

Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College:
A Potential Mechanism for Achieving Student Success

by

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Abstract

Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College: A Potential Mechanism for Achieving Student Success

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As Black men continually face challenges while seeking to graduate from college, researchers and educational leaders have continuously sought ways to understand and remedy the issues. Spirituality and religion have been found to have positive influences on Black students' success in college. This study was designed to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black men at a large and research-oriented Predominately White Hispanic Serving Institution in Texas. A general qualitative approach was used to examine how spirituality and religion among Black undergraduate men influenced their ability to persist and graduate. Interviews were conducted with 10 Black undergraduate men who identified as being spiritual and/or religious. A conceptual framework based on the major themes from Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012) was used as a lens to interpret the findings. The major findings suggest there are both internal and external components of spirituality and religion that positively influence

persistence and graduation for Black undergraduate men. Connecting students to their purpose, the importance of personal relationships, and institutional sources of support were key elements found to contribute to student success for Black men in college. This study helps extend the conceptual framework by adding new components and describing the influential role of spirituality and religion at large Predominately White Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
List of Illustrations.....	xiii
List of Tables.....	xiv
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Significance of the Study.....	2
Purpose of the Study and Research Question.....	4
Goals of the Study.....	4
Role of the Researcher.....	5
Conclusion.....	6
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	8
Current Status of Black Men in Higher Education.....	8
Root Causes of Current Performance and the Achievement Gap.....	11
Current Issues and Barriers for Black Men in Higher Education.....	16
Positive Influences on Student Success.....	20
Financial Aid Support.....	20
Pre-College and Pre-Freshman Programs.....	21
Self-Esteem.....	22
Extra-Curricular Engagement.....	23
Family Support.....	25

Peer Support.....	26
Faculty Support and Mentors.....	27
Spirituality and Religion.....	29
Spirituality and Religion.....	30
Defining Spirituality and Religion.....	30
Spirituality, Religion, and Black Culture.....	33
Spirituality and Religion Among Students.....	38
Spirituality and Religion Among a Broad Range of Students.....	38
Spirituality and Religion Among Black College Students.....	42
Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College.....	46
Conclusion.....	53
Chapter 3 Conceptual Framework.....	54
Chapter 4 Research Design.....	59
Methodology.....	59
Site.....	61
Recruitment Strategies.....	62
Participants.....	64
Data Collection.....	66
Pre-Screen Survey.....	66
Demographic Information Questionnaire.....	66
Interviews.....	67

Memos.....	67
Data Analysis.....	68
Trustworthiness.....	70
Clarifying Researcher Bias.....	71
Chapter 5 Participant Biographies.....	72
Apollo.....	72
Charles.....	73
Derek.....	74
Eddie.....	75
Lovehall.....	76
John.....	76
Pierre.....	77
Sonny.....	78
Steve.....	79
Wade.....	80
Summary.....	81
Chapter 6 Internal Components of Spirituality and Religion.....	83
Resilience and Overcoming Barriers.....	84
Dealing with Difficult Life Situations.....	84
Release of Academic Burdens.....	87
Motivation to Push Through and Excel.....	90

Summary	92
Focus and Guidance.....	93
Guidance for Eliminating Potential Distractions	93
Time Management	96
Discipline	98
A Constant Reminder to Remain Focused.....	99
Guidance for Staying on Track with Pursuing the Degree	101
Summary	102
Purpose.....	103
Purpose Directly Related to College Major and Career.....	103
Relationship Between Purpose and College Degree.....	108
Summary	113
Conclusion	113
Chapter 7 External Components of Spirituality and Religion	115
Institutional Support	115
The Church as a Source of Encouragement and Aid	116
Church Scholarships	119
The Church’s Connection to Purpose	120
Discipline Instilled Through the Church.....	121
Student Organizations as Peer Support Groups	122
Student Organizations’ Connection to Purpose	125

Summary	126
Personal Relationships	126
Clergy Influence.....	127
Faculty Relationship	130
Family Support.....	131
Creating and Sustaining Social Bonds	133
Combating Prejudices	138
Summary	139
Conclusion	139
Chapter 8 Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion	141
Overview of the Study	141
Key Findings.....	144
Key Finding #1: Focus and Guidance as an Addition to the Framework	146
Key Finding #2: Faith-Based Student Organizations as an Addition to the Framework.....	149
Key Finding #3: Personal Relationships/Pastors as an Addition to the Framework	151
Key Finding #4: Purpose Revisited	152
Summary	154
Participant GPAs and Enrollment Details	154

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy	157
Implications for Future Research	157
Implications for Practice	161
Implications for Policy	163
Summary	164
Limitations of the Study	165
Concluding Thoughts.....	167
Appendix A Recruitment Letter.....	169
Appendix B Email Announcement to Officials	172
Appendix C Consent Form	175
Appendix D Information Sheet	180
Appendix E Pre-Screen Survey	183
Appendix F Demographic Information Questionnaire	185
Appendix G Interview Protocol	188
References	191
Endnotes.....	203
Biographical Information.....	204

List of Illustrations

Figure 3-1 Conceptual Framework 58

List of Tables

Table 4-1 Demographic Information Table 65

Chapter 1

Introduction

There is a crisis in higher education for Black¹ students in the United States (U.S.) and this is especially true of Black men. Within postsecondary institutions, Black men have lower levels of college enrollment and graduation rates, which means fewer conferred degrees, especially compared to White men (Harper, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). Regarding college enrollment in the U.S., Black men comprise of only 5% of the population, while White men make up 27% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The six-year college graduation rate for Black men is 34.6% compared to 57.5% for White men (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). Also, 10.3% of the overall amount of degrees conferred in the U.S. went to Blacks (with over half of the degrees going to women), in comparison with 72.9% going to Whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These statistics can be viewed as an extension of how this population performs nationally along the K-12 educational continuum. For example, nationally, the graduation rate for Black boys from high school is less than half at 47%, compared to 78% for White boys (Holzman, 2010). Considering the concerns in the K-12 and higher education settings, there may some connections along the education continuum. Therefore, college graduation for Black men is a K-16 educational issue that deserves attention.

Significance of the Study

The status of Black undergraduate men's college performance can be attributed to various historical, academic, social, and personal issues (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 2009; Gavins, 2009; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Harper, 2006; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Stiff-Williams, 2007). Although there are several negative factors that have adversely impacted the performance of Black men in college, in fairly recent studies, scholars have noted many areas that influence positive outcomes (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2005; Harper, 2006; Harper 2012; Harper & Harris, 2006; McClure, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). One influential aspect of Black men's experience in college that can be explored even further is the role of spirituality and religion. Researchers have identified many areas that contribute to success for this population, including their identification with spirituality and religion (Herndon, 2003; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Black culture holds strong ties to both spirituality and religion (Cuyjet, 2006; Gavins, 2009; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Studies have shown that spirituality and religion can have a positive influence on Black Americans' transition from high school to college, college adjustment, academic performance, persistence, retention, and degree completion (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland 2014;

Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Research has displayed that students in the South tend to be more religious (Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). However, none of the surveyed literature contained studies that explicitly examined Black men from larger Predominately White Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in Texas.

This study not only specifically examines Black men at Lone Star University (LSU), a large and research-oriented Predominately White HSI in Texas where the largest racial group in the student population is White, but also it further extends Herndon's (2003) expressions of spirituality regarding retention. The themes that emerged from Herndon's study were first used as a conceptual framework by Wood and Hilton (2012), where they extended the framework to view academic success. The current study will potentially broaden the breadth and depth of the conceptual framework even further by exploring student success in the form of persistence and graduation, instead of only seeking factors of academic success (as sought by Wood and Hilton) and retention (as sought by Herndon). The major contribution of this study is that spirituality and religion have the potential to positively influence persistence toward graduation for Black men enrolled at Hispanic Serving Institutions in Texas, where the dominant population is White.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black men at LSU, a large and research-oriented Predominately White HSI in Texas. More specifically, the study is designed to examine spirituality and religion as a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation. The study will address the following research question: How does spirituality² and religion³ among Black undergraduate men influence their ability to persist and graduate? Considering Black men's past and current status as students at the postsecondary level of education, it is worth furthering the research on identifying areas that have the likelihood of bettering the performance of Black men in college.

Goals of the Study

This study has three main goals, which are aimed at improving the performance of Black men in college. The first goal is to inform research, practice, and policy. By examining the influence of spirituality and religion in the college setting, educational leaders, researchers, and policymakers will be offered a fairly new perspective on how Black men can be routed to achieve student success. The second goal is to extend the conceptual framework that was first established by Herndon (2003), and later furthered by Wood and Hilton (2012). This extension of the framework provides a view of how both spirituality and religion (not only spirituality) influences African American students' ability to

persist toward graduation. Also, focusing on persistence and obtaining a bachelor's degree also further extends the framework by examining beyond just retention and academic success. Lastly, the third goal of this study is to add to the body of knowledge regarding how to keep Black male students enrolled in, persisting through, and graduating from college. There is a wealth of research on Black men in college, yet still more research is needed on how to best help them succeed. Spirituality and religion has the potential to have a profound influence on students and this addition to the body of knowledge will be explored.

Role of the Researcher

Maxwell (2013) noted how important it is for researchers to explain potential biases and how they are dealt with in order to avoid threats to validity of the qualitative conclusions. As the primary investigator for this study, I am a Black man who identifies with both spirituality and religion. More specifically, I am a Christian who is a faithful member of a non-denominational Bible teaching church. My experiences as a Christian began as a pre-teen and I have been very active in religious activities as well as private spiritual practices. Therefore, there was potential for bias toward those who shared some of the same experiences. Additionally, since I am a Black man with college degrees, the participants may have been able to identify well with me, more so than if I had interviewed people from drastically different backgrounds. Thus, I dealt with these potential areas of bias by committing to allow the participants to offer their experiences without

forcing any of my beliefs on them. I did not share any details of my religious or educational background prior to collecting data. Also, I committed to not being persuaded to impart partiality, or favor certain participants more than others based on their experiences. Whether the participants' experiences were or were not similar to mine, I remained objective throughout the entirety of the study, including the data analysis process and presentation of the findings. Lastly, I did not provide much information about myself prior to the interviews as to not allow them to develop any preconceived notions.

Conclusion

This study is made up of eight chapters. Chapter 2 will review the body of literature regarding Black men in college and spirituality and religion. More specifically, the literature on Black men's past and current status, barriers, and influencers of success in college will be discussed. Also, historical aspects of spirituality and religion and its influence on black culture and students will be reviewed. Chapter 3 will define in detail the conceptual framework. The framework was derived from Herndon (2003) as well as Wood and Hilton (2012), whose studies both examined the role of spirituality for Black men in college. Chapter 4 will outline the research design. The study will employ a general qualitative approach, and data collection and analysis procedures will be assumed based on this methodology. Additional discussions about the procedures for ensuring trustworthiness and clarifying bias will be included. Chapter 5 will

provide brief biographical information about the participants. The findings of this study will be presented in Chapters 6 and 7 followed by discussion, implications, and conclusion sections in Chapter 8. The appendices will include the study's email announcement letters, information sheet, participant consent form, participant pre-screen survey, participant demographic questionnaire, and the interview protocol.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Past literature and statistics on Black men in college have offered insights regarding the issue of low enrollment and graduation rates. In this review of the literature, the current status of Black men in college will be briefly discussed through the use of current statistics in order to illustrate why this is such a tremendously important issue. Also, this chapter will highlight some of the root causes of their current status, offering some historical, academic, and social contexts. Additionally, current studies that have found positive influences of student success for Black men will be reviewed. Lastly, literature about the role of spirituality and religion for Black culture, especially for Black men in college, will also be reviewed. Ultimately, findings from the literature will help argue why spirituality and religion has the potential to help Black men to achieve student success in college.

Current Status of Black Men in Higher Education

When comparing Black men to their White counterparts regarding postsecondary enrollment, there is a significant gap. In fact, there is a small gap when comparing them to Black women. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), in 2009 Black men made up only 1,037,100 of the 20,427,700, or 5%, of total enrollment at institutions of higher education. Black women consisted of 9.2% of the total enrollment and White men made up 27%. It is also important to

note the other enrollment rates to view a holistic picture of the enrollment gap for men. Hispanic men made up 5.2% of the total enrollment, American Indian/Alaska Native men were .4%, Asian/Pacific Islander men 3%, and nonresident alien men 1.7%. The enrollment gap not only exists for Black men, but for all other male minorities.

Regarding Black men in college in the year of 2004, Harper (2006) noted they “comprised only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at American institutions of higher education, the exact same percentage as in 1976” (p. 14). Therefore, over the span of 28 years, no progress had been made regarding enrollment. He went on to mention “67.6 percent of black male undergraduates who start college never finish, which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education.” (p. 14). In this case, not only is enrollment low, but completion rates for Black men are even worse.

The graduation statistics for Black men are disturbing as well. According to The Chronicle of Higher Education (2013), Black college students have the second to lowest (after American Indian) six-year graduation rate in the U.S. among four-year public institutions, at 40.3%, and it is even lower in Texas at 36.0%. Other groups’ graduation rates in Texas include 58.1% for Whites, 63.7% for Asians, 43.5% for Hispanics, and 43.7% for American Indians. As a whole, Blacks are the lowest performing racial group as it pertains to graduating from college. Additionally, according to gender, Black men’s graduation rates are the

lowest in the U.S. at 34.6%, and considerably lower in Texas among four-year public institutions, at 30.4%. Other groups' male graduation rates in the U.S. include 57.5% for Whites, 64.4% for Asians, 46.0% for Hispanics, and 35.6% for American Indians. Other groups' male graduation rates in Texas include 53.9% for Whites, 58.6% for Asians, 38.3% for Hispanics, and 41.7% for American Indians. The graduation rate among Black men in Texas is more than 9 percentage points below that of Black females, at 30.4% vs. 39.9%. The U.S. graduation rates for Black boys in high school are 47%, which is certainly a K-16 educational issue that should demand a great deal of attention.

Since enrollment and graduation rates are low, the same is the case for the amount of degrees that are awarded to Black men. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), during the academic year 2009-2010, 10.3 percent of bachelor's degrees conferred from degree granting institutions of higher education were to Blacks. Of the 10.3% of degrees conferred to Blacks, 65.9% were conferred to women, while 34.1% were to men. This rate is compared to (both male and female) 72.9% for Whites, 8.8% for Hispanics, 7.3% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 0.8% American Indian/Alaska Natives. Blacks had the widest gap between genders. However, for each race more degrees were conferred to females.

The statistics indicate a gap between Whites and all other races including Blacks. It also identifies gaps between Black men and women, where the latter

have higher levels of enrollment, graduation, and degrees conferred. The areas where Black men perform the lowest out of all other groups are graduating and obtaining college degrees.

Root Causes of Current Performance and the Achievement Gap

Though this section only covers a brief history of Black people in education, connections can be made between the current and the past struggle. Scholars have provided historical overviews of Black men and the barriers that were faced regarding the pursuit of higher education. For example, since their existence in the United States, beginning as slaves in the 16th century, Black men were thought to be academically inferior, yet physically superior (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006). During the time of slavery, between the 16th and 19th centuries, it was forbidden and illegal for Black men, as well as Black women, to read or seek education (Gavins, 2009; Gasman, 2007). Scholars have noted that despite such exclusion and despite the circumstances, Blacks insisted on becoming educated (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006; Rooks, 2006).

At the beginning of the 20th century, as slavery ended, laws were set that created segregation between Blacks and Whites in many settings, including schools (Gavins, 2009). This caused mass animosity among the two races, as many Black people fought for equality in the midst of beatings, lynching, and jailing (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006; Rooks, 2006). The segregation created gaps, where Blacks were often poorer, exploited in work environments, and received a

“separate but equal” education due to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision, which segregated schools for Blacks and Whites (Gavins, 2009). Even still, Blacks persisted and were able to gain access to institutions of higher education (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006; Rooks, 2006). Gavins (2009) mentioned “it is estimated that 2,291 blacks, 236 of them female, finished college from 1866 to 1899; 350 finished at white colleges” (p. 18). Those individuals who did not attend white institutions found unique places to study. They went to get their education at colleges created to give Blacks greater opportunities to pursue degrees.

The plethora of Blacks seeking higher education and the mass segregation lead to the creation of colleges exclusively for Blacks, which today are known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), who for the most part all struggled in the beginning to sustain funding (Gasman, 2007; Lucas, 2006). Gavins (2009) explained HBCUs were created so that Blacks would have a greater opportunity to attend college. The Tuskegee Institute established by Booker T. Washington in 1881, was a HBCU that had a focus on vocational programs. Well-known educator and activist W. E. B. Du Bois opposed Washington’s vocational school approach and emphasized the necessity of a liberal education for Blacks (Gavins, 2009). Despite varying viewpoints on the appropriate type of postsecondary education programs to offer, the Black community found that both approaches were necessary to give students a variety

of educational opportunities. Between 1901 and 1936, with the help of HBCUs, a total of 38,460 Black Americans, approximately 63% of them men, obtained college degrees. At the forefront of their support system were parents, families, mentors, and the Black church, or various denominations of Christian churches or religious institutions of the African American community (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006). It is important to note the high levels of Black men who obtained degrees versus women, whereas according to the statistics listed above, there are more Black women obtaining degrees than men.

Gavins (2009) noted though progress had been made, by 1940, only about 12% of Blacks who were between the ages of 25 and 29 had high school degrees and less than 2% had a college degree. This low amount of Blacks with degrees was due in large part to segregation and “separate but equal”. The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, which began the process of desegregating schools was met with great backlash, including harassment and violence, though the decision helped change the education rights for Black (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006). White colleges and universities complied slowly and sometimes reluctantly (Gavins, 2009; Lucas, 2006). Between the 1960s and 1970s, the number of Black college graduates grew (Gavins, 2009; Rooks, 2006). However, fewer students attended and graduated from HBCUs (partly due to a lack of funding for these institutions) and more attended PWIs (Gavins, 2009). More Black students went to college, but the gap widened between Blacks and Whites

who actually graduated. By the 1980s, there was a significant lack in enrollment and the amount of degrees conferred to Blacks (Gavins, 2009; Lang, 1988).

The historical context presented by Gavins (2009) points initially to slavery and then segregation as the foundational constructs that have limited Black men's access to equal and fair educational opportunities. Gavins' final sentence in the chapter stated "Racialism bowed to *Brown* but resisted its promise of integration, for instance, by delaying and then resisting affirmative action efforts, thus continuing the presence of barriers limiting black male access to higher education" (p. 27). With the decline of HBCUs and with PWIs becoming more popular, more Black men attended college, yet the completion gap grew between Whites and Blacks, as well as between Black men and women.

Scholars have highlighted the various aspects of the achievement gaps between Blacks and Whites, as well as Black males and Black females (Garibaldi, 2007; Stiff-Williams, 2007; Verdugo & Henderson, 2009). The achievement gap between students is a K-16 issue because it begins early and has long-lasting effects. In fact, the achievement gap begins before children even start grade school (Garibaldi, 2007; Stiff-Williams, 2007). Black students are behind from the beginning. By the fourth grade, African American students read on a level two years behind White students (Stiff-Williams, 2007). By the end of high school only about 1% of African American students can read specialized texts (such as the science section in the newspaper), while about 8% of White students

can do this, noted Stiff-Williams, 2007. The author also mentioned by the time students graduate from high school, Blacks are behind Whites by four years. The achievement gap between Blacks and Whites is evident in standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT. White students average over 5 whole points higher on the ACT at 22.2, in comparison with the Black students' average at 16.9 (ACT, 2013). Additionally, White students' combined math and verbal SAT average score is 1061, in comparison with Black students' average of 860 (The College Board, 2013). The gap extends into higher education where White students enroll and graduate at higher rates than Blacks (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; U.S.; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013).

As noted earlier through statistics, there is also a gender gap for Blacks. Just as with White males, Black females also graduate at higher rates than the Black males. This graduation gap includes the bachelor's, master's, doctorate, and professional degree levels (Garibaldi, 2007; Jipguep, Harrison, and Bonner, 2009; Stiff-Williams, 2007). This is not only a race issue, it is also an inner-racial issue that has not always existed since Black males once held higher enrollment and graduation rates than their female counterparts (Gavins, 2009).

This gap in the ability for Black men to graduate from college at higher rates has long lasting effects on both Black men and our society. Failure to obtain a college degree (or obtain education in general) affects the employment and earning potential for Black men (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet 2009; Stiff-Williams,

2007). Lower graduation rates mean higher incarceration rates. Additionally, higher graduation rates mean less government money spent on aid, and better health.

It is likely that the academic achievement gap derived from different areas for K-12 and higher education (Lang, 1988; Stiff-Williams, 2007). For example, the K-12 gap may start with the poor educational systems that have less qualified teachers, lack curriculum strength, and have ineffective leadership. In higher education, family poverty, below average teachers, and weak curriculum have been attributed to the achievement gap for Black Americans. Stiff-Williams (2007) noted “institutional factors such as a less than supportive culture, inadequate advising and mentoring, a lack of financial resources, and mismatched pedagogical practices have been identified as contributors to the achievement gap in higher education” (p. 15). When considering this achievement gap, it is necessary to recall the historical context of Black Americans in the U.S., as they fought to be able to even receive educational equality. Institutional factors contribute to the achievement gap, yet deeply rooted societal issues were at the inception of the quest for higher education opportunities.

Current Issues and Barriers for Black Men in Higher Education

The previous sections noted the current status of Black men in higher education and root causes of their situation, and they reviewed aspects of the achievement gap. Scholars have provided some insight regarding the current

issues and barriers that have plagued Black men, specifically, in college. For example, with the achievement gap, there are now fewer Black men than Whites and Black women who are enrolled in and graduate from college. The gap creates disproportion that affects the relationships between Black men and women and Blacks and Whites (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet 2009; Stiff-Williams, 2007). The Black male to female ratio of collegiate enrollment is the most skewed compared to other races (Cuyjet; 2006). Cuyjet (2009) noted that the disproportion of Black men to women and White men created issues that may hinder success for Black men in college and other groups. From a social standpoint, Black men are more likely to take advantage of Black women and have multiple partners, creating an inner-racial element of distrust (Cuyjet, 2009). The disproportion of college enrollment between Black men and women also inevitably creates a disproportion of degreed Black females to males. Not having a college degree leads to greater economic and professional problems for Black men (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet 2009; Sharpe & Darity, 2009; Stiff-Williams, 2007). At PWIs, disproportion creates a lack of intercultural interaction between Black men and White men, which hinders students' ability to diffuse stereotypes (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 2009). Students who study with other races benefit from learning cultural aspects from direct and diverse experience (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 2009).

There is evidence that Black men in education are hidden, not accommodated, not recognized, and marginalized, which is known as

“invisibility” (Baldwin, Fidler, & Patton, 2009; Cuyjet, 2009). Black men are made “invisible” through masking, where the higher academic performance of females masks the lower performance of the males (Cuyjet, 2009). In this case, statistics are presented in race as a whole and not broken down by gender. Additionally, there is marginalization, especially at PWIs, when people believe that all Black men belong to certain subcultures. For example, some students, professors, or leaders on campus may associate Black men with being athletes, members of Black Greek organizations, facilities/maintenance staff, and criminals (Baldwin et al., 2009; Cuyjet, 2009). When this happens, educators fail to accommodate the variety of backgrounds and communities Black men originate from, thinking all derive from homogenous origins. Therefore, the thought that educators maintain is Black men are a monolithic group and can all be accommodated in the same manner.

Certain enrollment details may be barriers for Black students in general. Across multiple races and ethnicities, part-time enrollment has a negative effect on degree completion (Horn, 1996; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) examined the effect of part-time vs. full-time enrollment, where the former had adverse effects on college completion. They noted that being African American had no statistical significance in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups. The authors examined African American students overall and did not explore gender/sex within race. Also, scholars have found that

transfer students have faced more challenges, both socially and academically in college, than their counterparts who were not transfer students (Cejda, 1994; Jacobs, Busby, & Leath, 1992; Laanan, 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). In addition, Black students who transfer from community colleges are less likely to complete bachelor's degrees than White students (Bailey, Jenkins & Leinbach, 2005; Wang, 2009; Zamani, 2001).

