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Lessons In Success: A Multi-Campus Study of Factors Influencing Academic Accomplishment Among High-Achieving African American Students at Private Liberal Arts Colleges

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LESSONS IN SUCCESS: A MULTI-CAMPUS STUDY OF FACTORS
INFLUENCING ACADEMIC ACCOMPLISHMENT AMONG HIGH-ACHIEVING
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DEDICATION

First, to my wife Jenny, and my daughters, Ella and Kinley: I have no doubt there have been times when I have been tired, distracted, or consumed with my academic work. For those times, I am so thankful for your patience and understanding. Without your support, none of this would have been possible. I love you all so much.

I would also like to thank my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Katherine Chaddock. You have been supportive, encouraging, and responsive throughout this process. You have been an exceptional mentor, and I hope that I can one day have that kind of influence on my students as well. I am confident that a more motivating and empowering dissertation advisor cannot be found. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Christian Anderson, Dr. Peter Moyi, and Dr. Julie Rotholz. Your creative and constructive ideas have helped me shape my work in ways I could not have envisioned on my own.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic experiences of highly successful African-American male graduates of small, private liberal arts colleges using a qualitative approach. Fourteen highly successful alumni from selective, private colleges were purposefully selected for the study, including seven African-American males and seven white males. In semi-structured interviews, participants retrospectively described positive experiences they associated with their academic success in college. The study observed the importance of the small college in creating a deep sense of connection across the campus, empowering students to take risks that helped them succeed academically. This research also explored the idea that African-American participants used an "instrumentalist" approach to their undergraduate education. Though the study identified significant common ground between the two participant groups, several key differences emerged. African-American students stressed the importance of religious faith, open-mindedness, and campus organizations in helping them succeed academically. White students described the importance of making "mechanical" academic adjustments, such as improving study habits and developing organizational skills. The study also identified ground for future research around academic success in the small private college environment.

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CHAPTER I

STUDY RATIONALE

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to better understand how high-achieving African-American male alumni perceive and explain their academic success at small, white liberal-arts colleges (or, hereafter "WLC institutions" or "WLC"). Liberal arts colleges are generally associated with small class sizes, frequent interaction with staff and faculty, excellent teaching, and high-quality student advising, all factors that are generally understood to be highly beneficial to student engagement and academic success. In general, these institutions deliver strong academic results, but typically cost significantly more than larger state institutions. However, overwhelmingly white liberal arts colleges, particularly in the southern United States, often come with a less-than-critical mass of minority students, latent or overt racism, or few visible programs that appeal to a diverse student population. Despite the strengths of these institutions, these factors may complicate the educational environment for African-American males who choose to attend.

Accordingly, this study sought to understand and explain the experiences of African-American male students who have achieved evident academic success. Identifying these perceived success factors will potentially improve minority educational experiences in two primary ways. First, to the extent that the study identified success

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factors controlled by the institution, administrators and faculty could be positioned to more proactively to address minority student success. Second, the findings of this study may help institutions identify and encourage activities or types of interactions that positively affect African-American males. This qualitative study sought to give these students a greater voice in describing African-American academic success at small, white liberal arts colleges.

Research Questions

The research questions to be answered were:

1) What factors do high-achieving African-American male alumni attribute to their successful academic experiences at small, white liberal arts colleges?

2) How do these factors differ from the academic success factors attributed by high-achieving white alumni?

3) How did these success factors contribute to successful academic experiences of both African-American and white alumni at small, white liberal arts colleges?

Definitions

This study applied several significant filters to potential participants. Most importantly, each potential participant was selected because he was a "high-performing student" or "successful student." These terms are used interchangeable throughout this paper. For purposes of this study "high-performing students" or "successful students" were defined as participants who passed each of the following four tests related to their undergraduate experiences:

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1) Completed all college requirements with greater than a 3.20 grade point average.

2) Degree was conferred in four academic years or less (including summer school, if applicable)

3) Completed the majority of coursework at the institution of record.

4) Achieved a Net College Gains score of at least 350, as discussed below.

Before proceeding with interviews, each potential participant confirmed he met the four selection tests. Further, the data collection process in this study not only sought successful African-American and white students, but when possible, it also sought the most successful students available given their admissions parameters and using the Net College Gains formula outlined in the methodology section of this text. While Net College Gains was not a statistical methodology, it was used as an informal, purposeful sampling tool to help identify the most critical and information-rich study participants. This score was useful in identifying the participants who appeared to undergo the most dramatic and positive academic changes while in college. The formula for Net College Gains was: (College GPA x 500) - SAT Score. The score provided a way to evaluate how well participants performed academically, as measured by GPA, in comparison with their standardized entrance exam scores. In addition, for purposes of this study, small, white liberal arts college ("WLC") was defined as a small, private college with a liberal arts focus, an undergraduate enrollment of less than 6,000 students, and a minority student population of less than 15%. "Success factors" were defined as any data obtained that the study participant cited as a factor in academic success or a positive educational experience.

Significance

Student academic success is of ongoing importance to the field of education because it is a fundamental measurement of a core educational value. Most would agree that students should learn about topics of academic significance while in college, succeed in completing their course of study, and become more productive than they would have otherwise been without college. Therefore, it is generally accepted that academic success is highly desirable from numerous perspectives: theoretical, policy, individual, and institutional.

Theoretically, academic progression contributes to the student's ability to become a more useful member of society in a number of ways. Positive educational outcomes benefit the student's ability to find and maintain gainful employment, participate in civic affairs, and make good life decisions based on critical consideration of available information. In addition, positive educational outcomes theoretically add to society's base of "intellectual capital." The inevitable result is increased potential for economic viability, reduced likelihood of reliance on social programs, and greater intellectual agility necessary to meet the demands of a changing world.

From a policy perspective, academic success is of paramount importance, particularly in the United States, because massive amounts of financial resources and human capital are invested in both public and private education. Educational spending and demand for higher education in the United States grew exponentially with the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill established firmly the concept that higher education is a "public good" and that it is appropriate to subsidize education with financial benefits. Further, it established the role

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of the Federal government as both a financier and an overseer of higher education (Serow, 2004). Since the creation of the G.I. Bill, the number and diversity of students participating in American higher education, as well as the governmental financial stake in higher education, has increased dramatically. The American system of higher education benefits from significant levels of public and private spending, and accordingly must demonstrate good financial stewardship.

In recent years, external pressures to account for student success continue to increase the focus on measurable aspects of undergraduate education (Whitt, 1999). Examples of this include greater public scrutiny into student loan programs and the cost-benefits of higher education.   Coupled with continuing increases in minority participation rates in higher education, these movements have raised questions as to how we can better ensure that students succeed in college. There is little doubt that higher education professionals face greater pressure to ensure that students who participate in the American system of higher education are learning about topics of academic importance, and ultimately succeeding at their efforts. Academic success matters, both philosophically, and with respect to educational policy.

From an individual perspective, academic success is critical because it is closely associated with financial and intellectual achievement throughout the life of the student. In a 2011 Pew Research poll of over 2,000 statistically representative adults, it was revealed that nearly 75% of four-year college graduates believe that their college education was useful in fostering their intellectual growth. Another 55% stated the degree was useful in helping them obtain employment. The Pew Analysis also validated that a college education increases annual earnings by approximately $20,000 over high

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school graduates, in line with the beliefs of the graduates themselves (Pew, 2011). Despite criticisms of the high cost of higher education, it is clear that, at least for now, the cost of a college education is worth the investment. Further, small liberal arts colleges, such as those involved in this research study, are generally quite expensive. Therefore, for African-American students at small, liberal arts colleges, the financial and intellectual stakes are high.

From an institutional perspective, student academic success is also critical to the health of the college. Many private colleges are significantly more expensive than the mean cost of their respective state institutions, and the affordability gap is often closed by portable, state- funded, merit-based grants. To the extent current students fail to succeed academically, they risk loss of these state aid packages, which in some cases may tip the balance and make private colleges prohibitively expensive. The results can be student attrition, increased pressure to discount tuition, and the need to increase enrollment to reduce the impact. From a financial perspective, it is important that college administrators seek to maximize student academic success for both philosophical and financial reasons. According to several studies conducted in 2012 as part of the Delta Cost Project's study on the nature of student attrition and its costs, student attrition early in the college career is most commonly associated with personal reasons (57.4%) and financial problems (29%). Further, attrition also carries numerous costs beyond lost tuition that make this outcome undesirable to the institution (Delta Cost Project, 2012).

In addition, an important and highly visible debate is underway as to the future of higher education at small private colleges. Numerous stakeholders have criticized high-cost colleges and questioned the value of education in the liberal arts (Kiley, 2012).

These criticisms include policy statements made by President Barack Obama and Arne Duncan of the Department of Education suggesting that the costs of college are too high and need to be brought under control (Fain, 2013). While much of the ire is likely focused on certain abusive for-profit institutions, the "sticker price" of a college education has become an increasingly important consideration for policymakers, parents, and prospective students. This is particularly true for small colleges, which are usually not subsidized directly by state legislatures. In an era where consumers question the cost and benefits of the educational "product" they receive, understanding the relationship between cost and educational quality is paramount.

Higher education stakeholders would benefit from a greater understanding of institutional differences in educational delivery and its effects on students. Perhaps a student at a state institution pays a fraction of private college tuition on a per-credit hour basis, but is less likely to succeed at that institution academically due to factors that are not easily understood with a simple cost analysis, such as small class size and access to mentors. Alternatively, it is possible that a student who pays three or four times as much for an undergraduate education at a private liberal arts college receives intangible benefits that increased their level of academic success commensurate with the cost. Other possibilities are that there really is not much difference in academic success at large state institutions and small colleges for the average student, or that certain types of institutions serve particular demographic groups better than others from an academic perspective. Regardless, a better understanding of the benefits of undergraduate education to the student, in an institutional context, is a badly-needed component of the current debate around the costs and value of higher education.

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Much of the body of research related to African-American students focuses primarily on student success factors at public institutions and differing levels of engagement at public and private institutions. This is an important gap in the literature this study sought to fill: what factors contribute to academic success at WLC from the perspective of the African-American male student? Despite collective awareness that African-American males experience college differently than other students, institutions of higher education lack a definitive blueprint for African-American male success in college, and most particularly at WLC institutions.

Two factors may help explain this. First, the majority of existing research, particularly quantitative research, takes a deficit approach in examining this achievement gap by linking African-American males with traditional socioeconomic risk factors that purport to explain perceived underperformance. Stated differently, many studies concentrate on explaining what is "wrong" with African-American male students, rather than what is "right," focusing instead on negative attributes of people and communities of color (Milner, 2007; Schott Foundation, 2012; Hu, 2007). As a result, the existing body of research fails to adequately capture and understand *successful* college experiences of African-American males. Second, most scholarly research examines the experiences of minority students at large, flagship institutions, graduate institutions, or historically black colleges. Accordingly, we know relatively little about minority experiences at small, primarily white colleges, where the small number of students may contribute differently to areas of community engagement, academic motivation, student and faculty interaction, and each other.

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This qualitative study sought to identify academic success factors for high-achieving African-American males at these institutions. Success factors were expected to emerge in many different forms, including specific institutional programs, effective teaching techniques, or even personal motivation. The goal of this study was to identify these success factors by accurately portraying the experiences of the interview participants. The findings of this study could help institutions identify at-risk students, or more proactively shape the African-American student experience. The study also sought to identify any contrast between the experiences of African-American and white alumni from the same institution.

Overview

The academic experiences of African-American males in college have been examined from a number of perspectives, and the importance of this demographic group to the field of higher education continues to increase. In particular, many colleges continue to work toward greater racial diversity on campus, despite the fact that it can be difficult to attract a diverse pool of minority students to a small, majority white private college. Yet, in a 2005 survey of public college administrators, nearly 90% stated their universities were pursuing efforts to increase the diversity of their student bodies (Hicklin, 2006). In addition, greater public focus on maintaining cost-effective access to higher education for all students will force colleges to carefully consideration admissions policies, distribution of financial aid, and diversity of enrollment. African-American students will be an important part of this conversation.

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It is also well-established that a significant gap still exists in the college achievement of African-American students when compared with similarly-situated white students, and this effect is most pronounced with respect to African-American males (Wiggan, 2008). The African-American male student population continues to face difficult challenges with regard to higher education, and greater understanding of their college experiences may shed light on why this is happening (Strayhorn and Devita, 2010). A recent study by the Schott Foundation for Public Education showed that nearly 78% of white high school graduates attend college, significantly higher than the 52% rate attributed to African-Americans (The Schott Foundation, 2012).

There is significant evidence that campus diversity efforts have been effective. From 1976 to 2010, the percentage of African-American students enrolled in college rose from 9% to 14%. During the same period, the percentage of White students fell from 83% to 61% percent (IPEDS, 2012). In a similar trend, African-American admissions rates at elite liberal arts colleges have increased over time, and now frequently exceed those of the student population in general (Marble, 2008). This is a signal that liberal arts colleges are interested in enrolling minority applicants, a practice that should lead to increased minority presence in the student population at these institutions. For example, at Williams College the average admission rate for black applicants between 1998 and 2007 was 55.1%, compared to an overall admissions rate of 21.1%, representing a 34% difference favoring African-Americans (Marble, 2008).

However, maintaining diversity at small liberal arts colleges remains challenging for both students and faculty. In a recent survey, the highest rate of freshman minority enrollment at leading liberal arts colleges was just 11.4%, at Wesleyan University

(Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012). This survey, conducted annually, covers all institutional types and is primarily focused on performance measures associated with minority students in higher education. In the most recent survey, several top liberal arts colleges (including Bowdoin College, Grinnell College, and Bates College) had minority enrollment rates of less than 5% in the freshman class. In addition, very few colleges examined in the survey results have minority yield rates over 40%. This means that minority students, though accepted, may choose to attend elsewhere at rates higher than desired by college administrators.

A number of discussions are ongoing nationally regarding the ability of institutions, particularly in the liberal arts, to retain minority students and faculty. In a recent interview aired on National Public Radio, a student and administrator discussed the challenges faced by minority students who attend WLC. Racial isolation, geography, lack of African-American studies curriculum, and difficulty retaining minority faculty were all cited as factors contributing to the problem (NPR, 2013). Numerous responses have been organized, including a national consortium of diversity officers at liberal arts colleges. However, retention of minority faculty and students continues to be a point of emphasis for liberal arts colleges (Collado, 2013).

It is apparent that all colleges, including liberal arts colleges, will continue to grow more diverse as more diverse student populations access higher education. As a result, deeper understanding of the African-American student experience, particularly at WLC institutions, will become more critical. However, some WLC institutions face challenges in responding to the needs of diverse student populations. Some critics argue that modern top-tier liberal arts colleges function as culture clubs that define themselves

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mainly in terms of wealth, reputation, and membership standards (Goerwitz, 2008). Further, many institutions may have embraced diversity as a core value, but these values are not fully integrated into mission statements, recruitment, evaluation, and education of African-American students (Goerwitz, 2008).

The Liberal Arts College

Most liberal arts colleges do not promise prospective students a set of marketable skills upon graduation, expertise in a trade, or a direct pathway to "useful" employment. However, these colleges do attempt to instill in students a broad range of capacities, such as the ability to think critically and the responsibility to act as a contributing citizen in a democracy. These institutions are typically smaller, more expensive, and more selective than most large research institutions. The typical liberal arts college is most concerned with high-quality teaching, small class sizes, and strong student advising. Supporters of the liberal arts college contend that a true liberal arts education prepares the student best for life's diverse experiences:

> On the positive side of the utility balance, we have a sense that the liberal arts satisfy something distinctly human inside of us, a craving to know that seems to be natural and innate. Secondly, the liberal arts are personally empowering. They give us insight without experience. And I have just added a third utility, a public one -- that the liberal arts keep alive the memory and the work of those who have done great things for us. (Agresto, 2003).

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However, over the last few years liberal arts colleges have found themselves increasingly at odds with public stakeholders. This friction is part of a broader public push for accountability, utility, and efficient use of taxpayer funds in higher education. In several cases, the colleges have responded to this pressure by publicly discussing the importance of their mission. In 2012, Wake Forest University devoted a conference to the issue of the liberal arts mission, including over 250 professionals in the discussion (Wake Forest University, 2012). In addition, Wofford College themed its 2012 academic year "Re:Thinking Education", and has created a year-long "conversation about the future of the liberal arts." (Wofford College, 2012).

In both cases, the institutions have sought to foster broad conversations that articulate the traditional strengths of the colleges, as well as to address emerging challenges. At this critical time in the historical life of the liberal arts college, the current study in the context of liberal arts institutions will potentially add to this conversation. Proponents of the liberal arts experience would argue that the close-knit nature of these institutions is critical to student success. This study intends to shed light on the success of African-American males at WLC. How do African-American males benefit or succeed in the context of these institutions? Or do these types of institutions matter less to minority student success than traditionally believed?

Foundations of the Study

Most useful in providing background for the current research were studies that focused specifically on the African-American male demographic. It is clear that numerous factors affect the academic performance of African-American males in the

college environment, including both pre-college factors and influences within the college environment. Pre-college influences include factors such as family income, attitudes of friends and relatives toward higher education, and students' lived experiences in preparatory schools. Influences in the college environment include potential factors such as the type of institution attended, availability of extracurricular activities, method of instruction, and class size. The current study seeks to understand the African-American male student experience in the WLC environment in order to identify those factors key to the academic success[1] of this demographic group.

It is well-established that student engagement is an important predictor of student success, and this strong connection is important to this study (Astin, 1993). Students demonstrate engagement in any number of ways, including interacting with peers, meeting with faculty, participating in athletics, or spending time on academic work. However, African-American men are less engaged in their college experience at small, mostly-white liberal-arts colleges than at graduate institutions, particularly with respect to interaction with their peers (Strayhorn and Devita, 2010). It is possible that cultural obstacles in small liberal arts colleges may negate the traditional advantages of the small institution with respect to African-American males. Some of these obstacles could include a lack of a core group of minority students; limited orientation to the institution; or, recruitment of students who may not be strong fits for the institution.

Conversely, at master's institutions, African-American males may actually interact more because those cultural obstacles are not perceived to be present. With small

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[1] For purposes of this study, "student academic success" refers to college academic performance as measured by grade point average. A student would be considered "academically successful" after accumulating a 3.0 grade point average or higher and completing college work in a four-year time frame.

class sizes, greater opportunities for engagement with faculty, and a supportive environment, small colleges should represent an environment that is theoretically conducive to interaction, learning, and ultimately academic success. However, questions remain as to how this "small college effect" affects African-American men, and deeper investigation of the how African-American males function in this environment is needed (Strayhorn and Devita, 2010). Additionally, there are few studies that examine the way African-American students perceive their learning environment (Wiggan, 2008).

In a departure from the more "negative" line of scholarly inquiry, which has disproportionately focused on explaining performance deficits, it is especially important to understand how high-achieving African-American males perceive and explain their collegiate success. On one hand, it is possible that small colleges merely attract highly-motivated and prepared African-American students, ready to succeed. On the other hand, perhaps institutional factors indigenous to the small college are more important in shaping success, such as availability of professors, engaging teaching methods, or small class sizes. One of the desired outcomes of this study was to determine whether African-American males benefit from the traditional advantages of the small college and how they achieve those benefits.

