By the fate of their birth, race and gender have relegated them to narrow minded stereotypes that often erode self-esteem. To their good fortune, these exemplary young African American males are often supported by a social network of extended family and community members. Additionally, many of these students are sustained by faith. Their religious ties ground them in focusing on possibility rather than improbability.

As a sub-population in the campus culture they seek to make contributions that are valued and respected. They have demonstrated a desire to be included in the campus culture, not simply because of their gender and ethnicity, but because they are highly qualified to enrich the culture of the academy. These impressive young men are not charlatans, they are students who know the value of preparation and are willing to delay immediate gratification for long-term achievements.

Against difficult odds, they have committed themselves to excellence in academic performance and social engagement. Through their many outstanding achievements they exemplify values that emanate from strong character, respect for others and a belief in the virtue of simply being good citizens. They willingly reach out to those in need; they are selfless and outwardly focused. They have dreams, goals and aspirations to make the world a better place for all mankind.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Memorandum

**To:** Student Research Participant  
**CC:** File  
**From:** Elva E. Bradley  
**Date:** 10/27/2010  
**Re:** Current Research Study

---

I am writing to let you know about a research study that I am conducting as a part of my requirements for a doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration. The title of my study is: *How High-Achieving African American Undergraduate Men Negotiate Cultural Challenges At A Predominantly White Institution*. This is a qualitative study that will require the collection of information from individual students and selected faculty and administrative staff member. The formats for data collection will include: Individual Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and E-journaling.

It is the goal of higher education institutions to not just enroll students from diverse backgrounds, but to have those students successfully remain in school and complete their course of study. You may be aware that higher education retention and completion rates for African American males have not been strong. United States Census Bureau data released August 2008 indicates that: *Minorities now roughly one-third of the U. S. population are expected to become the majority in 2042.*

In a March-April 2005, *About Campus* article, Shaun Harper wrote:

More than two-thirds of all African American males who begin college never finish. This and a legion of other discouraging facts about African American males are the usual headlines. But what about those among this population who beat the odds, make the most of college and achieve in multiple ways inside and outside of the classroom? Who are they, and what can they teach us?

The purpose of my research study is to examine these and other questions about African American male collegians. I want to hear you tell your own story. It is for this reason that I invite you to attend an informational session to learn more about my research study and how you can participate in the study. The informational session will be conducted Monday, October 19, 2009

in Osband Hall Room 119 at six o'clock (6:00 p.m.). Light refreshments will be served. Eligible participants must have 30 college credit hours, a cumulative grade average of 3.0 or higher, be active in campus activities and have demonstrated leadership ability.

Your participation in this study will provide useful data to advance higher education practices. More specifically, the stories that you tell will enrich the literary knowledge base relevant to best practices for retaining African American male collegians in Predominantly White Institutions. Existing literature on this topic is very limited; hence your contribution is immensely important. I hope to see you at 6:00 p.m. Monday, October 19<sup>th</sup> in 119 Osband Hall. If you have friends that meet the study criteria, please encourage them to come with you. I am seeking twenty participants for the study.

## APPENDIX B

### QUALITATIVE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Background Information:

1. Why did you choose to enroll at Millennial University?
2. What did you expect the campus to be like before you enrolled?
3. Tell me what it is like for you to be a student at MU?
4. Based on your experiences, have your expectations about the campus been met?

#### Context of Student Experiences:

5. What makes you feel connected to the MU campus?
6. As an African American male at MU what are your campus experiences like?
7. What do other African American males tell you about their experiences at MU?
8. What do you think the campus experience is like for non-African American males?
9. What do your White male friends tell you about their experiences at MU?
10. What if anything would you like to change about your experiences at MU?

#### Student Perceptions of Faculty Interactions:

11. Tell me what it is like to be in class at MU?
12. How would you describe your relationship with MU faculty?
13. Tell me about your out-of-class experiences at MU faculty?

#### Student Perceptions of Campus Organizations and Leadership Opportunities:

14. Tell me about your participation in campus organizations?
15. What does it take to become a student leader at MU?
16. How do you make friends at MU?

#### Student Perceptions on Peers:

17. What do your African American male friends tell you about why they are leaving MU before graduating?
18. What do your White male friends tell you about why they are leaving MU before graduating?
19. What is the most common reason why African American males that you know leave MU before graduating?