In addition to the issues listed above, other barriers for black men were academic and money issues, which may be viewed as fairly universal, affecting all groups (Hall & Rowan, 2000). From a social perspective, Black men have faced being stereotyped and type-casted while also having faced racism, exclusion, physical and verbal aggression against them, and disconnectedness from the campus environment (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 2009; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Lack of Black faculty support and support for Black culture as a whole have also posed as barriers (Robertson & Mason, 2008).

In this section some current issues and barriers that black men face in college were briefly discussed. Again, it is important to note that these issues and barriers are potentially directly or indirectly related to the plights that Blacks faced historically. Understanding the historical circumstances is imperative while considering the marginalization and the inability of college campus stakeholders to understand the cultures from which Black men derived. The next section will

review literature regarding positive influencers of student success for Black males.

Positive Influences on Student Success

The literature reviewed in the previous section was focused on barriers that Black men continue to face in college. In the section prior to that, some historical context was provided as to potentially why Black men currently have low numbers of enrollment and graduation rates. This section will focus on factors that have positive influences on the persistence, retention, and completion rates of Black undergraduate men, as shown by fairly recent findings.

Financial Aid Support

The lack of financial aid has been identified as a challenge that Black men face while either on their quest to gain access to college and/or attempting to obtain a college degree (Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Stiff-Williams, 2007). However, students, especially Black and Asian Americans, respond positively to increases in state grant spending (Heller, 1999). Therefore, the more state grants that Black males receive, the higher the likelihood they will enroll and remain enrolled. Additionally, Black students are more sensitive to tuition increases than their White counterparts (Heller, 1999). The higher the tuition, the less likely Black males are to enroll and remain enrolled in college. Similarly, Chen and St. John (2011) found that there is a significantly positive relationship between non need-based state aid and persistence for African

American and Asian American students. This relationship between this form of state aid and persistence was stronger for African Americans than Whites. Harper (2006) found that participants in his study “remained enrolled at their institutions in part because financing their college education was not a burden...their institutional aid packages were such that employment beyond the borders of their campuses was unnecessary” (p. 15).

Harper (2006) urged that scholarship opportunities not be dismantled because doing so contradicts the efforts to retain Black men in college. He claimed that policymakers and educational leaders should do more to significantly increase the amount of earmarked need-based and merit-based awards at the institutional, state, and federal levels. Ultimately, it is evident that financial aid is a major concern for Black men in college and more should be done to provide funding, mainly scholarships and state grants, that will help keep them enrolled and graduating.

Pre-College and Pre-Freshman Programs

Black male college students benefit from programs related to college success before they even enroll in college (Harper, 2006; Hodges, 2011). Much of Shaun Harper’s research has focused on looking at high achieving Black men in college. High-achievers had at least a 3.0 GPA and were leaders, highly engaged on the campus, and participants in special programs such as study abroad and intern programs (Harper, 2006). Harper (2006) found that pre-college

programs, such as those that provide early exposure to college for grade school age children, are beneficial for access to college and excelling once enrolled. Some of the high-achievers claimed they would not have been ready for the admission process or ready to perform well upon enrollment otherwise. Also, pre-freshman transition programs for admitted students, such as summer bridge programs, proved to be beneficial for high-achievers (Harper, 2006). Some students would not have gained access to their institution otherwise because they needed to complete developmental courses. Their transition was aided as they were able to build relationships with faculty, staff, and their Black male peers. Hodges (2011) found that the particular pre-college program that he examined was critical for Black males' preparation to enroll in college in the future. This program increased their college readiness academically and provided social support for them during their journey to college. Therefore, exposing Black boys to college at an early age and connecting with them after they have been admitted, but prior to their first semester, is beneficial for their ability to build relationship that may foster success early.

Self-Esteem

Understanding and assisting with Black men's self-esteem is important for their success in college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006). For example, Bonner and Bailey (2006) provided ideas on how to enhance the academic climate for Black men in college. They noted that self-esteem must be developed,

especially regarding academic success. Negative images about themselves and preconceived notions from others on campus may leave students with low perceptions of their ability to achieve academically. Cuyjet (2006) noted that it is important for educators to recognize self-esteem issues, because if there is an issue, Black men revert to things like sports for status, devaluing academic achievement. Therefore, it is important to consider ways that educators who work with Black men can boost self-esteem, especially as it relates to academic issues.

Extra-Curricular Engagement

Scholars have found that Black students who engage in extra-curricular activities, such as student clubs and organizations, leadership roles, and internships have better chances of staying in school, persisting, and graduating (Harper, 2005; Harper, 2012; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Tinto, 1993). For example, Harper (2005) found that the best learning comes outside of the classroom. The participants' (high-achievers) experience through campus engagement in activities such as leadership positions and communication with key personnel aided their ability to persist and graduate. It was found that “students who take advantage of the institution’s resources and engage in a multitude of educationally purposeful activities have the most powerful and sustainable learning experiences during and after college” (p. 13). The participants believed that the barriers their peers faced could be limited by devoting time to an out-of-class activity.

This engagement aspect was also evident as Harper (2012) submitted that the majority of the participants in his study found that success was a direct result of campus engagement. These students were more engaged with peers and faculty through their clubs and organizations. The participants explained that their lower performing peers wasted time playing video games, hanging out with friends, and seeking romance.

One of the more popular forms of extracurricular activity that has been found to be beneficial for Black men is membership in a Black fraternity (Harper, 2007; Harper & Harris, 2006; McClure, 2006). For example, McClure (2006) interviewed 20 members of one fraternity at a PWI and found that Black fraternity “members were able to connect to the campus through their fraternity” (p. 1047). The participants felt a great sense of camaraderie and were better connected to the campus, which could also be viewed as a form of peer support (see Peer Support section below). McClure (2006) also found that membership offered a supportive environment and campus experience satisfaction. While noting past successes of Black fraternities, Harper and Harris (2006) mentioned “fraternal membership was essential to retention and overall success, as it provided the sole source of social support for African American college men” (p. 147). Black fraternity membership served as a home away from home. In a qualitative study on Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO) fraternity and sorority members at a PWI, Harper (2007) reported that membership led to engagement inside of the

classroom. Fraternity membership has both academic and social implications that can contribute to students' success.

Therefore, involvement in extracurricular activities is a key component of success. Through campus engagement, especially as it relates to extracurricular activities, a better campus environment is created that then facilitates a better academic and social environment for Black male students. A strong support system for Black men in college is necessary.

Family Support

Support from family members contributes to Black men's ability to have success in college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012). For example, Bonner and Bailey (2006) noted that family support is essential for Black men because they have strong ties to their immediate and extended family and connection with them is an important source of emotional and psychological support. Harper (2006) posited that parents who set high expectations for college have positive influence on their children. Some participants' families set clear expectations for the children to attend and succeed in college, regardless of whether the parents went to college. Additionally, many high achieving students claimed they had a parent or mentor to push them (Harper, 2012). Parents were instrumental in motivating students to attend and succeed in college. Therefore, it is clear that a familial type of support system creates an environment with the

ability to foster success due to the strong ties that Black men have with their families and the influence they possess.

Peer Support

In addition to family support, scholars have found that peer support is just as, if not more, influential on Black men achieving success (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Tinto, 1993). For example, noted earlier was the importance of pre-freshman transition programs. The same race peer support that began during that program created a support system that lasted beyond the summer and was beneficial to the students' ability to adjust to the campus environment (Harper, 2006). Bonner and Bailey (2006) stated, "ensuring that positive interactions occur within and between peer groups on college campuses is an important part of the matriculation process" (p. 27). Because college students face similar obstacles during the undergraduate experience, peer groups can provide a significant source of support. For Black men in college, peer groups can also provide a sense of belonging as well as giving and receiving feedback about their experiences. In a study on student engagement for Black men, Strayhorn & DeVita (2010) posited "structured experiences that encourage their engagement with peers, such as learning communities and peer mentoring programs, should be considered for implementation" (p. 98). Colleges that are

not fostering environments where Black men can be involved in peer groups may be hindering success.

While studying the role of an HBCU on academic success for Black men, Palmer et al. (2010) found that peer groups served as positive reinforcement. The participants acknowledged that other students in the peer group motivated them to persist. Interestingly, the positive peers popularized success, or made it popular to make good grades and to pursue success. Additionally, another type of peer group occurred through Black college racial homogeneity, which was beneficial for persistence. Participants saw other Black men with a similar drive and goal of being successful. Though subcultures existed, students saw various groups of Black men and were amazed to be in an environment where they all wanted to succeed.

For Black men, it is important for them to be in groups with their peers. Involvement in peer groups creates an environment of support that is important for their ability to be successful in college. Peer groups are a largely influential form of support in addition to that provided by the family. However, Black men have more frequent contact with their peers while in college.

Faculty Support and Mentors

Scholars have noted how influential faculty members are for Black male college students (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Palmer & Gasman,

2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008). More specifically, support from Black members of faculty is suggested and very influential (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Robertson & Mason, 2008). For instance, Bonner and Bailey (2006) suggested Black faculty should be hired and encouraged to act as mentors and role models to Black male students. Mentorship from Black faculty is a highly ranked form of interaction on campus, along with peer support, which is why they make the recommendation that educational leaders be mindful about making this type of hiring decision.

Black professors also noted that they felt obligated to contribute to the development of Black students, which helps create closeness that can translate into a better sense of engagement for students (Griffin, 2013). Also, Griffin (2013) found that by mentoring Black students, Black professors also gain fulfillment by giving back to the community and gain social support from their student mentees. Griffin and Reddick (2011) found that Black female faculty members have a more intimate, somewhat motherly, mentor relationship with students. Griffin and Reddick (2011) indicated that the Black male professors took more of a more formal approach to mentoring, especially with female students. Nevertheless, both male and female Black professors desired to have mentor relationships with Black students because they understood the relationship was needed to uplift the Black community.

Palmer et al. (2010) found that support in the form of Black professors and Black mentors were instrumental to academic success. Black professors identified with the Black male participants, yet pushed them, knowing their potential. Interacting with Black faculty also increases the likelihood that students can connect with them, and thus, connect to the campus. Additionally, the benefits have shown to be reciprocated as students also help motivate and support Black professors. However, Black mentors are not limited to faculty. Black non-student mentors in general are beneficial for Black men in college (Palmer et al. 2010; Stiff-Williams, 2007). Palmer et al. (2010) claimed Black mentors were important because they allowed students to see people in the roles they aspired to be in eventually.

Spirituality and Religion

One largely influential cultural aspect for Blacks is that of spirituality and religion. Cuyjet (2006) noted how important it is to study spirituality among Black men. He stated there is little evidence, but “the influence of the church in the African American community provides more than enough incentive for us to explore how today’s college administrators can use knowledge about African American men’s spirituality and faith development to enhance the quality of their matriculation experience” (p. 19). Additionally, much like other influencers of success, spirituality and religion fosters supportive relationships, similar to those provided by faculty, family, and peers. Involvement in religious activities can

also serve as a form of extra-curricular activity and spirituality can aid self-esteem development. Although there may not be a direct relationship with financial aid and pre-college and freshman transition programs, spirituality and religion are others areas that can help Black men achieve student success in college. The next section will discuss spirituality and religion in great detail.

Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality and religion has been found to help foster different elements of student success in college for Blacks (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland 2014; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Spirituality and religion and their influence on Black college students will be discussed in further detail throughout this section. However first, definitions will be provided for these terms. Also, literature will be reviewed regarding spirituality and religion and its presence in Black American culture. Then, the literature on spirituality and religion for college students in general will be reviewed, followed by discussing its influence on African Americans, especially men.

Defining Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality and religion are two separate constructs that are greatly connected and intertwined. It is imperative that the terms are first defined before delving further into the literature to understand how they have separate meanings, yet deep connections. Watson (2006) briefly defined the two, stating “spirituality

is a belief in some external, animating force, whereas religion is the adherence to an established system of beliefs and practices grounded in spirituality” (p. 113).

Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) go a step further in their description. Spirituality involves a personal journey for understanding life’s questions, relationships with a higher power, and meaning. They stated that spirituality is more individualistic, subjective, and emotional, yet less systematic, formal, and visible. Religion is an organized structure of rituals, practices, and beliefs in place to promote closeness with God. Religion is described as formal, organized, community oriented, and based largely on behaviors.

Another definition came from Holland (2014), who stated that religiosity (or the state of being religious) “will refer to formal, organized, and publicly recognized beliefs and practices of individuals, and participation in collective worship” (p.4). He went on to describe spirituality as a “more individualized and less structured practices with a more intimate, personal, and private connection to a sacred source that provides inspiration, motivation, and opportunities for introspection and self-development” (p. 4). For the sake of this study, I will refer to the definitions of spirituality and religion that are provided by these authors.

Though the definitions insist that these two constructs are vastly different, they are also related to one another. In a study designed to capture the definitions of spirituality for African American women and the distinctions they made between the spirituality and religion, Mattis (2000) found three main differences

between the two constructs. First, he defined them saying religiosity is following designated rituals and beliefs, while spirituality is the internalized expression of positive key values along with the effort to live out goodness in daily life. Second, spirituality involves relationships, whether it is with God or a higher power, nature, or transcendent forces. Third, religion is a conduit for reaching spirituality. Religious participation is a pathway to spirituality. For example, Taylor, Chatters, and Levin (2004) noted that “historically, the major goal of organized religion was to assist individuals in becoming more spiritual in their orientation and, thus, to prepare them for the afterlife” (p. 16). Again, here religion was a conductor for spirituality. Religion is studied in conjunction with spirituality quite often, since it is a means for seeking or obtaining spirituality. The case could also be made that to achieve spirituality, a person must engage in certain ritualistic behavior such as prayer and reading the Bible, which may be considered to be religious activities.

Another key term used in the literature is “faith,” which the American Heritage Dictionary defined as “belief in God or in a set of religious doctrines” (“Faith”, 2014). The phrase “belief in God” has ties with the word “spirituality,” while the phrase “set of religious doctrines” ties in with the term “religion.” Another key term in the literature is “the Black church,” which is defined as various denominations of Christian churches or other religious institutions of the

African American community for the purpose of this study. The next section will discuss spirituality, religion and their relationship to the Black community.

Spirituality, Religion, and Black Culture

Spirituality and religion has had its impact on Black culture as a whole (Baer & Singer. 2002; Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Cuyjet, 2006; Gavins, 2009; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). The majority of African Americans, or about 70%, claimed to be both spiritual and religious (Taylor et al., 2004), whereas only about 20% claimed to be neither spiritual nor religious.

Taylor et al. (2004) synthesized the wealth of empirical studies on religion in the lives of African Americans and present the patterns of religion (mostly denominations of Christianity), functions of religion, and the effects of religion. Ultimately, Taylor et al. and other scholars found that religion and religious institutions (including the congregations and clergy) have had a tremendous impact on the Black community (Baer & Singer. 2002; Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001). Regarding the religious participation of Black Americans,

Any discussion of the form and functions of religion and religious involvement among African Americans must be grounded in an understanding of the historical origins of these traditions and the social, cultural, economic, and political experiences that served to define

individual and collective religious expression for this group. (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 13)

African American religious expressions were rooted in a hostile society (such as during slavery and segregation) in the U.S. and, therefore, were important in addressing issues that were harmful to the well-being of Black Americans (Baer & Singer, 2002; Bridges, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Also from a historical perspective, Black religious traditions have taken on issues of civil and human rights, social and economic justice, and issues of emancipation (Baer & Singer, 2002; Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Similarly, Shelton and Emerson (2012) examined the intersections of race and religion among Black and White Protestant Christians. The authors express how deeply important religion is to the culture and also noted how the relationship between Blacks and religion is deeply rooted in historical social obstacles such as slavery, racial discrimination, and inequality.

African Americans have a higher sense of religiosity and are more involved in religious activities than their White counterparts (Taylor, et al., 2004; Shelton & Emerson, 2012). Taylor et al. noted that Black peoples' level of religious involvement is high, and they value their religious institutions. These institutions provide social, religious, and material support. They also submitted that "overall, Black Americans attend religious services on a frequent basis, have high rates of church membership, characterize themselves as being religious, and

are extensively involved in private religious activities (e.g. prayer, reading religious materials, viewing/listening to religious programming)” (p. 61). They are more religious than Whites and enact their faith in everyday life through prayer and meditation, reading religious materials, and attending religious services. Shelton and Emerson (2012) explained why Black Americans have a higher sense of religiosity in this manner:

Blacks and whites not only approach faith matters differently, but faith matters differently to blacks and whites. That is mainly because African Americans tend to lean on their faith as a supernatural call for help to protect against the consequences of historical and contemporary racial discrimination and equality. (pp. 4-5)

They further explained religious (Protestant Christian) involvement for Black Americans is more experiential, meaning that they are more active or strongly emphasize committing to and engaging in commonly recognized thought and practices of faith, more so than White Protestants.

Prayer plays a significant role in the lives of religious Blacks as a way of dealing with harsh realities (Taylor, et al., 2004; Shelton & Emerson, 2012).

Taylor et al. (2004) noted that Blacks pray to cope with the stresses of life and problems, such as health difficulties, job loss, and relationship issues.

Additionally, prayer is useful for providing strength, decreasing stress, and easing worries created by other problems in life. Taylor et al. (2004) expressed that

Blacks pray in two types of distinct patterns. It is either (1) in response to problems or (2) a staple part of their daily life. The authors also noted prayer is not only used to request certain outcomes, it is used to request personal traits and qualities to deal with issues. People also prayed for the ability to accept God's will for them, even though at the time it may not have seemed favorable. This was seen as a great coping mechanism. In addition to prayer, Shelton and Emerson (2012) noted that Black Protestant faith overall serves as a mechanism of survival needed for coping with trials and tribulations in the U.S. Blacks read and study the Bible to gain Godly perspectives and witness Him move in their lives, and they pray to God in order to deal with life's many circumstances.

In addition to prayer, Shelton and Emerson (2012) noted African Americans of Protestant faith also believe in supernatural miracles. This belief may also be considered a coping mechanism that provides believers with the understanding that the impossible can happen at any time. Believers are comforted with this notion of the supernatural, where the limits of the human physique and brain are not present. Comfort is a byproduct of believing that the impossible can happen due to the blessing that can be afforded. The belief in supernatural miracles is also a concept rooted in spirituality.

Blacks have tremendous support systems at their religious institutions (Taylor et al., 2004). Clergy (ministers and pastors) are an important resource in the Black community (Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004). Bridges

(2001) noted that one important aspect of an African American preacher was that he or she be called by God to serve the community. Clergy provide/oversee services that include youth programs, anti-poverty aid, programs and care for the elderly, health screening and awareness (Taylor et al., 2004). Clergy also provide individual and family counseling on matters such as marriages, unemployment, health issues, legal problems, and drug abuse. Battle (2006) wrote “the Black Church became known for its preaching because of the power of proclamation in relationship to political mobilization” (p. 68). In other words, clergy had strong social and political influence. Taylor et al. (2004) also made the claim that church members provide a source of social support. The authors also mentioned Blacks feel close to their church members and believe they would assist them in times of need. Church members are a very useful coping resource, as is prayer (Taylor et al., 2004). They provided assistance such as money, food, transportation, spiritual support, fellowship, companionship, and emotional support. They provided encouragement and a sense of belonging, according to Taylor et al., 2004. These were especially important during critical times such as illness, death, financial woes, and family matters such as childbirth (Taylor et al., 2004).

This section reviewed definitions of spirituality and religion as well as their historical relationship among Black culture. Deep roots of this relationship began during the time of slavery, just as the struggles of Black men in education began. Religion and certain aspects of spirituality, such as prayer and believing in

miracles, were discussed as it related to coping with life. Also, religious institutions were shown to play a major role in the lives of Blacks. The concept of coping with problems and the importance of support systems are evident here, just as they were evident as positive influences of success for Black men in college. The next section will review literature regarding how spirituality and religion manifests in the college environment.

Spirituality and Religion Among Students

The study of spirituality and religion has begun to garner some attention as scholars recognize their influence on college students. In this section literature will be reviewed on the topic as it relates to a wide range of students in the U.S. Then, the literature will be reviewed on spirituality and religion for Black American students and then, more specifically, Black men.

Spirituality and Religion Among a Broad Range of Students

Researchers have examined the effects of spirituality and religion along the K-16 continuum on students of all races. For example, Lee, Puig, and Clark (2007) studied the relationship between religiosity and postsecondary degree attainment. The authors examined the experiences of high school students and followed them to determine if they eventually graduated from college. The participants consisted of a sample of a larger, national longitudinal study which contained 11,551 mostly White adolescents in high school. The students were issued several follow up interviews, including the final one eight years after high

school to determine if religiosity influenced degree attainment. The students indicated if they had achieved a degree/were working on their degree, or no to both of those.

The main finding from Lee et al. (2007) was that “high school students’ religiosity is an important contributing factor in bachelor’s degree attainment” (p. 37). The majority of students, excluding Asian American, Eastern religion, Episcopal, and Jewish students, who self reported as having strong religious beliefs, as opposed to those with fewer religious beliefs, were more likely to attain a bachelor’s degree. The researchers also noted that religiosity is important for academic development. Students with higher levels of religiousness from low SES backgrounds were four times more likely to get their bachelor’s degree than those who are not as religious, especially those who are African American and Hispanic. The researcher suggested that counselors and counselor educators should consider religiousness as a means for advocacy for students, especially as it relates to recognizing sources of support, assets, and internal and external resources

In another study, Kneipp, Kelly, and Cyphers (2009) examined the two constructs of religiosity and spirituality and their effect on the adjustment to college. This quantitative study used a religiousness/demographics questionnaire, a spiritual well-being scale, and student adaption to college questionnaire to examine whether students’ spirituality and religiousness impacted college

adjustment from a well-being perspective. The participants consisted of 233 undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology course at a small southern university in the U.S. and who were from various religious backgrounds. Overall, Kneipp, Kelly and Cyphers (2009) found that there was a positive relationship between spirituality and religiousness and college adjustment. Spirituality was more of a predictor of college adjustment than religiousness. However, both were statistically significant. The intangible and internal motivation (spirituality) played a greater role in the college adjustment component than the tangible, external motivation (religiousness).

There is a fairly large study by leading researchers on spirituality and religion for students from various backgrounds. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's (2011a) examined students' changes during their time in college and how college served as a catalyst of their spiritual qualities. This longitudinal study surveyed over 112,000 freshmen from 236 higher education institutions of varying types in 2004. From the surveyed students, the researchers followed up with 14,527 of them from 136 of the institutions in 2007 during their junior year. The researchers also conducted interviews with some students and their professors. The researchers found that overall, college life plays an influential role in the spiritual development of students.

Astin et al. (2011a) found that although religious engagement declined while participants were in college, spirituality did grow. While in college,

students were found to be more engaged on their spiritual quest, be more connected to others, be more tolerant, and also more caring. Academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and satisfaction with college were enhanced by this growth in spirituality. Also, the researcher found that certain college activities enhance spiritual growth. Activities such as service learning, study abroad, and interdisciplinary studies enhance spirituality because they offer students the opportunity to learn about new cultures, new ideas, and introduce them to diverse people. Additionally, meditation, self-reflection, or encouragement from professors to seek meaning and purpose are examples of engaging in “inner work,” or other activities in college where spirituality is enhanced.

In a study that was a smaller part of the larger one mentioned above, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011b) attempted to develop a new method of measuring aspects of spirituality and religion for college students for the sake of offering researchers and practitioners a new way of tracking student development. This study focused on reporting on 12 scales, where three scales were based on spirituality, five were based on religiousness, and the other four were based on spiritually related qualities. This quantitative and longitudinal (beginning in 2003) study involved over 112,000 undergraduate students from 236 higher education institutions of varying types. The researchers developed their own instrument, which consisted of 12 scales. Overall, the research found that the 12 measures of

spirituality and religion can provide a new approach to studying and implementing student development practices, which has received minimal attention in higher education research.