As suggested, the existing body of research does not adequately address the lived experiences of high achieving African-American males in the context of WLC institutions. Further, existing studies fail to tie together a number of intriguing loose ends which this study intends to directly address: the missing African-American critical mass at WLC institutions, and whether it is mitigated by the small college effect; whether high-achieving African-American males experience the effect of the "burden of proof" or

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"proving their academic worth"; and what specific interventions are most effective at engaging African-American males. These are important gaps in the literature, and this study sought to help close these gaps by identifying the mechanisms by which African-American males feel they achieve success at WLC institutions.

For example, if African-American males feel the effects of isolation and lack of critical mass, yet succeed at WLC institutions, two possibilities emerge. One possibility is that the students have, consciously or unconsciously, selected into the WLC environment and already carry the tools for success, such as self-reliance, tenacity, and academic ability. A second possibility is that the students have developed other ways of achieving success, such as formation of informal minority student support groups, or connecting with particular mentors on campus. In either case, these traits and mechanisms should surface in the interview data as a key theme in the way the students explain their success.

Another area of concern is the issue of "burden of proof." This study sought to provide evidence of specific actions high-achievers take in response to this perceived burden, such as pursuing tutoring, membership in professional organizations, or taking on additional majors. In short, this study should provide positive evidence of how high achieving African-American males explain their success at WLC institutions, and seeks to compare those experiences with white male students at similar institutions. In addition, by studying this phenomenon, we may also be able map our positive findings onto the existing body of literature, which has historically focused on identifying obstacles and deficiencies.

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Type of Study

This study was undertaken as historical and biographical research. It involved purposeful selection of information-rich participants at selected small, white liberal-arts colleges. Participants included alumni who graduated between two and ten years prior to the conduct of the study. Accordingly, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with respect to the participant groups. Participants were generally asked to recall, as alumni, their individual college experiences in response to the research questions.

Use of memory-elicited data is well-established as a qualitative technique; accordingly, this study followed the methodology established by Eich (2010) to "co-produce" the interview with the participant. Essentially, interview questions were phrased in a way that allowed the participant to tell their own story, while clarifying *when* the participant was making meaning of the experiences. For example, if the participant felt that interactions with professors had an important impact on their college success, clarifying questions were posed to determine that this was their feeling *now,* not while they were a student.

It was also expected that individual perceptions of an event could change substantially over the years. However, Eich's methodology suggests that the memories retained over time are often the strongest; their particular impact or importance has allowed the memory to survive clearly despite the passage of time (Eich, 2010). Further, it is plausible that memories over time may become more accurate, as the participant has more opportunity to making meaning of the event over a larger life context. Retrospective interviews offer an additional advantage over interviews with current

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students. Current students could be uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues, or may be impacted by positionality problems associated with the perceived power gap between themselves and the interviewer. For example, current students may be reluctant to discuss issues openly and honestly if they believe their position is in conflict with the researcher's, primarily because the researcher is an "expert" with degrees and practical experience.

Such impaired independence on the part of the participant could have been extremely damaging, if not paralyzing to the data collection process. This effect remained a risk even in students who were near graduation. However, much of this pressure resolved once the student matriculated. As a result, alumni interviews and memory-elicited data contributed greatly to the validity of the interview results in this particular study.

To the extent that critical themes emerge from the data collected, they were coded and reviewed for validity and consistency. Though the results of qualitative research may not be generalizable to every institution, they may be transferable to similar situations and student groups. (Patton, 2002) Stated differently, if the selected research group succeeds academically as a result of specific factors, then we may be able to conclude that other similarly-situated groups can succeed as well if similar factors are present (Patton, 2002).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella, 1985). Pascarella's model addresses student change in the context of five sets of variables, with each set having a

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cascading, or cumulative influence on the others (Pascarella, 1985). Pascarella's model is unique and appropriate for this study because it recognizes that factors influencing student change build incrementally upon one another over time, and that the student's academic experience is collectively defined by several key variables. The core variables of the model are discussed below in sequence, and form the conceptual background for both the literature review and the nature of the research questions.

Assumptions

In the context of Pascarella's General Model, the study took the view that student failure or disengagement within the institution may be a symptom of the underlying problem, not the problem itself. A predominant assumption underlying this study was that most African-American students at WLC frequently experience some level of race-related duress during their college experiences, and those who succeeded would have overcome the duress in some way. This view was supported by a number of studies on race-related stress on college-going African-American men. In a substantial qualitative study, race-related incidents were reported more frequently by African-American students on primarily-white campuses (PWI's) than at HBCU's (Watkins, 2007). Watkins conducted focus groups involving 46 participants on the campuses of both an HBCU and a PWI. The study focused on significant negative life events and the student's responses to those events. While both white and African-American students reported stress-inducing events in their lives, the African-American students reported more of their negative life events involved the college campus or were related to college in some way. Further, in a recent qualitative case study covering over two years of

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observations on a predominately white college campus, Jackson (2012) noted that brotherhood was particularly important as a counterforce for helping African-American males overcome perceived racial obstacles on campus.

Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change creates a hierarchy whereby one can analyze student change and those who are in a position to effect change. The model builds incrementally from Variable 1 to Variable 5 (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella, 1985). Variable 1 encompasses what the student has already experienced before they enroll in college. For purposes of this study, though research may identify success factors that stem from this variable, it is largely out of the institution's locus of control. Current students have already been admitted to the institution and prior experiences obviously cannot be influenced. However, in Variables 2-4, the institution and its constituents could be in a position to create vehicles to help African-American students succeed, or to remove obstacles that prevent success.

In the case of an African-American male student attending a WLC, the current study posited that minority students would "self-construct" various academic and social support mechanisms that were informal and individual in nature, and that allowed them to maintain their level of academic success. The study also anticipated that small colleges would offer less formal support programs than larger universities, and therefore individuals would be forced to take primary responsibility for their own success in this environment. As a result, successful African-American males at WLC would be expected respond to race-related duress by assigning meaning and value to specific, positive interactions that they believed would help them overcome negative feelings toward the academic environment.

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The most important idea underlying this study was that high-achieving African-American male alumni of WLC have likely succeeded academically in the face of varying forms of race-related difficulties. The research questions were designed to give these successful students a voice, and allowed them to describe how they achieved success. The study attempted to contrast the voice of African-American male alumni with those of white alumni. The study posited that success factors cited by white alumni would differ significantly, and would focus more on non-institutional factors, such as family influences and formal educational opportunities. By comparing the two sets of participant responses, this research study sought to gain a sense for the effects of the WLC institution on academic success as it relates to race.

Research Position and Perspectives

One of the ideas underlying this study was that African-American male students may experience dissatisfaction with their experience at small, white liberal arts colleges, but somehow overcome it. If and when they do experience this dissatisfaction, how do they cope academically? Or were they selected at the institution already in possession of traits that would ensure their later success? This study sought to identify elements of coping mechanisms or counterspaces that contribute to African-American student success in these educational spaces. Accordingly, research explored the lived experiences of high-achieving African-American male students by examining their collegiate experiences retrospectively. In doing so, it is set out to link the educational challenges identified in previous scholarship to specific positive student factors and coping mechanisms that lead to greater minority student success.

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The possible answers to the question of how these particular African-American students attributed and defined their success were numerous. Perhaps the answer lay in the classroom, the type of work assigned, the personality of the professor, or the desire to compete with fellow students. Alternatively, perhaps the explanation would be much simpler, or no different for these African-American students than any other student at a small, white, liberal arts college. In any case, it seems clear that these interactions *mattered,* but *how*, *where*, and *why* they mattered were open questions.

Situated Learning

It is apparent that students at WLC institutions may be at high risk of becoming disillusioned with their educational experience when compared to white students at the same institution. In particular, minority dissatisfaction has been closely associated with the missing "critical mass" of minority students at WLC institutions (Strayhorn, 2008). However, engaging teaching methods, which are closely associated with WLC institutions, have been shown to create positive effects in the way African-American males experience college (Wiggan, 2008). It is unclear how these effects interact within the small college environment. Accordingly, it is important that institutions try to understand those factors that contribute to or accompany high-achievement in African-American students, especially males.

Summary

Overwhelmingly the body of research associated with African-American males takes a deficit approach. This study undertook the topic of African-American male

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academic success from a more positive perspective, to identify those factors that are

associated with strong academic performance at WLC. Accordingly, a qualitative

approach was appropriate and sought to highlight the experiences of individuals who had

achieved success at WLC. Memory-elicited data, gathered through a series of two

interviews with each participant, provided rich detail necessary to answer the study

research questions at four key WLC site selections.

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CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review has three major objectives. First, it considers broadly the reasons students succeed academically in college, and why that success is important. Second, it explores academic success through the lens of minority students, particularly African-American males. Third, it demonstrates the gaps in the literature that this study proposes to fill: a better understanding of how African-American males attribute their academic success at small WLC institutions. The review contemplates student experiences in two main areas: the context of pre-college academic success influences and success contributors during the college experience. The body of research related to student academic success has typically been examined with the core goal of identifying factors associated with student success, as well as the causes for student failure.

This literature review considered the body of academic research within the theoretical boundaries outlined in the conceptual framework. Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change was the framework for this study, and influenced the literature review, the design of the study, and subsequent analysis of the data collected. This model contemplated five major factors that could influence the amount and nature of change a student might experience in college. Pascarella's General Model describes five key factors:

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- Student Background/Pre-College Traits

- Structural/Organizational Characteristics

- Institutional Environments

- Interactions with Agents of Socialization

- Quality of Student Effort

Pre-College Factors in Academic Success

Pre-college factors related to student academic success have been examined in a number of studies, primarily in the context of academic preparation, as well as social preparation for handling interactions that occur in college. Higher levels of academic preparation and student motivation are known to closely align with student academic success (Adelman, 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Kuh, 2005; Perna, 2005). It is evident that the concept of college "preparation" goes well beyond standard academic competencies such as strong study skills, reading comprehension, and high standardized test performance. It has even been demonstrated that early social influences, such as the culture of the student's particular neighborhood, deter students from attending college, even in the face of strong personal motivation (Stewart, 2007).

Students may also be more prepared to attend college and succeed if they have stored significant "social capital" through continuous, positive social and educational experiences during their formative years. For students of limited means, and first-generation students, a relative lack of social capital may leave them underprepared for interaction with faculty (Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2012). Using data collected as part of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, researchers originally

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sampled 4,501 students, and in a follow-up surveyed 3,081 students about their college experiences. The participating institutions in this study were more heavily oriented toward the liberal arts, with 11 of the 19 participating sites being liberal arts colleges. The study found that first-generation students are actually impacted negatively by interactions with faculty, while benefiting from interaction with their peers (Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2012). This is primarily because these students are not prepared to interact constructively with faculty. These results indicate that the context of student – faculty interaction matters as much as the nature of the interaction, and could affect a student's self-efficacy, and ultimately the student's academic success. It also makes the case that we need to better understand the context of student interaction in the location where it occurs and with respect to the demographic group involved.

Socioeconomic status is also closely associated with academic success. It is widely accepted that students of higher socioeconomic status will generally succeed at higher rates than other students; the opposite is true for students of lower socioeconomic status. Part of this phenomenon may be explained by economic factors alone, as it has been widely demonstrated that a significant negative correlation exists between poverty and educational achievement at the pre-college level (Wong, 2012). However, in a series of case studies involving eight high-poverty, high-performing schools, Wong documents that the actions of teachers, assessment strategies, culture within the institution can increase performance levels of students, even in challenging circumstances. Stated differently, students who are poor will generally underperform when compared with students of greater economic means, unless there are interventions in place.

It is noteworthy that some debate exists as to whether the poverty-performance correlation is in fact an over-generalization of more subtle phenomena. Some evidence exists to indicate that "academic resources" available to the student may be a better overall predictor of future educational success than other measures, even socioeconomic ones (Adelman, 1999). Adelman's study used a massive bank of data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics on the scheduled graduating class of 1982, from 10th grade in 1980 until age thirty in 1993. This longitudinal study performed least-squares regression analysis on these data sources, which included primary sources such as high school records, to identify factors that contributed to high school completion. However, regardless of how financial resources are defined, the overall body of literature supports the contention that socioeconomic status correlates significantly with academic success. Some argue that the influence of social class characteristics on students is so pervasive that schools cannot overcome it, regardless of instructional programs, teacher training, and institutional climate (Rothstein, 2004).

Socioeconomic status is also inextricably tied to family background. Together these two constructs form a multi-faceted phenomenon which impacts educational outcomes in subtle and unforeseen ways. For example, marked conceptual differences persist between the social classes with respect to the norms of rearing and educating children.

As part of a comprehensive review of the research completed for the William and Flora Hewett foundation, Rothstein (2004) examined specifically the ways in which social class and life structure impacts students. Parents who are of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to have jobs that involve "order-taking" rather than "order-giving",

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and they often have less opportunity to influence their own daily lives than parents of higher socioeconomic status. This may result in the manifestation of a fatalistic worldview of various challenges in their lives, such as systems of education, a view which they may foreseeably pass along to their children (Rothstein, 2004). Further, this order-taking approach to combatting obstacles manifests itself in myriad ways, such as in early parent-child learning interactions. Rothstein's literature review found that parents of lower socioeconomic status tended to read to their children by focusing on rules of conduct, such as "paying attention," rather than engaging the child with creative elements and having them make connections to developments in the story. These differing approaches to education may snowball over time, and result in very different student postures and outlooks on the educational process. Similarly, Jun and Colyar noted in a survey of literature on the topic of student success that high student performance was nearly always associated with supportive and demanding parents who created high expectations for their children (Jun and Colyar, 2002; Tierney and Auerbach, 2005).

The messages parents impart upon their children also directly impact student success in college. Kranstuber, Carr, and Hosek (2012) completed a survey of 419 students enrolled in a public university in the Midwestern United States. Participants ranged from age 19 to age 44. The sample was comprised of 63% males, and a majority of white students. Using a detailed questionnaire, the study found that when parents pass along positive "memorable messages," which demonstrate elements such as care and concern for the child's well-being in college, students react positively. Stated differently, the presence of the memorable message correlates with academic success regardless of its specific content (Kranstuber, Carr, and Hosek, 2012).

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Of course, the type of messages and signals passed along to the student is affected by the family member's own experience, or lack of experience, with college. Similarly, in a 2011 book reviewing existing literature and practice in education, Templeton noted that parents may convey similar negative messages to their children as they received from authority figures, such as suggestions that they are slow, or are failures (Templeton, 2011). The implication is that socioeconomics and parental influences have a disproportionate impact on student success later in life, and that these effects are both incremental and interrelated.

Whether a student's immediate family members completed college has also been shown to correlate with academic success. The challenges and obstacles facing first-generation students are well documented, and it is clear that the collective benefits and rewards of college completion build incrementally over time. Kuh and Pike (2005) sampled 3,000 undergraduates using the College Student Experience Questionnaires, covering six dominant Carnegie institutional types. Kuh and Pike used latent variable structural equations models to generate and adjust a stable profile for comparison across all students selected in the sample. Kuh and Pike found that there were measurable differences between first and second-generation college students in the way they perceived college. A critical finding was that first-generation college students perceive the college environment to be less supportive than other students, and also reported less progress academically and intellectually while in college. However, these differences were primarily as a result of their educational aspirations and where they chose to live while attending college, both factors that are highly socialized and parent-influenced (Kuh and Pike, 2005). It is clear that first-generation students are at a disadvantage

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compared to their peers with respect to cultural capital, and are likely to be unprepared to properly interact with faculty upon entering college (Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2012). The broad implication is that differences in family backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions account for significant differences in college success.

In addition, other pre-college factors have been shown to influence subsequent academic success, including formal educational practices and interventions at the local, middle, and high school level. Though some level of academic preparation is an obvious and anticipated outcome of pre-college education, the factors that translate to student success come in a variety of forms. In a series of seven case studies involving high-performing, high-poverty elementary, middle, and high schools, Wong looked for patterns of curriculum and leadership which contributed to student success. His selected case studies were all in the United States, from Oregon to North Carolina, and covered elementary, middle, and secondary schools. He found that individual student focus, high expectations, collaborative teaching, and strong leadership were predictors of academic success in high poverty schools (Wong, 2012). Further, he found common practices of appropriate social interaction, feedback, knowledge construction, and knowledge connection to be particularly important to student success in challenging learning environments (Wong, 2012). It is also notable that students rely on a wide range of information in reaching the decision to attend college, as well as where to attend college. Tierney's 2003 review of the literature found that availability and quality of secondary school counseling services shapes student expectations, persistence in college, and ultimately, success in college (Tierney, 2005). Accordingly, absent strong parental influence or strong personal determination, school counselors may be the lone

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determining factor in where students attend college, and an important factor in how well students perform when they arrive.

The importance of pre-college factors on subsequent student academic success cannot be overstated, and there is a gap in our collective understanding of how accepted theories of student success and pre-college influences translate to African-American male student success in small, white liberal arts colleges. This study sought to close this gap by seeking the lived experience of African-American males, and identifying through the research methodology the impact and significance of pre-college influences on their academic success.

The Effects of the College Environment on Academic Success

The effects of the college environment on student academic success have been studied at length. The majority of the literature examines the college environment in terms of academic and non-academic factors that influence the student while in college. Astin's *What Matters In College: Four Years Revisited* is arguably the most comprehensive and fundamental inquiry into how and why students succeed in college; it examined a wide range of institutional factors, both academic and non-academic. This large, longitudinal study examined data from over 200 institutions and 25,000 students in order to determine which aspects of the student experience significantly affected educational outcomes. This study was conducted across all institutional types, including large, research-intensive universities and small private colleges.

Astin's study made a number of critical findings, but the most critical was that nearly any form of activity that better engages students in the college environment,

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commonly referred to as "time on task", contributes to student learning and development (Astin, 1993). Further, Astin found that several other factors correlated significantly with student success: faculty roles, extracurricular involvement, living arrangements, and peer groups, among others (Astin, 1993).

Other researchers have examined the role of the faculty more closely, and found that faculty involvement in student life, even if informal, is closely associated with both persistence and improved academic performance (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1978). While faculty involvement is generally understood to be a positive influence on student success, significantly less is known about how faculty influence particularly affects first-generation, minority, or at-risk students. This is an important question for this study, since the primary research question centered on student academic success in African-American males, a demographic group that is statistically more likely to be underprepared, or first-generation college attendees. A recent study contributes significantly to the body of knowledge in this area, finding that faculty involvement and engagement with the students becomes more important in difficult, challenging, or intimidating courses (Micari and Pazos, 2012). Micari and Pazos sampled 113 undergraduates who were enrolled in an organic chemistry course at a highly-selective university in the Midwest. Organic chemistry is understood to be among the most difficult courses in college, with an extremely high "washout" rate. The sample touched the classes of four different professors, and found that several instructor behaviors resulted in increases in student confidence and final grades: the student looking up to the professor, feeling comfortable approaching the professor, and feeling that the professor respects the students (Micari and Pazos, 2012).