20. What is the most common reason why White males that you know leave MU before graduating?

**Family and Faith Influences:**

21. Do you maintain frequent contact with your family or other relatives?

22. How do you feel supported by your family?

23. Do you have a church affiliation?

24. If so, how does your connection to a church or faith influence your student life?

**Student Perceptions of the Institution:**

25. What has been your least satisfying experience as an MU student?

26. What has been your most satisfying experience as an MU student?

## APPENDIX C

### Memorandum

**To:** Perspective Faculty/Staff Research Participant  
**CC:** File  
**From:** Elva E. Bradley  
**Date:** 10/27/2010  
**Re:** Request to Participate in Current Research

---

I am writing to let you know about a research study that I am conducting as a part of my requirements for a doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration. The title of the study is: *How Does Campus Culture at a Predominantly White Institution Influence the Challenges of High-Achieving African American Males?* This qualitative study will require the collection of information from twenty (20) pre-screened students and five (5) faculty and administrative staff members. Two (2) faculty members (one White male and one African American male) and three (3) administrative staff members (two African American males and one White male) will constitute the total of five non-student participants.

As you may be aware, it is the goal of institutions of higher education to not just enroll students from diverse backgrounds, but to have those students successfully remain in school and complete their courses of study. Over the years, the retention and graduation rate for African American male collegians have not been strong. United States Census Bureau data released August 2008 indicate that: *Minorities, now roughly one-third of the U. S. Population, are expected to become the majority in 2042.*

Harper (2005) wrote in a *March-April About Campus* article that:

*More than two-thirds of all African American males who begin college never finish. This and a legion of other discouraging facts about African American males are the usual headlines. But what about those among this population who beat the odds, make the most of college and achieve in multiple ways inside and outside the classroom? Who are they, and what can they teach us?*

The purpose of my research study is to examine these and other questions about African American male collegians. I want to hear your story about experiences you have had with this student group. Because of your active and ongoing support to African American students you are being invited to participate in this study. To learn more details about the study and the contributions that you can make, please confirm within three days of receipt of this memorandum that you will participate.

A one hour informational session will be conducted at 5:00p.m. Monday, October 19, 2009 in the Osband Hall Conference Room. Osband Hall is on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue across the street from the rear of Foster Auditorium. You may contact me by email at ebrad\_07@charter.net or during business hours at 348-3921. During evening, you may call me at 349-2697. Light refreshments will be served during the informational setting. Eligible participants must have a demonstrated record of working with and advising students in and out of the classroom. Eligible participants must also have worked at Millennial University (a pseudonym) a minimum of three years.

Your participation in this study will provide useful data to advance higher education practices. More specifically, your story will enrich the literary knowledge base relevant to best practices for retaining and graduating African American male students from Predominantly White Institutions. Existing literature on this topic is very limited; hence your contribution is immensely important. I look forward to hearing from you by October 22, 2009. Thanks in advance for giving serious and immediate attention to this request.

## APPENDIX D

### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/FACULTY

#### Background:

1. You are known on campus for being supportive and helpful to African American males; tell me how you became involved with this group of students?
2. How did you establish a relationship of trust with African American male students?
3. Why do you commit out-of class time to mentor/advise African American males?
4. How receptive are African American male students to your role in their campus experiences?

#### Teaching and Learning:

5. In your opinion, what do you think culturally relevant teaching is?
6. How important is pedagogy to diversity?
7. How do you view the academic achievement of African American male students at MU?

#### Campus Culture/Climate:

8. From your perspective as a faculty member, what is needed at MU to retain more African American males to graduation?
9. What do African American male students tell you about their experiences at MU?
10. How do you help African American male students feel connected to MU?

#### Academic Performance/Social Interactions:

11. How does intellectual development impact academic outcomes for African American male students at MU?
12. What do African American male students need to be cognitively ready for course rigor at MU?
13. How do you encourage African American male students to become engaged in social activities?

Challenges to Graduation:

14. How do cultural dynamics at MU impact the challenges of African American male students?
15. How do scholarly efforts of African American male students impact their challenges to graduation from MU?



## APPENDIX E

### QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/ADMINISTRATORS

#### Background:

1. How do you help African American male students connect to the MU culture?
2. What out-of-class factors are most important to the adjustment of African American male students at MU?