Astin et al. (2011b) posited that researchers and student affairs practitioners should consider spirituality and religion while tracking student development. Considering spirituality and religion offers new insights to studying and practicing a more holistic approach to student development. Ultimately, spirituality, religiousness, and spiritually related qualities are influential in the lives of college students from various backgrounds and various types of institutions. Therefore, these factors play a tremendous role in student development.

The studies examining wide varieties of students found that spirituality and religion play a role in college adjustment and degree attainment (Astin et al., 2011a; Astin et al., 2011b; Kneipp et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2007). Also, these studies have implications for spirituality and religion being beneficial to student development. The following section looks at the influence of spirituality and religion on student development in a particular racial group.

Spirituality and Religion Among Black College Students

The previous section reviewed literature that studied college students from varying backgrounds. This section focuses on studies on Black students. Walker and Dixon (2002) examined the role of spirituality and religious participation for

Black Americans from an academic performance standpoint at a PWI. In this quantitative study, the researcher developed a questionnaire designed to capture family constructs, including cohesion, spirituality, and parental support. Additionally, the survey captured academic hardships. The GPAs were used as a measurement of academic performance. The sample included 109 European Americans and 83 African Americans from a PWI. Many comparisons were made, but the focus was on the Black Americans. Participants were enrolled in a psychology course and were all volunteers.

Walker and Dixon (2002) found that overall identification with spirituality positively correlates with academic performance, especially for African American students. Black Americans indicated they had higher levels of spiritual beliefs and religious participation than their European American student peers. There is a specific relationship between spirituality and academic performance for Black Americans. Those individuals who indicated stronger identification with spiritual beliefs and behaviors had higher GPAs and more academic honors in one academic semester of the study. They also reported fewer academic probation and suspensions. In contrast, religious participation was more influential on academic performance than spiritual beliefs for all students. The social support associated with religious participation was more influential on academic performance, but for Black Americans, “the beliefs as well as the implementation

of those beliefs appear to be important” (p. 117). Religious participation alone was more effective for the European American students.

One particular study went beyond the confines of the college campus. In a mixed methods study, Donahoo and Caffey (2010) examined the impact of the church on African American college students. They found that church involvement had a positive influence on students. Maintaining church involvement was important for student success in college because it positively influenced the transition to college, academic performance, coping with stress, spirituality, and career selection.

Holland (2014) explored religiosity, spirituality, and places of worship as they relate to the transition from high school to college and success in college. More specifically, the study focused on academic aspirations, engagement, and achievement for Black urban youth. Forty-nine students were surveyed and interviewed. They were of multiple classifications and 93% identified as Black or African American. They were students of a metropolitan area university and had to have graduated from one of the public high schools in the urban school district within the last five years. The overall finding was that religiosity, spirituality, and/or places of worship influenced the participants’ aspirations, engagement, and achievement regarding access to college and success in college.

Holland (2014) claimed that students identified with internal motivation. When asked what encouraged them to apply to college and be successful, students

indicated their motivation came from a sacred source. Students' connection to God and the Bible provide direction and strength to overcome obstacles. It was also found that the role of spirituality and religion influenced role, commitments, and responsibilities in school, extracurricular activities, work, friends, and family. The involvement in religious activities related to their places of worship/spirituality kept them focused, grounded, and created a sense of connectedness with the college, thus enhancing academic engagement and achievement. One student was the chaplain of an organization while in high school. Another male college student athlete was in the choir, which prompted him to stay at the university, which was near his church and family. Additionally, a college student claimed that Bible study was a must for a typical college day.

Holland (2014) also claimed congregation members were supportive of the students' educational/career pursuits, especially, and their lives in general. Church members influenced educational aspirations through peer support and mentor relationships. Church members were like family, offering care, support, and motivation to the students. Lastly, the congregations offered resources and services. Places of worship offered tutoring opportunities, books and supplies, college planning, and financial support in the form of scholarships/taking up special offerings for those members headed to college. These resources and activities mainly occurred while the students were still in high school preparing to transition to college. One student was part of a college outreach ministry that

took college tours on a bus during the summer. Holland (2014) suggested that places of worship could be better informed and knowledgeable about factors surrounding access to and success in college. Schools can benefit from the support that places of worship have to offer and the close relationships the churches have with students. They can also increase outreach efforts specifically for these churches. Also, churches are less formal and offer a more familial and personal environment. They can reinforce information for schools.

The study of spirituality for Black students yields slightly different findings. The studies found that spirituality influenced academic performance, impacted the high school to college transition, and that the church played a significant role (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Holland, 2014; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Spirituality and religion also was a motivating factor and influenced career guidance (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Holland, 2014). The previously mentioned notion that Blacks are more spiritual and religious and the literature in this section helps to move the argument toward why this potential mechanism for achieving success may be beneficial to Black men (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Holland, 2014; Taylor et al., 2004; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Walker & Dixon, 2002).

Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College

The next four studies in this literature review are even more closely related to the current study because they focus specifically on Black men in college.

Also, it is important to note that some of the studies are connected. Perhaps a seminal study is that from Herndon (2003), where the purpose was to explore how spirituality related to African American males' ability to stay in school at a PWI using grounded theory as the framework. This qualitative study interviewed 13 Black men, ages 19 to 26. The participants' religious affiliations included 10 Christians, one Muslim, and two others. They were enrolled at a Mid-Atlantic university in the United States. Herndon (2003) found that, in the college setting, spirituality served as a source of comfort and support, and there were three main themes that emerged around this concept.

Herndon (2003) found that spirituality bolstered resilience. Religious acts such as reading scriptures, praying, and attending church service aided students' ability to stay in school. These acts helped them deal with the stress of being in school, especially as it related to being at a PWI. Again regarding resilience, spirituality helped students push through hard times both socially and academically. Next, spirituality provided a sense of purpose by helping create peace of mind and focus. Spirituality encouraged one student to go back to school to obtain a degree with a purpose. Students were able to maintain the faith regarding pursuit of their purpose. Without spirituality, life could be empty with no certainty. For one student, spirituality was the whole purpose of existence. Everything that the students wanted to pursue in life in the future was based on spirituality. It was the main source of direction.

Lastly, Herndon (2003) found that spiritual support was provided by Black religious institutions. The local religious institutions served as a strong source of support through being a formal venue for the continuing exploration of spirituality. The people of the church encouraged one participant to stay in school. They also taught the participants to make wise decisions and not be bogged down by systems (e.g. set of policies that pose as hindrances). The church members served as a surrogate family and network of support. The church provided a surge of encouragement to complete homework through the reading of scripture and devotional time. Herndon (2003) offered the suggestions that campus administrators can develop and foster more programs that are faith based and seek relationship and partnerships with local churches in order to help keep Black men in school and eventually graduate. Support systems (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2008), as noted earlier in the literature review, are beneficial for Black men in college and the church is a prime source for those who identify with spirituality and religion.

A concept similar to that of resilience was found in another study. Watson (2006) conducted a study to identify where spirituality is positioned in the lives of Black male college students and how it contributes to their ability to survive in college. A quantitative study was conducted where 46 participants responded out of 97 who were targeted. The participants were from three HBCUs in the

Southeast U.S. The participants were all from a mentoring program and all volunteered their time for the survey. The instrument was a survey that consisted of 23 Likert-type questions and three open-ended questions. The survey was designed to capture the educational experiences in general and spiritual and religious beliefs and practices related to survival and success in college. The main finding was that belief in a higher being and their use of resistant soul force (or ability to overcome barriers) “completes the sense of spirituality these African American male students use to sustain themselves in the college environment” (p. 124).

Furthermore, Watson (2006) found that responses indicated the participants could handle what came their way through the grace of a higher being. Educators need not neglect the impact of spirituality (as it relates to a higher being) because it is an important characteristic of the educational process for Black American males. For example, a participant thanked God for preparation for the workforce. Another participant was able to achieve his education because of a divine calling. Also, faith in the Lord helped a participant overcome racism, which has been found to be a challenge for Black men (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Another attributed survival and success to God’s purpose for his life. Lastly, for another participant survival and success both in high school and college was due to having the support of Christ. God and/or the Lord as a means of overcoming and surviving is an important source of support.

In an attempt to duplicate Herndon's (2003) study in a different environment, Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008) sought to examine the role spirituality plays for Black males enrolled at a historically Black university as it pertains to them staying in school. Thirteen Black male students, ages 19 to 26, from a Southern historically Black university were included in the qualitative study. Grounded theory was used as a framework, just as it was in Herndon's (2003) study. Three major themes emerged to describe the role of spirituality among Black men attending a historically Black university, which were (1) prayer being used as a coping mechanism and for guidance, (2) spirituality is used in a social context, and (3) religious institutions as a form of social support. The findings of spirituality in relation to prayer, guidance, and support from religious institutions were parallel with Herndon's study. However, Riggins et al. (2008) also found that the participants expressed spirituality verbally and they controlled their own fate in school, where it was found that God does not play a role in academic life.

Regarding the role of spirituality, Riggins et al. (2008) found that through prayer, the participants received direction and a sense of guidance during times of uncertainty in their process of college matriculation. A participant asked his spiritual being for guidance regarding his destiny. Another participant who grew up in the church knew to ask God for guidance through problems, so he knew to

lock himself in a room and drop to his knees. One student prayed for peace from the stresses of working and going to school.

Riggins et al. (2008) also found that spirituality is discussed in a social setting. Students discussed different realms of spirituality and different religions and religious customs. From a social perspective, spirituality was used to avoid certain temptations on the college campus such as drugs. One student discussed how spirituality helped decipher right from wrong. He explained that spirituality enticed his desire for eternal life, so avoiding wrongdoing is essential. Lastly, in relation to spirituality, there is support from religious institutions. Church members encouraged the participants to remain in school. They offered advice if things were not going well and motivated the men to stay in school. One participant received a scholarship from the church, which served as motivation because he did not want to disappoint the church that invested in him. Again, this support system the church offers encompasses a positive influence that Black men need in order to succeed.

In another study related to Herndon's (2003), Wood and Hilton (2012) explored spirituality as a factor of academic success. Academic success referred to grade point average and completion of courses toward degree goals. Using a semi-structured method, researchers interviewed 28 Black American males from a community college in the Southwest region of the U.S. The average age was 24.5 with participants ranging between the ages of 18 to 58. Their areas of study

varied vastly. Eleven of the participants identified spirituality as a mechanism for academic success (two were Jehovah's witnesses and nine were Protestant Christians). As a conceptual framework, the authors used Herndon's (2003) three expressions of spirituality, in an attempt to further the research in this area.

Wood and Hilton (2012) did find that spirituality was identified as a mechanism for academic success. First, students saw God as a confidante, which aided their academic success. God was with students at all times and they could engage in a dialogue with Him about challenges and successes. Students felt less isolated. Second, spirituality inspired excellence in school. The participants who identified as Christians were expected to perform at their highest level in everything they did. Third, spirituality promoted academic success by providing purpose and a sense of direction. Students had direction regarding what to major in and what careers to pursue, and their direction was based on the idea that they had a destiny to fulfill. Fourth, spirituality supported students' abilities to overcome barriers through prayer and knowing that God was there for protection. Lastly, spirituality helped to reduce relational distractions. Students were able to stay away from negatively influential peers and events, especially those that went against their faith.

The studies on Black men specifically have a great deal of similarities, especially regarding overcoming barriers, surviving school, prayer, and purpose (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012).

Additionally, as with some of the other studies regarding Black participants (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Holland, 2014), the church served as a tremendous form of support (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008). These findings helped shape the conceptual framework, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

Throughout history, Black students have faced many adversities regarding their ability to have access to education. For the males, there is an achievement gap between their Black female and White male counterparts, potentially due to context history of inequality. Additionally, Black men have faced a host of barriers that have contributed to their low enrollment and graduation rates in college. However, there are several variables that influence Black men's performance in college positively. Spirituality and religion have been shown to have a positive influence on how students perform in college. These two construct that are very much connected, are well embedded within Black culture. Research has shown their influence on Black students, especially Black men (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Based on the literature reviewed in this chapter, the influence of spirituality and religion on student success for Black men in college will be the focus of this study.

Chapter 3

Conceptual Framework

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a conceptual framework is a written or visual output that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them” (p. 18). Additionally, Maxwell (2013) claimed that a conceptual framework is “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 39). The conceptual framework allows for a researcher to use findings from similar and previous research as a model for a study (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, I use an integrative lens based on the studies of Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012), which explored the role of spirituality in the lives of Black undergraduate men at PWIs.

While Herndon (2003) examined the relationship between spirituality and retention, Wood and Hilton (2012) explored the connections between spirituality and academic success. These scholars found overlapping and, yet, different themes about how spirituality contributed to the academic success and retention of this student population. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the themes from Herndon’s (2003) and Wood and Hilton’s (2012) research that contributed to the use of this conceptual framework. In addition, I will describe how this conceptual lens is important for my exploration of the academic

experiences of Black undergraduate men in a public predominately White institution in Texas.

Herndon (2003) identified three themes that described how spirituality helped Black men stay in college. First, spirituality bolsters resilience in that acts such as reading scriptures, praying, and attending church service helped the participants remain in school at a PWI. Resiliency helped them deal with social and academic challenges they faced on campus. Second, spirituality provided a sense of purpose for these young men. More specifically, it was their main source of direction, especially as it related to college and career decisions. Third, Herndon (2003) found that African American religious institutions provided spiritual support. These formal settings (e.g. churches, congregations, etc.) offered the participants critical sources of support and helped them further explore their spirituality.

Wood and Hilton (2012) used the themes found in Herndon's study as a conceptual lens, furthering this conceptual framework. Although the authors did not find that religious institutions supported students' academic success, they found five themes regarding the influence of spirituality on the academic success of Black men in college. Similar to Herndon's finding of the concept that spirituality bolsters resilience, one theme that emerged was spirituality provided the ability to overcome barriers. The participants in this study felt that God was with them at all times, especially during difficult times. Similar to Herndon's

finding about spirituality providing a sense of purpose, Wood and Hilton (2012) also found that spirituality gave students a life purpose by directing them to their chosen majors and career paths. The framework was extended as Wood and Hilton (2012) found that students saw God as a confidante. Since they were able to engage in dialogue and/or connect with Him, they felt less isolated. Also, spirituality inspired excellence in school, since their religious beliefs encouraged them to perform at the highest level in all endeavors. Additionally, spirituality minimized relational distractions because students' commitment to their faith lead them to refrain from associating with peers and events associated with negative influences. The researchers did not find that religious institutions supported students' academic success, as found in Herndon's study. Nevertheless, they did contribute the additional themes/concepts of God as a confidante, spirituality as inspiration for excellence, and the reduction of relational distractions.

The themes from Herndon's (2003) and Wood and Hilton's (2012) research will be used as a conceptual framework for this study. These themes include: (1) spirituality and religion in relation to resilience/overcoming barriers; (2) spirituality and religion in relation to sense of purpose; (3) spirituality and religion in relation to religious institution support; (4) spirituality and religion in relation having God or a higher power as a confidante; (5) spirituality and religion in relation being inspired for excellence; and (6) spirituality and religion in relation to eliminating relational distractions. This framework informs my work

because findings from Herndon's and Wood and Hilton's studies both revealed the influence that spirituality has on Black male college students. However, this study has the potential to add to this framework with more broad findings.

While both authors only focused on spirituality, I explicitly examined both spirituality and religion for this study. Although these constructs have different meanings, they are deeply intertwined (Mattis, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). For example, religion is used as a means to obtain spirituality, while spirituality can be achieved through following certain ritualistic behaviors (Mattis, 2000; Taylor et al., 2004). Also, the framework will be extended with persistence and graduation as the focal point, in addition to academic success and retention. The role of spirituality and religion may influence these metrics of students' success, areas where Black men have not performed well.

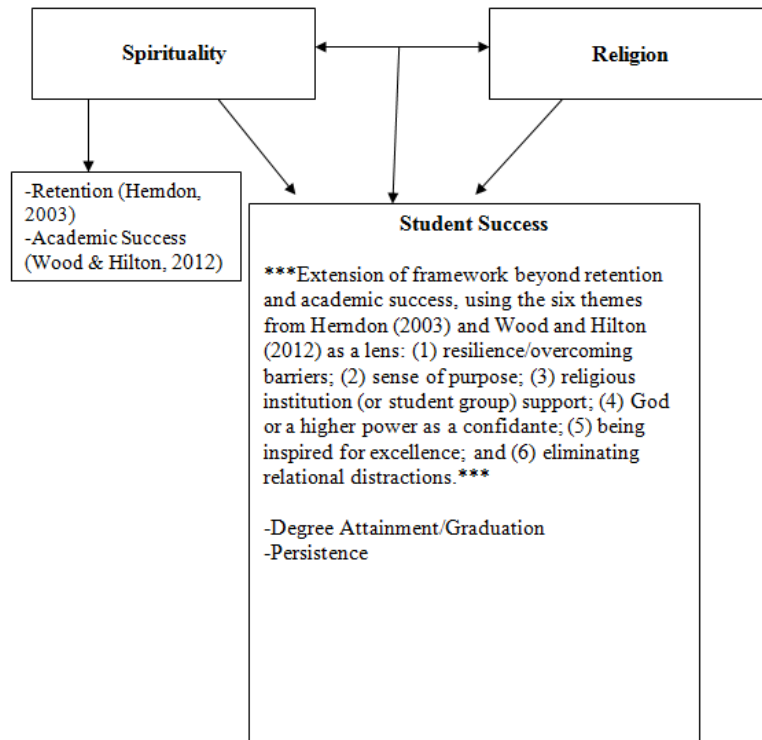


Figure 3-1 Conceptual Framework

Chapter 4

Research Design

Again, the purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black men in college at a large and research oriented Predominately White Hispanic Serving Institution in Texas. More specifically, the study is designed to examine spirituality and religion as a potential mechanism for achieving student success, or persistence and graduation. The research question is as follows: How does spirituality and religion among Black undergraduate men influence their ability to persist and graduate? This chapter outlines the study's methodology, site, participants, recruitment strategies, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and clarification of researcher bias.

Methodology

For this study, I used a general qualitative approach in route to answering the research question. One definition of qualitative research is as follows:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 1998, p. 15)

Characteristics of qualitative research as presented by Creswell (1998) include:

(1) taking place in a natural setting; (2) using multiple methods that are interactive

and humanistic; (3) being emergent rather than tightly prefigured; (4) being fundamentally interpretive; and (5) the qualitative researcher views social phenomena holistically. Additionally, the qualitative researcher, as the key instrument in data collection, acknowledges bias and “uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous” (p. 182).

This study was designed to explore the problem of academic performance (enrollment, persistence, graduation) in higher education for Black men and how their connection with spirituality and religion may influence their success. The experiences of the participants were examined on the campus in which they attended school, and detailed reports of their identification with spirituality and religion were captured and analyzed to provide a comprehensive perspective.

A qualitative approach was best suited for this study because quantitative studies are focused on variables or “view explanation as a demonstration that there is a statistical relationship between different variables” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 29), known as variance theory. Conversely, Maxwell (2013) discussed process theory, which “tends to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these; explanation is based on analysis of how some situations and events influence others” (p. 29). Therefore, a general qualitative research approach was employed to capture the participants’ experiences with people (i.e. students, pastors, congregations), situations (i.e. academic pursuits,

social involvement), events (i.e. campus activities, religious events), processes (i.e. religious acts such as prayer, persistence/graduation), and other influence.

Site

This study was conducted at Lone Star University (LSU), a large and research-oriented Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Texas where the largest racial group in the student population is White. Only one interview was conducted at an off-site location due to the participant's lack of transportation. In this case, I interviewed the participant at a park less than two miles away from the campus. All participants were enrolled students at this institution. LSU is located in North Texas within the Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) Metroplex. The university has an enrollment of 33,329, with 25,690 of that being the undergraduate population (*College Navigator*, n.d.). The racial demographic breakdown for undergraduate students is 12% Asian, 15% Black, 25% Hispanic/Latino, 40% White, 3% two or more (races), 1% where the race/ethnicity is unknown, and 4% non-resident alien (*College Navigator*, n.d.). First-year retention rates for first time in college, full-time students based reported as of 2012 were 74.5% for American Indian/Alaska native, 67.4% for Black/African American, 69.1% for Hispanic, and 69.1% for White (Lone Star University, 2013). Six-year graduation rates for first time in college, full-time students reported as of 2007 were 51.3% for American Indian/Alaska Native, 31.5% for Black/African American, 41.7% for Hispanic, and 40.1% for White (Lone Star University, 2013). It is important

to note that, based on the statistics above, Black students have the lowest retention and graduation rates at LSU.

Students have a wealth of services and programs that are available to them. The programs and services include a robust residential life department, health and recreation programs, a wealth of student organizations, civic engagement, veteran services, and a tremendous student services division. Within student services, there is a safety and security department, a career development center, counseling and psychological services, health services, a student disability department, tutoring services, along with a host of others.

Recruitment Strategies

I chose to use a variety of methods to recruit students. First, I sent an email announcement (See Appendix A: Recruitment Letter) out to a host of student organization leaders, student organization general members, and the faculty advisors for the student organizations. Also, I emailed several university administrators, staff, and faculty whom I felt had direct relationships with Black male students based on their roles and appointments (See Appendix B: Email Announcement to Officials). I requested their assistance to send my email to qualifying students and/or ask for the contact information. Additionally, I attempted to recruit students from two sociology classes as well as two predominantly Black student organization meetings, where I explained the study

and passed out information sheets that highlighted the criteria for participation (See Appendix D: Information Sheet).

Students who were interested based on the email announcement contacted me, after which I sent a pre-screen survey (See Appendix E: Pre-Screen Survey). This survey allowed me to capture facts about the potential subjects to determine if they were a fit for the study, such as their classification and religious background. A small amount of students displayed interest after I spoke at their student organization meeting. I then gave the interested students the pre-screen survey to determine if they could participate in the study as well.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants due to a lack of interest in participation from students after the first six were identified. This sampling technique allowed for participants to make recommendations for other potential participants who met the criteria to become part of the study (Creswell, 1998). The first 10 students who responded to the recruitment strategies all completed a pre-screen survey, demographic information questionnaire (See Appendix F: Demographic Information Questionnaire), and consent form (See Appendix C: Consent Form). The participants were interviewed after all of this information was collected. Additionally, prior to the interview, they were asked to bring an artifact/item along with them that symbolized their experience as a spiritual and/or religious person seeking to graduate.

Participants

As shown in Table 4.1, participants of the study included 10 Black men who attended Lone Star University. The amount of participants aligns with Creswell's (1998) writings about qualitative sample sizes. This relatively small amount of participants was due to how in depth the interviews were; thus, the wealth of information is robust (Creswell, 1998). I used criterion sampling to obtain the desired amount participants for the study. According to Creswell (1998), criterion sampling consists of identifying and selecting participants who meet a certain criteria, mainly those who have experienced the phenomenon.

It was imperative that the participants identified with spirituality and/or religion as it related to their time as undergraduates striving for success as Black men in college. Therefore, the criteria for selection was: (1) racially identify as a Black/African American man; (2) be at least 18 years old; (3) be enrolled as a junior or senior student at Lone Star University; and (4) self-identify that spirituality and/or religion is important for striving toward graduation. It was important that the participants have at least a junior classification in order to indicate a measure of persistence.