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Micari and Pazos' findings echoed Wong's research into formative educational performance in high-poverty, high-performance schools. Interpretively, it seems that when the academic stakes are high, personal interaction becomes increasingly important. Interestingly, the study also found that the personal interactions with the professor, though positive, did not change the student's "academic identity." Stated differently, students who disliked science probably still disliked science after the course, yet the nature of interaction with the professor allowed them to navigate it more successfully than they would have otherwise.

Other researchers corroborate these findings. In particular, Vogt showed that faculty who "bring themselves" to the classroom via personal anecdotes and professional background create connections to students that contribute to student success (Vogt, 2008). Carvajal (2005) found in a similar qualitative dissertation that faculty involvement was important, particularly when the faculty focused on the out-of-class student relationship (Carvajal, 2005). This line of inquiry is critical to this study, because it suggests that positive faculty interaction matters to students, and the more challenging the college environment, the more important these interactions become. The body of research also indicates that the professor or instructor must "earn" the respect and allegiance of students in the classroom, and that students tend to ignore or discount formal titles (Pace, 2007). This is important because it implies the instructor must earn the respect of a wide and diverse array of students, including minority students, who may share different worldviews than the instructor.

Other lines of inquiry find important relationships between student success and the specific spaces in which learning occurs. In particular, learning communities have

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been found valuable in creating a shared learning experience that encourages both academic and social integration (Tinto and Russo, 1994). A learning community may be loosely defined as an academic space in which more than one academic course is built around a single theme. For example, a hypothetical class entitled "Man and the Universe" could theoretically encompass astronomy, theology, philosophy, and mathematics, depending on the instructional goals. The basic premise of the learning community is that it is effective because integrates social and academic learning. Using mixed methods, Tinto and Russo surveyed students enrolled in a coordinated studies program within a large community college and compared them with students who were not enrolled in coordinated studies on a number of measures, including social engagement and academic gains. The research instrument was based on Pace's Quality of Student Effort survey. Students who were enrolled in a coordinated studies program showed greater academic involvement, learning gains, and ability to regulate their own learning (Tinto and Russo, 1994).

Similarly, Tinto's mixed methods study of classroom communities at Seattle Central Community College (1997) was particularly insightful and lends credence to the effectiveness of integrated learning. This study, particularly the qualitative case analysis, confirmed that learning communities influence student success because they give students an academic "voice", and encourage development of informal student support groups (Tinto, 1997). However, specific teaching methods and learning strategies are also influenced by the institution in question, and impact students in different ways. The student experience is dynamic, and the effectiveness of specific programs and interventions is a product of a changing environment. Stated differently, institutional

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type and the level of student academic and social interaction is a function of institutional type and the learning environment. (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Williamson & Creamer, 1988).

While it is clear that integrated academic-social learning interventions such as learning communities can be effective, relatively little is known about their impact on African-American students, and even less is known about how they intersect with race in the context of small, white liberal-arts institutions. One of the primary research questions in this study will inquire into this gap in the literature: why do African-American males feel they succeed academically at small, white liberal-arts colleges? Will integrated learning experiences matter to these students because they help close academic and social gaps? Do academic interventions matter to the study participants in these learning spaces?

Institutional influences also play key roles in student academic success. Influences that are of primary importance to this study include student participation in Greek organizations and the effects of institutional type. The effect of Greek organizations on student performance has been examined in a number of studies. Pascarella, Flowers, and Whitt (2009) examined the effects of Greek affiliation on student performance and found substantial negative effects in the first year of college, and more negligible negative effects in subsequent class years. This study did not address the Greek impact on minority students in detail, but did find that minority males in Greek organizations experience an inverse effect, with positive rather than negative effects on academic performance early in the college career (Pascarella, 2009; Pascarella,

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1996). With extremely high rates of Greek participation compared to most state flagship and regional public institutions, the impact of Greek life, and in particular African-American social fraternities, is an important line of inquiry in this study at WLC institutions. Do these fraternities contribute to the academic success of African-American males at WLC institutions?

The private, liberal-arts college is frequently championed as a bastion of good teaching, student engagement, and integrated learning. The institutional focus centers on a broad-based, residential educational experience, engaged students and faculty, and experiential learning. Pascarella (2004) closely examined the pedagogical effectiveness of liberal arts colleges and found them to be exemplary. Pascarella sampled 16 four-year colleges and universities located in 13 states; the colleges were purposefully selected to represent a cross-section of institutional types and governance structures (Pascarella, 2004). Five of these institutions were private liberal arts colleges. The study showed that liberal arts colleges evidenced strong practices in undergraduate education than either research universities, or regional institutions (Pascarella, 2004). This effect is recognized by the students and alumni of these institutions as well (Kuh, 2003).

Kuh and Umbach (2003) also made significant findings pertinent to the liberal arts college. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2002 and 2003, which included survey results from nearly 50,000 college seniors at 568 universities and colleges in the United States, Kuh and Umbach analyzed NSSE data for evidence of the impact of college on student character. Character, for purposes of this study, was defined by the authors as a composite of twelve selected NSSE variables, including survey items such as civic engagement, oral communication skills, ethics, and

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general knowledge. Students at liberal arts colleges reported greater gains in character development than students from other institutional types, though other reported gains were not statistically significant. Further, small institutions, private institutions, and institutions with even a modest religious affiliation contributed significantly to character development (Kuh and Umbach, 2003).

These studies suggest that, in a vacuum, liberal arts colleges offer exemplary instructional environments for students to develop. However, despite an engaging culture of teaching and learning, Strayhorn and Devita (2010) found that this effect did not directly translate to African-American male students at these institutions. Rather, African-American males collaborate and interact less with their peers at liberal arts colleges than at master's granting institutions (Strayhorn and Devita, 2010). This suggests a significant gap in the literature. Why would African-American males interact less at otherwise extremely "engaging" institutions? Further, if they are interacting less, which has been established as a key predictor of educational success, how are they managing to succeed?

Underrepresented Minorities and Academic Success

Pascarella suggested that future academic research should anticipate a significant increase in diversity in American higher education (Pascarella, 2005). Further, he predicted that this fundamental increase in diversity would become pervasive to the nature of educational research. The broad implication is that a larger paradigm shift in higher education is underway, in which minority student populations will continue to

increase in importance. It is clear that the educational experiences of minority students will increasingly become the rule, rather than the exception to the rule.

In viewing minority student experiences in higher education through the lens of academic success, it is apparent that the college experiences of particular ethnic groups vary widely. Ethnicity and minority group status also affects a broad range of student behaviors, from the initial decision as to whether to attend college, up to the selection of a graduate institution for further study (Pascarella, 2004; Desmond, 2009). Though it is well-established that an achievement gap exists between African-American students and white students at the college level, this gap is also apparent with respect to other minority groups as well, and is explained by a wide range of factors. As a general rule, the body of research shows that various interventions with respect to the academic performance of minority groups have met with mixed or inconsistent results (Engberg, 2004). Most studies seek to explain minority achievement gaps in terms of access, the learning environment, motivation, personal values, family ties, or socioeconomic differences. As part of this literature review, experiences of minority groups on campus, including Hispanic, Asian, and African-American students were examined.

It has been established that most Hispanic students do not complete high school, a proportion greater than any other minority student group, including African-Americans (Chapa and De La Rosa, 2004). Further, Hispanic students as a group lag behind every other block minority group in nearly every measurable educational category (Desmond, 2009). A 2009 study of nearly 13,000 Hispanic high school seniors from the state of Texas found that the majority were reluctant to attend college due to strong family ties. Many of the students surveyed reported strong family ties had impacted their decision to

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attend college, either due to family responsibilities or latent pressure from parents and sibling to maintain the integrity of the family unit. If they chose to attend, this effect increased the likelihood the student would attend a local college, non-residentially (Desmond, 2009). This finding is particularly important given that both completing college in-residency and having the freedom to choose from a variety of postsecondary institutions is closely associated with college success. One criticism of Desmond's study is that it was conducted in Texas, where the state flagship colleges are located farthest from the heaviest concentrations of Hispanic students. This geographic gulf may have influenced their decision whether to attend college, or if they chose to enroll, where to attend college. Nonetheless, Desmond's study controlled for the effects of household income and parental education, meaning that nearly all of the difference in college choice could be explained by the social influence of the family unit. However, in a smaller quantitative study of 100 first-generation minority students at a diverse institution on the West coast, students were not motivated to attend college by family attitudes. Rather, personal attitudes and desire to attend college were the decisive factors (Dennis, 2005). The site for this study was an urban college with a high population of ethnic minority and immigrant students; in this study the family unit mattered less.

Other studies have considered the effects of the learning environment on minority students. Museus (2012) completed a survey of 60 minority students, representing a wide cross-section of institutional types. The students were purposefully sampled and included Asian, African-American, and Latino undergraduates. The study made a number of insightful findings, but several were particularly instructive with respect to this study. One of the key observations was that at primarily white institutions, both minority and

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white faculty were capable of creating better academic outcomes for in the student (Museus, 2012). In addition, the study highlighted four key areas where students reported effective interactions with faculty: sharing common ground; providing holistic support; humanizing the college experience; and providing proactive support (Museus, 2012). It is interesting to note that each of these interactions were not specific to the mechanics or practice of teaching. Rather, they were "non-academic" in the sense that they related more closely to the institutional climate.

The overarching context of Museus' study was an attempt to achieve better understanding of how faculty could help students find greater access to social capital, which is generally defined to include the varying types of social connections that individuals maintain, and the relative value of those connections. The study confirms that faculty and campus mentors are critical sources of all types of capital previously untapped by students, particularly underrepresented students. Further, it underscores the pivotal nature of non-minority faculty, who are most prevalent among the sites selected for this study. From the perspective of instructor feedback and advice, a longitudinal study of over 1,400 Hispanic and African-American students found minority students were negatively impacted by both negative criticism and the study skills instilled in them by faculty. Negative feedback had a particularly damaging effect on African-American students. However, the study also showed that constructive faculty criticism and a multicultural environment benefitted both student groups significantly (Cole, 2008).

Each of the studies examined in this review underscored the fact that white faculty matter to minority students, and can help them succeed. Accordingly, it is clear that educational research, particularly with respect to minority students, must take into

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account a wide range of factors that influence academic success in minority students, including institutional context, social spaces, the message delivered, and the messenger.

First-Generation Students and Academic Success

First-generation college students are generally defined as those for whom neither parent completed a four-year college degree. Previous studies have found that first-generation students are less involved on campus, have less social and financial support, and are at greater risk of failing to complete college. However, one of the most important observations made about first generation students is that they have increased substantially in number since the millennium (Strayhorn, 2006). Given the political focus on higher education in the United States, particularly the Obama administration's focus on increasing post-secondary educational attainment, this trend is likely to continue. In addition, first-generation students are disproportionately represented in high-growth areas, such as for-profit and distance education. As a result, when combined with the increasing political rhetoric surrounding access and affordability, issues that affect first-generation students will continue to play an important role in higher education for the foreseeable future. With respect to this study, the experiences of first-generation college students are also important due to the due to the disproportionate number of minority students who are first-generation. Research findings that speak to the first-generation student experience will inevitably share a significant amount of phenomenological overlap with studies of minority students.

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Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella completed a large, longitudinal study of first-generation college students in 2012. They surveyed students from 19 colleges in 11 different states, across both four-year and two-year institutional types (Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2012). The study examined pretest and posttest effects of liberal arts colleges on an original sample of over 4,500 undergraduates, including white and non-minority students. The study made several key findings associated with first-generation students. In general, first-generation students obtained greater incremental benefits from challenging academic work and peer interaction than their fellow students. In addition, those students whose parents had at least some college experience, even if it did not result in a degree, benefited from that experience, apparently because the parent's acquired college "social capital" transferred to the student. Last, the study found that first-generation students were sometimes negatively impacted by their faculty experiences. The researchers posited that this was a result of the first-generation students' lack of experience in dealing with situations that demand social capital, such as negotiating or advocating with a faculty member (Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2006).

The practical implication of this study is that teaching and advising practices considered to be foolproof in second and third-generation college students may in fact impede the intended outcome when applied to first-generation students. These findings are consistent with respect to the body of literature associated with first-generation students, and make one very important point. First-generation students should not be expected to acquire an understanding of the system of higher education on their own; this responsibility inevitably falls on the college or university. The study further suggests that it may be effective to pair first-generation students with non-first generation students in

any formative work or in initial housing assignments (Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella, 2006). This fits with the "social capital" model, in that it may be possible to generate transfers of social capital between students, rather than simply from parents or authority figures. Students enter college with certain social connections and networks that are beneficial to them, known as social capital. First generation students typically have less effective, less developed social networks than students whose parents completed college O'Keefe and Djeukeng, 2010). The college experience can be especially useful for them when they can acquire social capital from a variety of sources, including authority figures and peers.

<center>**African-American Males and Academic Success**</center>

One important consideration in the design of this study is that it is extremely difficult to decouple student engagement, academic success, motivation, and racial coping mechanisms in terms of a quantitative or correlational study. This research study sought to fill this gap by helping identify the thought processes and deep experiences which describe student engagement and define success at WLC. The idea of African-American male academic success is important because the college achievement gap is still wide.

In historical context, the academic achievement gap between African-American males and their white counterparts has been explored from a number of perspectives, including minority experiences at many different types of institutions (Strayhorn and Devita, 2008; DeSousa and Kuh, 1996; Flowers, 2003). However, regardless of the type of institution involved, one of the primary reasons African-American students leave college is because of poor performance (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996).

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In addition, African-American male students learn significantly less than white students in the first three years of college (Flowers, 2003). In a longitudinal study of over 3,000 students, both African-American and white, Flowers (2003) found that white students achieved greater cognitive gains than African-American students during this time frame. This was despite controlling for precollege characteristics, background, social experiences, and institutional type.

Even successful African-American students expend much more effort to achieve the same results as white students (Campbell, 2010). The overall conclusion that can be drawn is that too frequently, African-American students take too long to achieve success in college, or succeed only with an inordinate amount of effort and by circumventing numerous obstacles. Accordingly, research that helps the academic community improve or accelerate the performance of African-American male students performs a critical social and educational function. By better understanding the African-American student experience, attentive institutions can create better outcomes in the classroom and make more effective use of limited resources.

Institutional Type

The institutional type and the climate on campus have been examined as a significant influence on the African-American student. In a quantitative study based on a nationally-representative sample of respondents to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, Strayhorn (2008) found that with respect to African-American males, supportive relationships correlated with satisfaction. However, the study found no statistical link between relationships and academic success. A key finding of this survey

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was that when African-American males attend college, they are less likely to become academically and socially integrated into college life, and have difficulty seeking help and developing useful relationships (Strayhorn, 2008). It is less clear how this difficulty translates into academic performance.

Conversely, certain "negative" engagement factors that detract from direct campus interaction, such as the amount of paid work students complete in addition to their academic responsibilities, may negatively impact their academic success (Strayhorn and DeVita, 2010).

Strayhorn and Devita (2010) also examined African-American males in the context of the liberal arts college. Using a population of all African-American males who took the College Student Experience Questionnaire in 2004, the study filtered for unmarried, full-time students who lived on campus. The resulting sample size for statistical analysis was 149 African-American males across all institutional types. The study found that African-American males actually collaborate and interact less with their peers at smaller colleges than at graduate institutions, which is a striking finding. Why do African-American male students interact less, despite small class sizes and a captive audience of peers and professors? In a similar line of inquiry, some studies show that African-American male students benefit in unique ways from their experiences at historically-black colleges and universities, such as engaging more deeply with the institution and continuing on to post-graduate study at higher rates (Pascarella, 2004).

Other studies confirmed this finding, and further suggested that minority students may develop a culture of "tolerance" at institutions where they are in the minority. Stated differently, minority students may hide their unhappiness simply to follow through with

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their original commitment to the college, rather than openly admit dissatisfaction (Thompson, 1991). These reactions may be a result of disparities in how African-American males view the college experience compared with their white counterparts (Flowers, 2003). Strayhorn suggested that African-American students at primarily white institutions may struggle due to the lack of a "critical mass" of similarly-suited students (Strayhorn, 2008). Perhaps this explains the fact that high achieving African-American students feel pressure to "prove themselves" at primarily white institutions, despite strong academic credentials (Strayhorn, 2008). These findings imply that African-American male students may encounter a challenging environment at WLC, though their specific experiences and responses to these institutional environments remain poorly understood.

Alternatively, based on the research available, it appears that African-American students engage and interact more deeply at HBCU than at WLC. However, it is not clear whether these environments actually result in greater learning or student academic success. It may be beneficial to African-American students that historically black colleges offer a critical mass of African-American students (Palmer, 2010). Pascarella identified a similar effect at historically-black colleges; African-American students reported they interacted more with faculty, a variable known to correlate with student satisfaction (Pascarella, 2004).

Further, a 2002 study found that African-American student engagement (or disengagement) cannot be explained solely in the context of Ogbu's 1994 theory of oppositional culture (Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, and Johnson 2002). This finding was echoed in a much smaller, but similar in-depth qualitative case study of four black males, in which the researcher determined that his study participants were successfully

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navigating advanced math courses and achieving academic success (Stinson, 2011).

However, African-American students are known to create "counterspaces" that allow

them to cope with prevailing attitudes and race-related micro-aggressions on campuses

(Solarzano, 2000). Further, the creation of coping or countering mechanisms is not out of

the ordinary when students are faced with opposing institutional or cultural forces.

Mehan (1994) found that when high-risk community college students were placed in an

"untracking" program, the students developed positive coping mechanisms such as peer

groups. Along similar lines, Wildhagen (2008) found that high-achieving African-

American males are often penalized socially in "white" educational settings, but that the

penalties relate more to cultural intersection than academic factors (Wildhagen, 2008).

This suggests that differences in the social environment may not translate directly to

differences in academic performance. However, these studies lend credence to the idea

that African-American students may be forced to cope with an intensely "white"

institutional environment in unique ways in order to succeed. One qualitative study of 28

African-American doctoral students identified important institutional traits from the

perspective of African-American students. The study found that whether the institution

allowed the students an outlet through which to tell their "own stories", and whether the

institution exhibited cultural sensitivity were important institutional characteristics

(Ballard, 2010).

From a slightly different perspective, some studies have examined African-

American males in institutions other than higher education. One of the key findings in a

study conducted in the mid-managerial workplace found that African-American males

benefit less than their white counterparts from informal social networks (Johnson, 2011).

The author suggested a possible explanation could be a "quid pro quo" informational exchange system, whereby African-American males are not perceived to offer as much in return for shared information or access to the social network (Johnson, 2011). This finding lends credibility to the idea that similar social barriers may also exist in higher education.

Other lines of inquiry have identified factors associated with faculty, staff, mentors, and authority figures that contribute to African-American academic success. Specifically, access to African-American college alumni, counselors, and mentors has been associated with student success (Herndon, 2004), as has completing college in residency (Flowers, 2004). Family is also an important influence on the educational experience of African-American students, and this influence begins very early (Herndon, 2004).