#### Social and Interpersonal Interactions:

3. How do you encourage peer interactions among African American males at MU?
4. What impact does leadership roles have on connection to the MU campus for African American males?
5. How does racial background impact African American male participation in campus social life at MU?
6. Why are you so well known at MU for being a supporter to African American male students?

#### Service and Volunteerism:

7. Why is service and volunteerism particularly important for African American male students at MU?
8. How do you assist African American male students in getting involved in service and volunteer activities at MU?

#### Challenges to Graduation:

9. When you encounter an African American male who is thinking of leaving school, how do you counsel that student to stay at MU?
10. What are some of the more common reasons why African American male students leave MU before graduating?
11. From your point of view, what can MU do to retain more African American males to graduation?
12. How have you been successful in encouraging African American male students to not leave MU before graduation?

## APPENDIX F

### QUALITATIVE FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

#### Background:

1. What do think are the most pressing issues for African American males at MU?
2. Why are these issues most pressing?

#### Institutional Role (s):

3. What actions should MU administrators take to enhance multicultural diversity in the campus culture?
4. If you could spend one hour talking with faculty about the life of African American males at MU, what would you say to them?
5. If you could spend one hour talking with administrative staff about the life of African American males at MU, what would you say to them?

#### Student Role (s):

6. What can MU students do to help address issues that are most pressing for African American males on campus?
7. How active are you and other African American males in student organizations?
8. Do you serve a leadership role in any campus organizations?

APPENDIX G

Investigator: Elva E. Bradley

Dissertation Title:

*How High-Achieving African American Undergraduate Men Negotiate Cultural Challenges At A Predominantly White Institution*

E-JOURNALING AGREEMENT

Print your pseudonym

I \_\_\_\_\_ am a research study participant, and I understand that one aspect of data collection will be achieved through E-Journaling. I am one of ten students selected to participate in e-journaling through a Facebook Network. E-journaling participants will have the option to determine events, observations, activities, verbal exchanges and reactions to encounters deemed reflective of the culture of Millennial University.

As a member of this distinctive Facebook Network group I agree to submit comments on a weekly basis (each day or no less than three time each week)

If I desire to do so, I am permitted to submit comments on a daily basis during the four week data collection phase of the study. I have been informed that the research investigator will review e-journaling comments on a daily basis over the course of the four week data collection period. Comments will be retrieved daily and stored in a secure file maintained by the investigator.

Further, I agree to **not** discuss my comments with anyone outside the network group. I also agree to not extend a membership invitation to anyone within or outside the ten member e-journaling Facebook Network. I also agree to only use my pseudonym when communicating to the Network. I have been informed by the research investigator that at the conclusion of the four week data collection period, the e-journaling Facebook network established for this study will be discontinued. The research investigator will deactivate the network on the final day of data collection.

Sign \_\_\_\_\_

Print assigned pseudonym

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX H

Investigator: Elva E. Bradley

Dissertation Title:

*How High-Achieving African American Undergraduate Men Negotiate Cultural Challenges at a Predominantly White Institution*

TRANSCRIPTIONIST CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

As an independently compensated transcriptionist (agreement with Study Investigator) I understand that in this capacity, I may have access to information that is solely intended for the support of the referenced dissertation. I, \_\_\_\_\_ (type or print name) agree to transcribe recorded information verbatim. I will not edit comments, or in any way alter the information recorded in the digital voice activated device.

I further agree to not discuss any aspect of my transcription work with anyone other than the principle research investigator, Elva E. Bradley. If I need clarification, or have questions about my duties as a transcriptionist, I will make direct contact with the investigator at ----- during business hours at 000-000-0000 or after business hours at 000-000-0000. I will not communicate directly or indirectly with anyone other than the research investigator. I understand that doing so may compromise the confidentiality of study participants and the integrity of the research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Transcriptionist

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Exhibit I

CONSENT FORM FOR RELEASE OF STUDENT RECORD DATA

I am a participant in a research study that is titled: How High-Achieving African American Undergraduate Men Negotiate Challenges at a Predominantly White Institutions. I have been informed that it is necessary to access selected information from my student record to determine my eligibility to participate in this study. I have been informed that my record information will be released only to the researcher and will not be accessible to any other party.