Table 4-1 Demographic Information Table

Participant	Age	Classification	Entered LSU as...	First Gen	GPA	Major/Minor	Enrollment	Spiritual/Religious	Religious Upbringing	Religious Affiliation Currently
Apollo	23	Senior	First-time-freshman	No	2.5	Communication Technology/Business	Part-Time	Evenly spiritual and religious	Catholic and Christian/Baptist	Christian/Baptist
Charles	23	Senior	First-time-freshman	Yes	2.9	Exercise Science History with Secondary	Full-Time	More spiritual than religious	Christian/Baptist with a Muslim father who sought to convert the family to Islam	Christian/Baptist
Derek	21	Senior	First-time-freshman	No	3.2	Teacher Certification	Full-Time	Spiritual	Christian/Baptist	Christian/Non-Denominational
Eddie	25	Senior	Transfer	No	3.4	Nursing	Full-Time	More religious than spiritual	Catholic	Catholic (Christian)
John	23	Senior	First-time-freshman	No	3	Civil Engineering	Part-Time	Evenly spiritual and religious	Christian	Christian/Non-Denominational
Lovehall	31	Senior	Transfer	Yes	3.7	Sociology and Broadcast Communication (double major)	Full-Time	Evenly spiritual and religious	Christian	Christian/Non-Denominational
Pierre	23	Senior	First-time-freshman	No	2.8	Marketing/Advertising	Part-Time	More spiritual than religious	Christian	Christian/Non-Denominational
Sonny	23	Junior	Transfer	Yes	2.3	Economics	Part-Time	Evenly spiritual and religious	Christian/A.M.E	Christian/A.M.E
Steve	21	Senior	Transfer	Yes	n/a (just transferred)	Philosophy/Music	Full-Time	Spiritual	Christian/Baptist	Unitarian
Wade	22	Junior	First-time-freshman	No	2.2	Industrial Engineering	Part-Time	Evenly spiritual and religious	n/a until 16, then Christian	Christian/Non-Denominational

Data Collection

The data collection methods included a pre-screen survey, a demographic information questionnaire, in-depth/semi-structured interviews, and memos. The breadth of data collected came from the interviews. Each method is discussed in further detail below.

Pre-Screen Survey

Surveys were given to the participants prior to them being selected for the study. This process happened after they received an email announcement, heard me present about the study, and/or learned about the study through another person. The students were surveyed to determine whether they were a fit for the study based on the established criteria (e.g. race, classification, religious background, etc.). Students who met the criteria were contacted and asked to participate in the study.

Demographic Information Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent to participants prior to the interview. In some cases, students had to complete the questionnaire in person after they had already qualified for the study based on the pre-screen survey. This questionnaire was used to obtain personal information (e.g. age, religious affiliation, family background), college information (e.g. major, GPA, classification), residential information (e.g. housing, household size), and contact information (e.g. email, phone number). The purpose of this document was to collect similar background

information from the participants in order to develop a demographic table and to assist with the data analysis and writing. The questionnaire was also be used to facilitate conversation during the interview.

Interviews

One face-to-face audio recorded in-depth and semi-structured interview took place with each participant. Semi-structured interviews involve a protocol of set open-ended questions with the potential probe questions that may or may not be used, and the understanding that other questions may emerge based on dialogue between the researcher and interviewer (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interview questions were used to capture information about the participants' experiences as college students who identify with spirituality and religion and how that related to their undergraduate pursuits to persist and graduate. All interviews occurred at locations and times most convenient for the participants.

Memos

Maxwell (2013) described memos as “any writing that a researcher does in relationship to the research other than actual field notes, transcription, or coding” (pp. 19-20). Therefore, memos may consist of a comment on an interview transcript, audio recorded ideas, or even a whole analytic essay (Maxwell, 2013). The purpose is to get thoughts down on paper or electronically so that information and ideas are not lost. This method was especially important for this study due to

its scope and the in-depth interviews where it was difficult to retain all of the information mentally. I also captured thoughts that emerged while I was reading the interview transcripts and listening to the audio recorded interviews.

Data Analysis

For this study, I analyzed data collected using the qualitative data analysis processes outlined by Creswell (2003). Creswell noted that qualitative data analysis involves “moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 190). This understanding was accomplished mainly through thoroughly reviewing interview transcripts, listening to the audio recorded interviews, and memoing. The process entails six steps that are listed below.

The first step in the data analysis process was organization and preparation, which involved transcribing interviews verbatim, scanning documents and images, and arranging and sorting data. The second step was reading through/listening to all of the data. I listened to each individual interview recording and made memos, noting major themes that emerged based on the participants responses. I also read each interview transcript and took notes in the margins electronically. Larger portions of key data were highlighted so that I could be sure to make note of critical information. The third step was coding the data. This involved the process of organizing data into small chunks before any meaning is made of those chunks. Initial codes were based on the conceptual

framework (spirituality and religion in relation to resilience/overcoming barriers; spirituality and religion in relation to sense of purpose; spirituality and religion in relation to religious institution or student group support; spirituality and religion in relation having God or a higher power as a confidante; spirituality and religion in relation being inspired for excellence; and spirituality and religion in relation to eliminating relational distractions) and the research question of this study.

However, other codes were developed based on data that emerged. For examples, there were common experiences that multiple participants mentioned that were not a part of the initial coding structure. Therefore, new codes were made for an enhanced capture of the data. In step four, I used the coding process to generate more broad themes based on the codes that were identified as relevant to the study. The themes were developed into the main basis of description in the findings, as they provide the main synthesis of experiences lived by the participants.

The last two steps deal more with how the data is presented and interpreted. Step five of the data analysis process involves how the themes are presented. I used a qualitative narrative to present a detailed discussion of several themes. Lastly, step six involved the interpretation of the data or meaning of the data. This interpretation is the basis of Chapter 8.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is attempting to establish credibility and objectivity within the data collection process, data analysis, and reporting of information (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). I employed respondent validation, also known as member checking, and the use of rich data in order to enhance trustworthiness. Maxwell (2013) described that with member checking, the researcher solicits feedback about the data collected from the participants. With member checking, participants have the opportunity offer feedback as to whether the data being presented is an accurate representation of their experiences.

During the interview process, I continually asked follow up questions to make sure that I captured participants' responses correctly. I also offered summaries of some responses that seemed a bit unclear while the interview was still in process. Additionally, I followed up with students via email regarding any further information that was unclear based on the collected data. For example, I noticed during the transcribing process that one participant mentioned a student organization that I could not understand. Therefore, I contacted him to get clarification on the actual name of the organization. In another incident, a student listed he was a junior on the pre-screen survey, but listed himself as a senior on the demographic questionnaire. I contacted him to determine his actual classification. It was very important to capture these types of small details to help

ensure credibility and trustworthiness, even though they may not have seemed significantly relevant to the overall purpose of the study.

Rich data was collected through the interview and transcription process. Maxwell (2013) noted that rich data is derived from interview studies where “such data generally requires verbatim transcripts of the interviews, not just notes on what you felt was significant” (p. 126). The interview protocol was designed to pull detailed descriptions from the participants about their experiences. These experiences are highlighted later in the findings chapters, including lengthy quotes that help describe the themes that emerged throughout the data collection process.

Clarifying Researcher Bias

As the researcher, my race/ethnicity as a Black/African American man, education, and identification with both spirituality and religion was stated earlier in the study. I go through the appropriate actions in Chapter 1 as well as the section on trustworthiness to explain the processes whereby attempts are made to keep any bias from occurring. In the next chapter, I begin the presentation of the findings.

Chapter 5

Participant Biographies

It was necessary to provide a succinct biographical information chapter about the participants before delving into the internal components of spirituality and religion that influenced their drive to persist and graduate. The background information helps provide a better understanding of how their faith intersects with their academic pursuits. This chapter provides brief biographical information on each participant. They were all junior and senior students at Lone Star University (LSU) and had to meet certain criteria to participate in this study. Their ages ranged from 21 to 31 and there was a good mixture of first time freshmen and transfer students. Also, four of the young men were first generation college students. Most of them were active participants in student organizations and activities. The next ten sections of this chapter consist of the short biographies.

Apollo

As a senior in high school, Apollo's first-choice college was not LSU, where he ended up attending as a first-time freshman. His desire was in fact South Texas University, a large public university in Houston. Apollo chose to stay close to home in Mansbrook, small town in north Texas, due to the birth of his daughter during his senior year in high school. He chose to attend LSU to remain close by to raise his daughter. His father was from Jamaica and his mother was from the northeast part of the U.S. Because both of his parents served

23 years in the U.S. Navy, Apollo bounced around from city to city as a child before settling in Texas. This upbringing also instilled a lot of discipline in his household.

Apollo's parents were Protestant Christian, yet sent him to Catholic school up until high school. He went to mass and learned an immense amount about Catholic traditions, holidays and prayers, but he attended Baptist church on the weekends. Apollo grew to identify as a Baptist Christian as a young adult. He also identified as being evenly spiritual and religious. His acts of spirituality and religion included daily prayer, regular church attendance, and sometimes on-campus Bible study through faith-based organizations. Apollo, 23, was a part-time student with a major in communications technology and a minor in business. He was heavily involved in a number of African American student organizations, including a Black Greek letter organization.

Charles

Charles grew up in a Baptist Christian, single parent household with his mother and younger sister in Longhorn, Texas. He helped raise his little sister and worked to help support the family while in college. He chose to attend LSU due to its close proximity to his family. Charles was solidified in his identification as a Baptist Christian despite influence from a family member when he was about 12 years old. Around this time, his father came back home from incarceration and attempted to convert the family to Islam. Charles did not stray

away from his faith and, actually, learning about the Islamic religion helped him understand how to defend Christianity. In the process, he learned more about religions overall, but grew stronger in his own faith. He stated that he was more spiritual than he was religious due to his personal journey as opposed to fellowshiping with a number of other people. His acts of religion and spirituality included reading the Bible on a weekly basis, daily prayers, and rare cases of attending church. At LSU, Charles was involved in student organizations that centered on the development and uplifting of African Americans. Charles, 23, was full-time senior who began his LSU as a first-time freshman and majored in exercise science.

Derek

Derek was a 21-year-old senior who came to LSU as a first-time freshman. He was enrolled full-time as a senior history major with secondary teacher certification. Originally, Derek was from Perry, a small town in East Texas and matriculated through the K-12 system there. His father has worked at a soup manufacturer for approximately 30 years, and his mother had recently (within the last 10 years) received her bachelor's degree in education as a non-traditional college student. After obtaining her degree, she began teaching in their hometown.

Derek was drawn to LSU due to its diversity and also his familiarity with it since his older sister graduated from there. Additionally, Derek received

scholarship and grant money from the university, which was enticing. Derek was very involved in student organizations and also volunteered a significant amount of his time on campus. He was brought up in a Baptist church in his hometown. However, Derek had recently moved away from the Baptist denomination of Christianity. He was still a Christian, but he identified more as a spiritual person who followed the beliefs of Christianity. He attended church about once a month, prayed multiple times a day, and read the Bible about twice a day.

Eddie

Eddie was from Onitsha, Nigeria, and was the only participant who was not native to the U.S. He had two siblings, and their parents raised them as Catholics. He studied engineering in Nigeria, but came to the U.S. to study healthcare because he wanted to eventually become a physician. After time at a community college, Eddie decided to attend LSU. He still had aspirations of becoming a physician, but mainly chose to attend LSU due to the full tuition scholarship they offered and their reputable nursing program. Eddie had been involved on campus as a mentor, resident assistant, and a student senator. Additionally, Eddie was in the honor's college, where he conducted independent research in the healthcare field. Eddie, 25, was a full-time senior majoring in nursing. He still maintained his identification as Catholic, where he was more religious than spiritual. Eddie's religious practices mainly consisted of attending church every Sunday, praying daily, and reading the Bible occasionally.

Lovehall

Lovehall ended up at LSU by way of both community college and Southern Baptist University, a small, private Baptist university. His main reasons for choosing LSU were for its diversity, cost of attendance, and proximity to his apartment and church. At his church, he was heavily involved in the broadcast ministry department. He was the most seasoned participant at age 31, having worked full-time in the finance industry and attending school part-time before becoming a full-time student at LSU. Lovehall was a first-generation college student and the only participant with a double major, studying both sociology and broadcast communication. He was involved in a variety of student organizations, including one centered on African American studies and support, a sociology fraternity, and an academic achievement honor society. He came from a single-parent household, where his mother raised him and three other siblings. His family grew up in the church and, in his opinion, maybe attended a bit too much. Lovehall stated that he was an evenly spiritual and religious Christian with no denominational influence. He prayed daily, fasted once per week, read the Bible about twice per week, and attended church every Sunday.

John

John was born in Dayton, Ohio, but his family moved to Armada, a city in the panhandle of Texas when he was two years old. He was the only collegiate athlete out of all of the participants, coming to LSU on a track scholarship. In

addition to track, John decided to attend LSU based on family that he had in the area. Initially, he was an architecture major because he liked to draw and design. Later, he discovered that architecture was no longer his passion, so he switched majors to civil engineering. John began attending LSU as a first-time freshman and was a 23-year-old senior attending school part-time at the time of the interview. He was a member of two faith-based student organizations/campus ministries and was also a member of an association for Black engineers. As a Christian with no denominational affiliation, he identified as evenly spiritual and religious. His acts of spirituality and religion included regular church attendance, daily prayers, daily Bible reading, fasting once per month, group Bible studies, and group prayers.

Pierre

Pierre initially wanted to attend Central Texas University, a large public university in central Texas. He was going to transfer after his freshman year, but he became too engaged in student life at LSU, which prompted him to remain enrolled there. Pierre, 23, was a part-time senior marketing major with a minor in advertising. His involvement on campus included student congress, volunteer-based organizations, the chess team, and a Black Greek letter organization. He had been very adamant about being active on campus, especially with the fraternity since his father was a member of the same organization. He even won

awards for his active approach to his freshman year in college. Additionally, Pierre was an entrepreneur, running his own business in the media field.

His parents were from the Midwest, but they moved to Houston, where he was from. Pierre was a Christian who identified more as a spiritual than religious and did not adhere to any particular denomination. His acts of spirituality and religion included daily prayer, attending church about twice per month, fasting a couple of times a year, and random scripture reading (by opening the Bible to a random page). Pierre mentioned that in the past, he would receive premonitions that gave him foresight into certain events/actions in the future, but that tapered off as the years progressed.

Sonny

Sonny grew up in a gang-infested area in Beach Town, a city 40 miles east of Los Angeles. His father worked in construction and suffered from alcoholism, while his mother spent a great deal of time unemployed and also suffered from mental illness and depression. And while his brother never joined a gang, he lived a very similar lifestyle to that of a gang member. However, Sonny's neighborhood friends, although on the gang path, knew that he was a person who had the ability to get out of that environment and become an educated and successful young Black man. Because of his background, Sonny was very much tuned into the manner in which Black people treated each other as well as the social injustices they faced, both at LSU and the world at large. He felt disgusted

with Black adolescent culture, especially with how they tore each other down through rap music.

Through his grandmother, he was brought up in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Christian Church, what he identified with at the time of the interview. He mentioned that he was evenly spiritual and religious and his practices included attending church about twice a month, prayer around three or four times a week, and playing the saxophone, especially since he played as a musician for churches. Sonny attended Willow College, a junior college in Texas before going to LSU. At LSU he was very involved with some of the African American based student organizations. Sonny, a 23-year-old first-generation college student, was a part-time junior who majored in economics.

Steve

Steve was born in Denver, Colorado, where his father lived, but is mainly from Fort Worth, Texas, where his mother lived. His mother was $\frac{3}{4}$ African American and $\frac{1}{4}$ Native American, while his father was $\frac{1}{2}$ African American and $\frac{1}{2}$ Native American. His grandparents were Christian pastors, and he even taught Bible classes as a child to younger children. After high school Steve first attended Sacred University, a large, private, Baptist university in Texas. Then, after some struggles both spiritually and financially, he decided to attend Hillworth College, a community college near that university, where he obtained an associate's degree. He came to LSU to be close to home after suffering

financial problems from his first two academic stops. As a young adult, Steve had a spiritual awakening after internal battles about religion and Christianity. After a brief stint identifying as Muslim, he came to the understanding that he could have spirituality without necessarily trying to fit into a particular religion. Steve, 21, a first-generation college student was enrolled full-time as a senior at LSU, where he majored in philosophy and minored in music.

Steve identified largely as a spiritual person, claiming Unitarianism. Therefore, he was open to learning from a wide variety of religions and beliefs, yet not necessarily pledged to follow any one in particular. His desire for following this belief was to seek the answers to life and reality. His spiritual practices included a lifestyle of fasting, wearing quartz crystals, meditation, channeling (a meditative state where your awareness is lowered), and skateboarding.

Wade

Wade, 22, planned to be the first person in his family to graduate from college. His father began college but dropped out. Wade's parents broke up when he was very young, leaving him and his younger sister in a single-parent household with his mother, though his father was involved in their lives. Wade was the only participant who was married, and he was expecting his first child. On campus, Wade had been involved as vice president of Faith and Inspiration, a faith-based student organization/campus ministry, and a few other groups that

were centered around the growth and development of African Americans, both socially and academically. He came to LSU as a first-time freshman to major in industrial engineering. He mainly chose to attend LSU because he was offered scholarship money, despite the fact that he had only recently heard about the university as a senior in high school. He was a part-time junior at the time of the interview.

Wade was a devout Christian who identified as nondenominational and evenly spiritual and religious. He was not raised as a Christian as a small child, but came to know his faith at the age of 16. Wade prayed daily, read the Bible daily, attended church up to three times a week, hosted Bible group studies, fasted about three times a year, and witnessed (shared his faith in Christ) to the community about twice a year.

Summary

Overall, the participants highlighted how spirituality and/or religion significantly influenced their overall life in a positive manner. The influence of their faith carried over into their collegiate pursuits, providing encouragement, motivation, and structure. They came from various parts of the country and were all unique in their own right. It was important to understand how they defined spirituality and religion to help determine the essence of what it actually meant to them and how it influenced their lives. They all echoed definitions that were in alignment with those described in Chapter 2. The following chapter details the

participants' experiences with the pursuit of their college degrees and, specifically, how spirituality and religion served as a mechanism for student success internally.

Chapter 6

Internal Components of Spirituality and Religion

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black men in college at a large and research-oriented PWI in Texas. More specifically, the study is designed to examine spirituality and religion as a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation. The main goal is to help explain how spirituality and religion is a mechanism to help Black male students persist through college. In this chapter, I provide details on how the participants' internal identification with spirituality and religion influenced their ability to move toward graduation. Using a conceptual framework based on the finding of Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012), along with a qualitative approach, allowed me to capture rich data from the participants that outlined their experiences as spiritual and/or religious African American men seeking to obtain a bachelor's degree.

The first section highlights how spirituality and religion helped to bolster resilience and ability to overcome barriers that the participants faced as African American male college students. Then, focus and guidance in college through spirituality and religion is described in detail by the participants. Lastly, the participants offer their thoughts on the relationship between spirituality and religion and their purpose, which largely related to their major.

Resilience and Overcoming Barriers

A theme that remained consistent with findings from the studies of Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012), from which the conceptual framework was drawn, was that of how spirituality and religion aided the students regarding resilience and overcoming barriers while in college persisting toward graduation. Additionally, Watson (2006) found that spirituality created soul force, or the ability for Black male college students to overcome barriers. Most of the participants (6) noted the manner in which their religion and/or spirituality was a key component in dealing with certain hardship and obstacles as college students. This section explores how the participants had resilience and overcame barriers by dealing with difficult times, releasing academic burdens, and pushing through to excel courtesy of motivation.

Dealing with Difficult Life Situations

For many students, college is their first time living as adults and learning to deal with the realities of life. Pierre had to deal with an especially difficult situation when he had to overcome the death of a close relative:

And I know as far as academia, it was times that I had full on catastrophes happen. My brother passed away at the beginning of my junior year, 2012 in the spring semester in January. And so that was just the rug that got pulled from under me. So at that point I was really...I was pretty much emotionless; I was a droid. I didn't feel anything, I didn't know anything.

But, at the end of the day I knew I needed to stay in school, and I knew that it would find a way to work its way out.

Additionally, Pierre went on to add that other hardships of his included having his car towed several times while in college. On one occasion, he did not have enough cash to get it out of the lot. After praying about the situation, a man came up to him, talked to him for about five minutes and then gave him the rest of the cash that he needed. Pierre knew that this was no coincidence.

In these difficult situations, Pierre was sure that he had something that some of his fellow students did not have. He stated, “The way I think other people would have broken, I feel as though I stood tall because I just knew...just the peace about it, it’s hard to describe it sounds redundant, but that’s pretty much what it is.” This peace that he referred to was the peace that he received from God, knowing that He would make a way. Pierre mentioned that through both his religion and spirituality he had peace and did not “freak out” about those difficult times. He added, “So I’ll walk across the stage without gray hair and without balding, because even though I stress, I definitely stress like anybody else, but at the end of the day it doesn’t come to my detriment.” The peace offered through his spiritual and religious relationship with God did not fully alleviate stress, but it did provide a sense of comfort in difficult times.

Another difficult situation that emerged on more than one occasion for some participants was the lack of money. For example, Charles lived in a single

parent home where he helped his mother raise his little sister. He discussed how prayer got him through a trying financial situation:

Last year I was the only person working in my household, so I was working two jobs and then doing schoolwork and doing my different orgs [organizations] that I was a part of. So it came down to a lot of prayers just to stay motivated and focused and centered. That's actually when my faith became stronger. Because through that things started happening, as long as I persevered and worked with my prayers. So I started getting grants and scholarships and stuff throughout that...that I didn't think was possible. Because of that it made me stronger in my faith.

Charles was an active participant in a handful of student organizations, yet he was supporting his mother and sister while also being a college student. He dealt with the difficulty of providing for his family at home, financially supporting his education, and juggling work and school. Charles recalled that through prayer, the seemingly impossible was made possible. After enduring financial hardship, he was able to obtain the financial aid necessary to ease his financial burden and remain in school, moving him closer to graduation.

As seen with both Charles and Pierre, African American males are sometimes faced with stressful and sometimes disastrous situations while seeking to obtain their degrees. Whether dealing with the loss of a loved one or supporting loved ones, obstacles arise that have the potential to derail young men.

Prayer and having peace provided through God helped sustain these young men through their difficult times.

Release of Academic Burdens

Some of the students regarded various aspects of academics as obstacles or barriers. These burdens are not to be confused with hardships such as death. In fact, these academic burdens are part of the fabric that makes up college life. And while these academic burdens caused certain hurdles that the participants had to overcome, prayer was cited as a factor in being able to release their burdens. For example, Derek, a Christian who prayed multiple times a day, noted that spirituality aided him a great deal in his daily life as well as in academics. He mentioned that praying before going into big tests and presentations was equivalent to having a weight lifted off of his shoulders. Derek added that prayer before these academic situations was “sort of a release of burdens.”

Similar to Derek, Apollo also saw a great use for prayer academically. He added that prayer went beyond just practicing it before the test. Apollo mentioned that it was typical for him to call on spirituality and religion “right before a test, right after a test, pray for preparation. Then, I guess with spirituality rejoicing after.” After facing this burden, Apollo immediately had a spiritual joy, knowing that he had faced the situation and it was out of his hands.

Another thought on the academic burden was Steve’s notion that since spirituality aids you in every part of your life, it should aid you in your academics

as well. Although he was not a Christian, he made quite a few Christian references, mainly due to his upbringing. He made this statement about how spirituality helps to remove academic struggles:

It makes academics so much easier because you don't have to just struggle struggle struggle with the academic. You can say ok, if you believe in God, like, for some reason people don't think that you can pray to God about your school work. Like, I mean you can, like, if he's gonna help you in every other aspect then I feel like it's even more in your academics...you know guide your life because the more intellect...this is just my personal opinion, but the more intellectual you are, the more you understand intellectual things, I feel like the closer you can get to understanding your spiritual practice.

Therefore, academics are aided by spirituality, but also by being more adept in studies, a person is also able to aid their spiritual pursuits. Where some people may have thought that spirituality was not important for a person's studies, Steve felt that his spiritual connection was key to his ability to overcome academic struggles.

Where Derek and Apollo mentioned prayer, Steve shared how his spiritual meditation related to his study habits. He specifically recalled some failures and struggles with metaphysics, noting how dense the material was and how he sometimes loathed the thought of studying the subject. The problem was not that

he could not understand it, but that he had to diligently refer back to the literature several times to retain the information. However, through his spirituality he was able to persevere, acknowledging that after being frustrated with having to study hard, reluctantly, he could meditate and that would help him overcome his academic struggle and persevere.