A qualitative study completed in 2004, consisting of 50 Ivy League undergraduate African-American students, confirmed these findings. The study found the participant students relied on family units for advice and as "ports in a storm", long after leaving home and beginning their own careers (Barnett, 2004). Further, certain personal interactions with faculty, such as meeting for "a coffee or a Coke" or receiving career advice, correlates with African-American student involvement and success, a finding supported by Cole's work on African-American student identity (2011).

A review of the literature conducted by Owens (2010) also found similar themes that contributed to success in African-American students, including offering encouragement, providing a voice on campus for African-American men, and dispensing career-specific advice (Owens, 2010). Similarly, in a study involving 28 African-

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American male community college students and utilizing semi-structured interviews, the data gathered indicated that faculty can help African-American students by "knowing" them personally, and by creating a friendly learning environment that also "keeps check" on the students frequently. An additional finding was that professors should push the students to perform, as that behavior both demonstrates concern for the students' well-being and offers encouragement to reach high standards (Wood, 2011). A study involving high-achieving African-American students found that a "day one" connection to the institution via a bridge program help generate improved outcomes (Hughes, 2010).

Other factors related indirectly to mentorship also appear to contribute to African-American male student success. In a qualitative study of ten African-American medical students and three practicing physicians at Florida State University, the study participants cited social support, education, exposure to the field of medicine, group identity, faith, and social responsibility as key factors in their academic and career success (Thomas, 2011). Despite previous studies identifying associations between a supportive learning environment and African-American male satisfaction on campus, the body of research has not yet addressed how these factors help define academic success, particularly in the WLC.

Interactions on Campus

The body of research has determined that good teaching practices, engaging pedagogy, and extracurricular activities positively impact African-American male educational experiences, particularly when the teaching is perceived as caring (Wiggan, 2008). Other research has demonstrated that African-American males thrive in

environments that are supportive and nurturing (Strayhorn and DeVita, 2010). In addition, African-American males report greater academic gains when they attend institutions that focus on teaching rather than research (Flowers, 2003). Further, classroom methodology can impact minority students in unforeseen ways. One study found that specific instructor behaviors can have differing effects on minority students, including subtleties such as gestures and word choices. The study concluded that classroom effectiveness increases learning when a diversified classroom is appropriately matched with teaching ability and technology that is in step with varying student needs (Lopez, 2007).

An older study conducted by Trujillo examined similar issues in the classroom environment from the instructor's perspective, and determined that instructors exhibited different behaviors toward minority students. Specifically, instructors generally asked tougher questions to non-minorities, gave them more time to answer, and generated more demanding follow-up responses than with minority students (Trujillo, 1986). This is important because it is well-established that high instructor expectations correlate positively with student academic performance. Though other variables are involved, expectations can affect a range of factors, including student motivation and interest in the topic of study. Perhaps the most important factor is that high instructor expectations can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, with students conforming to expectations (Rosenthal and Rubin, 1978).

A significant body of evidence also suggests that active learning, strong teaching, and collaborative academic exercises are particularly influential on the African-American demographic group because these factors may help mitigate oppositional identity

(Wiggan, 2008). Oppositional identity is the idea that minority groups may reject or disengage from the dominant culture of an institution, particularly when the individuals in the group have little opportunity to influence policy in the institution. Downey examined oppositional culture from the instructor's perspective and reached mixed conclusions, finding that though race affected the way teachers perceived student behavior, it was difficult to discern racial preferences related to oppositional culture from ordinary instructor bias (Downey, 2004). Though Downey's study was conducted in an elementary school environment, it is useful in that it underscores the difficulty in identifying and parsing out subtle classroom interactions in a way that supports valid conclusions.

It seems clear that African-American male students flourish with good teaching and engagement with "agents of socialization" on campus, such as professors and staff members. However, this finding is also contingent upon obtaining a better understanding of the environment in which the learning occurs. Do African-American males engage in academic learning differently at WLC? Is the WLC a better learning environment, or a more difficult situation for minority students to overcome? The depth and variety of the existing body of research suggests that African-American student engagement is a complex phenomenon, clearly associated with race, but also associated with many other context-oriented variables that are different from race, such as family, economic, and social issues (Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, and Johnson 2002).

This research is specifically intended to help us understand student success in the context of a small, mostly white college in the South. In addition, as discussed later in this text, the selected institution will be high-tuition, and will be a "traditional" Southern

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institution. Stated differently, racism and inherent economic contrast should be present in the research environment. In this context, the study can help explore their roles in the experiences of successful African-American alumni from WLC.

Further, with respect to the specific effects of the success factors, and how high achievers are able to benefit from them, the study seeks to understand what it is about the success factor that actually translates to success. For example, if a student cites a close relationship with a professor as an important factor, we should be able to understand what characteristics of the faculty interaction translated to success. Was it because it made the student feel confident, and removed "burden of proof" anxiety? Or was the context more social, in that the student felt more ingrained in the fabric of the institution? Also, the question should help us understand what enabled the student to avail themselves of the success factor. Were they approached by the professor? Or did they seek out the professor? This is important because it helps us understand the relative importance of actions taken by members of the institution. Stated differently, if the study reveals that African-American males are more successful when they are actively approached and engaged by professors, institutional leaders need to know.

Summary

This review of the literature demonstrates that substantial research has been conducted with respect to the African-American student experience, particularly at large institutions. Further, significant research has been conducted on student academic success, both among African-American students and other student populations, such as first-generation students. However, little research has been conducted on African-

American students, particularly males, who attend primarily white liberal arts colleges. Understanding perceptions of academic success among this demographic group has important policy implications. Many liberal arts colleges are striving to improve various measures of diversity. These institutions are known to be bastions of good teaching practices, but it is not known whether these practices translate to academic success for the African-American male demographic group. Are these institutions doing all they can to promote African-American male student academic success? Or, are the factors associated with academic success beyond their ability to influence them?

METHODOLOGY

Design and Methodology

Methodological Approach

This qualitative research study was based on a purposeful sample of high-achieving African-American male and white alumni at selected WLC. Information-rich" interviews were instrumental to the study, providing critical information "about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry… studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (Patton, 2002 p. 230) Accordingly, qualitative analysis of purposefully-selected critical biographies provides deep, intimate knowledge of the phenomenon under examination. In this study, qualitative research provided meaningful information concerning the specific thought processes, reactions, and decisions made by study participants. This is in contrast to a traditional quantitative study, which would have correlated certain variables with academic success factors, without providing the richness of detail available through a qualitative design.

This study purposefully selected both African-American and white participants. Including interviews with white students helped bring into sharper relief the stories and experiences of African-American students and helped draw out key differences in the qualitative data. These differences would not have been as apparent if data were only

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drawn from a sample of African-American males. A key element of understanding African-American student success was identifying the degree of similarity or difference between minority and majority students.

Conceptual Framework

Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change was the conceptual framework for this study, and helped guide the nature of the research questions, formation of appropriate interview questions, and analysis of the results (Pascarella, 1985). This model describes factors that influence the magnitude and nature of the change students experience in college. Each factor has a cascading effect on subsequent factors, but takentogether, they describe conditions that create student change. Figure 3.1 illustrates the core variables of the framework and interprets how the variables shaped this study.
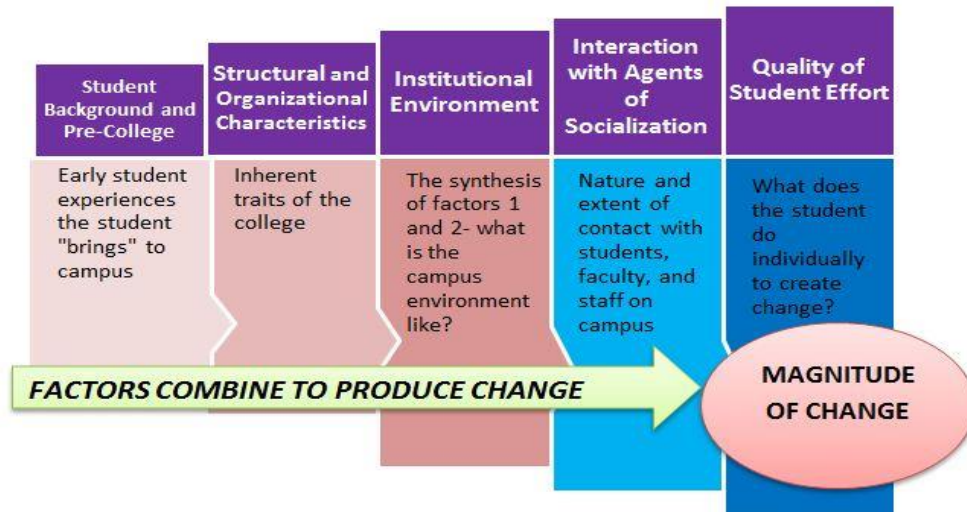

Figure 3.1: Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change (1985)

Pascarella's model recognizes that a wide variety of variables enter into the student's experience and ultimately shape the degree of change the student can undergo while in college. More positive variables contribute to the student's experience and ultimately result in greater capacity for positive change. Negative experiences can mitigate the effects of other positive variables. Though many of the variables Pascarella uses to frame student change are independent, each variable can have an influence on the others. For example, a student with a poor pre-college background may feel these negative effects if economic problems at home reduce the student's ability to afford to attend college.

The first two variables in Pascarella's model directly influence the character of the third variable, the Institutional Environment; subsequently, the Institutional Environment facilitates or, in some cases, discourages the effectiveness of the fourth variable, Interactions with Agents of Socialization. Agents of Socialization are conceptualized as individuals with particular influence on the student while in the change environment, such as peers, faculty, and staff at the institution. Quality of Student Effort while in the environment, the fifth variable, describes how "engaged" the student is with the institution and the socializing forces encountered. The level of effort put forth by students while in the institution, and while influenced by Agents of Socialization, directly shape the "outcome" or level of change observed (Pascarella, 1985). Student effort can take a variety of forms, including management of time, significant effort, focus, and study skills.

Variable 1, the Student Background/Pre-college Traits usually represent influences the student has already experienced, or traits the student already possesses,

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prior to entering college. Family influences, values, learned behaviors, level of educational proficiency, and socioeconomic status are examples of student background traits. Variable 2, the Structural/Organizational Characteristics, are typically a physical function of the institution in question, including the form of governance, whether the college is public or private, the size of the institution, and the selectivity of the institution, among numerous other factors. Variable 3, the Institutional Environment, can be described as the "climate" of the institution, created as a function of the first two variables. Variable 4, Interactions with Social Agents, includes "contact points" within the institutional environment that include individuals such as faculty, staff, advisors, and coaches. Variable 5, or Quality of Student Effort, considers how effectively the student connects, or takes advantage of the Social Agents and the Institutional Environment (Pascarella, 1985). This includes a wide range of factors associated with student effort. Examples of "student effort" include self-efficacy, willingness to work hard, and propensity to seek help from staff, peers, and faculty. This final factor essentially captures the overall will of the student to persevere, seek assistance, and to help foster their own academic success. It can also manifest itself in a number of specific forms. Students may adapt and learn time management skills; investigate deeply topics in which they have great interest; or, put forth great effort. They may also display other forms of personal investment, such as visiting professors in their offices, or seeking contact with peers outside of formal class time.

     This model is a dynamic model that also accounts for the pervasive influence of the student's effort as an element influencing change. Using Pascarella's model, this study sought to provide insight into how this model applies to African-American males at

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WLC institutions, and how the influence of particular factors changes in this environment. This study focused on the reasons the selected demographic group experienced academic success at small, white liberal arts colleges. As a result, it was foreseeable that the interview participants would draw on the wide range of their lived experiences in describing their academic success. This suggested that they may cite factors that are traceable to any one of Pascarella's Five Variables in describing their experiences. It was also possible that would suggest unforeseen factors that did not fit within categories conceived within Pascarella's model. For example, personal values systems that may change throughout life, such as religion and ethics, are not adequately addressed in the General Model. Further, other events, such as significant personal events that may have occurred while in college, whether positive or negative, do not fit well into Pascarella's categories. The purpose of the researcher in this study was to identify and illuminate any recurring themes appearing in the stories told by the interviewees.

Site Selection, Criteria, and Justification

At first consideration, small, selective WLC may seem like places where community and closeness might promote a favorable atmosphere for minority students. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the demographic and sociological environment could create a difficult learning environment for African-American males. Racial isolation, a limited critical mass of minority students, and the dampened effect traditional social support mechanisms could all make the WLC a difficult place for minority students to succeed. This effect could be particularly strong in an environment where race is a highly visible issue, such as the South, or at a high-

tuition college, where economic differences that might correlate with race would be most apparent. Both of these are present in the sites selected for this study. Fundamentally, this study sought critical cases that would draw out rich, high- quality data and help clearly delineate African-American male academic success factors at WLC. Situating the study in expensive, southern WLC's increased the chance of generating critical cases with rich information. Stated differently, the study was intended to help define why African-American males feel they succeed at WLC, an environment where social and demographic factors could make this most challenging.

According to Patton (2002), "Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study." For purposes of this study, a WLC was defined as a traditional liberal arts college with fewer than 5,000 students and a combined minority population of less than 20%. In addition, three other critical factors made the selected sites desirable: the institutions were high-cost when compared with other institutions in the area; each college was located in the South; and, each enrolled a proportionally high number of students from the immediate geographic area, as compared with similarly-situated colleges. These factors are important because, when present, they were expected to generate more information-rich participant responses. It is generally accepted that minority students rely more heavily on student aid than white students, both in terms of total dollars, and overall rates of student aid acceptance. The selection of high-cost colleges increased the likelihood that the study would draw out socioeconomic contrasts between African-American male students and the overall majority student population.

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It was also important that the study was performed in a college in the South. Though the purpose of the study was not to examine racial interaction specifically, the historical context of the South with respect to educational opportunities for African-Americans was considered important to the overall background of this study. A similar study performed in Southern California, or the Metro Northeast, for example, would likely identify different success factors less closely associated with regional racial identity.

Finally, it was important to choose colleges that retained a high percentage of students from the surrounding geographic area. This factor was important because it ensured that regional racial and demographic trends more closely reflect demographics of the institution. For example, if we were to select a highly diverse institution, such as Harvard University, as a study site, it is likely that we would not generate appropriate critical cases for purposes of this study. The geographic and cultural diversity of the Harvard student body could make studies involving racial interaction less meaningful, particularly when observed in historical and regional context. Only 15% of Harvard's students are from Massachusetts, which means the average Harvard student, in all likelihood, would not have the same lived cultural experiences as the average Bostonian or resident of the state of Massachusetts. By selecting high-cost, Southern WLC's with a high proportion of local students, the study was expected to generate high-contrast case data. Therefore, the study was conducted at sites where African-American male student success might be perceived as most difficult.

Based on the foregoing general criteria, the sites for this study included Furman University, Davidson College, Wofford College, and Presbyterian College. In addition to

general criteria described previously, these institutions were selected specifically for their academic rigor, low minority enrollment, and liberal arts focus. These colleges range from #12 (Davidson) to #121 (Presbyterian) in US News and World Report's rankings of top national liberal arts colleges (US News, 2013). While there are other liberal arts colleges within the geographic region, these colleges are among the relatively few southern institutions in the top 150 "national" liberal arts colleges. The list is otherwise dominated by institutions in California and the metropolitan Northeast. The four institutions identified for the current study are considered to be among the best liberal arts colleges in the nation, and are representative of the top private colleges in the South.

In addition, these colleges were selected for their similarity. They are similar in size of enrollment, participation in Division I athletics, and mission. All consider themselves to be selective, moderately selective, or highly selective institutions in terms of admission. Each is a traditional liberal arts institution, with student populations typical of selective liberal arts colleges in the region. They are also among the most expensive colleges nationally, and in the southeastern United States. Finally, each college maintains a strong focus on the residential undergraduate experience. For these reasons, the four institutions selected made strong sites for analysis of student experiences at academically rigorous liberal arts colleges.

Profile of Selected Sites

Four traditional liberal arts colleges were selected as sites for the study: Davidson College, Furman University, Presbyterian College, and Wofford College. Davidson College is located in North Carolina, while the remaining institutions are in South

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Carolina. The selected institutions share a number of characteristics. Each is a traditional liberal arts institution with small enrollment and high tuition, when compared with state institutions. In addition, each is considered at least "selective" in admissions, with two institutions typically classified as "highly selective." As a group these colleges attract strong students. Across all four sites, the average SAT scores for entering freshmen typically range from 1100 to 1400, not inclusive of the recently-added writing portion of the score. In addition, all four institutions report low minority enrollment when compared with typical state institutions and less selective private colleges in North Carolina and South Carolina. All of the institutions participate in Division I athletics. Two of the institutions have graduate programs: Furman and Presbyterian. Institutional endowments range from a low of approximately $80 million at Presbyterian to a high of $570 million at Furman (US News, 2013). Undergraduate enrollment for the four sites ranges from a low of approximately 1,400 students at Presbyterian to a high of approximately 2,800 at Furman. Each of these colleges is residential, with a very small number of commuters and part-time students.

Davidson College

Davidson College is a highly-selective liberal arts college located in Davidson, North Carolina, a small town situated just north of Charlotte. Davidson was founded as a Presbyterian institution in 1837, and reports an undergraduate enrollment of around 1,750 students as of 2012 (Davidson College, 2012). Davidson is considered to be a model liberal arts institution, as it has produced 23 Rhodes Scholars, is highly competitive in Division I athletics, and has a mean SAT score of approximately 1330. Approximately 8.2% of the 2012 entering class is African-American. Davidson has an acceptance rate of

24.8% (Davidson College, 2012). In addition, Davidson College recently curtailed the use of loan-based aid to students, the first liberal arts college in the United States to do so (Davidson, 2012). This is particularly important in light of the college's $41,000 tuition rate. The loan curtailment program is indicative of the college's financial strength, and is also reflected in Davidson's nearly $520,000,000 endowment (Davidson, 2012). In 2012, US News ranked Davidson as the nation's 12th best liberal arts college, not far behind giants such as Williams College and Amherst.

Furman University

Furman University is a "more selective" liberal arts college located near Greenville, South Carolina. Furman was founded in 1826 and has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,800. Furman focuses on service learning, and like Davidson is highly competitive in Division I athletics. Furman's mean SAT score in 2011 was approximately 1270. Of the 2012 entering class, only 6% are African-American. Furman has a freshman acceptance rate of 83% (Furman University, 2012). Furman's endowment is approximately $570,000,000 (Furman University, 2012). Furman also offers several graduate programs in education, and is the largest and least diverse institution examined in this study as measured by total enrollment. In addition, Furman's 2012 tuition rate was approximately $41,000 (Furman University, 2012).

Wofford College

Wofford College is a "more selective" institution located in Spartanburg, South Carolina, with an enrollment of approximately 1,600 students for the 2012 academic year. Wofford was founded as a Methodist institution in 1854, and has an endowment of approximately $160,000,000 (Wofford College, 2012). Approximately 9% of Wofford's

students are African-American (Wofford, 2013). Like each of the institutions selected in this study, Wofford participates in Division I athletics. In 2012, Wofford reported a mean SAT score of 1260 and an acceptance rate of approximately 65% (Wofford, 2012). Also of interest is that Wofford reports a high percentage of students active in Greek life, with nearly 60% of male and 50% of females participating in organized fraternity and sorority activities. Wofford's tuition rate in 2012 was $33,190 per year.