I have been informed that to be a participant in this research study I must have the following characteristics:

- Cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Have completed a minimum of 30 semester credit hours (sophomore to senior status) \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) credits will be included \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Recognized for active leadership in student organizations \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Active engagement with faculty and administrators; in and out of the classroom
- Acknowledged with honors, scholarships and academic achievement awards \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Participant in undergraduate research, internships, and or study abroad \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Record of volunteerism (mentoring, tutoring, Big Brother, etc.) \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- No record of judicial sanctions, honor code violations, or other disciplinary action \_\_\_\_ (initial)
- Self-identified as African American male based on record of enrollment \_\_\_\_ (initial)

I have been informed that the information from my student record that is used in this research Study will be maintained in a locked and secure file cabinet in the possession of the researcher. The data will be maintained by the researcher through the completion of the study and completion of requirements for the doctoral degree. After such time the record information will be shredded and rendered inaccessible to anyone. I further understand that in order for my student information to be released to the researcher, I must give consent by signing the CONSENT FORM FOR RELEASE OF STUDENT RECORD DATA. By affixing my initials, I have given my consent for my record information to be released to researcher Elva E. Bradley. Information items that are not initialed will be self disclosed by me to the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research participant printed name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research participant signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher printed name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Exhibit II

MILLENNIAL UNIVERSITY

HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Research: How High-Achieving African American Undergraduate Men Negotiate Cultural Challenges At A Predominantly White Institution.

**Investigator: Elva Elaine Bradley**

**IRB Approval #:**

**OSP #:**

**Sponsor: Not Applicable**

You, \_\_\_\_\_ are being asked to be in a research study.

**The name of the study is:**

How High-Achieving African American Undergraduate Men Negotiate Cultural Challenges at A Predominantly White Institution.

**This study is being done by:**

Elva E. Bradley, a graduate student in Higher Education Administration in the College of Education at The University of Alabama.

**What is the purpose of this study—what is it trying to learn?**

The purpose of this study is to find out how high-achieving African American male students learn to do well at a university campus where they are in the minority. I want to learn what these students do when they are in class and what they do when they are not in class. In the past very few studies have been done about high-achieving African American male students. In this study I want to learn how this group of students gets help from other people on the campus. Questions will be asked about four parts of the lives of high-achieving African American male students.

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The four parts include: (1) Family Support (2) Spirituality and Religion (3) Peer Interactions and (4) Faculty/Staff Interactions. Finding out what high-achieving African American males at a mostly White university think about these four parts of their lives will help the university set up programs to encourage other minority students to stay in school, to take part in school activities, and graduate.

**Why is this study important—what good will the results do?**

The results from this study may help universities know what type of programs and services make minority students feel supported. Universities may also learn how faculty and staff members can better help minority students feel like members of the university family when they are in class and when they are out of class. Universities may also learn how to help more minority students to become leaders on campus and stay in college until they graduate.

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to be in this study because you are a high-achieving African American male enrolled in a predominantly White institution. You have been identified as a high-achiever because: (a) you have completed thirty credit hours of college coursework. Advance Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) credits are considered as part of your earned college credit hours. (b) you have an overall grade point average of 3.0 or higher, (c) you are active in campus activities, (d) you are known to seek leadership opportunities, and (e) you are also known to actively interact with peers, faculty and administrators. Also, you have been asked to be in this study so that you can tell your own story of academic success. Your story may help other African American male college students to be successful.

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

This study will include twenty (20) African American male students divided into two groups of ten students (the students must be 19 years of age or older), two (2) male faculty members, (one White and one African American), three (3) administrators, (one White male and two African American males). The study is small but designed to provide a cross sectional representation of faculty and staff that support the success of high-achieving African American male students at Millennial University.

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### **What will we be asked to do in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do one of two group activities that are listed here:

1. Each student in Group 1 will do two one-on-one hour long interviews and keep notes on a computer about things that you see and do in class and out of class during the four week study. The computer notes that you write will be like homework. In the homework you may write about things that happen in class and how you feel about them. You may also write about things that you see and do when you are not in class. You may say how you feel about being a student at Millennium University (MU). Millennium University is a made up name that will be used in this study. Using this made up name will help protect your privacy.
2. Each student in Group 2 will do a one-on-one hour long interview and participate in one hour long focus (discussion) group session during the four week study. In the focus groups you will be asked to talk about what it is like to be an African American male who makes good grades in college. You may also talk about things that you like to do and what you do not like to do at MU. You may also talk about the group activities that you are in and why you like these activities. You may talk about how other people at MU make you feel. If you could change anything about MU, what would you change and why?