Steve made note of two barriers in his life that affected him in school. He worked a part-time job, often having late shifts. He also had a spiritual practice of minimalistic eating, or a lifestyle of fasting. Therefore, he was constantly tired and hungry. However, spirituality gave him the resilience to persevere. Steve referenced his experience with these obstacles and how meditation was beneficial:

And so I'll just sit there and remind myself, ok like let's just meditate.

And I'll just meditate for 30 minutes and that will just uplift me and I'll be like I'm energized. I wanna do this homework...this is interesting stuff.

Why am I regretting doing this? This is gonna help me and make me think...if I can think more about this when I'm sleepy, then how much can I do when I'm, when it's been a week and I haven't eaten?

Through meditation, Steve was able to fight through fatigue and hunger to focus on his papers and studying. These are traits that have proved to be beneficial in his ability to persist to the senior level. Spirituality provided resilience to overcome those academically burdensome situations.

Motivation to Push Through and Excel

Spirituality and religion served as a source of motivation, mainly beyond the classroom. Charles' home and work situation was noted earlier in this section. He referenced how he had to help raise his little sister and support his family all while being an active student. However, through prayer he was motivated to endure the difficult circumstances of balancing those different acts. Similarly, Lovehall noted the role of spirituality and religion in his academic life:

Oh! It keeps me going! So many times I wanna be like I wanna give up. I'm tired. Again we talked about the discipline and the focus and the reasoning. And so, it all comes back to that, especially taking into consideration the load that I carry... 15 plus hours with two degree plans, with work, you know, with family obligations, with outside extra-curricular activities. And then on top of all that trying to have a social life with a young lady; that can be very, very time consuming. And so you have to juggle a lot and sometimes when it comes to school work you want to cut corners and you want to do certain things.

Lovehall's double major in sociology and broadcast communications, running his own company, his family obligations, and his extra-curricular activities sometimes drove him to want to quit school. Nevertheless, he noted that his spirituality reinforced that he was in school for a purpose. Part of that purpose was him aiming to be an ideal role model for his nephew. Spirituality and

religion, though, was his primary source of motivation to endure the obstacles that came along with the juggling act and to persist through college.

Derek faced a different type of trial. He noted that in his first couple of years at LSU, he struggled academically because he was in the process of figuring out what he actually believed. He was in the process of shifting from a more religious person to a more spiritual person. Once he realized that he identified more as a spiritual Christian, his academic pursuits were given a boost, which led to him being in a better position to finish his degree. Derek spoke about how his ability to remove fear and doubt and finish his degree was aided by his spirituality:

I guess you could say now I know all those things and I'm more confident as far as me pursuing the completion of my academics. So...I'm more confident, I guess you can say I'm more...my goals and expectations are bolder. I think that I can go a lot higher than what I initially believed that I could do. So I guess you could say its...it related because it helps me, it boosts a lot of my expectations, personal expectations. And all the fear and the doubt and the worry of, you know, not completing it or not doing this or that is gone because I believe that I can do, pretty much I believe I can do anything I put my mind to. And a lot of that has to do with my beliefs and what I believe.

After having some academic struggles, Derek came to better understand where he stood spiritually, which ultimately led to him being more confident that he could finish his degree by removing his insecurities. The spiritual advancement was necessary for him to be able to get past the doubts he had about obtaining a bachelor's degree. In the process, he was motivated to have a greater self-worth and higher expectations for himself academically. Spirituality afforded him the assurance that he could graduate and do grand things with his life.

Summary

This section focused on how participants' identification with spirituality and religion aided them in the areas of dealing with difficult situations, overcoming academic burdens, and being motivated to persist in school despite multiple forms of deterrents. Prayer and meditation were key practices that assisted them with overcoming barriers. Also, spirituality and religion were directly related to easing academic worries and stress, while also providing peace and confidence. Overall, spirituality and religion offered participants the resilience to withstand the hardships they faced both academically and outside of the classroom as college students seeking to graduate. The next section will highlight how spirituality and religion serve as a means of helping African American males remain focused in college.

Focus and Guidance

In looking at the participants' experiences, a larger theme emerged that added to the conceptual framework, which was the concept of spirituality and religion serving as a catalyst for educational focus throughout the pursuit of a college degree. Previous scholars drew connections between spirituality, focus and guidance, and how they influence Black college students (Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008), yet they were embedded within larger themes within the findings. The majority (8) of the participants identified areas related to focus that aided their academic efforts, and their ability to remain in and persist through school with the ultimate goal of graduating. This section explores how, for the participants, spirituality and religion: 1) served as guidance for eliminating potential distractions, 2) promoted time management, 3) encouraged discipline, 4) was a constant reminder to remain focused, and 5) was a guidance for staying on track with pursuing the degree.

Guidance for Eliminating Potential Distractions

A major theme discovered in Wood and Hilton's (2012) study was the idea that spirituality reduced the amount of relational distractions that Black men encountered in college. For example, their participants neglected certain social events that were contradictory to their spiritual beliefs. Also, Riggins et al. (2008) found that students' spirituality kept them from partaking in potentially harmful substances. Similarly, the participants in this study shared several examples of

how their religious and spiritual beliefs guided them socially in the college campus setting.

Both Wade and John offered insight into common social college student practices such as drinking and partying. John gave this comment regarding how he was able to avoid getting caught up in the party scene:

Spirituality and religion help your academic life by, I guess, keeping you focused on why you came to college. If you have no spirituality or religion, then college can be just another party for you. But when you have those, spirituality and religion, then, you know they keep you focused on, I know I need to get to classes.

Here, the strong influence of spirituality and religion turned him away from the heavily popular act of partying and directed him to the idea of being focused on attending class.

This influence was similar to what Wade encountered regarding the temptations and distractions that the college setting had to offer. The party scene and certain aspects of fraternity life did not align with his spiritual beliefs. Through consulting with God and prayer, ultimately he was steered away from those two particular areas that otherwise may have been a distraction from his progress toward graduation. Wade's faith also played a role in the people that he spent time with. He mentioned how most of his friends were Christians. His rationale for this was that some of his peers that did not share his same faith made

relentless attempts to persuade him to do certain things against his beliefs, such as drink alcohol. He added that avoiding those types of friends put him in a position to be less distracted, and he could continue to focus on school.

For Lovehall, certain social settings, especially those including women, had the potential to pose as distractions. Therefore, he explained how, through spirituality, he had certain boundaries:

So within my life, the system that I create or the system that God has for me I know it has boundaries. So, even when I feel like I'm outside of his system and living my system, I still have certain boundaries where I say I can do this, but I won't go that far. Because I understand that if I go that far I may tip over the edge, and just like if the ocean water goes beyond the shore it's going to cause chaos. If the rhythm in the ocean gets off just by a hair of a fraction of rhythm then you've got tornadoes, and hurricanes, and tsunamis because something shifted. So, that's what my spirituality helps me with as far as my social relationships.

Here, he compared distractions in the college social setting to how the ecosystem can potentially be thrust into a state of pandemonium. If he was to operate outside the parameters set by God, then life could be thrown off kilter, or in other words, he could lose focus and engagement.

On the contrary, Eddie felt that his religious beliefs did not affect him in the social setting. For example, where Wade and John felt that partying and

drinking could be a distraction, Eddie felt that he was fine with it as long as it was legal. He stated that his beliefs did not limit him from socializing with certain individuals and attending parties and consuming alcohol. His experiences differed from that of the others.

Time Management

A couple of the participants offered insight into how spirituality and religion influenced them to manage their time wisely. One major theme identified through Wood and Hilton's (2012) study was how spirituality inspired academic excellence within their participants. Similarly, Wade felt that spiritually there was a standard of excellence that he had to uphold. One way this higher standard manifested itself was through time management. In his early years in college, Wade's focus was poor because he struggled to manage his time. However, he was encouraged by God to have this standard of excellence, which prompted him to utilize his time better in an effort to "honor Him by maximizing those gifts and talents with just the different skills He has given me as far as math and sciences". The mandate of having a standard of excellence influenced Wade to become more aware of how he was using his time, creating a better focus in his academic pursuits.

Sonny talked at great length about the importance of time management and how it was related to spirituality and religion. He mentioned a family friend that helped him connect time management to spirituality using the number seven.

For example, there are seven colors in the rainbow, seven musical notes, seven days of the week, and the Bible mentions seven as the number of completion.

This translated for him that as a student he needed to have a schedule:

And so that was promoted to me by him and so, you know that's how it relates to my academics. I still to this day aim to manage my time every day, have a schedule, as well as back to that quote I said earlier, I pray like it's up to God and I work like it's up to myself. And so I keep both of those two in my mind and I just push forward.

Sonny learned the impact of time management on his academic focus. Part of this management came with knowing that he had to work diligently and "put that work in," yet also understand the need for prayer. He felt as if there was only so much that he could do, such as having a scheduling and having a work ethic, but the rest was in God's hands.

Sonny further emphasized the relation of time management to spirituality and religion with the thought that God gives people gifts and expects them to achieve a level of mastery. Mainly speaking of his musical and academic pursuits, through God, people can make it to the next level in the things they pursue. The only way that a level of mastery can be accomplished is through strategic dedication of time and effort, according to Sonny.

Discipline

Steve, a highly spiritual person, consistently declared how spirituality was instrumental to sustaining a high level of discipline. Before his spiritual awakening, Steve hit a rock bottom, both spiritually and academically. He was lost because he did not quite want to follow a particular religion and was at a crossroads regarding what he believed, which caused him to suffer in college (before getting to LSU). However, when he solidified his spiritual beliefs, he was given a boost that resulted in an academic focus based on discipline. He stated, “Ok we have to have discipline to actually want to study for eight hours a day after you’ve got off work and you’re tired and you want to go to sleep, but you know you still need to study.” He went on to note that it also took a great deal of discipline to read before going to class and not just expect the instructor to provide that information. This discipline was afforded through the spiritual act of meditation, often for two hours at a time, which he admitted was not a simple task. In fact, he noted that meditating for even five minutes was extremely difficult and took him about three months to learn. Steve added:

But, once you start taking the time to be disciplined and you realize that that’s why people understand, its cuz [because] they’re disciplined in that spirituality, they’re disciplined in their studies. And that, you know that

discipline leads to exponential growth and the understanding of that academic, spiritual life. Anything in life.

Steve offered how that discipline benefits both spirituality and academics. Spirituality provides better understanding of academics and vice versa. He believed that spirituality informs academics and academics inform spirituality. However, in order to be successful at either, a certain level of discipline is needed.

Steve also explained his discipline from a financial perspective. He understood that he needed to have gumption in order to work late nights to pay for school. He was not at all thrilled about having to work to pay for school, but he understood that it was necessary. Therefore, he understood that same discipline needed to be applied to his academic determination. This discipline was fundamental “for the things you need to do to get you through school as you do for learning while you’re in school.” He added that “just having the discipline in my spirituality...it trickles over to everywhere in life.” Spirituality in his overall life was important, and that influenced his desire to persist through school. This relationship meant that discipline, as a spiritual tool, was a key component of his ability to focus on his academic efforts.

A Constant Reminder to Remain Focused

A few of the participants remarked about how they remained focused and were guided through spiritual and religious reminders. Lovehall recalled how his Christian beliefs kept him grounded and focused on staying in school. His

thought was that it was easy to get lost “so it’s like that anchor that says every now and then, remember, this is why you’re doing it. Remember, this is why you’re doing it.” He was referring to how spirituality was a mechanism for success as a college student, especially in regards to obtaining his degree and pursuing his purpose (which is discussed later in this chapter). Similarly, Charles stated that spirituality kept him grounded and helped him remember that his spiritual connection with God was the reason he was able pursue his degree. Remembering that God was always with him through constant communication provided him with clear focus throughout his journey to graduation.

Wade had a slightly different perspective on what he was reminded of by his spiritual and religious beliefs. He mentioned seeing potential areas of failure that he anticipated coming his way based on previous experiences, but praying to God for guidance. He spoke about spiritual and religious reminders regarding his obligation to his family:

I guess it somewhat gets to reminding myself why I’m here, what I am supposed to do, what is it gonna do for my ability to provide for my family. Cuz [because] in my role as a husband and leader of my household, that’s something that you enter a covenant between God and your wife. So I’m charged with a greater responsibility to take care of that. So the main things is it just provides a reminder of why I’m here and

you know, to get on that go ahead and you know, zip up the pants, tighten them up and keep going kind of thing.

Regarding his ability to remain in school, his religious belief instilled that as the leader of his home, he was obligated to provide. Therefore, he was persuaded to prevail as a student as a spiritual/religious duty.

Apollo wanted mentioned some symbolic pieces that he no longer had which served as reminders to remain focused. The items were bracelets and necklaces that had either a cross or the Christian fish symbol. He had collected those items in high school and his earlier college years, but they had all broken. He noted that as a student “those really helped me out because it gave me daily reminders of my faith and how to stay persistent and just when in doubt to have something to physically touch or to see that would just keep me encouraged.”

Those articles were physical mementos that offered a spiritual/religious sense of motivation as a college student.

Guidance for Staying on Track with Pursuing the Degree

All of the participants indicated that spirituality and/or religion played a major role in their overall life. In this case, spirituality and religion carried over into their life as college students. When asked what influence spirituality and religion played on his life overall, John came out right away and stated explicitly that he is on the right track and about to graduate due to his faith. He stated that spirituality and religion “keeps your head straight. So, it keeps you at peace in

everything you do” including in his efforts to graduate. Interestingly, John brought up a common stereotype regarding African American males. Some believe that African American men have a higher probability of being incarcerated than graduating from college. John felt that he was able to dispel that myth through the guidance that spirituality and religion offered. He felt that his faith helped him stay on track to graduate and not succumb to the stereotype of Black men being more likely to go to jail than finish college.

Eddie felt that the religious support that he received through his faith was beneficial academically. He felt that God offered him academic guidance, which made him feel more successful and gave him the ability to achieve. Again, this guidance had the ability to motivate him and keep him en route to graduation. Similarly, Wade recalled how when he found himself on the verge of getting off track or failing a class, he strongly consulted with God and prayed for guidance. He was then able to obtain focus again because he had direction, which for him was graduating, pursuing his purpose, and supporting his family.

Summary

Spirituality and religion offered a means for these participants to maintain focus and guidance as Black men in college. In most cases, their beliefs steered them away from negative distractions. Also, some of the participants had better focus as a result of being able to better manage their time. Additionally, their faith advanced their level of discipline and provided reminders as to why and how

they were to remain in school and persist toward graduation. Lastly, they were guided academically to remain on the path to graduation. The next section will highlight how spirituality and religion serve as a mechanism for understanding and pursuing purpose.

Purpose

The relationship between purpose and spirituality and religion among Black college students has been highlighted in the scholarly discourse as a positive relationship that guides students toward their degrees, majors, and careers (Herndon, 2003; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2013). A concept that nine of the ten participants relayed was the idea that spirituality and/or religion was a key component for helping them pursue their purpose, mainly as it pertained to their major and future career. This theme of purpose was directly in line with the framework set forth by the studies of Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012). This section focuses on the two subthemes that emerged from the participants' experiences of how spirituality and religion influenced the pursuance of purpose. The subthemes were 1) purpose directly relates to college major and 2) the relationship between purpose and college degree.

Purpose Directly Related to College Major and Career

Several participants affirmed that their spirituality and/or religion influenced their major choice and career path. The connecting piece between spirituality/religion and major/career was purpose. The participants' faith had an

effect on what they wanted to study and/or pursue as a career based on what they felt their purpose was, mainly due to what they felt God had set out for them to accomplish in life.

Sonny mentioned that the Lord had instilled in him such a deep interest in his major that he felt strongly compelled, because of his religion, to finish school. He felt obligated to God to study his passion of human behavior through the field of economics. In fact, this spiritual and religious connection to his major and the strong internal desire to study human behavior prompted him to change his major from mechanical engineering to economics. Always connecting religion and spirituality, he noted that his spirituality influenced him in this way “because I’m interested and I truly have a passion for the things I’m researching in my major, I feel like the things that used to be challenging, I don’t mind reading and putting the work in.” Therefore, through understanding his passion and purpose set forth by God, he went from not enjoying mechanical engineering, to satisfaction with economics based on the passion that he found within.

Sonny’s passion, through his purpose, caused him to question his peers’ reason for studying their fields. He recalled instances where he interacted with business majors to find out what they ultimately wanted to do with their degrees. A common response from them was a basic desire to just “work in business.” Just working in business was not Sonny’s desire, as he believed quite the contrary:

I just kind of leave them alone, not to offend them. But, for me, I'm here not to [just] get the degree. I'm here to get the knowledge that's gonna provide me with insight for my future. That's the reason I'm here. Where I feel like some people are here just to get that...just to get that degree to show the world that hey I did this, now you can pay me this salary. I'm not here for that reason. I'm here for the reason I want to be able to go...I want to find things that I'm passionate about, and so that passion I believe is directly related to my spirituality. Or to say it better, my passion...my drive for my major is my passion, which is connected to my spirituality.

His passion for studying human behavior was rooted more deeply in his purpose that was so compelling to him through his relationship with God.

Similarly, John felt the need to change his major because having both a spiritual and religious foundation gave him a better sense of purpose which directly influenced what he wanted to study. He stated his sentiments on this matter:

I guess an example for me was, my purpose was not to be an architect, so being spiritual and religious helped me gain my purpose or what I think I know my purpose is - that civil engineering is my purpose and it helps you in a way where if you feel like quitting you know there are scriptures and stuff that helps you maintain focus and stay motivated.

Spirituality and religion helped John recognize his purpose, while also providing a platform of resilience through focus and motivation. John stated that prayer, reading scriptures from the Bible, meditation, and talking to God all contributed to him being able to find his purpose, which directly related to his major. He offered, “If you have those spiritual and religious backgrounds, they help you know what you wanna do and what God has put you on this earth to do.” Therefore, he felt that God put him on the earth to study his major and finish college.

Not surprisingly, Derek was guided to the major of history with secondary teacher certification after first majoring in business. This decision was not at all popular with his parents and friends. Derek was a member of a highly reputable and prestigious business leadership academy at LSU. After the time and effort that Derek invested in his business studies, changing his major seemed to others as a step in the wrong direction. However, Derek underwent a “spiritual reformation” after growing up in a more Baptist/religious setting. He felt more compelled to more closely examine the Bible and, thus, was prompted to live a more spiritual Christian life. Through this reformation, Derek felt that his spirituality altered his journey for the better:

My spirituality played a big role in determining what I wanted to do as far as my academic pursuits later. One of the big things that I’m really interested in and one of my life goals is that I want to inspire others to do

what inspires them. And so I felt that it's particularly important with young people. And so I want to be very involved with young people. And you know, I guess I see it as a way that I can change or alter or motivate young people.

Ultimately, Derek realized that his purpose was to help empower young people and be in a position to share his spiritual beliefs with them. In that case, he decided that business was not the right major and that it was more purposeful to major in a field that would place him in front of children where he could have a positive influence on them. Derek also added that his spiritual connection helped shape his discussion in his major class and also his perspective on the way he viewed history.

Steve changed his major more than once and noted that his spirituality had a "1 to 1 role" with his majors. He ultimately chose his philosophy major because of his intellectual interests and desire to understand the world through his spirituality. Spirituality could also be aided "academically with science, with literature, with music, all kinds of other things that we can do in the scholastic world that can aid that very same purpose. And so then I decided to become a philosophy major." He felt philosophy was the best field for him to use his intellect to understand the world through philosophical thoughts and theories.

Steve was the only participant to mention graduate school. He wanted to pursue philosophy on the doctorate level in the form of a Ph.D. in mystical

studies. Pursuing a philosophy degree to him was pursuing spirituality within academics. Steve offered this thought on the mixture of spirituality and an academic major:

Lets intertwine your philosophy and your spirituality cuz [because] philosophy is one of the best things you can intertwine spirituality with because it's... only that and religion...but a religion degree is only a philosophy degree in a certain area. It might be one of the only areas of academia that says, hey, go ahead and like practice and try to understand your spirituality because everyone else in the world wants to understand it anyway, but none of them have the time. So if you're gonna spend your time doing that, go ahead, and get paid for it.

For Steve, being able to study spirituality, which was such an immense portion of his life, was akin to academic fuel. Though he did not articulate this, it was evident that Steve's extensive sense of spirituality greatly influenced his desire to study spirituality in the form of philosophy, which served as a purpose for his academic and career trajectory.

Relationship Between Purpose and College Degree

Purpose was a major catalyst for major choice, but perhaps more importantly, for the sake of this study, was its relationship with the participants' actual quest for their bachelor's degrees. Many of the participants discussed how pursuing their purpose had a positive relationship on their drive to obtain their

degree. The spiritual and religious understanding of purpose was a stimulant for persistence toward graduation.

In some instances, obtaining a degree was considered a tool for moving in the direction of achieving purpose. For example, Wade knew that his purpose was to ultimately help people become better people. He didn't quite know what that meant in terms of how it translated to a major. In fact, he was torn between changing his major from industrial engineering to education. Also, he had thoughts of preaching. He felt that his form of preaching may not be from the altar to a congregation, but more of a personal/one-on-one form of ministry. Nevertheless, Wade felt that finishing his college degree was part of God's plan. He felt that God put him in college for a reason and that it wasn't necessarily the key to success in his life, but it was a great tool to have on his tool belt. He viewed the degree as a resource, but God as the main source. Speaking of a college degree, he said "I just view it as one of the things that I was given this opportunity to achieve in part of my greater purpose, whatever it may be. I have an idea, but not 100 percent clarity." Though he had not quite figured out his specific purpose, he knew the degree was a component of successful completion of God's plan for him.

Speaking further of the connection between purpose and degree completion, Wade recalled deadly instances in his life. When he was about 13, he was shot in the head with a pellet gun. The doctor said that a major blood vessel

was slightly missed. There were other situations that he was saved from, too, but he said that God sustained him for a reason. In the midst of those situations, he was still able to perform at a high level academically. He went on to add this about being saved from serious injuries and persisting academically on into higher education:

So the idea of college and everything else and then knowing that God had a purpose for my life, being sustained through so many things, you know, it's been my motivation for acquiring the degree and then whatever comes in life after that, just trying to be the best at it.

Again, Wade did not quite know with clarity what God's purpose was for him, but he knew that he had made it to the point where he was in college for a reason, which was just the motivation that he needed to understand the importance of obtaining a degree.

Lovehall also felt as if obtaining a degree was a tool on the tool belt to be able to pursue his purpose. He ran his own communications company already where he pursued his purpose professionally. His purpose, similar to Wade's, was to help people identify and maximize themselves. "People often conform to society, but rarely do they take the time to find out who they really are and what they were created to do in life," he said. However, Lovehall was only in school to further develop his talent and establish credentials that would be accepted by people. He articulated his point with this statement:

Trust me, I wouldn't be in school if I didn't have to hone my skills and cultivate my skills because people, no matter how great you are, they always wanna see credentials. And that's all that school is really about. We get a paper and put it on the wall so that when people come through they can say, ok, because he did that and he has that on the wall then he must know what he's talking about.

Lovehall imparted that his spirituality and religion told him that he had to go to school in order to show himself approved. He added, "Now granted, I can go out there and do what my purpose says, but I think anyone who has been given a great gift, you should cultivate it." Therefore, God compelled him to obtain a degree to live out his purpose in a manner that is acceptable to the public.

Additionally, Lovehall spoke about how his spirituality and obtaining a degree complement each other by saying "I know my spirituality. I know where my foundation is. And to obtain a college degree would be to complement that. Again, if for nothing else, when I talk to people, I don't necessarily need the college degree." He only really needed what God had bestowed upon him to relay to clients, but from his perspective, society had a need for credentials. The degree was a form of societal validation to display that formal, institutionalized knowledge had been attained. Nevertheless, the quest for a degree was influenced spiritually as a feature needed to fully pursue his purpose, which was established by God.