Presbyterian College

Presbyterian is a "selective" liberal arts college located in Clinton, South Carolina, a rural area located nearly equidistant from Columbia, home of the University of South Carolina, and the Upstate region. Presbyterian recently opened a graduate School of Pharmacy, one of the two selected institutions to offer a graduate program. Presbyterian has an $80,000,000 endowment and reports an acceptance rate of 67% (Presbyterian College, 2012). Of the four colleges examined in this study, Presbyterian is the most tuition-dependent and least expensive at approximately $30,000 per year. Approximately 9% of its students are minorities (Presbyterian College, 2012).

Campus Climate Policies Affecting African-American Students

Davidson College

Davidson offers a significant number of programs that support minority students. Compared with the three other institutions used as sites for this study, it has the most robust, formal minority support system in place. Two of the cornerstones of Davidson's programs are the STRIDE program, which is a summer transitional program to make sure that minority students transition effectively to their first year of college, and a

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Multicultural House, which is a building dedicated to serving students of color (Davidson College, 2013). The STRIDE program, or Students Together Reaching for Individual Development in Education, offers a number of services to students. Programming includes a Peer Mentor program, a "Mid-Year" Checkup, a pre-college enrichment program, monthly speakers, and an end-of-year celebration. The Multicultural House is an open space with a stated mission of serving minority students at Davidson. It has meeting space, audio-visual equipment, kitchen space, and is otherwise fully-furnished. In addition, Davidson employs a staff of two in the multicultural affairs office. Davidson also has an active Black Alumni Network, which produces a newsletter and manages a calendar of events.

Furman University

Furman also has a well-developed office of multicultural affairs. This office also employs a staff of two, and offers a slate of events for minority students. In addition, it sponsors numerous clubs under its administrative umbrella, including The Student League for Black Culture, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Furman University Gospel Ensemble, Hispanic Organization of Learning and Awareness, and the Minority Association of Pre-Medical Students (Furman University, 2013).

Wofford College

Wofford College employs one full-time employee in its office of multicultural affairs. Wofford offers a number of programs that support the minority student experience, including the Association for Multicultural Students, South Asian Student Association, Transitions, and Voices of Victory. Transitions is geared toward making the

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first two years of college easier for students, while Voices of Victory is a religious organization made up of primarily African-American students (Wofford College, 2013). Other informal groups exist on campus, including a gospel choir known as "Souljahs for Christ" which is comprised predominately of African-Americans students.

Presbyterian College

Presbyterian College sponsors an office of multicultural affairs which administers a Diversity Council as well as a Multicultural Affairs and Concerns Committee. In addition, Presbyterian also reports an African-American Alumni Council, but little information is publicly available on its work. Based on analysis of the Presbyterian College website, Presbyterian employs one staff member full time in multicultural affairs (Presbyterian College, 2013).

Participant Selection, Criteria, and Justification

The participant group for this study consisted of high-performing African-American male and white alumni of the selected institutions who performed well academically, particularly when considered in light of their standardized entrance examination scores. To increase the trustworthiness of the study findings, alumni were selected who graduated between two and ten years prior to the conduct of the study, or between the spring semester of 2003 and the spring semester of 2013. Such participants were expected to best illustrate the factors they believed helped them be successful, or in some cases, what actions at the institution took that helped them become successful. Further, their experiences were expected to help determine whether success factors were different for African-American and white students.

The framework for data collection was memory-elicited data analysis as conducted by Eich (2010). Eich suggests that memory is an effective source of data because it generates lasting impressions, and the memories retained by individuals tend to be the most important because they have been refined and interpreted over time (Eich, 2010). This study used Eich's "co-production" process which sought to clarify recollections in their proper time context. For example, a particular memory, as retold by the participant, could have represented how the participant felt at the time of the interview, or how they felt at some point in the past. The focus of the study was on identifying the "now," or the lasting impression (Eich, 2010). The importance of obtaining the lasting impression is that at the time of the interview, the participant would have had time to reflect on the college experience, and would discuss only those things that were most important or influential to them in an interview setting.

Sampling Criteria

This study relied on purposeful critical case sampling and snowball/chain sampling methodologies to identify information-rich and illustrative individual cases for examination. These two approaches, taken together, ensured that the best available data were selected for analysis. Critical case sampling is useful in identifying "high-contrast" situations that clearly demonstrate the effective boundaries of an observed phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling (chain sampling) is a process which involves strategically approaching informants with questions about the study; the result is a growing "snowball" of informants and information, with the end result being a list of the most critical or widely known cases (Patton, 2002).

The starting point for the purposeful sample was a list of African-American male students at the selected WLC who met the minimum project criteria. Any potential participants who participated in intercollegiate athletics were specifically excluded from selection for a variety of reasons. Athletes have a unique experience socially and academically that is not reflective of other students. In addition, the process by which athletes are selected by the institution for admission is quite different than for other students in general, and African-American students in particular. These differing values, social experiences, and peer affiliations make them unsuitable for this study.

"High-performing" or "successful students" were defined, for purposes of this study, as an students who earned grade point average of at least 3.0 upon matriculation from the college, and who met the additional tests described in the introduction. The end result was a purposeful sample of seven "high-performing" African-American male alumni and seven high-performing white male alumni, for a total of fourteen participants. In addition, in order to develop the most critical cases, an informal scoring system was employed to identify those qualifying students who achieved the most academic gains relative to their original entrance examination scores.

The formula for Net College Gains was: (College GPA x 500) - SAT Score = Net College Gains

For example, a student with a 3.0 College GPA and a 1000 SAT would have a Net College Gain of 500. On the other hand, a student with a College GPA of 3.8 and an SAT of 1000 would have a Net College Gain of 900.

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This sampling method was purposeful in that it began by selecting a population of African-American male alumni with GPA's that exceeded 3.00, then prioritized them to identify those individuals who performed very well in college compared to their standardized test scores. The implication was that these individuals represented critical cases, which could lead to richly-detailed stories related to their own perceived academic success factors.

The use of snowball sampling in conjunction with critical case sampling performed two important functions. First, it confirmed the validity and quality of critical cases already selected. For example, a group of high-performing African-American males who meet the formula criteria creates a greater degree of likelihood that the snowball sampling process identified one or more of the same candidates. Second, the snowball sampling process also identified new, previously unknown participants who were beneficial to the study. In both cases, snowball/chain sampling was important as a quality control mechanism and a source of high-quality cases that may have been overlooked in the critical case sampling process. In some cases, informants were instrumental in suggesting particular participants due to their exceptional fit for the study. In other cases, snowball sampling opened up potential participants that were not initially identified by key informants.

Using the snowball sampling methodology, key informants were identified within the college and the private sector (such as employees in the workforce, student affairs professionals, faculty, and students) and asked for recommendations in an attempt to identify critical cases. To the extent possible, snowball sampling results were used to

"improve" or replace critical cases, to the extent individuals identified through the snowball sampling process were more suitable for generating information-rich results.

In determining when to cease collection of data, quality of data collected and the emergence of new themes were considered to be primary criteria. Though an initial pool of potential candidates had been identified, the quality of data collected guided the study on an ongoing basis. After interviewing the fourteen initial participants, it was determined data saturation had been achieved. No new themes had emerged in the raw interview data, and in most cases interviewees discussed similar themes in a repetitive manner. Transcribed data was also reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure potential emergent themes were not overlooked. To accomplish this multiple points of view were taken during review of transcriptions, including examining responses and success factors from a variety of different perspectives, such as internal vs. external; institutional vs. non-institutional; or, self vs. external agent. This helped ensure successful identification of any critical or recurring themes in the data. Before the conclusion of the interview process, interview field notes had begun to identify the "predictability" of the interviews. This is not to suggest that the interviews were not valuable, but rather, to suggest that the interviews were beginning to reach a point of data saturation. After interviews with all fourteen participants were concluded, it became clear that additional interviews would not shed further light on the research questions.

Role of the Conceptual Framework in Study Design and Data Collection

An extensive review of the literature was instrumental in selection of the appropriate framework for the study. This conceptual framework, in turn, helped shape

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the selection of interview questions. Later, the framework was critical to organizing the research findings into appropriate categories. Using Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change, research questions were shaped around its five tenets:

- Student Background/Pre-College Traits

- Structural/Organizational Characteristics

- Institutional Environments

- Interactions with Agents of Socialization

- Quality of Student Effort

Interview questions were designed to adequately address student experiences in each aspect of Pascarella's framework, while leaving enough flexibility for interviewees to openly describe their experiences as they intersected with that particular tenet of the framework. For example, in addressing Factor 1, Student Background/Pre-College Traits, one interview question was "How did your background and experiences before college affect your academic success?" The question allowed each participant, to co-produce and explore their experiences within the theoretical boundary of the study. This process was repeated for each tenet of Pascarella's framework. By designing interview questions that were open, yet pertinent to each framework tenet, it ensured the research study obtained useful interview data. Interview questions were also tested in a series of three pilot interviews prior to the beginning of the current study. The data obtained in these interviews helped solidify the validity of the interview questions. In addition, the pilot interviews provided information that assisted in the creation of new interview questions, as well as adjustments to existing interview questions.

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Data Analysis

Data review employed narrative and thematic analysis to capture all pertinent interview data. In narrative analysis, the details of the story, as well as the way the story is told, are both significant sources of interview information (Glesne, 2011). This included examining the data for concrete information, as well as information that was more latent, such as attitudes, feelings, or reactions to established events. Thematic analysis also focused on identifying significant, recurring, and hidden themes in the data gathered.

Specifically, all individual interview results were gathered, each interview was transcribed, and a complete set of field notes was created. Interviews were audio-recorded and notated. Coding was completed for each transcript, generating a codebook identifying critical themes. In addition, themes identified were continually revisited in an effort to make sure my field notes accurately portrayed the participant's experience.

In coding the data, the focus was on weighing and understanding the themes that were most common, as well as themes that were uncommon, but which were most important. As coded themes emerged, data analysis was conducted until data saturation was obtained and no additional codes of interest emerged from the inquiry. The end result was a codebook matrix, containing primary codes and subcodes, each of which were directly associated with a quote, statement, or a behavior observed or captured in the data analysis. The research questions identified drove the data gathered, and from the data, appropriate codes emerged.

The final step of data analysis included modeling of the codes to create transferable, actionable research results. Member checking to ensure data validity

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included providing each participant a copy of the key findings, context, and associated quotations for their input. Their feedback also contributed to the overall validity of the findings. During the research process a peer debriefer, familiar with the participant population, assisted in interpreting and examining the data in an effort to accurately capture the experiences of the participants. Constant reconsideration of the themes identified assured they were plausible in the context of the data gathered as a whole.

In compiling results and making classifications for purpose of analysis, Pascarella's framework was used as an organizational tool. The conceptual framework originally helped shape interview questions, and accordingly, it later functioned well as a method to organize data gathered. Using the codebook developed during participant interviews, recurring and critical themes were grouped into each of the five tenets of Pascarella's framework. Not only did this help organize findings, it helped me gain greater insight as to where particular alumni experiences were occurring within the student change model described by Pascarella. This proved to be useful in understanding precisely *where* in Pascarella's model each participant group, both white and African-American, were attributing their academic success.

Trustworthiness

One of the methods employed for maintaining data trustworthiness and rigor was maintaining vigilance with respect to positionality and subjectivity throughout the study. I remained vigilant with respect to my own positionality, in particular the possibility that my positionality could have changed during the course of the research. I considered reflexivity and documented these considerations through a series of regular, introspective

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memoranda, in which I took an inventory of my positionality. In addition, I typically included such introspection as a regular part of my complete set of field notes. As the research instrument, the lens in which I receive the data clouded the data I received. By maintaining this inventory, I sought to improve the validity of the data obtained. Essentially, I regularly considered my own "independence" of mind, and when I sense it was challenged or compromised, I thoroughly documented the nature of the situation and its possible impact on the validity of the data obtained. With respect to the interview processes, each interviewee received a copy of the significant findings for review. Each participant had an opportunity to review and comment. This was an important step in ensuring validity of data, and provided an element of triangulation to the qualitative research process. Although each individual researcher would naturally interpret the data in a unique manner, the general themes and context of the data should be consistent, and interviewee review processes helped ensure that result.

Role of the Researcher

In analyzing this study, I accounted for the relationships between myself and the study participants in terms of subjectivity and positionality. As the research instrument in qualitative inquiry, the researcher must remain keenly aware of "subjective I's" during research (Milner, 2007). With respect to subjectivity, as an individual from a modest family background, I often focus on issues of perceived inequity. To avoid polarizing any aspect of my research, I used a more open-ended interview style. This contributed to a more free-flowing interview, built on open-ended and participation-inducing interview questions.

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With respect to subjectivity in this study, my weakness has historically been that I tend to take an "advocate" position if I sense that a research participant has been treated unfairly, and in those cases I risk losing an independent perspective with respect to the data I have gathered. My strength is that I believe I can successfully engender trust from participants. If I understand their experiences, and empathize, they may be more likely to share their experiences with me at a deeper level. I believe that my subjectivity gives me a strong background to understand the issues of inequity that the research participants may be facing, as well as the advocacy interest to encourage me to dig deeply into the findings.

With respect to positionality, I am an insider with respect to institutional forces that impact the participants, but very much an outsider with respect to social factors. For example, I may understand how African-American students interact with me and one another inside my classroom, but I have no access to their dormitory rooms, informal lunches and social gatherings, and information networks. What do they "tweet" each about? How do they find out what they need to know to succeed? Do they share "best practices" with one another? Do they hold one another accountable? Who do they talk to when they encounter difficulties? Have their perceptions of what is important changed since graduation? I consider the racial divide between researcher and study participants a weakness, but it may be mitigated by shared gender and similar or approximate age. I also view my position as an authority figure as a weakness that could have affected the depth and quality of information I received. However, the strength in this position is that I have developed, in my opinion, a "public" reputation among students as a fair and approachable person. This likely contributed to my ability to recruit participants and

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retain them throughout the study. However, all things being equal, I believe my positionality with respect to this study was preferable to that of a dispassionate researcher from a different socioeconomic and educational background.

Study Implications

Ethical Issues

The ethical issues involved in this study primarily revolved around obtaining informed consent and maintaining the confidentiality of the study participants. This became a more difficult proposition given the intensive nature of qualitative inquiry and the relatively small size of the colleges involved. In a WLC environment, confidentiality was much more difficult than at larger institutions, increasing the likelihood that the participants could be seen or identified by an outside party. Further, it was possible that qualitative inquiry could reveal an illegal, immoral, or unethical act on the part of the institution, or another student. No such issues arose during the research process.

Limitations and Considerations

The limitations of this study involved several factors: subjectivity and positionality; institutional type; small sample size; geography; self-selection; and, generalizability issues.

One limitation of this study was that it relied on my ability to obtain honest and accurate responses from participants. In addition, the interview questions needed to accomplish the goal of obtaining necessary data without alienating or offending the participants. The question of "Why are you successful?" on the surface seems mundane,

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but under the surface the possibility existed that participants could have interpreted the querying instead as a question of their ability or credentials.

A second limitation of this study is that it focused on just one institutional type: the small, liberal arts college. It is possible that the participants in this study were already heavily invested in the mission of the liberal arts college, because they self-selected into it as freshmen. Accordingly, interview data coming from students at liberal arts colleges could be unfairly colored by stories of personal interaction, small class sizes, and similar well-known traits commonly associated with these institutions. This kind of information, regardless of its validity or importance, would also likely have been discussed with students and highlighted in information provided in orientation seminars and during their time in college. Although choosing alumni who were several years removed from study was intended to minimize this effect, it is possible the research findings are colored by the lexicon associated with a single institutional type.

A third limitation of this study was that it involved a small sample size. Though it is understood that qualitative research does not seek to identify generalizable correlations, just fourteen participants were ultimately selected from a pool of thousands of qualifying potential interviewees. It is possible that the students who agreed to be interviewed, or who were identified by informants as possible interviewees, shared certain personality characteristics or experiences. Further, such shared characteristics may have changed the nature of the data gathered in a fundamental way. The possibility exists that those who chose to be interviewed were already outgoing, socially involved, and flexible by their nature, and inherently more likely to agree to an interview. Accordingly, it is likely they

would exude these characteristics in an interview setting and describe their success in those terms.

A fourth limitation of this study was geography. This study was confined to institutions in two states: North Carolina and South Carolina. Both states are in the South, a region generally understood to harbor stronger religious affiliation than other parts of the country. As a result, interview themes from similar studies located in other parts of the United States would likely result in different findings with respect to religious faith. In addition, most parts of the South have a history of strained racial relations, a factor which may have made racial interaction more important than in other parts of the country. It seems likely that this would manifest in success factors such as social adjustment for minority alumni. Accordingly, this study would likely produce different results, particularly with respect to religion and race, if conducted in a different geographical setting.

Another limitation of this study was its qualitative nature, which by definition limits generalizability. Accordingly, the study itself would not be useful in predicting results across broad student populations. Further, it could reveal little transferable information that might be useful to another institution, even a similarly-situated one, due to the specificity of the liberal arts college context.

It is also possible that students who took advantage of certain success factors noted in interview data were naturally more likely to avail themselves of those factors at the outset. For example, students who reported benefiting from open campus organizations, interaction with faculty members, or campus religious groups were pre-disposed to participate in those activities. It seems possible that intelligent, engaged,

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outgoing students would be more likely to participate in and associate their success with activities that correlate with their natural abilities, such as clubs and organizations. As a result, it is necessary to consider that the makeup of the purposeful sample, high-achieving students, could produce self-reinforcing research results. There is the potential that in such a small sample, outgoing students could predominate in the purposeful sampling selection process. Subsequently, they could also predominate in data collection by describing their experiences through the lens of the high-performing student, characterizing their academic success as a result of characteristics they in fact brought with them to the interview.

Finally, the conceptual framework in this study was a limitation, primarily because it did not encompass all possible factors that could have emerged in the interview process. By adopting this framework, the researcher may naturally gravitate to identifying factors associated with the framework, or that support the framework. Accordingly, it is possible that the factors identified in this study were identified as a result of cues obtained in the conceptual framework.

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Summary

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Much of the research literature related to the topic of African-American male college students is negatively-oriented. It is focused on the problems and potential solutions associated with the African-American male performance gap, rather than identifying and understanding success and reproducing those conditions which foster it. Almost nothing in the research literature has examined African-American male student success at WLC, particularly from a qualitative perspective. This study sought to

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compare the experiences of highly successful students, both African-American and white, to identify the reasons they believed they succeeded academically at WLC institutions. Specifically, the WLC was chosen as the appropriate research site because it is a high-tension environment for minority students. While liberal arts colleges provide small class sizes, one-on-one attention, and accessible faculty, these institutions are usually overwhelmingly white and can be quite exclusive from racial, socioeconomic, and geographic perspectives.