The interviews and the focus group sessions will be recorded with a voice activated digital recorder. A backup recorder will be used to make sure that all information is saved. Each student will be given a code so that no one can be individually identified. To determine which roles you will play, twenty code names have been placed in a basket. The code that you pull from the basket will have your Group number on it. At the end of this instruction period, each student will write their name and their code on a blank card that you will put in an empty basket. If you decide to be in the study, your code will be matched to your real name which is on this Consent Form. After this introductory session only your code will be used to record data during the study. In appreciation for your support to this study, each of you will receive a free movie pass at the end of the study. Only students that complete the full study will receive a movie pass. Faculty and administrative staff participants will receive a letter of thanks.

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**How much time will I spend being in this study?**

The ten students in Group 1 will spend two hours doing interviews. The students in Group 1 will also write computer notes about things they see and do on campus and how they feel about these things. Over the four weeks of this study, student will do computer notes about ten to fifteen minutes each week or they may choose to write for a longer period of time. Students in Group 1 will spend three to four hours in the study. The ten students in Group 2 will spend one hour doing an individual interview and one hour in two focus group sessions. The students in Group 2 will spend approximately three hours in the study. The three hours will be spread over a four week time period.

**Will being in this study cost us anything?**

The cost will be the time that you give as a volunteer in the study. You will not be asked to pay any money to be in this study.

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

Knowing that you are doing something that will help other students in the future will probably make you feel good and be proud of yourself. You will also know that you have made a very important and historical contribution to higher education research. African American male high-achievers at majority White institutions have been given little attention in prior research studies. Hence, you are adding much needed information that will be useful to policy makers and people who make decisions about how to help students be successful.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

It is not expected that any danger or harm will happen during this study. However, it is important to point out that sometimes when people talk issues of race it may cause them to feel some discomfort. If you believe that you are not comfortable with the study activities, please talk directly with me or call me (Elva Bradley—(000)000-0000 or (000) 000-0000). You may also contact -----the University -----Research Compliance Officer, at (000-0000) to discuss your concerns.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Each participant in the study will be given a code name or number. Only your code name or number will be used in the study. Each student will take a card from a basket. Each card will have a code name and number on it. Your code will be matched to this Consent Form based on the number that is on the card that you pulled from the basket. Information that you give in this study will only be used by me (the researcher). Information collected from you will always be kept in a locked file in a room with a security alarm. Information from the study will be reported for the entire group. In cases where selected quotes are used, your code name will be used with the quote. You can help protect your privacy by not talking about this study with people that are not in the study.

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**Do I have to be in this study?**

No. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in this study, it will be because you have made the choice to volunteer. Remember, even after you volunteer, if you later decide that you no longer want to be in the study, you may leave the study whenever you choose to do so. Because it is highly possible that I may know some of the students through work relationships, I have asked a non-study staff member (-----) to conduct the Consent Form review with you. This is being done to keep you from feeling that you have to be in the study because I know you.

**If we do not want to be in the study, are there any other choices?**

You may choose to not be in the study and you are free to leave. You are requested to not talk o anyone about the details of this study or give out the name of others who have been invited to this information session.

**What if new information is learned during the study that might affect my well-being or decision to continue in the study?**

Because this is a study in which you are telling your own story, it is not expected that new information learned during the course of the study will individually affect you.

**What if we have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?**

Please ask any questions that you have about the study before you leave this information session. If you have questions later, please contact me at -----. If you have concerns, please bring them to my attention now, or you may contact me individually after the information session. If you are concerned about the protection of your privacy or your individual rights, please call -----, the Research Compliance Officer for Millennial University at 000-000-0000.

**What else do we need to know?**

You do not give up any of your rights by signing this Consent Form. A copy of the Consent Form will be given to you at the end of this information session. After these sessions tonight please review the Consent Form to be sure you understand what you are being asked to do as a volunteer in this study. Keep your copy of the Consent Form in a safe, private place. The Millennial University 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 the study is being carried out as planned. The researcher pays all cost for this study. This study is related only to the academic research requirements for study in Higher Education Administration.

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| Signature of Research Participant | Date        |
| _____                             | _____       |
| Signature of Researcher           | Date        |
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