Strikingly similar to Lovehall's ideas about why the degree was needed were Pierre's thoughts on the same matter. Pierre identified that his purpose was "to completely revamp the way African Americans conduct, support, and market businesses. I plan to do that with the tools of motivational speech and business consultation." He knew that he needed to obtain a degree to live out his purpose but viewed it as more a formality as seen in this statement:

Truth be told I just, I really just look at the degree as a check mark. The only reason I'm even in college honestly is because at the end of all of this I wanna be a motivational speaker. And in motivational speaking you're only as good as your opening and you're only as good as your introduction is. So in this particular world, in this particular society...saying that you are magna cum laude at DeVry...ha ha...doesn't go as far as saying you're magna cum laude at Harvard. Saying that you worked for 22 years for a particular firm without having some letter behind your name just doesn't put you in this position that you want to go to in regards to touching both the top and the bottom. So to me, it's a check mark. It's a stamp of approval in some aspects.

Pierre added that as an entrepreneur, he was not in college to get a job; he was there so that he could learn to create jobs. He went on to add that he had a big vision, but had some hills to climb to get there. This vision was set by his purpose that, though reluctantly, required a college degree.

Pierre added that God's purpose for his life provided comfort. He reflected on being a fifth year senior and felt that regardless of test scores, academic shortcomings, and manmade constructs created to withhold his ability to qualify for certain things, that God had a purpose for his life that he would fulfill. He felt that, ultimately, he would be successful, realize his purpose, and knew that God would make a way for him to complete his degree. God gave him peace in allowing him to know he had a purpose and that he would finish college.

Summary

The participants' pursuit of their purpose was a driving force in the process of completing their college degrees. For some, their purpose steered them toward a major and future career, which is a primary step in the degree seeking process. Also, the degree was seen as either a tool or simply a benchmark in the process of gaining progress toward achieving their purpose. Either way, spirituality and religion influenced most of the participants' desires to obtain a degree based on their purpose. In the next chapter, the spiritual and religious influencers via various types of external relationships will be explored.

Conclusion

The major themes related to the internal components of spirituality and religion that influence Black men in college to aspire toward graduation were resilience to overcome barriers, focus and guidance, and purpose. The themes of purpose and resilience are directly aligned with the conceptual framework of this

study composed through the findings of Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012). Previous researchers noted the spiritual connections between focus and guidance (Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008), but I felt that the experiences of the participants warranted a more in depth level of attention. I drew these subthemes for focus and guidance: 1) served as guidance for eliminating potential distractions, 2) promoted time management, 3) promoted discipline, 4) was a constant reminder to remain focused, and 5) was guidance for staying on track with pursuing the degree. I believe these subthemes further articulate the importance of the theme that can be added to the current conceptual framework. Overall, resilience, focus and guidance, and purpose, via spirituality and religion, bring forth intrinsic elements that foster student success for Black men in college.

Chapter 7

External Components of Spirituality and Religion

The data presented in Chapter 6 displayed how the internal factors of spirituality and religion influenced the participants' quest for a college degree. The purpose of this chapter is to detail the participants' experiences with external factors of spirituality and religion that, again, influenced their ability to persist in college en route to obtaining their bachelor's degree. The two main themes that emerged were the influences of institutional support and personal relationships. Regarding institutional support, the two main forms of institutions that the participants mentioned were religious institutions, mainly churches, and faith-based student organizations. The forms of religious and spiritually influential personal relationship identified were those with clergy, faculty, family, and peers. In this chapter, I will first provide accounts of how the participants' perceived spiritual and religious institutional support. Then, their religious and spiritually related personal relationships will be detailed.

Institutional Support

Much of the literature regarding the influence of spirituality on African American undergraduate students highlights the importance of support from religious institutions (Cuyjet, 2006; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008). All 10 participants of this study acknowledged in some way how they, or other African American students, were

supported by churches and faith-based student organizations and activities. This section focuses on the subthemes that emerged from those two external entities that influenced the participants' ability to succeed as college students. These subthemes include 1) the church as a source of encouragement and help, 2) church scholarships, 3) the church's connection to purpose, 4) discipline instilled through the church, 5) student organizations as peer support groups, and 6) student organizations' connection to purpose.

The Church as a Source of Encouragement and Aid

Wade, Derek, and Steve all offered insight into the essential aid their churches offered them as undergraduate students seeking to graduate from college, similar to what scholars have found (Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008). Wade's church was actually the parent institution of Faith and Inspiration, the organization/campus ministry that some of the other participants were members of as well. Faith and Inspiration also hosted weekly Bible studies that, again, some participants mentioned attending. Wade was a leader of the organization, mainly through his church. Nonetheless, he stated how the church in general offered a support system to him and other college students. Most of the people at the church had degrees and were more than willing to offer any type of advice that would assist students' ability to have success in college. This support system was informal, yet effective.

Derek's church back in his hometown had a similar influence. He mentioned, "I would say I've gotten a lot of inspiration and encouragement...pretty much every time I go back home it's a lot of positive encouragement to keep moving, you know. Keep going through the grind that college has on you." The members of the church knew the obstacles that the young men dealt with, and made a point to intercede. He also said, "A lot of the members in the church continue to pray for me throughout college, through my academic pursuits. So, I would say that they've been pivotal as far as the church and the church members are concerned." The prayer and encouragement was a key component in his ability to perform academically in college.

Church members' seasoned experience was motivation to remain in and persist through college, recalled Steve. Though not a member of this local Unitarian church, Steve often visited whenever he felt the need to fellowship. He noted that their age and experience with hardships was beneficial for him:

They've been through the depression, they've been through the 60s and 70s, they've been through the Nazi takeover in the western world. So they've been through so many hardships and I see that's how they get through it, is through spirituality. And so it helps me to reinforce, like hey, don't worry about it. Keep doing what you're doing and that will get you through.

His interaction with the people at the church had just the amount of encouragement and motivation that he needed to be resilient

Pierre was in college student ministry at his church. A large portion of support that he received was through a social media apparatus. Although annoying at times, the daily messages that he received from the ministry participants provided a means of support. However, Pierre felt that for him, it was not beneficial to get too involved in the church. He added this statement on the matter:

I try not to stay that close to the church because I feel like the closer you get to the church a lot of the time you start to see a lot of the behind the scenes stuff that becomes distracting. You start to see a lot of the humanisms and a lot of the politics and the other stuff. I try not to.

This belief was due to his idea that manly flaws had the possibility to interfere with the greater spiritual connections. He wanted his spiritual connection to remain as untainted as possible.

Charles and Eddie were not involved in any ministries or activities at church, but both recognized the benefits of religious institutions. Charles said that the good churches offer scholarships, internships, and Bible study groups that are catered toward the college students. He added his belief that “if a church is truly there for the community, they will have things set forth for the students.”

Similarly, Eddie said that his church did have activities for the college students that were beneficial, but he never took part in them.

Church Scholarships

Past researchers found that lack of financial aid and scholarships were barriers to the collegiate success of Black men (Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Stiff-Williams, 2007). However, religious institutions have been known to provide some scholarship money that assists their young members with funding their education (Holland, 2014). For example, both Pierre and Derek received some scholarship money from their churches. These scholarships were not extensive, but provided a bit more than what they would have had otherwise. Pierre received a scholarship that was gifted from his nondenominational Christian church that was located near the campus. He joked that it was not a large amount, saying that “it was a book scholarship, so it wasn’t a whole lot, but it did what it needed to do at the time. He may not come writing checks with three and four zeros, but He’s [God] always on time.” In addition to scholarship money from his church back home in East Texas, Derek also received monetary gifts from individual church members. Therefore, the financial support went slightly beyond gifts from the institution as a whole and included additional aid from individuals.

The Church's Connection to Purpose

Chapter 6 of this study highlighted the participants' academic connection to purpose via spirituality and religion. This connection was an important one in particular for Wade, especially since he was still in the process of seeking his purpose. His church was the main impetus behind his infatuation with purpose. In fact, he said that helping individuals find and pursue their purpose was one of the main missions of the church. Therefore, the church was somewhat of a conduit for helping him select a major and finish college in order to be in a position to have employment that was purposeful in the eyes of God.

Lovehall's deep connection to the church played a significant role on a major transition in his life. He had identified what his purpose was (to maximize people's lives), but that needed to be centered on the church. He wanted the church to be his "central core location." After being in the workforce and making good money, he knew that in order to pursue his purpose he needed to go back to school. He recalled, "If I'm going to go back to school for it, I want the church to be my central core location, so everything that I do, I want to be wrapped around my church." Within a matter of six months and with some internal fright, he quit his job, took a lower paying job, moved out of a nice apartment and moved into a three roommate situation. He did this to be close to LSU and to be able to afford tuition, but more importantly to be close to his church, which was instrumental to

his success. This entire transition was all a great leap of faith for him. However, he needed to do it to pursue his purpose. He articulated that thought here:

My spirituality said, ok, I want to do this because I know there is something greater. But I know that this has to be taken care of as well. And so I did it. And within a year's time from wanting to do it, everything that I set out to do I did it. My church was ten minutes down the road. I go to school, live, and work within a two mile radius. But all that was based off because I said I want to put my spirituality first. And it happened. So yeah, without spirituality, I wouldn't be here at [LSU]. It was definitely my driving force.

His church was the motivation behind the big move and humble lifestyle that he underwent in order to be in position to complete his degree and pursue his purpose. Additionally, his involvement with the broadcast ministry at his church prompted him to pursue that as a second major.

Discipline Instilled Through the Church

Sonny went into great detail about how church members that he had encountered helped instill a sense of discipline within him. He recalled the trials and tribulations that he saw those people endure, including losing family members and losing their home. He also mentioned how some people in the church were living on the wild side, but ended up coming back and living right, according to Christian values. These people, he said, had the discipline to remain strong in

their faith, attend church every Sunday, and get involved despite their problems. Sonny also recalled how he was one of the few Black males from his neighborhood peers to be in college. He felt obligated to be a positive role model to the younger people from his community and to show them that it is possible to go to college and graduate. He felt that there were times when he wanted to “wild out.” However, seeing the discipline of the church members helped him to be more disciplined to make sure that he remained focused and, if he did begin to “wild out,” get back on the right path toward graduation.

Lovehall’s life changing endeavor (mentioned earlier in this chapter) was encouraged through a sense of discipline that was instilled through his church. He knew that he wanted to complete his postsecondary education. However, that involved having the discipline to move and take a lower paying job so that he could be closer to school, work, and most importantly, his church. It also took a great deal of discipline to work, go to school full-time, and be active in the ministry at his church.

Student Organizations as Peer Support Groups

Peer support groups have been beneficial to Black undergraduate college men by improving the likelihood of success (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Some of the participants indicated that faith-based student organizations at LSU served as peer support groups that aided their efforts

as college students. As noted earlier, Wade was a leader of Faith and Inspiration on campus that was a subsidiary of his church. This organization was initially and essentially created as a support system for African American college students, though other people were widely welcomed as well. The creators felt that an organization was needed to help support and retain Black students. He explained that as one of the leaders, he had recently received a great deal of feedback on the positive impact that Faith and Inspiration had on its members. They were a fulfilling the mission that was set at inception, based on the information that he received.

Additionally, Wade mentioned that he had been president of another African American student-based organization in the past, but helping to lead this faith-based student organization challenged him to hold himself accountable in an entirely different manner. He offered details on this matter:

If I'm not taking care of my business, I can't be an officer in the organization. If I'm not a student here at LSU and then if we don't have enough officers then the organization doesn't exist. Then the support system for them spiritually no longer exists. And then whatever else comes along with that opportunity, that God put me in a position or a platform to assist others, since I didn't take care of my business it's affecting everybody else kind of thing. So, wanting to do well for them and then if I'm going to be a leader in an organization I should have some

kind of standard about myself as well in pretty much every area. And so I guess academics falls into that.

He had to be accountable for the sustainability of the organization and for both the academic and spiritual support of the members. Additionally Wade felt that God held him accountable to be a leader from a spiritual perspective. Being a leader, he knew that he had to practice what he preached, both academically and spiritually. The accountability meant he had to continue making progress toward his degree and toward his relationship with God. Both areas had a positive influence on his ability to move himself and others through college based on this student organization.

Speaking about Faith and Inspiration as well, Charles offered a different perspective on how it affected him. He mentioned that he was able to make friends through the Bible study offered by the organization. He said that his religion and the student organization allowed him to “make bonds with people that have the same interest as me per se. So I’ve made friends based on my religion.” The camaraderie allowed for the creation of a social bond that offered peer support, which is an important component of success for African American men in college.

Eddie said that he was affiliated with the Catholic campus ministry on campus. Though he was not actively involved, he recognized that they had Bible studies and retreats. He also noted that he saw that Black people on campus,

even outside of the Catholic denomination, benefitted from the social peer support settings of faith-based student organizations and Bible studies.

Student Organizations' Connection to Purpose

Again, the common theme of purpose emerged in the student organization setting. Charles mentioned how Faith and Inspiration (co-lead by Wade) drove the importance of purpose through their Bible study. The organization emphasized “how God acts with purpose so we should to. We wake up every day in order to do things. It’s just our journey to learn what we’re supposed to do, why he keeps waking us up.” The idea was that purpose was important to life overall and even more tedious to every waking moment. The emphasis on purpose was important because the organization implied that the members understand why they were getting up and going to school every day, which was to ultimately get to the point of fulfilling their purpose.

Speaking of Faith and Inspiration, John exclaimed that the Bible study put on by them had a huge influence on his persistence in college. He explained the reason why understanding purpose was such a tremendous focus for the organization:

Just to make sure you know why you are doing, make sure you are not just going into a major for...say money or something like that. But just making sure you know where you are going and if it’s the right plan God has for you.

Faith and Inspiration was instrumental in helping the members find a spiritually rooted aspect to their studies and college experience. Helping people like John understand the spiritual component of college served as motivation to persist and graduate.

Summary

Institutional support from churches and faith based-student organizations motivated the participants to succeed. Churches had members that were encouraging and helpful to the participants. Also, churches provided funding in the form of small scholarships and individual gifts that were helpful for students in moving toward their degree. Additionally, student organizations offered tremendous support, created social bonds, and further emphasized the pursuance of purpose. The participants' spiritual and religious relationships that aided college success will be detailed in the next section.

Personal Relationships

Nine of the participants discussed how certain aspects of their personal relationships with different individuals and/or groups of people had spiritual and religious connections to their success in college. This theme adds a different dynamic to the current conceptual framework that is used in this study. None of the other themes found by Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012) focused directly on spiritual and religious personal relationships that influenced, whether directly or indirectly, persistence through college. The five subthemes that

emerged based on the experiences of the participants were: 1) clergy influence, 2) faculty relationships, 3) family influence, 4) creating and sustaining social bonds, and 5) combating prejudices.

Clergy Influence

The participants mentioned that clergy, such as pastors and ministers, had positive influences on their ability to be successful in college. Lovehall, Wade, and John all shared the effect that a pastor had on their educational pursuits. Steve, on the other hand, did not receive any direct support from clergy, but endorsed the idea that they did have tremendous potential to promote higher education to African American males.

Lovehall shared details about his close relationship with his pastor. He was a part of a group of men that met with the pastor of his church on occasion to have “real talk” sessions. This particular pastor was a former principal who weaved the importance of education into his sermons regularly. Lovehall recalled the pastor’s thoughts on the importance of a college degree for a Black man:

Don’t be afraid to sharpen your axe. And of course he took me to a scripture where it kind of talks about that...and he said never be afraid...there’s nothing wrong with a Black man having more tools on his tool belt because when it’s time for him to build the house for his family or his legacy, then you want as many tools that you can to build the thing that you need to build. If you’re limited in your tools, then you’re limited

in your resources, and your house, which can be a great mansion, can only be a small hut because you don't have the equipment necessary to build. Again, the tool in the toolbox reference appeared, where the importance of a degree for a Black man is identified as a necessary resource. The pastor, as a former educator, was able to impart this type of knowledge on Lovehall, which served as guidance for him as he worked to earn his degree.

Wade mentioned how his pastor even went beyond motivating him to persist in college. He offered that his pastor was a great influence and role model, even more so than his father. Referring to his father, Wade said that he had "been there my whole life and he's been a good influence on my life. However, some of the things that if I was to seek him as a role model for, it probably wouldn't be ideal." Even though his father was in his life, he was not ideal as a role model. Therefore, the pastor filled that void. John mentioned that the pastor preached sermons, texted scriptures, and encouraged Bible reading that helped in his daily life, including school. He said that multiple ministers, one being his father, played a huge role in his life. He shared "They always encourage you. They always keep you motivated. The role that they play, all of them play in my life, just helping me get to graduating by encouragement". The ministers specifically focused on aspects of spirituality and religion, such as sermons and scriptures, to motivate John to graduate.

Steve grew up in the Baptist church but separated from it when he became solely spiritual with no specific religious affiliation. Contrary to the experiences of John, Wade, and Lovehall, when he was growing up in the church, there were no pastors that emphasized the importance of earning a college degree. His pastors were not telling him how to pray in order to get through school or teaching him how to get through college. Yet, even though he was a profoundly spiritual person, he recognized the influence that clergy can have on Black men in college:

People can learn to, in the African American population, to just use that power that preachers have and that our spiritual leaders have to educate our men and how to get through college. You know, to give them that hunger for college because a lot of African American men are pretty religious guys. That's something in our culture that we have a strong religious faith base. And if we can use that faith base to get more of our young men into the school system and stop rebelling against it, even though, yeah it doesn't work for us all the time, it's not our friend all the time, and it is hard cuz [because] its getting more expensive. But there are ways to do it.

Even though he did not attend church regularly, he identified the stalwart presence that clergy/spiritual leaders have on African American men, especially as it pertains to encouraging persistence through college. Growing up, he did not

have this type of encouragement, but as a college student, he recognized its potential. He offered that African American men are very religious and their affiliation with clergy creates a unique relationship that can assist them in moving toward graduation.

Faculty Relationship

Healthy relationships with faculty have been found to be a key component for the success of African American men in college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Spirituality helped Steve create a beneficial personal bond with certain faculty. He recognized that his teachers, mainly in the philosophy department, were very “spiritual guys.” He mentioned that he got lucky and was able to observe this fact, which most of his classmates did not recognize. Steve mentioned that this recognition was not to gain “brownie points,” but he wanted to connect with them spiritually and learn to think like them on a spiritual level. However, in the process he felt that having a better camaraderie with his professors did give him a slight advantage in class. The faculty members did serve as a support system for Steve, which he needed because his mother, often a main source of support, was busy with her own education and taking care of children. He shared this comment about this level of support:

Just having that support, actual support from my teachers is really just helping me...helping me grow and get along through school. And if it wasn't for my spirituality, then I don't really think I would be able to have that opportunity to connect with them on that level to help myself.

Spirituality was a medium for connecting with members of the faculty that had both academic and supportive functions. Had it not been for this spiritual connection, Steve may not have progressed to where he was at the time, preparing to graduate.

Family Support

Support from family members is another essential factor for Black men to fair well as college students (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012). Apollo's family was spiritual and used prayer as a means to help him persist. He said, "My family supports me. They want me to go through school. My family is spiritual. So, my parents do pray that I will finish school. And growing up in that environment, I know they're always praying for me." He added that this level of support and prayer for him even increased his own prayer efforts from himself. Through spiritual support from his parents, he had a greater desire to pray for his success and have a greater daily walk in faith. His parents, through prayer and encouragement, were a great source of motivation to persist.

The source of encouragement was slightly different for Lovehall. He shared a scene from the movie *Love and Basketball* where the son (a star

basketball player) lay in the hospital bed and the father (a former star basketball player) was there visiting him. The son ended up scolding the father for not being an upstanding man, mainly due to his infidelity. The son ended up asking the father, “How come you couldn’t be the man you always tried to make me.” This scene stuck with Lovehall because it reminded him of how he did not want to have a similar encounter with his nephew, with whom he was extremely close. He spoke of their relationship in parallel to the movie scene and the son’s quote:

When I think about my spirituality, when I look at my schoolwork, when I look at life in itself I never want my nephew, as a prelude to my fatherhood but is in very many ways like my son...I never want him to look at me and ever say that, as much as I look at him and ride him and tell him, yo, you’re a king, you’re the man, you’re my dude, I can’t wait until you’re valedictorian. I tell him all those things now because I speak into his life. But I never want him to say my uncle only spoke to me he never showed me how to get it done.

So, instead of the parental figure being the source of encouragement, in this scenario the child served as the source of encouragement. The nephew was the motivational factor behind Lovehall getting schoolwork done and understanding the importance of completing his education. This spiritually rooted familial relationship was partially responsible for Lovehall’s desire to move toward graduation.

Creating and Sustaining Social Bonds

The participants also shared how their spirituality and religion helped create and sustain social bonds they had with individuals and groups on campus, which were beneficial to them as college students. In order for students to be retained on college campuses, especially PWIs, it is imperative that they are socially acclimated (Tinto, 1993). Participants believed maintaining a circle of friends whose actions and beliefs were in line with their own was important. John mentioned that most of his friends were spiritual and religious, just as he was, because “most of the stuff you talk about, it’s spiritual and religious. So the effect it has on my social life, I feel like it helps you”. That way, the things that they talked about and the activities they participated in were reflective of his beliefs. He added that keeping his relationships in tact in this manner was beneficial religiously, spiritually, and both inside and outside of school. Since religion and spirituality was such a tremendous part of his life overall, the social bonds that he maintained were an important aspect of his success in college.

In a similar regard, Derek’s spirituality influenced him to meet up with friends in one-on-one settings, such as having lunch, to talk for hours about the Bible. There was no boundary between denominations. Discussing the Bible with friends allowed them to compare social issues occurring in the world and on campus to those in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible offered a perspective on how he and his friends viewed certain situations they encountered while in college,

while also creating a social bond. Additionally, through his spiritual beliefs, Derek bonded with a number of African American men on campus. He shared that these relationships with some of his best friends, whom he met in college, were “through sparking up a conversation about Jesus or God or prayer or whatever. I’ll say something in class and somebody else will come up to me after class and then we’ll kind of just talk. And then friendship forms.” Spirituality allowed beneficial homogenous relationships to be formed, which fostered a productive social bond.

Steve, on the contrary, had not been the recipient of any positive socially homogenous relationships with other Black males. The lack of bonding was mainly due to his spirituality, which was quite the opposite of Derek’s experiences. He described that he felt “a little out of place being an African American man, non-Christian, who was really strangely spiritual.” He described that as an African American man, he was expected to be Christian or Muslim. He was also expected to dress in a more trendy fashion or care more about his social status. This was not the case, mainly due to, as he named it, his “strangely spiritual” persona. His spirituality turned him more toward focusing on academics, inner-self, and healthy relationships with others, as opposed to the more trendy aspects of college. Though Steve was hurt that he was not largely accepted from a social standpoint by other African American males, he was supported by some other beneficial spiritual relationships.

Steve found at an early age that connecting with spiritual friends was beneficial for sparking his scholastic mind. He specifically referenced his friends back in the town where his old college was and his girlfriend. His friends would tell him that they knew he was going through tough times, but he needed to get his school work done. Steve's girlfriend encouraged him regarding college in this manner:

She's like ok, what's your goal in this, why are you doing this? And this kind of helps me with, I remember why I'm going to school, why I'm doing this and I remember this is actually gonna help me in my spiritual life...this is gonna help people understand where I'm coming from.

Getting this degree is gonna help me get the recognition I need to have people listen to what I have to say.

This personal relationship with his girlfriend connected academics and spirituality, where one aided the other. Spirituality would help him pursue his purpose and academics would give him the validity to do such. Also, his friends, though not physically with him, motivated him to get schoolwork done when he did not necessarily care to do anything academically.

Steve also described a YouTube channel that he created for the purpose of sharing both academic and spiritual knowledge. His friends believed that he had a significant amount of knowledge, and YouTube was a platform to transfer information back and forth to each other. He said that they mainly talked about

academic topics and added that it was “funny because most of the time we are talking academic stuff cuz [because] we’re all nerds...but what people don’t realize is that academic talk is speaking about the spiritual world, just through a material explanation.” This created a virtual social bond that kept him engaged both spiritually and academically.