So, why do highly successful African-American male students feel they succeed at WLC? Are their reasons different than similarly-successful white students? Or are successful students at these institutions more similar than different? My interest in answering these questions was to help paint a more complete picture of student academic success, and to tell the stories of these highly successful students in this specific institutional context. In performing the study, I examined the following research questions:

- What factors do high-achieving African-American male alumni attribute to their successful academic experiences at small, white liberal arts colleges?

- How do these factors differ from the academic success factors attributed by high-achieving white alumni?

- How did these success factors contribute to successful academic experiences of both African-American and white alumni at small, white liberal arts colleges?

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Data were gathered through a series of two interviews with each participant, and analysis of each alumnus' resume or written history covering the post-high school period. A total of 28 interview sessions were conducted. Each interview consisted of a series of questions, associated with a specific research question below, in the format of (R1), or "Research Question 1." In addition, each question was associated with a Framework Variable in Pascarella's General Model, as designated for example with an "F1" for Framework Variable 1. In addition to interviews, document analysis was performed with respect to each research question, since it was not clear which data elements would emerge on each student's resume or statement of history. Stated differently, documents were analyzed in the context of each research question.

In order to maximize trustworthiness, the data-gathering consisted of an initial interview, followed by a final interview approximately 30-90 days later. The timing helped achieve two key objectives: it established individual rapport between me and the individual interviewees, and ensured data saturation. Further, by allowing a period of time to elapse between the initial and final interview, it allowed interview participants some time to reflect on themes and topics discussed in the initial interview. Interview questions are discussed later in this chapter.

This chapter presented an overall outline of the methodology used to conduct the research in this study, including the major concepts driving the study, the sampling methods involved, data analysis and collection, ethical issues, and validity. It also provided detailed descriptions of the sites in the study, including details about each campus and its demographic and economic profile.

CHAPTER IV

INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

Pascarella (1985) described how students experience change using a series of five "cascading" factors. Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change showed that students experience change as a product of their experiences before college, the college environment, and their personal investment in college. Each of the tenets of Pascarella's model impacts the other tenets. For example, an academically underprepared student will experience the college environment differently than a well-prepared student. Accordingly, that student may invest more fully or "de-invest" in the college experience as a result of the way they perceive the college environment. Taken together, they explain well how students from different backgrounds experience and change in a new environment. In this case, Pascarella's model provides a strong theoretical framework for considering student academic success.

Highly successful students are instructive primarily because they are models for success. By observing and understanding their success, the researcher can better understand how others might succeed in the same environment. In attempting to understand why these fourteen high-performing students felt they were academically successful, I interviewed each of them. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face, except in cases where access to the participant may have been limited. In

addition, I conducted some follow-up interviews by telephone and interactive or "virtual" face-to-face technology. All interviewees were interviewed twice, with the exception of one participant who declined a second interview. This participant felt that he had nothing new to add to a second interview and that he had provided all of the detail he could in the first interview.

Using face-to-face interviews as a primary data-gathering tool as well as employing a semi-structured interview design allowed the participants to respond to all key research questions, while maximizing interview flexibility. Occasionally, topics of importance to the participant emerged during the inquiry, and this format allowed me to sufficiently explore those topics while maintaining the overall structure of the interview. Throughout the interview process participants explored their experiences within the context of the research questions. When participants deviated materially from the research topic, I made efforts to keep the interview on track by re-orienting the participant to the subject matter. In all cases I achieved rich, meaningful data that contributed to the findings of the study.

Participants

Participants in this study were all academically successful students who graduated from selective, moderately selective, or highly selective WLC in North Carolina and South Carolina. Each student's story was unique, yet when taken as a whole, common patterns emerged as to the factors that students attributed to academic success. Specifically, there are a number of similarities between all successful students, as well as significant differences between the racial groups identified in this study. Stated

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differently, almost all participants interviewed seemed to perceive certain factors as keys to their success. However, at the same time, African-American and white participant groups defined their academic success quite differently. This is true with respect to both the reasons they attributed to their success, and the perspective from which they described their success.

Each participant was given a fictitious name and participant number, primarily so the reader would be able to identify each participant clearly without compromising the participant's identity. In cases where the participant provided specific, contextual information that was important, but which could have compromised his identify, those details were redacted. This exercise was particularly important when interview topics involved personal life events or information, such as socioeconomic status or political views. Specific dates are not provided for each interview, but interviews were conducted between January 1st, 2013 and July 5th, 2013, pursuant to the availability of the participant. Participants were interviewed at locations of their choosing, including their offices, public places, and on the campus of their respective institutions. In providing options for interview locations, I attempted to be as flexible as possible in order to build rapport and encourage active participation.

Finally, in assessing each interview and the data produced, participants were asked in particular about their socioeconomic status. While several participants reported that they considered themselves to be of low socioeconomic status, no students referred to themselves directly as having "high" economic status. This is not unexpected, as having significant wealth is likely an uncomfortable fact to reveal in a one-on-one interview. It is likely that a number of the students in this study who indicated they were

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of moderate socioeconomic were, in fact, of high socioeconomic status. This was also

supported by resume data and details revealed in their personal histories. Stated

differently, it is likely that at least some of the participants in this study who self-

identified as "moderate" in socioeconomic status were in fact of high socioeconomic

status. The following chart provides summary information about the participant pool.

Table 4.1: Overview of Participant Pool

Participant Number	Code Name	College	Race	GPA	SAT Score	College Gains
1	Brad	Davidson	AA	3.20	1070	530
2	Sean	Davidson	AA	3.34	1150	520
3	Will	Davidson	WH	3.25	1230	395
4	Greg	Furman	AA	3.25	1150	475
5	Wes	Furman	AA	3.38	1060	630
6	Trent	Furman	WH	3.60	1280	520
7	Ivan	Furman	WH	3.86	1310	620
8	Bart	Presbyterian	AA	3.20	1050	550
9	Andrew	Presbyterian	WH	3.67	1080	755
10	Dan	Presbyterian	WH	3.96	1410	570
11	Seth	Wofford	AA	3.81	1180	725
12	Rob	Wofford	AA	3.52	1160	600
13	John	Wofford	WH	3.48	1200	540
14	Zach	Wofford	WH	3.62	1160	650

Summary of Participant Data

Highlights from each individual's biography are included below, and includes a general background of the participant's life; a family history; and, any pertinent information obtained from resume documents.

Participant #1: Brad

Brad is a married, African-American male graduate of Davidson College and a native of Florida. Brad was a religion major at Davidson and was pursuing graduate work in religious studies while running his own business at the time of this study. He completed his undergraduate work at Davidson with a 3.20 GPA. Brad was a first-generation college student, and was raised primarily by his mother. Though he did have stepfather, he indicated his stepfather was "not in the picture" during his formative years. Brad also has two brothers, both of whom are college graduates. Brad considered himself to be of low socioeconomic status.

Brad grew up in a relatively poor neighborhood in a large city in Florida. He described his neighborhood as a place with a number of distractions, where it might be easy to lose one's way. Brad stated that most male children in his neighborhood were interested in "athletics, girls, and fighting." However, in Brad's case he described having a number of support systems in place, which he referred to as "protective factors." The most important of these factors was his mother. Though he was raised by his mother alone, and despite the fact that his stepfather was "not in the picture," Brad was grounded and instilled with a sense of confidence. About his mother Brad stated "My mother was my biggest fan and coach. She accepted nothing less than the best. I was even punished for getting C's. But it was a tough and encouraging love." Brad recounted that his

relationship with his mother helped instill in him a sense of confidence and preparation, and established in his mind that he was a "smart guy."

In addition to the influence of his mother, Brad talked about the particular importance of being identified as a high performing student early in his career. Specifically, this moment came in the fourth grade, when he scored in the top 10% of those taking a nationwide standardized exam. This was a key moment in his formative development, which he explained helped him realize that he was capable of great things in the academic realm, and that he was different from his peers.

Brad went on to attend a public high school in Florida and applied to Davidson College at the urging of a particularly influential high school guidance counselor. He received an academic scholarship and achieved a 3.5 GPA in his first semester as a freshman. Brad described this first semester as a "culture shock" but that his intense desire not to fail helped him through. He described this semester as key in setting a trend for his future performance in college. In particular, he noted the difficulty he encountered in coming from a low socioeconomic neighborhood where he was the "smart guy" to Davidson, where many students were wealthy and everyone was strong academically. He provided a poignant illustration of how he coped with these difficult times: "I remember nights where I would come into my dorm room and just sit down on the floor and pray, asking God to get me through it. Without it [prayer and the Bible] I wouldn't have been able to handle it."

For Brad, his spirituality was the most pivotal factor in his academic success, and he discussed it at length in both interviews. He referred to his Christian faith as a "coping mechanism, my way to endure hardship." His faith was an integral part of his daily life

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in college, and still is today. He described this not as a "reactive" method of coping with difficult situations, but rather a guiding set of principles through which he "feels God" nearly all of the time. When we discussed this more closely, he curtly stated "I don't just pray when I need it. For me it is a way of life. My life is a prayer!"

Brad's perspective on faith is that it helped him be a successful student because it helped him endure those situations that might have derailed his success. Interestingly, despite the intensity of his faith, he felt all students would be more likely to succeed if they were more spiritual. Specifically, he noted: "I would recommend that all students get in touch with some kind of spirituality. It's an integral component of human existence. It's not just going through the motions." Brad also attributed his success at Davidson to being consistently challenged by his professors to rise to high standards. He described his frustration in an Ancient Greek class, in which he was struggling with interpreting accent marks associated with specific words: "I went up to the professor after class and just told him that I wasn't going to be able to get this. [the accent marks] He responded by saying 'You just have to do it.'" Brad recounted this experience as an important factor in his later success because it reinforced the idea that his professors did not simply hope he would do well, they expected him to do well. He stated "The expectation [at Davidson] was for me to be exceptional. In every class I enrolled in, the professors expected excellence. It drove me to be my best." Brad also explained Davidson helped him achieve academic success by shaping his worldview through a variety of cultural experiences. He recalled "I grew up hearing that white America wants you [black males] to fail. Well, Davidson is white America. What I learned was that this wasn't completely true."

Brad described in particular how participation in a number of campus programs helped him learn to reach out to others who were different, which he cited as important to his academic performance. In particular he felt STRIDE, a mentorship program for new African-American students at Davidson, was a key to his success. In this program, new African-American students are paired with an African-American student who is an upper classman. These students come to campus several weeks early and are followed throughout their careers in order to make sure they are able to adjust to Davidson. Brad also cited as a success factor an intercultural dialog program, in which students of different races, gender, and economic class were brought together to discuss issues of diversity.

Brad's experience at Davidson was quite typical of the African-American male participants in this study. He reported that his faith was a significant factor in his success in college. In addition, an event which identified his academic abilities early in life seemed to set him on a course for future success. He also described a strong start as a freshman as a key to his success, a theme which recurs throughout this study, particularly in the stories of the African-American male participants.

Participant #2: Sean

Sean is a 24-year old African-American male and 2010 graduate of Davidson College. Sean is currently employed by a non-profit organization in Washington D.C. Sean graduated with a 3.34 GPA in sociology and was the recipient of a full academic scholarship at Davidson. Sean attended Davidson as an out-of-state student, as he was originally from the Midwest. As part of his undergraduate major Sean concentrated on

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Ethnic Studies, and was the recipient of numerous academic awards and fellowships, including the UC-Berkeley Junior Summer Institute in Public Policy and International Affairs, as well as the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation fellowship. Sean was a first-generation college student. His mother attended some college but did not complete her degree, while his father was employed as a firefighter. His parents were divorced, and he was raised primarily by his mother. Sean considered himself to be of low to moderate socioeconomic status. He has an older brother and an older sister, both of whom attended college.

Sean grew up in Arkansas and was raised primarily by his mother, who was divorced from his father. His father, a firefighter, did not attend college and was not an active part of Sean's formative years. However, Sean's mother forcefully promoted education to Sean as a "way out." Though no one in his immediate family had a college degree, a number of non-family members who Sean admired had obtained college degrees; this inspired him to work toward higher education. As a child, Sean indicated that as a child he had a significant amount of early responsibility, in the form of "adult chores." This seemed to instill in him a sense of self-sufficiency which would stay with him through his adult life.

Sean was identified and selected as a participant in the Arkansas Commitment program, a nonprofit organization in Arkansas that identifies and helps develop talented African-American high school students. In this program students are exposed to different types of colleges, including liberal arts colleges. It was through this program that Sean first became acquainted with Davidson College and decided to apply.

Sean indicated that being "socially prepared" helped him succeed academically at Davidson. In high school he was heavily involved in a wide variety of activities, and this helped him develop both a commitment to learning and a high degree of responsiveness to constructive criticism. He found this to be an excellent fit with the culture at Davidson. Sean observed:

> Davidson cultivates a love of learning. Everyone had an open door, and you could go and have a dialogue at any time. Everyone liked learning and wanted to be there. I actually enjoyed studying, and I had a community of friends that reinforced that.

Sean seemed particularly "ready" to succeed academically at Davidson, which seemed to be a result of his focus on making the most of his first semester. Many students enter college almost anticipating a poor first semester, with the idea that they will make up for it later in their academic career. Not Sean.

> My scholarship required that I have good grades. I didn't have the luxury of messing up, so you could say that I streamlined my academic career. I took it [academic work] seriously, and I studied my butt off. I had engaged friends. To be honest, I don't know what else you would do in college besides your work.

It is notable that Sean's preparation was not necessarily academic in nature. Rather, it was a fine-tuning of his approach to college. He began at Davidson with an open mind and a workmanlike approach to achieving academic results. In addition, Sean's success seemed to stem from his willingness to seek help.

> My advice to students like me [African-American males] is not to use your first year as a reason to screw up. Take it seriously. Things are not as easy as you

think, and you don't have time to make mistakes. If you profess that you want something, go get it. Help is there if you need it, so go get help!

Aside from his intense personal motivation, Sean also felt that his academic success at Davidson was a result of the care and nurturing he received in the college's small, familiar environment. He recounted that is was important to him that his professors showed intellectual curiosity about him as a person. In particular, they understood his challenges as a first generation college student.

> It's not hard to figure out which students are first-generation. I had a white professor that understood me as a first generation college student, and it was really just him being intellectually curious, just being a good professor. The faculty and staff are very supportive, like family. Davidson creates an environment for minority success. The faculty at small schools are there if you want them. This isn't the case at larger schools. They are still making me successful today. I still talk to them. As a matter of fact, I still owe a call to one of my mentors right now, and I am about two weeks late. [referring to an African-American male Student Affairs professional at Davidson]

Sean's description of his academic success is somewhat atypical of the African-American males in this study in that he did not report faith as a significant factor. However, similar to other African-American male participants, Sean felt he succeeded partly as a result of his academic talent being identified before college. Finally, the small environment and attentive, caring professors created an environment in which Brad felt he could learn and develop a greater cultural awareness.

Participant #3: Will

Will is a white male and 2009 graduate of Davidson College. He completed his undergraduate degree in mathematics with a 3.25 GPA, and later completed graduate work in business at Wake Forest University. Will is originally from South Carolina and attended Davidson as an out-of-state student. Both of Will's parents completed college, and Will's father, brother, and grandfather all attended Davidson College. He was employed as an analyst at a regional bank in South Carolina at the time of this study, and is of moderate to high socioeconomic status. Will was a member of the Bernard Society of Mathematics and played club rugby while at Davidson. Will is single and has no children.

Will spent a significant amount of time describing the active and direct role his parents took in his education from a very young age, a factor he described as being key to his later academic success. Notably, he was identified when he was very young as both "gifted" and "learning disabled" which prevented him from entering a gifted program in public school. He described how his parents reacted and intervened to make a difference.

> I was about two months off of the cutoff to make it into the grade I was going to go in [first grade]. Instead of holding me back, my parents sent me to the day school [a private school] so I was always a year younger than everybody else in school, and then went back to public school [in] second grade. So I took a test at the day school and got the magic number that let me get into the Odyssey Program in public school, so I went back to public school that year. With all that being said, it was just that, whatever my parents had to do to get me the tools I

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needed to do well in education, they were willing to do. They were just very

involved in the process the whole time.

Also, Will referenced his own effort and hard work as an important factor in his success. This is a significant recurring theme among most participants, but it was particularly strong among white participants. Will describes his satisfaction with working hard, regardless of the outcome.

I remember at Davidson, I would just hate life for a couple of days, but then when you're done with the exam, it was such a release. You know you did your best and even if the grade isn't what you wanted, you did everything you could to at least try to get that grade. I never really tried the opposite.

Will also felt that Davidson provided an extremely supportive learning environment. He described the value and importance of the small-school environment to his academic success.

I feel like if I had gone to a bigger school I would have just kind of gone through the motions, maybe not have been as involved as I was at Davidson. You walk through the school and if you don't know the person you recognize them, you've done something with them, and you can always pretty much say hello passing by.

As with all other participants in this study, the significance of the small college environment seems to be that it allows students to feel safe taking risks and experiencing cultural and academic diversity. Though larger institutions are also diverse and allow for a variety of experiences, it seems the small college is more effective in that it provides a familiarity and kinship that the larger institution cannot. The result is that students seem

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to be more willing to take academic risks, because if they fail, they will do so among "family."

Will also discussed the importance of his social fraternity, Kappa Sigma, in his academic success. The fraternity seems to be significant in that it galvanizes a structure of support around academic success:

> When you are in a fraternity it just seems like those kind of people there are interested in that sort of social environment, getting a real tight group of friends, being able to use that tightness to go do something in the community. Those are the same people that put a big emphasis on doing well in school and preparing themselves for the future.

Will, however, like many other white participants, considered college to be a time to explore educational values and fields of interest. He spoke about the importance of having time to explore academic coursework and engage deeply in academic assignments. However, he also attributed much of his academic success to making academic adjustments, a theme that recurred among white participants.

Participant #4: Greg

Greg is an African-American graduate of Furman University, and was employed as an Assistant Principal at a public high school in South Carolina at the time of this study. He was also married with one child at the time of the interviews. Greg was an education major in college, finishing with a 3.25 GPA. He went on to complete a master's degree in education after completing his undergraduate work. Greg described himself as coming from a low-to-moderate income family and was a first-generation

college student. His mother was a nurse. She completed some coursework at a local community college but did not achieve a degree, while his father was a plant worker who became disabled while on the job. Greg was active in high school sports and is now employed at the same high school he attended.

Greg discussed at length how his parents' involvement in his education shaped his academic success in college. As with many participants in the study, Greg's parents were focused on his success. In a recurring theme among African-American male participants, his mother played a pivotal role in his academic achievement:

> I mean from the time I was a little kid they said I was going to school so I felt like I had to, I had to go to school and be successful. My mom was always looking for me to have something to do in the summertime. She's not an advocate for her child sitting home and "getting on her nerves."

Though Greg's mother seemed to be tough and single-minded with respect to Greg's education, he recounted a touching moment in which she demonstrated her desire for Greg to succeed.

> From the time I was in first grade [my mom] it was like "you're going to school." [meaning college]   My mother wrote in my first grade yearbook a long paragraph about me going to school. Every now and then I pull that book up because it's at my house and I can read what my momma wrote. You're going to school, there's no other option for you. I started to take school seriously from the perspective of what I wanted my future to be like.