Charles and Sonny discussed how they navigated the sometimes sensitive topics of spirituality and religion. Charles shared that he wasn’t necessarily an “overt, just out there type Christian where I would just go around saying scriptures or just ministering, but just like in deep conversation it always comes up and that’s how I develop better bonds with my friends.” He was not comfortable outwardly ministering, but religious conversations were critical for maintaining relationships with his friends. For Sonny, just like politics, he tried not to discuss religion with his friends. He felt that mainly discussing spirituality was acceptable for sustaining friendships with people on campus because spiritual values can carry over, where some religious customs or beliefs will not. For example, he mentioned “one of my best friends from Peru is a Mormon, and so we don’t talk about religion. However, we do talk about spirituality.” He did not discuss religion because sometimes getting into the details and beliefs caused arguments. Therefore, to maintain a peaceful and productive social environment, he steered away from religious topics altogether.

Spirituality also taught both Steve and Lovehall to treat people on campus in a more respectful and less judgmental manner. For example, Steve said that before fully maturing in his spirituality he was more judgmental. Spirituality allowed him to learn to accept people from all walks of life. He shared “through my spiritual practice I’ve come to learn that I’m no better than anyone else I see. Even if they have zero dollars or have a million dollars, I’m no better or I’m no worse.” This mindset helped him socially on campus to be more helpful to his peers also.

Similarly, Lovehall stated that spirituality allowed him to see people for people, especially because the campus was so diverse. He explained that everyone on campus was human, so they needed the opportunity to do right, yet it they also were prone to do wrong. Lovehall added that he could personally find something in common with any person on campus, that everyone needed a common touch:

We can be different races, different religions, different socio- economic levels, but if you give me five or ten minutes and we can have that conversation of what is it like to be you, you know, one of those conversations...in that time I am going to be able to find common ground. And my spirituality helps me understand that by having that common ground, that you can exchange a common touch. And that is the love of Christ.

He added that as he interacted with people on campus, he understood how important it was to allow people to make mistakes, because it was inevitable. Spirituality taught him not to get hung up on peoples' imperfections. Extending grace to all was a key social component for him in the college setting.

Combating Prejudices

Racism and prejudice have been identified as factors that hinder the progress of African American males in the college setting (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 2009; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Watson (2006) found that faith in the Lord helped a participant overcome racism. Similarly, just as spirituality and religion added positivity to social scenarios, it reduced negativity as well for two of the participants. Pierre recalled how Black men were treated differently on campus. Where it was fine for one ethnic group to hang out late nights on campus, or around campus housing, if Black men were to be in those positions, there would be a problem. He recognized this as a social concern, nevertheless having a "spiritual background to it gives you an ease and a comfort of being able to progressively work toward doing much more than having an open hatred and anger towards what seems to be like an oppressive system." Though he sensed bias, his sense of spirituality diffused a potentially negative situation that may have distracted him from the goals of pursuing his degree.

Sonny shared the story of a seemingly racist article that was published in the LSU newspaper. The main argument in the article was, according to Sonny,

“you’re either African or you’re American, pick one or get out.” Sonny was a very socially conscious individual, willing to fight for Black rights. In fact, he felt that many of the Black student organizations were too indifferent on such issues. He stated “I feel like they really don’t wanna attack the real issues of the modern day that Black people are dealing with, where me, I’m going straight to that. I’m not a person afraid to dig in.” Therefore, Sonny felt that maybe he should have taken it upon himself to combat race related issues. However, his sense of spirituality kept his actions from becoming too excessive and kept him from getting distracted from his path to a degree.

Summary

Personal relationships served as tools for motivation, support, and social bonding. The participants’ relationships with pastors, family, and friends mainly bolstered positive results in terms of the ability to have success socially in college. Additionally, personal relationships with faculty proved to be beneficial for one participant. Spirituality also diffused potentially negative social situations. A conclusion to Chapter 7 will be presented in the next section

Conclusion

The major themes related to the external components of spirituality and religion that influenced success in college for the participants were support from religious institutions, support from faith-based students organizations, and personal relationships with clergy, family, faculty, and peers. Scholars have

found that religious institutions positively influence Black students' efforts to be successful in college (Cuyjet, 2006; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008). However, the participants indicated how influential the faith-based student organizations were to their pursuit for a college degree, which adds to the current conceptual framework. Also, in addition to the influence of religious institutions, the participants' experiences with clergy stood out. Separate from the institutional support is the personal guidance and advising that came from the one-on-one relationships from the highly revered pastors/ministers/preachers, which also can be used as an addition to the conceptual framework. The influence of institutions and personal relationships also highlight the importance of emphasizing both religion and spirituality in regards to the ritualistic acts and need to communicate with a higher being and others on a spiritual level. The next chapter will include a discussion of the findings, implications and conclusion.

Chapter 8

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

This chapter includes a discussion and interpretation of the major findings of this study as well as implications for future studies. First, I will provide an overview of the study followed by the presentation of the key findings. A discussion of enrollment details will be discussed after the key findings. Then, I will discuss the implications for research, practice, and policy followed by limitations to the study. The chapter will end with my concluding thoughts.

Overview of the Study

Statistical data shows that Black men in college have lower enrollment and graduation rates, especially when compared to White men and Black women (Harper, 2006; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). For example, Black men make up only 5% of college enrollment in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) and their graduation rate is only 32.7% (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013). An immense amount of research has sought to examine methods of increasing the success that Black men are able to have in college. One particular area identified as a potential mechanism to enhance success has been the influence of spirituality and religion on Black men in college.

Research on college students has indicated that spirituality and religion positively influences their college experience as it pertains to factors such as

academic achievement and success, degree attainment, retention, adjusting and transitioning to college, and overcoming social barriers that college may present (Astin et al., 2011, Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland 2014; Kneipp et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2007; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). The influence of spirituality and religion is especially the case for African Americans since their culture tremendously encompasses spirituality and religion from both social and historical perspectives (Gavins, 2009; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). More specifically, research on Black men in college has shown how they can benefit from spirituality and religion (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Watson, 2008; Wood & Hilton, 2012). These benefits are especially important given their low rates of enrollment and graduation when compared to Black women and White men.

While scholars have identified the manner in which spirituality has aided Black men in their collegiate academic success and retention at HBCUs and at PWIs, none had examined this concept at a large HSI in Texas (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Wood & Hilton, 2012). Furthermore, none of the previous research thoroughly examined the participants' viewpoints on both spirituality and religion and how both of these deeply intertwined constructs had their respective influences. Additionally, Herndon (2003) examined the influence of spirituality on retention (ability to remain in school), while Wood and Hilton

(2012) explored its influence on academic success (i.e. grade point average and successful completion of classes). This study served the purpose of filling the gap of studying both how spirituality and religion influence Black males at a large HSI in Texas to not only remain in school and have success in completing courses, but also how they influence persistence and graduation.

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black men in college at a large and research-oriented HSI in Texas, where the largest racial group in the student population is White. More specifically, the study was designed to examine spirituality and religion as a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation. Filling the gaps listed in the previous paragraph helped to extend the conceptual framework first set by Wood and Hilton, based on the findings of Herndon. The framework provided a lens that allowed me to explore the participants' identification with spirituality and/or religion and how it related to their ability to persist and graduate. I used a general qualitative methodology to help answer the following research question: How does spirituality and religion among Black undergraduate men influence their ability to persist and graduate?

I recruited and interviewed 10 participants who were over 18 years old, were juniors or seniors enrolled at LSU, and self-identified as Black/African American men who were either spiritual and/or religious. The main sources of

the data were the semi-structured interviews and demographic questionnaires. Member checking was an instrumental tool to help clarify areas of uncertainty from both the interviews and questionnaires. The major findings, especially as they relate to past literature and the extension of the conceptual framework will be detailed in the next section.

Key Findings

The research question for this study was as follows: How does spirituality and religion among Black undergraduate men influence their ability to persist and graduate? I found this question to be answered in five different ways, based on the themes that emerged. First, spirituality and religion bolstered resilience and helped students overcome the barriers they faced as college students. Second, spirituality and religion helped the students have a level of focus and guidance that was positively influential to their success. Third, the relationship between spirituality and religion and purpose influenced the students' persistence toward their degree. Fourth, the participants benefitted from the institutional support they received from churches and faith-based student organizations. Lastly, personal relationships were responsible for a portion of the students' success in college. The latter two themes were manifested through external perspectives, while the former three manifested internally.

There were, according to the themes presented above, key findings that stood out based on the conceptual framework used in the study. The framework

established based on Herndon's (2003) and Wood and Hilton's (2012) studies allowed me to use their findings as a lens of what to explore. Their findings were: (1) spirituality and religion in relation to resilience/overcoming barriers; (2) spirituality and religion in relation to sense of purpose; (3) spirituality and religion in relation to religious institution support; (4) spirituality and religion in relation to having God or a higher power as a confidante; (5) spirituality and religion in relation to being inspired for excellence; and (6) spirituality and religion in relation to eliminating relational distractions.

Based on the experiences of the participants, I did not explicitly find spirituality/God or a higher power was a confidante as a major theme, as did Wood and Hilton (2012). The majority of the students did mention how their identification with spirituality and/or religion played a major role in their life overall and that it spilled over into their experiences as students. Charles explicitly mentioned that he kept a constant communication with God. However, there were not many mentions of continual "dialogue" with God, such as what Wood and Hilton (2012) found. Also, Wade was steadfast in his standard of excellence because of his own sense of spirituality and religion. This aligned with Wood and Hilton's finding of how spirituality served as inspiration for excellence. Nonetheless, Wade was the only participant who explicitly made note of this particular source of influence. Additionally, Wood and Hilton's finding that spirituality reduced relational distractions showed up in this study, yet it was

embedded in the theme of focus and guidance, which I will discuss later in this chapter. The themes of resilience and overcoming barriers, purpose, and religious institution influence were found to be in alignment with the conceptual framework.

Themes emerged that I considered being additions to the conceptual framework of this study, which make up most of the key findings. These additions include the theme of focus and guidance, the subtheme of faith-based student organizations as a source of institutional support, and the subtheme of pastors as an influential personal relationship. Another key finding highlighted by both Herndon (2003) and Wood and Hilton (2012) was the relationship between spirituality and purpose (also religion for this study). I consider this a key finding since nine of the ten participants spoke about purpose. I discuss these key findings throughout the rest of this section.

Key Finding #1: Focus and Guidance as an Addition to the Framework

Scholars have found that spirituality has positively influenced levels of focus and guidance for Black college students in certain instances (Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008). However, I felt that it was necessary to bring this theme to the forefront due to the magnitude in which it serves as a mechanism of success. Eight participants (Wade, Charles, John, Eddie, Apollo, Sonny, Steve, and Lovehall) outlined five different areas of focus and guidance through spirituality and religion, which were how they (1) helped to eliminate

relational distractions, (2) promoted time management, (3) served as a reminder to remain focused, (4) promoted discipline, and (5) were guidance for staying on track with pursuing the degree.

Wood and Hilton (2012) found that spirituality reduced relational distractions. Partying and substance abuse has been a common distraction for Black male college students (Riggins et al., 2008; Wood & Hilton, 2008). Much like what has been found in previous research, one component of the focus and guidance theme that emerged from this study was the idea that the participants' identification with spirituality and religion helped keep them from indulging in distracting behavior such as partying and substance abuse. Wade even noted how he refrained from joining a fraternity because it could have been a distraction from both school and his spiritual and religious beliefs. Considering the many temptations prevalent on a college campus, it seems as if having a spiritual focus and religious practices are sufficient to steer some Black men away from distractions and keep them mindful of the reason why they went to college: to obtain a college degree. Their ability to be successful hinges somewhat on their ability to focus. Spiritual and religious beliefs were shown to influence focus, guide students toward success, and allow them to persist by eliminating distractions, including certain distracting people in their lives.

There was not much scholarly literature that specifically highlighted spirituality and religion's influence on time management, reminders to stay

focused, discipline, and guidance for staying on track to graduate. However, these are elements of focus and guidance that Black men who are spiritual and/or religious can take advantage of while pursuing a college degree. Sonny's religiosity was influential for how he spent his time. His views of how many things were related to seven, such as days in the week and the number of musical notes, helped shape his view of the importance of time. For him, things had to be structured based on blocks of time. That is a simple, yet useful tool for Black men to consider as they seek to persist. Since time is a valuable resource that cannot be replenished, there is a critical need to regard the use of time as a way of keeping focused.

Similarly, the participants' religious beliefs and spirituality served as an apparatus to remind them of the importance of staying focused. Spirituality and religion reminded the participants of why they were in school, which was to ultimately complete their degree. The reminder provided them with a sense of direction and helped them better understand why they had to endure classes and sometimes even certain obstacles. Students need to be focused in order to complete their degree, and constant reminders to remain focused despite the many tasks and distractions are critical to students' success.

Steve spoke in depth about how his deep sense of spirituality was essential to his discipline in school. This mainly related to his discipline in studying for difficult subjects and having to work and go to school at the same time.

Discipline is another area of being focused that, much like time management has to be developed. This development, based on findings from the current study, was aided through spirituality.

Overall, the experiences of the participants showed how spirituality and religion provided a sense of focus that helped them stay on track to graduate. The overall influence of spirituality and/or religion in their life was a main source of remaining in school and striving to graduate. Mostly, God was their main source of motivation to remain on the straight path to accomplish what they set out for, both academically and professionally.

Key Finding #2: Faith-Based Student Organizations as an Addition to the Framework

Scholars have provided evidence of the importance of Black churches on African American culture (Baer & Singer, 2002; Battle, 2006; Bridges, 2001; Cuyjet, 2006; Gavins, 2009; Shelton & Emerson, 2012; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Additionally, literature has highlighted the importance of support from religious institutions for Black undergraduate students (Cuyjet, 2006; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008). In addition, the participants in this study drew attention to the influence of their faith-based student organizations.

The scholarly discourse points to the idea that peer support groups serve as a mechanism to enhance the success of Black men in college (Bonner & Bailey,

2006; Harper 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Also, engagement in extra-curricular activities has been shown to increase persistence and graduation for Black college students (Harper, 2005; Harper, 2012; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Tinto, 1993). The experiences of the participants indicated that the faith-based student organizations served as a peer support group/extra-curricular activity, which is in line with the literature. This study connects the components of peer support groups and extra-curricular activities with spirituality and religion. Participation in the organizations kept them engaged, yet it also provided the spiritual support that was helpful for them to remain in school and persist. In fact, one of the organizations, Faith and Inspiration, was created as a support system for Black students through a spiritual and religious lens. The experiences shared by the participants through the interviews emphasized the social support that was offered, which was beneficial for retention. Additionally, the spiritual support system was help the students needed to stay academically motivated to do well in college.

The faith-based student organizations also encouraged purpose, which is highlighted in more detail later in this section. It is important to note that spiritual relation to purpose came up in several areas, such as major choice, careers, church, and student organizations. Through the Bible studies hosted by Faith and Inspiration, the importance of purpose was largely emphasized. This insistence

on considering purpose as a college student was instrumental in encouraging the participants, as well as other individuals on campus, to thoroughly understand what they are studying and pursuing as a career. The emphasis on purpose, in turn, largely influenced their desire to graduate. Faith-based student organizations can influence persistence and graduation for African American men based on the focus on spirituality and religion as it relates to the pursuance of purpose.

Key Finding #3: Personal Relationships/Pastors as an Addition to the Framework

Taylor et al. (2004) noted the robust influence of clergy on Black culture in general. The authors mentioned how clergy provided social support, counseling, and community oversight to the Black community. As mentioned previously, the Black church as a whole has been influential to black undergraduate students (Cuyjet, 2006; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008), and more specifically, Black men in college (Herndon, 2003; Holland, 2014; Riggins et al., 2008). However, the participants highlighted the importance of personal relationships that had spiritual and religious roots. A key relationship directly related to the church is between the student and a member of the clergy.

Scholars have found that student relationships with faculty and mentors have a positive influence on Black male college students (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn

& DeVita, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Having an open dialogue with and obtaining advice from a superior figure is beneficial for Black male college students, based on those findings. In the same regard, the participants shared experiences they had with pastors and ministers, which are similar to the relationships that students have with faculty and mentors. The only difference is that the relationship that the participants spoke of was rooted in spirituality and religion.

From the participants' experiences, pastors and ministers served as role models while also encouraging the pursuit of higher education. Lovehall's pastor was a former educator and said that education was a tool for the tool belt. Wade's pastor was somewhat more of a role model than his father. Steve did not have much interaction with clergy but noted how spiritual leaders can encourage African American men to attend and complete college. Therefore, the participants indicated the tremendous influence that clergy can have on the population of Black men in college. Their spiritual leadership has the ability to help guide young men to first understand the importance of college, then to establish a personal relationship that is supportive for helping them persist and graduate.

Key Finding #4: Purpose Revisited

Spirituality and religion has been noted for having a direct relationship to purpose, which is important for helping Black students identify major and career

choices (Herndon, 2003; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012). The participants in this study indicated that spirituality and religion had a direct relationship with major and career choice based on what they perceived as their purpose. Also completing their degree was an important step in reaching their purpose. I identified this as a key finding, even though it is not a new addition to the framework or body of literature on the subject at large.

I found purpose to be a key finding due to its tremendous influence on African American males graduating from college. The fact that nine participants discussed having an understanding of purpose in relation to major, career, and/or graduation made it evident that the topic needed to be revisited. Some of the participants changed their major once they discovered what their purpose was. Changing majors is common for college students, yet in this case, the participants changed their major based on a spiritual perspective. Their perspective offered substantial rationale for changing majors that was rooted in spirituality. For most participants, God guided the decision for their major choice, in spite of their own thoughts, which gave them the comfort to know they could be successful. In some instances, a passion that was instilled in them was the first step to understanding what their purpose was. Their ability to understand their purpose and comprehend what their plan was for the future put them on the path to persisting in college.

Ultimately, the degree was necessary for the participants to be in a position to live out their purpose. In some cases, going through the process of attaining a degree was a hindrance. However, the participants were willing to endure that hindrance in order to achieve that life purpose, which mostly manifested as a career. The degree was also a benchmark in the process of moving toward their purpose. It was something that needed to be checked off as complete, and served as motivation to get to the goal. However, some students were also passionate about their major and enjoyed their classes on the way to obtaining their bachelor's degree. Nevertheless, regardless of whether or not the student wanted to go through the process of college and classes, the spiritual urge to move toward purpose was reason enough to encourage students to persist toward the degree.

Summary

This section highlighted the areas that served as additions to the conceptual framework used in this study. Also, I reiterated the importance of purpose for African American men in college. In the next section I offer a discussion of certain enrollment details of the participants.

Participant GPAs and Enrollment Details

The participants reported details about their enrollment at LSU (as shown in Table 4.1). In addition to the students' identification with spirituality and religion and their influence on persistence, GPAs also offered insight on their

success as college students. The average GPA for the nine of the participants was 2.8. This average excludes Steve's GPA because he did not have one on file at the time of the study since he had recently transferred to LSU. The seven seniors' (Apollo, Charles, Derek, Eddie, John, Lovehall, and Pierre) GPA was 3.0 in comparison with 2.25 for the two juniors (Sonny and Wade). The two juniors had the lowest GPAs. Therefore, the higher the classification the more successful the students were academically.

The five part-time students' (Apollo, John, Pierre, Sonny, and Wade) average GPA was 2.5 vs. 3.3 for the four students (Charles, Derek, Eddie, and Lovehall) who were enrolled full-time. The literature on enrollment intensity (part-time or full-time) does not offer much about Black students in particular. However the participants' success, in terms of GPA, is similar to that of the overall population of college students (Horn, 1996; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). The average GPA for the six students (Apollo, Charles, Derek, John, Pierre, and Wade) who entered LSU as first-time freshmen was 2.7 compared to 3.13 for the three students (Eddie, Lovehall, and Sonny) who transferred into LSU. This finding is contrary to the literature regarding the success of transfer students based on GPA, where the Black transfer students are not likely to complete Bachelor's degrees (Bailey et al., 2005; Wang, 2009; Zamani, 2001). The participants who were transfer students were actually more successful and likely to graduate based on GPA and classification. All of the transfer students in this study were seniors

(Eddie, Lovehall, and Steve), with the exception of one junior (Sonny).

Additionally, the average GPA for three first-generation students (Charles, Lovehall, and Sonny) was 2.9 vs. 2.85 for the six students (Apollo, Derek, Eddie, John, Pierre, and Wade) who were not first generation college students. The first generation enrollment status did not present a large disparity in the participants' GPA.

Regarding the relationship between enrollment status and religious affiliation, all of the students who entered LSU as first-time freshmen (Apollo, Charles, Derek, John, Pierre, and Wade) were Protestant Christians, while the only two non-Protestant Christians (Eddie and Steve) were transfer students. Interestingly, the two non-Protestant Christians were both full-time students and all of the part-time students (Apollo, John, Pierre, Sonny, and Wade) were Protestant. On one end, the Protestant sample population embodied one quality of traditional students (first-time freshmen). Then, on the other hand as part-time students they looked more non-traditional. The relationship between GPA and current religious affiliation was not very telling. Steve, who again did not identify with any one particular religion (yet listed himself as Unitarian) had no GPA on file at the time of the study since he had recently transferred. Lovehall, a non-denominational Protestant Christian had the highest GPA at 3.7, while Eddie the Catholic student had the second highest at 3.4. Two non-denominational Protestant Christians, Derek and John, had the third and fourth highest GPAs at

3.2 and 3.0 respectively. The rest (Apollo, Charles, Pierre, Sonny, and Wade), ranging from 2.9 down to 2.2, were all Protestant Christians, where two were Baptist (Apollo and Charles), one was A.M.E. (Sonny), and two were non-denominational (Pierre and Wade). Therefore, religion had varying effects on academic success, based on GPA as an indicator of the participants' ability to persist. In the next section I offer implications for future research, practice, and policy.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

I will provide suggestions that have the potential to influence research, practice, and policy based on the findings of this study. First, I outline implications for future research by highlighting new knowledge that was found in this study. Then, I offered recommendations for K-16 educational practitioners. Lastly, I discuss implications for K-16 policymakers.

Implications for Future Research

The current study expanded the body of knowledge on the influence of spirituality and religion on Black men by exploring it at a public Predominately White HSI in Texas. Past researchers have studied how spirituality and religion have influenced staying in school, surviving the college experience, and academic success (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008; Watson, 2008; Wood & Hilton, 2012). However, due to the nature of how Black men are currently performing in postsecondary institutions of higher education, there was a need to examine more

aspects of spirituality and religion that influence other areas of student success. For example, instead of only examining retention and academic success, I explored graduation and persistence as well.

Through this study I was able to identify themes that add to the conceptual framework that was used. Spirituality and religion's influence on African American males' focus and guidance in college was a key finding. Also, spiritual leaders such as pastors and ministers have tremendous influence to encourage degree attainment. Similar to clergy, faith-based student organizations provide a support system for African American males that promotes persistence and graduation. It is also important to note the spiritual and religious influence on purpose that also encourages graduation.

All of the participants in this study were still currently enrolled in college as juniors and seniors. Though they had persisted past the initial two years of college, future research should explore the influence of spirituality and religion on individuals who have already received their bachelor's degree. Also, the research could be expanded to study graduate level students. It would be interesting to find out their progression both academically and spiritually and how the two intersect. In fact, there may be a need to explore this topic throughout the entire K-16 spectrum. A longitudinal study may examine the role of spirituality and religion on students beginning in grade school, following them throughout their educational journey.

Another area of future research could be to separately examine church college ministries, faith-based student organizations, and student-pastor relationships. Some of the participants indicated the influence of their church on their academics. They indicated that support from their religious institution was tremendous for their success. Also, faith-based student organizations and students' relationships with their pastors were highly influential. Researchers could study each of those relationships individually. One study could focus more in-depth on how the church provides support to its college students, and even high school students preparing for college. Also, a case study could be conducted on a faith-based student organization to determine its influence on each individual member. Lastly, another study could be conducted on pastors' personal relationships with college students (or high school students preparing for college) to explore the benefits of that interaction. I believe there is relevance in studying each separate entity based on the findings that I presented in this study.