She also set a strong example of solid work ethic, which Greg also observed and used as a model for his future success in college.

My mom works hard. There's just a drive. You can do this, you can be successful. I will not accept you not being successful because you have the capabilities. I've seen you-- you have it. It eventually got in my head, so every time I go into a class I figured I'd go ahead and lay it down, figure it out. I'm going to just jump in until I figure out what I need to know, what you're asking of me, so it's a strong work ethic and expectation.

Greg's parents also made sure he was exposed to developmental opportunities, particularly those involving leadership and travel. He described how his mother included him in all types of travel opportunities during his pre-college years:

I traveled a lot, so I mean you kind of get a perspective on the fact the world is bigger than [names specific places around his hometown]. My mom used to go on trips for the Congress of Christian Education, so they always had an annual trip, and it would be in different places and she would always take me. So I've been to quite a few places that most people around here have never been to.

Some of Greg's travel was related to developmental opportunities, such as Upward Bound. Greg talked about the influence of this program on his development at length during our interviews.

I've been on a cruise; I've been up the East Coast; I've been to Chicago. But that came through Upward Bound. A lot of my trips, at least four of them, came through Upward Bound: Chicago, New York, Florida, and DC. When I went to DC I actually went through GT [gifted and talented student] classes.

In addition to developmental opportunities, as with most African-American males in this study, being identified as talented or gifted academically was an important factor in Greg's later academic success.

> I was identified as gifted and talented, and that gave me some other opportunities that I don't think I would have had if I hadn't been identified. Personally I think it helps when people actually know what you're capable of. I feel like they [teachers] probably helped me because they already knew I was smart because they had identified me as smart- it was valid.

In a familiar theme among African-American participants, Greg also credited faith and spirituality with being critical to his academic success. In his mind, spirituality was beneficial because it helped him develop the "mental fortitude" to succeed under any circumstance. Initially he did not mention faith in our first interview, but when he later brought it up, he stated that he could not believe he had forgotten it due to its importance in his life.

> I went to Sunday school for ten or twelve years, and I think I had perfect attendance. My mother was diligent about it- you [meaning Greg himself] always went to school. Life is a gift that God has given you, so I said to myself- why waste the gift? Everybody is not going to like you, and what you choose to do is bigger than any person. You are here. God has a plan for you. You have a purpose.

Similar to Brad from Davidson, Greg seemed to channel faith as a guiding force during challenging times. He suggested that faith helped him stay the course when he otherwise might have left the institution, and he attributed his decision to stay at Furman to key

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campus programs and interaction with certain administrators he came to know well. After his first year, he experienced difficulties and approached student affairs staff for help. In particular, Furman offered a program that helped African-American students adjust to Furman. The staff member who administered this program played a pivotal role in Greg's success at Furman.

> Ms. [Furman staff member] who operated [minority student program] was like a
> mom to me at Furman. I knew I could always go there. You need someone who
> can give you honest feedback. At one point I considered transferring, and she
> helped talk me through it.

Greg's interview was typical for the African-American participants in this study. Familiar themes emerged, including faith, talent identification, and the strong presence of his mother in his educational development. Greg also benefited from key campus programs that helped minority students transition to Furman. In addition, Greg shared numerous themes with the participant group as a whole: the importance of small class sizes and positive faculty and staff interactions.

Participant #5: Wes

Wes graduated from Furman with a degree in education, and at the time of the interviews was teaching fourth grade in the South Carolina public school system. He completed his degree at Furman with a 3.38 GPA. Wes described his family background as low-income. He attended a "nearly 100 percent" African-American high school in South Carolina, and became one of the few students from his high school to attend the South Carolina Governor's School. Wes was a first-generation college student. His mother

worked in the medical technology field, a position she obtained through the Job Corps, while his father was a member of the armed forces. Wes has two brothers, both of whom attended and completed college, as well as an uncle who completed his degree at Presbyterian. Wes is a talented musician, and participated in musical performance groups both during and beyond college.

Wes described how his parents played an active role in his early education, which he felt set the stage for his later academic success. He describes the expectations and routines his parents set out for him from a very young age:

Growing up, it was assumed I was going to college. The money wasn't there, but the expectation was that you'd better get a scholarship. When I got home from school, even in elementary school, it was expected that you do your homework first, then watch TV and play. Or, you pick up a book and read.

He also described how these "reading" and study sessions were quite formal and in some cases timed. Both of his parents were active in monitoring his homework completion and reading.

As with most African-American participants in this study, spirituality and faith once again emerged as an important factor to which Wes attributed his academic success. Wes' reflections on spirituality were also unique in that he referred to the church in similar terms as his own family. Greg attended a Baptist church in the Greenville area, which gave him a "home away from home" while he attended Furman.

I had lots of cheerleaders along the way. Family. People who were proud of me, not just immediate family, but church family. The church actually gave me a scholarship. It wasn't a huge amount, but it helped cover books. My church

family was in Greenville [near Furman] and they made sure I was ok, (and that)
my needs were met. It made me not want to come home and not do well. I didn't
want to let them down.

Wes stressed the fact that his relationship with the local church played a "major role" in
his academic success. He joined within the first few months of attending Furman, taking
on a position in the church as a part-time musician. He eventually progressed to a full-
time musician, as the church worked with his class schedule to make sure he could fulfill
both his student and church obligations.

In our interviews, Wes also stressed a business-like approach to his studies.
Rather than viewing college as a social scene to be enjoyed and or as an entertaining
"experience" he focused on what he needed to do to succeed academically. He describes
his approach:

I pushed myself when I was in college. I did not go to be social or to party. I
didn't go to escape or "break loose." I went to study, to learn, and to find a
career. I worked hard to keep myself from slipping.

Wes also had several close, positive interactions with key professors that he credited with
helping him succeed. In particular, he related an anecdote about his time spent student
teaching, during which he initially received a difficult classroom placement. The
placement caused him significant financial and logistical hardship, but with the help of
his professors he worked through it.

During the second half of my senior year, I was sort of on shaky ground. During
the senior year we received our placements [in schools]. Mine was difficult, and I
had trouble with scheduling. The teacher became frustrated with me, and we had

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several disagreements. I was having to travel to Spartanburg for my placement, and it was expensive. In one instance I came late, and I didn't really understand that I was expected to be there at a particular time. I thought it was a situation where I would arrive when I was able to after completing my work on campus. My major professors were very helpful, and though I didn't ask for it, helped me with the situation. They took time out of their schedules to meet with me as a group on a Sunday to talk through it and helped me get my placement changed.

Wes also credited several campus organizations with his success. Furman's Student League of Black Culture and the Gospel Choir helped Wes feel comfortable and better engaged in his academic work. He also received what he described as a "comfortable roommate pairing." His roommate was also an African-American male who was active in the church and had similar musical taste.

Wes felt that being open-minded about his experiences at Furman played a key role in his success academically. Several African-American male participants also echoed this sentiment, as Wes explained:

In my case it [my Furman experience] could have been bad. I was homesick, like other students, but I think if it had been the flip side [white students at an HBCU] it would have been the same. It takes a willingness to think outside, globally. The world is full of all sorts of things! It isn't so much a race issue as it is a cultural thing. Some white students [at Furman] were very similar to me. But I was an oddball. I accepted the fact that I wasn't the norm. I had a willingness to

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embrace differences. I adapted and acclimated, but I retained who I was. The real divide is culture. I really wanted to prove I was as good as anyone else there.

Wes also cited a number of academic factors that were common in the participant pool as a whole. He discussed numerous positive interactions with professors, small class sizes, and hard work as well as the factors previously identified. However, Wes' interview was typical of African-American male participants in this study.

Participant #6: Trent

Trent is a *Cum Laude* Furman graduate with a double major in business and communications. Trent is a single white male. He attended Furman as an out-of-state student, and is originally from eastern North Carolina. Trent finished his undergraduate work with a 3.60 GPA and was employed in the public relations field at the time of the study. Both of Trent's parents graduated from large state colleges in North Carolina, as did his brother. Trent received a full academic scholarship to attend Furman.

Trent's parents played a pivotal role in his academic success. As with almost every participant in the study, parents shaped the participants' expectations for college and helped them position themselves to succeed once they arrived on campus. Trent explains his interactions with his parents:

Definitely I grew up in an environment that valued higher education. In my family it wasn't an option whether or not I would go to college. My parents gave me the skill set that I needed to be a good student and they gave me the expectation that I needed to succeed. I think that was significant. My parents were quite explicit in that, you know, you will get good grades and I was never

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rewarded for good grades. For me it was just an expectation, it was, 'good you got an A.' You were supposed to, that was the mentality my parents had.

Engaging in a variety of extracurricular activities before arriving at college was also important to Trent's academic success. This seemed to be effective in expanding Trent's thinking, in addition to forcing him to manage his time. Time management was a theme that recurred frequently in the white participants in this study. Trent explained his experiences:

> I think my extracurricular involvement growing up helped tremendously. I was in Boy Scouts. I was an Eagle Scout so I think that taught me a lot about hard work, how to work with others in teams, which is a huge part of success in school, group projects and things like that. It was also work skills you sort of need, life skills in terms of character development and interacting with others. I think that was a big part of it. I was also musically inclined, from fourth grade on played the piano, trumpet, or French horn, and I think that helps as well, to stretch my capacity to think and manage time.

Trent also felt that having a full academic scholarship actually provided a "positive" kind of pressure that encouraged him to succeed academically. Trent struggled early with a math major, before changing courses of study into business and communications:

> Having the pressure of a scholarship GPA component attached to [my work] was a huge driver. I don't think I would have picked up my GPA nearly as quickly, going from a '2 point something' to a 3.0 if I didn't know I would be losing the scholarship money if I didn't perform to a certain degree.

He also described how close, frequent, and personal interactions with professors helped him to do well academically. Trent related several experiences which showed how students and professors worked closely at Furman.

> Starting out as a math student and transitioning [to other majors] when I sat down with Dr. [major advisor] I pretty much had to beg him to let me into the major. He set the expectation for me that you know, you're going to do well in these classes, so I did.

Another professor with whom Trent worked closely continues to influence him in his professional work today.

> It's funny that I'm [now] in public relations because Dr. [professor] called public relations the "Dark Arts," and he joked with me about that. [laughs] But he was also one of the ones that really helped me become who I am and have the values I do in public relationships. He called me a spin doctor, and said PR people are spin doctors, so I've made a point since college to make sure I'm not and hold myself to a standard professionally in the field that I think he would be proud of.

Trent also identified a key academic success factor that resonated with most of the white participants in the study: identifying an area of study they were passionate about. Trent suggested he would advise students similar to himself to try to find a passion first, and then study it, not the other way around:

> [Students should] find something that they are passionate about and follow it. I know too many people who come into school, one of my fraternity brothers is an excellent example. He was from [a foreign country] and his parents pushed him into pre-med, so he started out in the sciences, did poorly in school, and one day

he pretty much had to tell his parents he wasn't going to do it anymore. He ended up going into art and doing quite well and now he's in advertising, so I think finding your innate talents and where your interests lie is one of the biggest factors in academic success. You can only force yourself to do something for so long before you burn out and get disinterested. That's the single piece of advice I would give.

Trent's interview was in line with most other white participants in this study. He benefited greatly from the close interaction at Furman with staff and professors, as well as parental involvement and expectations with respect to his early education.

Participant #7: Ivan

Ivan is a white graduate of Furman with degrees in communication and political science. He is a native of South Carolina, and is married with no children. Ivan was employed by Furman University at the time of this study. Ivan's father completed a degree at the University of South Carolina, while his mother also completed undergraduate work at Winthrop University. Ivan attended a very small, private high school which was run by a small network of parents. His mother taught at the school, while his father operated a family business. Ivan considered himself to be of low to moderate socioeconomic status. He attended Furman on a full scholarship, graduating with a 3.86 GPA.

Ivan's interview was unique in that he demonstrated a common theme among all participants in this study: he experienced significant parental involvement in his education. However, his experience was different because he was educated in a very

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small school that was run as a charter school. Parents and "moms of all of the kids" were the teachers and administrators, while Ivan's mother was a guidance counselor for the school. Ivan felt this was excellent preparation for Furman, as it revolved around significant individual engagement with both teachers and learning. His parents also encouraged him to engage in positive learning activities early on:

> My parents were focused on education, and believed in it. I also received lots of attention as an only child. On many occasions my parents encouraged me to go to the library, and afterwards we would go get pizza or something similar. [They] went about it in a well-rounded way, in their approach to education.

Ivan felt he was extremely well-prepared upon arrival at Furman, which he credited to being individually engaged throughout his pre-college years. Despite this, he still had lingering doubts about his own ability to succeed academically at Furman. This was true despite an excellent SAT score which suggested he should have no trouble.

> I was skeptical of my own success, and I had a great deal of anxiety that I might fail out. My father even suggested that I might have trouble at Furman, and that I could always go to USC if I did. But growing up, I was encouraged to get involved, to do everything. I think this really translated over to Furman. I was very active in an extremely small sphere, and for me college was an immersion, "24-7." It allowed a lot of movement [among different activities].

Ivan felt this contributed to his acclimatization to the college, and ultimately to his academic passion. Similar to most other white participants, Ivan suggested that academic success equates with finding an area of interest.

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I'd suggest students "chill out" [when they arrive as freshmen]. It's gonna be

okay. They should get passionate about things. Don't dwell on grades. Choose

engagement, and find a passion.

Similar to other white participants, Ivan took an "experiential" approach to college rather

than merely focusing on achieving the degree.

Ivan was also unique in that he was the only white participant to discuss the

important of several recurring themes among African-American participants. He cited

his community of faith at home, as well as a transition to a community of faith at Furman

as key to his success academically. In addition, he pointed out the importance of being

from a small community in his success.

I think it was feeling you always have to "report in" [in a small community].

When you go home, everyone at home asks how you are doing. I felt that people

wanted me to succeed, or were relying on me to succeed.

Interestingly, Ivan also reported as being of low socioeconomic status, and was also the

only white participant to identify as such.

Ivan's interview was atypical of white participants in this study. Though he cited

common success factors such as close interaction with professors as key to his success,

many factors he discussed were more typical of African-American participants such as

faith and strong ties to his home community.

Participant #8: Bart

Bart is an African-American graduate of Presbyterian College. He completed his

undergraduate work in Chemistry, finishing with a 3.20 GPA. Bart was a first-generation

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college student. He is now employed as a manager in a large engineering firm in his native South Carolina. At the time of this study, Bart had recently enrolled in an MBA program and was close to completing that degree. Bart was raised primarily by his mother until the age of seventeen, when she passed away due to cancer. He described this as an extremely difficult part of his life, after which he turned her passing into a source of motivation. Bart's mother was an important guiding force in his life, as she worked two jobs to support the family. Her work ethic left a distinct impression on Bart. His grandmother and grandfather stepped in after his mother's passing and helped raise him up through his enrollment in college. In addition, Bart has a stepfather with whom he had a close relationship who is employed as a college professor. As far as education, Bart's mother attended some technical college, while his grandmother and grandfather completed high school. Bart's biological father was "not around" during most of Bart's formative years, and though he does communicate with him now on occasion, he is still not a significant part of his life. Bart also has a sister who attended college. Bart is married, and has a 19-month old daughter.

During our interviews, Bart spoke extensively about the importance of his mother's strong role and work ethic as an influence on his later academic success. Despite not having higher education, his mother demanded Bart's best:

My mom was strict on academics and always demanded excellence from me. When she passed away before my senior year, it was tough. I saw my mom work so hard for the family, and I knew in the back of my mind that if I had the opportunity [at college] I would do better. Because of her I never wanted my family to have to struggle, and I want to give them things and provide for them.

In addition to the critical role his mother played in his academic success, Bart also benefited academically from the small, welcoming environment Presbyterian offered:

> My major [chemistry] had four people in it, and only three were in my graduating class major. The small classes encourage people to work together. You didn't have many options, because it was something welcomed, but also something forced. Once people got to know you, they saw you differently.

Bart also attributed his academic success to the personal attention he received from key professors.

> I felt I received a lot of personal attention, almost like I was taken under their [professor's] wing. They demanded discipline, and it came both ways. You got both kinds of attention, when you did something satisfying and when you did something disappointing. They knew you. When you missed class, they knew you were missing. They stayed on top of your progress, and knew everything that was going on.

Bart was heavily influenced by one professor in particular, a major professor he worked with extensively in his chemistry program of study.

> He still keeps in contact with me. He was the first person who ever came out and told me that I could be very successful. That meant a lot to me. It wasn't coming from a parent or a friend, it was from a person who didn't have to say it. He was helpful, he provided references for me, he just made it a great experience.

In general, Bart consistently characterized his Presbyterian experience as a "great experience." However, like all of the African-American males in the study, he described

his first semester as a "culture shock." He describes what advice he would provide himself as a freshman, if he had the chance to go back:

> You need to embrace that culture shock. You need to learn to balance your time. People are going to be partying and missing class. You need to learn to do things on your own and think about—what if you fail out? You need to make your own path. My mother watched over me but she let me live. She gave me freedom. I have a neighbor I grew up with, and he's in jail. You know why? His mother never let him do anything, and as soon as he got the chance, he just went crazy. [In college] you're going to have access to different things, people, places. You have to transition and take that initiative.

Bart also seemed to value the access to diverse experiences the liberal arts college offered him, both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

> At PC, you had to coexist with people who were so different. Some were like you [referring to himself], but others were from a long line of PC grads. You have the idea of what a PC person looks like, and I didn't look like a PC person. PC was better than I expected. Once people got to know you, they didn't see color, and you could be a regular student. My roommates were all totally different. They all had completely different friends, and when they would come around, you would experience different things. Even now, I still have a good relationship with Jim Smith [pseudonym], a [a top level administrator] at the college. I could call him today if I needed anything, that's how well I know him.

Bart's experiences were similar to both African-American and white participants. Like most of the alumni interviewed, he attributed his academic success to "forced, but

friendly" interaction with different demographic groups. His experiences are similar to other African-American participants in that it was important to him that his talent was identified by a mentor, though Bart's identification came later than most. Bart did not discuss faith, a common theme among many African-American participants. However, his description of the strong parental role his mother played emerged as a familiar theme, particularly among African-American alumni.

Participant #9: Andrew

Andrew is a white graduate of Presbyterian College and is originally from a small town near Orangeburg, South Carolina. Andrew's undergraduate GPA was 3.67, and notably, he had the highest Net College Gains score of any participant in the study. He subsequently completed law school at the University of South Carolina and is presently employed by the state of South Carolina in the legal field. His position at the time of this study could be described as "politically significant." Andrew worked on his family's farm, making him a fourth-generation dairy farmer. According to Andrew, his father and grandfather were both extremely well-known in the South Carolina farming industry. His father and grandfather graduated from Clemson, while his mother completed an associate's degree and works in the dental field. Andrew considers his family to have been socioeconomically in the "middle class."