While I examined the individuals' personal spiritual and religious affiliations and how they influenced them as students, future research could explore religious trends in further detail. I discuss certain limitations of this study later in this chapter. One limitation, however, was the lack of religious diversity among the participants. The majority of the participants (8) were Protestant Christians, one did not identify with any religion, and the last identified as Catholic. Future research should seek to expand for more diverse participants in

order to capture more broad experiences from varying religions. Different religions may yield differing or similar influences for college students seeking to graduate.

Also, scholars have identified religious classification schemes, mainly based on Protestant denominations that help interpret peoples' economic, social, and political attitudes and behaviors (Smith, 1990; Steensland et al., 2000; Woodberry, Park, Kellstedt, Regnerus, & Steensland, 2012). The schemes include measures of fundamentalist-moderate-liberal and conservative-liberal scales according to religious/denomination affiliation, which also indicate the manner in which people of certain denominational affiliations interpret the Bible. Future research investigating the role of religion on the persistence of African American male students could include a more in-depth analysis regarding Protestant denominational influences. Incorporating where a denomination falls within existing classification schemes could illuminate different effects on student outcomes. For example, are students affiliated with more conservative denominations, such those in the Southern Baptist Convention, more likely to persist than students affiliated with non-denominational congregations? Do students in more liberal denominations make different connections to education and the importance of pursuing higher education than do fundamentalists? These types of questions can be posed in future studies to consider the role of denomination.

While this is a potentially rich area of research, I felt it was important in this study to focus more on how individual students interpreted their own religiosity and spirituality rather than emphasize institutional contexts, such as denomination, and how that shapes their perceptions. Additional research can add to this line of inquiry in a more intentional manner now that a relationship between religion and spirituality has been confirmed in my research.

Implications for Practice

Social support systems are critical and influential components of success for Black men in college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006; Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). Researchers found that spirituality and religion fosters support systems through religious institutions and church congregations (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008). I also found that the support systems within churches had great influence on the participants in this study.

Areas of practice that can be implemented are extended outreach to students from local religious institutions, including churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. Spiritual leaders and congregations can offer programs for students throughout the K-16 continuum and present them in the form of extra-curricular activities, which is another component that has a great deal of influence on Black men (Harper, 2005; Harper, 2012; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Based on the experience of one participant, a similar method was used

where a campus student organization (Faith and Inspiration) was formed as a spin-off of a local church. In the event that students are not receiving the support needed on campus, they can seek out religious institutions that may be of service. Being connected to the religious institutions can also enable the students to develop personal relationships with pastors, who were found to be positive figures in the lives of the participants of this study. Therefore, in this case the practical implications are for religious institutions.

In relation to the above-mentioned suggestion, colleges and universities may be in a position to better promote faith-based student organizations as a religious institution and extra-curricular activity. Peer groups have been found to be beneficial for Black men in college (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006; Palmer et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). The participants in this study identified how influential the student organizations were as a support system. Therefore, faith-based student organizations stand to offer multiple opportunities (e.g. peer group, extra-curricular activity, and religious institution) for Black men to be positively influenced to succeed in college.

Lastly, as found in the literature (Herndon, 2003; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2013) and in this current study, helping African American males connect to their purpose is a practice that may yield higher graduation rates. Students can recognize their purpose internally based on their own spiritual and religious practices. External influences such as pastors, student organizations, and

religious institutions help students figure out and understand their purpose as well. Students who understand their passion and skills in conjunction with that they feel God has called them to do may be in position to have better success. Therefore, if educational leaders implement programs that connect Black men to their purpose, they may have a higher likelihood of persisting and graduating.

Implications for Policy

Cooper, Fusarelli, and Randall (2004) defined policy as “a political process where needs, goals, and intentions are translated into a set of objectives, laws, policies, and programs, which in turn affect resource allocations, action, and outputs, which are the basis for evaluation, reforms, and new policies” (p. 3).

Based on this definition and the reviewed literature, policies for Black men and their relationship to spirituality and religion can be drawn.

Enrollment and graduation statistics show that there is a need to improve the academic performance of Black men at institutions of higher education, and policymakers and leaders must identify goals that can help Black men stay in school and graduate. One way of accomplishing these goals would be to explore programs that revolve around engagement and social support through spirituality and religion. These programs may include on-campus religious events such as revivals, concerts, symposiums, conferences, speaker series, and pep rallies.

Of course, with these programs will come the need for allocating funding to support the events. Therefore, policymakers and educational leaders will need

to be prepared to prove why these types of programs can help Black men achieve success in college. Student-based organizations may need to be included due to the influence they potentially have on campus. Additionally, with these new needs, goals, programs, and funding, policymakers and educational leaders will need to be in a position to survey and evaluate the programs to determine their effectiveness. Evaluation will be beneficial for making the case to continue these programs or find another route. Nevertheless, the evaluations will be a mandate for the new policies.

In order for these programs to be implemented, policymakers and educational leaders may need to appoint important stakeholders on special committees that can oversee the processes and procedures. Due to their strong influence and authority in the Black community, local pastors may be ideal for advising the establishment of policies and implementation of programs (Taylor et al., 2004). Other stakeholders that can be considered are leaders of the faith-based student organizations and Black leaders on campus and in the community.

Summary

These implications have the potential to create better outcomes for Black men in college. It is imperative that the less-than-ideal academic performance of Black undergraduate men is given attention, not only because of their current status but also because of the history of marginalization and barriers to education Black men have faced. Spirituality and religion, if further developed from the

perspectives of research, practice, and policy, have the ability to evoke change in this population. Exploring this topic further by examining how spirituality and religion influences persistence and graduation will create a new area of knowledge in the body of research about Black men. This research has the potential to influence practice by offering explanations for why implementing factors of spirituality and religion on campus events and services can be beneficial to students. In order for practice to occur, policies will need to be in place to help create and sustain success.

Limitations of the Study

The current study is limited in certain areas. The first limitation is that the study is based on only a small number of participants due to time constraints. Two studies very similar in scope were those of Herndon (2003) and Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon (2008). Both of these studies had 13 participants. In a more comprehensive study, it would be ideal to have more participants from more than one institution of higher education in order to gain a richer idea of the influence of spirituality and religion.

Spirituality and religion may influence some of the outcomes for some Black men in college. However, there may be other factors that contribute academically, psychologically, emotionally, and financially to the Black males' success as students. Therefore, the study is limited due to the fact that the data

were collected mainly to explore the influence of spirituality and religion on student success.

There were some recruiting difficulties that may have limited this study. Initially, the study was intended for full-time students only. However, during the recruitment process, I found that several interested potential participants, that I had either spoken to at student organization meetings and/or through other participant recommendation (snowball sampling), were part-time students. I was then compelled to go back and make a modification to my IRB protocol in order to be able to gather information from a more diverse pool of participants. This was a limitation due to the time and effort that was allotted, where more participants could have been identified even sooner.

Additionally, there was a lack of diversity in the religious affiliations/backgrounds of the participants. Eight of the participants identified as being Protestant Christians, one did not identify with any one religion, and one was Catholic. Despite the immense email solicitation to broad groups of people, class visits, and student organization meetings, the response from people of other religious groups was minimal. I specifically communicated with representatives of non-Protestant student organizations, such as Catholic and Muslim groups through emails and phone calls. Again, there was not much interest to participate according to the lack in response that I received. Regardless of the limitations,

overall this study offers rich data on the manner in which spirituality and religion serves as a mechanism for student success.

Concluding Thoughts

Black men as a whole have faced immense obstacles en route to having overall success throughout the educational continuum. Academic literature has explored the influence of spirituality and religion on students in college, including a more specific focus on Black men. I felt that it was necessary to explore this phenomenon in Texas at a Predominately White HSI, where the largest racial group in the student population is White, while also extending the conceptual framework. By doing such, new findings were added to the body of scholarly knowledge on the topic.

The participants shared their viewpoints on how spirituality and religion was a mechanism to aid their success as Black men at LSU. Their experiences showed the value of resilience and overcoming barriers, understanding and pursuing purpose, and focus and guidance from a spiritual and religious perspective. Also, the participants encountered external support from religious institutions, personal relationships, and student organizations. Educational leaders can make note of the manners in which each factor enhances Black men's ability to move toward graduation.

This study met the goals of (1) informing research, policy, and practice, (2) extending the conceptual framework, and (3) adding to the body of knowledge

of how to enhance success rates for Black men in college. Spirituality and religion both have tremendous influence and should be used in conjunction with educational practices. It is my hope that educational leaders from each level of the K-16 educational continuum can take away valuable nuggets from this study in an attempt to improve their communities by being able to better educate Black men as well as other minority groups, potentially.

Appendix A
Recruitment Letter

Dear Undergraduate Scholar:

My name is Brian English, and I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies within the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). Under the advisement of Dr. Ifeoma Amah, I am conducting a qualitative research study to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black undergraduate men at LSU. More specifically, I hope to learn about how spirituality and religion are a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation. This letter is to request your participation in this research study if you are a Black male junior or senior student at LSU who self-identifies that spirituality and/or religion is important for striving toward graduation.

As a potential participant of this study you will be requested to sign a consent form and complete a pre-screen survey. If you meet the participant criteria listed above (last sentence of the first paragraph)/within the pre-screen survey, you will be requested to 1) complete a demographic information questionnaire, 2) participate in a one to two hour interview, 3) participate in a possible follow-up interview, and 4) provide oral and/or written feedback regarding the interview transcripts and results of the study. If you do not qualify to proceed on to the demographic questionnaire and interview process based on the pre-screen survey, your collected information will be destroyed (i.e. shredded).

A possible follow-up interview may be requested if we do not finish the initial interview and/or I need to obtain additional information from you. Once the initial interview is completed and transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it was recorded, word-for-word, by me or a professional transcriber, a follow-up email or phone correspondence will be sent to you. The purpose of this email or phone correspondence is to allow you to review the transcripts and/or a summary of the conclusions drawn from your interview to ensure that I capture your responses accurately. My dissertation advisor (Dr. Ifeoma Amah), a professional transcriber, and I will be the only people with access to the audio recordings and transcripts.

Your information will only be used for the purpose of my dissertation research and article publications. Your information will be maintained in a confidential manner, and no identifying information will be reported with the results. Additionally, your participation is voluntary and will not affect your relationship with LSU. If you wish to withdraw from the study, you can do so at any point during the study and your data will be destroyed (i.e. shredded) immediately.

Participants who meet the criteria to participate in the study based on the information provided in the pre-screen survey and who are interviewed will receive a \$10 dollar gift card to a fast food restaurant. Students who do not meet the criteria to participate based on the pre-screen survey will not be compensated.

A summary of all procedures involved include: a) completing a pre-screen survey, b) completing a demographic information questionnaire, c) participating in a one to two hour interview, d) participating in a possible follow-up interview, and e) providing oral and/or written feedback regarding the interview transcripts and results of the study. The interview will take place during the fall 2014 semester at a time and location that is most convenient for you. If you or someone you know of wish to be involved in this study, please reply to this email or contact me by phone at (214) 499-4617.

Respectfully,

Brian L. English
Ph.D. Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
brian.english@mavs.uta.edu
(214) 499 – 4617

Appendix B

Email Announcement to Officials

Hello:

My name is Brian English and I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies within the College of Education and Health Professions at The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). Under the advisement of Dr. Ifeoma Amah, I am conducting a qualitative research study to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black undergraduate men at LSU. More specifically, I hope to learn about how spirituality and religion are a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation. This letter is to request your assistance in sending the attached information sheet out via email to potential Black male junior or senior students at LSU who self-identify that spirituality and/or religion is important for striving toward graduation.

Potential participants of this study will be requested to sign a consent form and complete a pre-screen survey. If potential participants meet the participant criteria listed above (last sentence of the first paragraph)/within the pre-screen survey, they will be requested to 1) complete a demographic information questionnaire, 2) participate in a one to two hour interview, 3) participate in a possible follow-up interview, and 4) provide oral and/or written feedback regarding the interview transcripts and results of the study. If students do not qualify to proceed on to the demographic questionnaire and interview process based on the pre-screen survey, their collected information will be destroyed (i.e. shredded).

Possible follow-up interviews may be requested if we do not finish the initial interview and/or I need to obtain additional information from. Once the initial interviews are completed and transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as it was recorded, word-for-word, by me or a professional transcriber, follow-up emails or phone correspondence will be sent to the participants. The purpose of this email or phone correspondence is to allow participants to review the transcripts and/or a summary of the conclusions drawn from their interview to ensure that I capture the responses accurately. My dissertation advisor (Dr. Ifeoma Amah), a professional transcriber, and I will be the only people with access to the audio recordings and transcripts.

The students' information will only be used for the purpose of my dissertation research and article publications. Students' information will be maintained in a confidential manner and no identifying information will be reported with the results. Additionally, participation is voluntary and will not affect their relationship with LSU. If a participant wishes to withdraw from the study, he can

do so at any point during the study and his data will be destroyed (e.g. shredded) immediately.

Participants who meet the criteria to participate in the study based on the information provided in the pre-screen survey and who are interviewed will receive a \$10 dollar gift card to a fast food restaurant. Students who do not meet the criteria to participate based on the pre-screen survey will not be compensated.

A summary of all procedures involved include: a.) completing a pre-screen survey, b) completing a demographic information questionnaire, c) participating in a one to two hour interview, d) participating in a possible follow-up interview, and e) providing oral and/or written feedback regarding the interview transcripts and results of the study. The interviews will take place during the fall 2014 semester at a time and location that is most convenient for the participants. If students wish to be involved in this study, please have them contact me by email (brian.english@mavs.uta.edu) or phone at (214) 499 – 4617.

Thank you for your time and support regarding my dissertation work. Have a pleasant and productive day.

Respectfully,
Brian L. English
Ph.D. Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
brian.english@mavs.uta.edu
(214) 499 – 4617

Appendix C
Consent Form

Consent Form

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Brian L. English, Ph.D. Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Email: brian.english@mavs.uta.edu
Phone: 214-499-4617

FACULTY ADVISOR

Ifeoma A. Amah, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Arlington
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Email: iamah@uta.edu
Phone: 817-272-0991

TITLE OF PROJECT

Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College: A Potential Mechanism for Achieving Student Success

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study about how spirituality and religion plays a role in your experience as a college student seeking to achieve success (e.g. persisting and graduating from college). Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black undergraduate men at Lone Star University (LSU). More specifically, the study is designed to examine spirituality and religion as a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation.

DURATION

Participation in this study will last between one and two hours.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 15.

PROCEDURES

Potential participants will be requested to complete a pre-screen survey. The pre-screen survey will be used to capture facts about participants to determine if they are a fit for the study, such as race/ethnicity, age, academic classification, and religious background. If the potential participants meet the participant criteria listed above based on the information provided in the pre-screen survey, they will be requested to 1) complete a demographic information questionnaire, 2) participate in a one to two hour interview, 3) participate in a possible follow-up interview, and 4) provide oral and/or written feedback regarding the interview transcripts and results of the study. If students do not qualify to proceed on to the demographic questionnaire and interview process based on the pre-screen survey, the students' collected information will be destroyed (shredded).

1. The completion of a demographic information questionnaire. This questionnaire will be used to obtain personal information (e.g. age, religious affiliation, family background), college information (e.g. major, GPA, classification), residential information (e.g. housing, household size), and contact information (e.g. email, phone number).
2. A face-to-face interview. The interview will capture information about the participant's experiences as a college student who identifies with spirituality and religion and how that relates to your undergraduate pursuits to persist and graduate.
3. Possible follow-up interview. Follow-up interviews may occur if the initial interview needs to be completed and/or to obtain additional information. This entails email correspondence and/or phone calls to discuss areas that may not be clear or had the most potential to be misunderstood or misinterpreted.
4. Provide feedback. Participants will review the summaries of the data that has been collected during the interview(s) and provide feedback. This procedure is to ensure that responses were captured accurately.

The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher and/or a professional transcriber. The recordings will be kept with the transcription for potential future research involving the academic, social and personal experiences of Black undergraduate men. The recordings and transcription will not be used for any future research purposes not described here.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

This study will identify potential areas that can positively influence the academic performance of Black male college students. The results may yield useful information for students, educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers about ways to improve the college persistence, retention and completion rates for this student population.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseeable risks of risks or discomforts involved in this study.

COMPENSATION

Participants who meet the criteria to participate in the study based on the information provided in the pre-screen survey and who are interviewed will receive a \$10 dollar gift card to a fast food restaurant. Students who do not meet the criteria based on the pre-screen survey will not be compensated.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected which includes the audio recording and transcriptions from this study will be stored electronically and password protected on a computer in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department (Trimble Hall 103J) for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the LSU Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at LSU has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Brian L. English (brian.english@mavs.uta.edu) and/or Dr. Ifeoma Amah (iamah@uta.edu). Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@LSU.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent

Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you _____ confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER

DATE

Appendix D
Information Sheet

Information Sheet for the Study “Spirituality and Religion Among Black Men in College:

A Potential Mechanism for Achieving Student Success”

Primary Investigator: Brian L. English, Ph.D. Candidate

Purpose of the Study

Under the advisement of Dr. Ifeoma Amah, I am conducting a qualitative research study to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of Black undergraduate men at Lone Star University (LSU). More specifically, I hope to learn about how spirituality and religion are a potential mechanism for achieving student success, which is defined in this study as persistence and graduation.

Participant Criteria

In order to participate, students must meet the following criteria:

1) racially identify as a Black/African American man; 2) be at least 18 years old; 3) be enrolled as a junior or senior student at LSU; and 4) self-identify that spirituality and/or religion is important for striving toward graduation.

Procedures

Potential participants will be requested to sign a consent form and complete a pre-screen survey. If the potential participants meet the participant criteria listed above based on the information provided in the pre-screen survey, they will be requested to 1) complete a demographic information questionnaire, 2) participate in a one to two hour interview, 3) participate in a possible follow-up interview, and 4) provide oral and/or written feedback regarding the interview transcripts and results of the study. If students do not qualify to proceed on to the demographic questionnaire and interview process based on the pre-screen survey, the students' collected information will be destroyed (shredded).

Interview Time and Location

Participant interviews will take place during the fall 2014 semester at a time and location that is most convenient for the student.

Compensation

Participants who meet the criteria to participate in the study based on the information provided in the pre-screen survey and who are interviewed will receive a \$10 dollar gift card to a fast food restaurant. Students who do not meet the criteria to participate based on the pre-screen survey will not be compensated.

If Interested...

If you OR someone you know meet(s) the criteria listed above and wish to participate in the study, please contact Brian English by email or cell phone, which are both listed below. Thank you!

Respectfully,
Brian L. English
Ph.D. Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
brian.english@mavs.uta.edu
(214) 499 – 4617

Appendix E
Pre-Screen Survey

Pre-Screen Survey

Demographic Information

- Name:
- Age:
- Racial/Ethnic background:
- Country of birth:
- Religious/Spiritual denomination or affiliation:
- Enrollment Status: (Part-time Full-time)
- Classification (e.g. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior):
- Major(s)/Minor:
- Current G.P.A:

Contact Information

- Email Address: _____
- Phone Number: _____
 - Phone Type (Home Cell Work)
- Home Address: _____

Appendix F
Demographic Information Questionnaire

Demographic Information Questionnaire

(Note: This questionnaire was adapted from Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon, 2008)

Demographic Information

- a) **Participant's name:**
- b) **Age:**
- c) **Racial/Ethnic background:**
- d) **Country of birth:**
- e) **Religious affiliation:**
- f) **Financial aid status** (*e.g. dependent or independent student*):
- g) **Marital status** (*e.g. single, married, divorced, domestic partnership*):
- h) **Number of children:**
- i) **Ages of children** (*if applicable*):
- j) **Hometown:**
- k) **Distance from family** (*e.g. local, another city in state, out of state, outside of the U.S.*):
- l) **Frequency of contact with family** (*e.g. daily, weekly, several times a month, monthly, several times a year, never*):
- m) **Type of contact with family** (*e.g. phone, email, Skype, Facetime, Google Chat, travel [e.g. car, bus, plane]*):

College Information

- a) **Are you a first generation college student?:** Yes No
- b) **When did you enter LSU?:** first time freshman___ transfer student___ other___
- c) **Major(s)/Minor(s):**
- d) **Current G.P.A:**
- e) **Classification** (*e.g. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior*):
- f) **How are you paying for college?** (*e.g. financial aid, grants, loans, scholarships, work [on campus, off campus, familial assistance, foster care youth, etc.]*):

g) Extracurricular Activities:

- a. On Campus:
- b. Off Campus:

h) Future Career Goals:

Residential Information

Do you live on or off campus?

a) If you live on campus:

- Type of housing: (residential halls/ apartment/ house/other):
- Number of people living in house:

b) If you live off campus:

- Type of housing: (apartment/ house/other):
- Number of people living with you:

c) Do you live with your family members:

If yes,

- Type of housing: (apartment/ house/other):
- Amount of family members living in the household:
- Amount of family members living outside of the household:

Contact Information

- a) Mailing address:

- b) Telephone number:

- c) E-mail address:

Appendix G
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

(The Interview Protocol was adapted from Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon, 2008)

Participants Name: Pseudonym: Interview date: Interview time: Interview location:

You are here to participate in a research study about how spirituality and religion plays a role in your experience as a college student seeking to persist and graduate from LSU. The questions that will be asked are designed to capture your experiences as a Black male college student who identifies with spirituality and/or religion.

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself? (Prompts: hometown, family background (e.g. familial structure, income level, etc.), educational background (e.g. first generation college student, entered LSU as a freshmen or transfer student, extracurricular activities involved in on and off campus, etc.)? Why did you choose to attend LSU?)
2. What does spirituality mean to you? or how do you define spirituality?
3. What does religion mean to you? or how do you define religion?
4. In your opinion, is there a difference between spirituality and religion? If so, please explain. If not, why not?
5. Describe the role spirituality and/or religion plays in your life overall.
6. What acts of spirituality and/or religion do you practice (e.g. prayer, attending church/temple/mosque, fasting, etc.)? How often do you pray? How often to you attend worship/service?

7. How do spirituality and/or religion affect your experience as a Black/African American man at LSU?
8. Describe the role of spirituality and/or religion in your academic life.
9. Can you tell me about the role of spirituality and/or religion in your social life?
10. What role does spirituality and/or religion play on your ability to remain in and persist through school? If it does, please share an example? If not, why not?
11. Can you tell me about the relationship between spirituality and/or religion on your quest for a college degree (i.e. graduate from college)?
12. Describe the influence your religious institution(s)/ organization(s) may and/or may not have on you regarding your college persistence and graduation?
13. Do you have anything else to add/share that we may have not discussed during this interview?

Thank you for your time and support. I will contact you soon for a possible follow-up interview.

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Endnotes

¹ Black(s) and African American(s) are used interchangeably.

²Spirituality mainly refers to the pursuit of a relationship with a higher being and seeking purpose. The term is discussed in great detail in the “Spirituality and Religion” section of Chapter 2.

³Religion mainly refers to a formal set of beliefs, customs, and practices, especially as it related to morals and values. The term is discussed in great detail in the “Spirituality and Religion” section of Chapter 2.

Biographical Information

Brian L. English was born and raised in Dallas, TX. After graduating from the Business Magnet High School at Townview in 2002, he attended Texas A&M University-Commerce. There, he received a bachelor's degree in marketing in 2006 and his MBA in 2008. After a brief stint in corporate America, Brian began to work in education, specifically in the area of college access and readiness. He worked for a small non-profit organization for three years before going to work for The University of Texas at Austin as the director of the UT Outreach – Dallas program in 2012. Just before taking that role, Brian began the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Ph.D. program at The University of Texas at Arlington.

Brian plans to continue to research factors that help contribute to better success for Black men in college. Additionally, he plans to put research to practice by implementing and sustaining success programs for students at institutions of higher education. One of his ultimate passions is to help connect students to their purpose and passion in life, which is sometimes found through college majors and careers.

Brian lives in Dallas, TX with his wife, Ashley. They have one son named Joseph, and another son, Joshua, due to be born in May of 2015. Ashley also plans to complete her Ph.D. in 2015. They are members of Concord Church in Dallas.