As with most white participants in this study, Andrew felt that his own effort was most critical to his academic success. He describes how his life on the family dairy farm shaped this view:

I think that any values that your family instills in you are awfully important, and one of the values instilled in me from the earliest onset was to work hard. I probably started working on the farm when I was six years old. I drove a tractor before I drove a truck or car for that matter. Me and my brother were actually fourth generation dairy farmers. As you may or may not know, dairy farm cows have to be milked twice a day, 365 days a year. There are no holidays and they especially like to get out of their fences in the middle of the night, on Christmas Eve, or every other holiday there is. Being a fourth generation farmer I was kind of ingrained in that—to work hard for what you get and where you are in life and that translates to rewards down the line.

Andrew also spoke at length about time management, and the importance of being able to balance a number of different tasks. Most white participants in this study also mentioned similar themes:

I was used to going to school, playing sports, working, and when you get to college you have other extracurricular activities so you know how to manage it. You know how to apply your strengths to each and apply the appropriate amount of time to each so that you can get everything done and give it your all at that. So that lent itself well to me as well because at small universities you're not only asked to go to school and study, you're asked to get involved.

Andrew's parents also set high expectations for him, without promise of tangible rewards for his strong academic performance. Several other participants expressed a similar sentiment, that expectations were important, but also that rewards should be intrinsic.

There wasn't a $100 bill every time I came with an A on a test or an A in school. Some folks do that, some people reward their kids and maybe they should, but you know it was always a 'good job, son, let's do it again next time' and I appreciated that. I knew coming out of a small school that, you know, PC's an expensive school, and I knew once I was there I had to keep my grades up because we were, I mean, I'm a realist, we were on a dairy farm. My parents don't have a boat load of money to send me to private school and so forth, especially coming from a small town so I didn't want to disappoint them in that respect, and I didn't want to disappoint myself either.

Andrew also felt that the "closeness" of the community at Presbyterian was a key factor in his success, primarily because it created a sense of family and shared responsibility for one another. He describes the environment at Presbyterian:

When you pass someone on the sidewalk walking to class you say hello. It's kind of, you get to know a lot of people outside of class, you don't just pass them and not say anything like you do at a lot of other schools. Everybody is asking, "hey how are you doing, it's good to see you, what were you up to this weekend, how's your week going" and so forth. It's kind of like a family- you get to care about other people. It's a very tight knit, close environment.

Andrew identified most of the themes that were typical of white students in this study. He attributed his academic success to the influence of parents and family; the close-knit community at Presbyterian; and, his background as a farmer, where he learned to work hard and juggle numerous tasks. As the highest performer in this study as measured by

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Net College Gains, his interview was enlightening because he was showed significant academic gains as compared to other members of the participant pool.

Participant #10: Dan

Dan is a *Summa Cum Laude* graduate of Presbyterian College. He completed his undergraduate work with a 3.96 GPA, the highest of any participant. Dan is a white male, and is married with two children. He went on to complete a doctoral degree in management, and was employed as a college professor at the time he was interviewed. Dan is a native of South Carolina. He has a brother and a sister who both completed undergraduate degrees. In addition, his father completed a graduate degree in engineering from Clemson University. Dan considered himself to be of average socioeconomic status. In addition, Dan was entirely home schooled before attending college.

Dan's interview was unique in that he seemed to place little significance on the external college environment when compared to other participants. While he was similar to many white participants in that he took a mechanical, or methodological approach to academic success, he differed because he viewed his success as a product almost solely of his own effort and ability. Hard work was a dominant theme in Dan's interview.

> [My success] was due to just studying. For pretty much any class I could study the night before the test and do well. I mean, other than that I paid attention in class, I took notes. I really didn't do much outside of school though.

Dan was homeschooled, and he attributed much of his strong work ethic and independence to his independent work at home, prior to college. He felt this was

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important to his academic success at Presbyterian because he did not "need" anyone to help him along. In addition, Dan indicated that his parents expected high achievement, a value that seemed to transfer to him as well.

> There's always been high expectations, particularly from my family. When I'd go to school, take a test, and get a 95, my parents wouldn't say 'that's great, you got a 95', it was more like 'Why not a 100?" Not that they weren't proud, but the expectations were always high, so even at PC, anything less than the best was kind of less than expected. At PC I always expected to get A's because that's what I'd always done.

Dan described hard work as a cornerstone of his success, and in his opinion, the key to any student's success academically.

> In my opinion anybody can do well in a class, it's just a matter of whether they're willing to work hard enough to do it. Particularly in a field like management or anything in general education, English, history, science, math. It's just, are you willing to work hard enough to get an A. In terms of personality traits, I suppose that's an internal locus of control, where I believe I can control my success to a large extent. So I expect to do well and I believe that if I try hard I can do well.

Despite Dan's independent nature and approach to academic success, like all other interviewees, he felt that close interaction with his professors at Presbyterian was a critical factor in his academic success.

> For me it [the small college] was important because I was able to know the professors. They would remember who I was. It was kind of nice not to feel like some faceless number you know, like you did at [another state institution] where

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you just kind of got churned through each class. I just liked to chat with the

professors, some of them after class. This really made me more interested in my

future career [in higher education] because I saw some of the things they did, and

you know it just struck me as an attractive lifestyle. Almost across the board

people that would be there wanted to teach, they wanted to make an impact on

students, so you didn't have like graduate assistants that would come in for 20 or

30 minutes and throw some stuff at you and go on their way.

Despite his focus on independence and effort throughout the interview, Dan did

appreciate the academic variety offered by liberal arts colleges. He felt this impacted his

academic success in other areas by improving his "agility" as a student.

It [Presbyterian] kind of forced me to take a lot of different classes and things that

I probably wouldn't have signed up for on my own, which had a lot of impact on

[my] learning to understand things that are at least slightly unfamiliar to me or

unnatural… then also communicating them. A lot of things we covered were set

up so you'd have to write papers, essay type sort of things.

Dan was the only interviewee who expressed no need to have a second interview, though

politely, primarily because he explained that he felt he had nothing new to offer.

However, his interview was typical of white participants in this study in that he placed

great emphasis on his own effort and ability in achieving academic success.

Participant #11: Seth

Seth is a *Magna Cum Laude* African-American male graduate of Wofford

College. Seth completed his language major with a 3.81 GPA. He was active in many

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campus organizations, and received numerous awards for academic achievement. After completing his undergraduate degree, Seth graduated from the University of South Carolina School of Law. He was an adjunct instructor in both languages and law at several educational institutions at the time of the interview sessions, and was married and with a son and a daughter. Seth's mother is an active-duty military member who obtained a doctoral degree later in life. In addition, a number of Seth's family members attended college, including his grandmother and grandfather. His grandmother was an educator, while is grandfather was employed in law enforcement. Seth lives in Columbia, South Carolina.

Seth's interview focused on several key themes that were closely associated with most other African-American male participants. First, his stated approach to academic success in college was "businesslike" and his mindset was goal-oriented.

> I wasn't what I guess you would call a social butterfly. I was there to get my degree and that was it. I knew Wofford's value especially in this part of the country, and my credential would speak for itself.

Seth spoke at length about the importance of campus programs that were supportive of the African-American student community. He felt these were critical to his success, and the success of other African-American students on campus. In particular, one of his quotes seemed to best capture the essence of the African-American male student experience in this study.

> I loved Wofford as a school, that's where I found my wife, there's a reason I chose Wofford, but I didn't always like the cultural atmosphere you know. The fact that there were people I could relate to made my stay worthwhile. I still talk

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to my friends from college. I have their numbers, and could call them right now if I wanted to. I love Wofford. I'd go back, I'd do anything I could do to help out, but I will say if it weren't for Souljahs For Christ and Association of Multicultural Students, I would not have succeeded, because they accepted me culturally and made a way for me to flourish socially and academically. Without that social aspect, it's like going to a job you don't enjoy. You get up every day and say well, let me just get my degree and go.

Seth also expressed key themes regarding his pre-college experiences that he felt were key to his academic success. First, his parents and grandparents were very involved in his development, particular in that they set high expectations. They also took actions to shape his educational experiences in a way they felt was beneficial to him.

My grandparents of course came from a little small country town, Chesterfield, SC, which of course was extremely racist during that time, and you know they were sharecroppers and everything. Their idea of what it took to be successful, who they had to meet, how they had to present themselves transferred to me. So my mother was big on proper English. You don't do things good, you do them well. She was a writer, so she taught me, as much as I hated reading, she made sure that I did. They were very instrumental. I was zoned for a school district that was predominately black, but because of the school's funding and disciplinary problems, they drove me every day to [another district] which had a better reputation because it was predominately white or had more white students, and they told me that.

In a theme that emerged strongly in several African-American participants, Seth also discussed at length the idea that as an African-American male, it was critical he learned to navigate in "two worlds." The first world was his home, and the second was the campus of the WLC.

> My grandparents were always on me, they said you need to learn how to behave in a white world. They groomed me to be this way. They never wanted me to forget where I came from, but they wanted to make sure they helped me succeed you know. When I am in public I use [informal name] but when we're doing business, I use [formal name]. They didn't try to make me not black or anything, my grandparents are country you know. My grandfather can still skin pigs, but when they would answer the phone it was hello how are you sir, then all of a sudden after he hung up it [an informal manner of speaking] was back. Code switching, that's my personal word for it. [They said] you need to get this right and show the white folk, cause, the reason they said that was because every program had an honor school or a magnet or whatever. They told me to apply for and get in to it and "son you show them your stuff."

While the story about the importance of "code switching" was an example of deep involvement in education and success "coaching" by Seth's grandparents, the context of the story was quite different than parental involvement stories told by white participants. Based on the experiences of the participants as retold in this study, it seems particularly important that African-American males become exposed to and learn to navigate in the environment of the WLC.

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Seth also expressed the importance of having been identified early as academically talented, though it did come with some difficult experiences. He was selected for the Alert Program, an elementary magnet program in the state of South Carolina. Seth spoke about how it helped him understand he was talented, but often came with consequences.

We used to say, that's just where the smart kids go, but very few African-Americans got into that group. By the time I got to 8th grade there were still only 4 African-Americans in that group, and it was a very large group of students. But I remember coming home feeling different, or even feeling like one of my Alert teachers treated me differently than her other students. When I would speak in class, it was a big deal, and I always seemed to get in trouble. When I would come home crying, not understanding, [my grandparents] would tell me stories about what they went through in the past, and how not everyone is going to like you because of your color. But it drove me to do better or to go the extra mile to show that I'm capable of being here, and that transferred all the way to Wofford.

Seth also expressed the important role close relationships with professors at Wofford played in building confidence in his own academic ability. He recounted winning a very prestigious award within his academic language department, over a very well-known classmate.

There was another person in my class, and you know I had the highest GPA, but she spoke in a beautiful tone, she spoke very well and this person was basically like the model for the [specific language] department. I remember when one of my major professors pulled me in and told me I was going to win the [name of

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award] Award. I must have seemed surprised, and she said 'Yeah, you doubted yourself?" I said I just assumed that [the female student], the [referred to the political connection of the female student] was going to win it. The professor said 'You don't realize how good you are, do you?' You know, I said well, I don't know, but I worked hard and it apparently paid off.

Seth followed up by describing the day in class after being told he would win the award. Only he and the professor knew about his selection at that point in time.

I will never forget that day in class. I was just smiling ear-to-ear because I knew I was getting that award. Somebody in class said 'I wonder who is getting the honors award?' and I kept quiet because I technically wasn't supposed to know. I was the only black person in class and no one even thought to say that it was me. They said 'Oh yeah, I bet [female student] got it' and maybe this and maybe that. I thought it was funny. I mean, I spoke out in class, I got good grades, but you know they just assumed it was [female student] because of the way she spoke, the way she carried herself. I just sat in the background and kind of did my work.

Seth's interview exemplified the most critical themes that emerged among African-American male participants in the participant pool. His interview was full of passion. He was confident in his academic ability and steadfast in the fact that the experiences he related were most important to his academic success. He seemed to capture well the idea that it is important, in the experience of the study participants, to be identified early as a talented African-American student. In addition, the ability to navigate in "two worlds" was also a recurring theme in the interviews with other African-American participants.

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Participant #12: Rob

Rob is a single, African-American male graduate of Wofford College and native of Hartsville, South Carolina. He completed his undergraduate degree in Chemistry with a 3.52 GPA, and received numerous academic awards while at Wofford. Rob was enrolled in a high-profile medical school in North Carolina during the time this study was conducted. Rob has a sister who is significantly older; she completed a bachelor's degree at the University of South Carolina. Rob's mother received an associate's degree, while his father received a certification in electrical work. Rob was a first-generation college student, and considered himself to be of low to moderate socioeconomic status.

In our interviews, Rob spoke at length about the importance of his hometown community in facilitating his academic success. This seemed to create a positive and lasting sort of pressure that encouraged Rob to perform his best.

> Coming from where I came from, which is a predominately African-American neighborhood I would definitely say that I was very successful when compared with others. Very few people in my neighborhood actually went to college and then I think the more you're the closer to my age the more people attempted, but still the neighborhood would look at me in a way, would put more, I guess, pressure on me, more expectations on me to have the standard of excellence compared to everyone else, especially in my neighborhood. Then I got to high school, that standard of excellence kind of carried all the way through middle school, high school.

In Rob's case, he seemed to respond to that pressure by achieving excellent academic results. However, he did express some degree of stress associated with this type pressure, similar to several other African-American participants:

> In my first year of college I began to panic, and I had to take extra measures to meet their standards [meaning his hometown]. They expected greatness so I have this personality, I hate to let people down, and so it would be upsetting when I wouldn't make an A and everyone expected me to make that A, so I had to take any means necessary to figure out- how do I get that A?

Accordingly, having felt this kind of pressure, his advice to similarly situated students was to be goal-oriented, but to build some down time into their study schedules:

> Time management, relax, have an end goal. Have some breaks, 30 minutes to watch TV, eat, but you put in that energy learning everything you can about it, the important details, and go into that test feeling confident. Once it's over you knew you had a few days to relax, and that you can go to the movies, read, do what you like to do to enjoy your life. Some of my friends actually took that literally, some people took vacations, some people traveled, but it was that end goal that kept you moving and that's still what I do today.

Rob's goal-orientation as it relates to academics emerged frequently as a theme among African-American males participants, while time management emerged strongly among the group as a whole. Both groups discussed time management, but the clarity and prevalence of time management as an interview theme was more substantial among white participants.

Rob also discussed the importance of being able to master the jargon and protocol of two worlds, the world of the WLC, and the world he came from "back home." This seemed to have a fundamental impact in both the academic and the social scene on campus.

> I can think of many cases at Wofford where it happened, so I had to learn how to just use a lot of correct grammar or adapt to their level, their jargon, their slang. So in the middle of my sophomore year and I think the term swag had come out, and I was a college student, and yes I used the term swag a lot. Then I think I went to a class and saw that one of my friends who wasn't of the same race wore a nice shirt and I instantly said, 'Oh man, you're swagging in that shirt.' He looked at me with this confused face, he didn't know if to feel it was a compliment, so I had to take a couple of steps back and you know just complement his shirt in the correct way, saying it was a very nice shirt, and then I kind of explained what I meant by swag.

One unique theme that emerged in Rob's interviews was the value of simplified administration at Wofford College, which allowed him to focus on academic and social achievement. The fact that, in his view, Wofford provided seamless, one-stop service to new students was immensely helpful to him. Rather than having to seek assistance at many different administrative contact points around the campus, he was able to get his questions answered by one or two individuals. This is an area that may be worthy of future research, particularly in the context of minority and first-generation college students.

The Wofford College administration has been wonderful to me. It seems like

they're all geared toward the same goal, helping you get the education you need

and then graduate. So there is not a disconnect from one office to the others, they

are all synched together and so I actually spent a lot of time on the student

services side working with [particular office] especially [high level administrator.]

I remember [the administrator] knowing so much about me but I knew so little

about her. So yes, they take the time to fully understand every student there. You

weren't a Wofford student, you were Rob who attended Wofford College. I

definitely have to say financial aid was on point too. They were willing to send

out a lot of notices to help you get other financial aid if you needed it. They

understood your situation. There were several times where they got a couple of

mix ups and they would actually beat me, email me first before I could email

them to fix the situation. People were really there to help you.

This seems like an important theme for WLC, perhaps one that is understated in other

participants. As discussed in Chapter 5, future research should consider the impact of

simplified administrative policies on the academic success on those students who are

first-generation college students.

Rob's interview was an excellent example of African-American male

participation in this study. Though he did not discuss faith or religious themes

significantly in the interviews, document analysis revealed his significant participation in

religious organizations. This includes several of the campus organizations mentioned by

other participants, as well as his active church participation at home. He may have

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chosen not to discuss faith as a personal matter, but it clearly had an influence on his campus experience.

Participant #13: John

John is a single, white male graduate of Wofford College. He received his undergraduate degree in a business field with a 3.48 GPA, and was enrolled at the University of South Carolina School of Law at the time of this study. John is a native of Spartanburg, South Carolina. Both of John's parents attended college, as did his older brother. John was active in a fraternity at Wofford, in addition to several clubs related to the legal profession. John's family was of moderate to high socioeconomic status. John is single and has no children.

John pointed to mostly intrinsic factors in shaping his academic success. Like most of the white male participants in this study, he perceived success to be a function of figuring out the "blocking and tackling" of putting together good work, such as learning how to study, and finding the right peer group. John also felt his competitiveness gave him an edge.

> I think it was just purely kind of a competitive nature in myself, you know I
> wanted to make better grades and once I realized what it was going to take to
> make the better grades I eventually started doing it. Freshman year my priority
> was to go have a blast in college, and you know that's kind of normal for a lot of
> kids. And then as I realized you could have fun and make good grades too, you
> know, I, I just started prioritizing I guess. I also surrounded myself with smart
> people where were making good grades and who cared about academics that kind

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of rubs off on you if, you know, they're supposed to be your peers but they're making better grades, you know at least to me it was kind of eating at me. I always thought I was at least as smart as my friends, but you know they were making a lot better grades. And I think that was just, in the beginning I thought I could kind of coast through and be happy with a 3.0 or whatever it was I was making, and then I just kind of realized I did want better grades.

John also pointed out the importance of his mastery of the mechanics of studying and learning, a theme common among white participants. As his academic career progressed, he learned to prioritize, study more efficiently, and avoid distractions.

Most of it too was being more organized. I allocated my time better, managed my time better. What I finally realized was that it didn't take that much more time. I guess I started to learn my own study habits a little bit. I started to realize that I didn't write papers very well if I was in Milliken [a large study hall]. I would write them a lot better if I was in the library. Nuances about how I learned best, I started to learn those, and that made a big difference, because freshman or sophomore year, I would probably do most of my work in my room, and you just can't do that. You've got friends walking in and out and asking you what you are doing, distracting you, that didn't work for me. I didn't ever want to be in Milliken in case someone came in my room with a fun idea and wanted to go do something. I didn't want to miss out on anything by going somewhere else, but eventually I learned it was probably going to take half the time and I was going to do better work if I went to Milliken or the library. And if what they were doing was that fun, they would do it again anyway!

Interestingly, John's mastery of his study habits was an informal process, something he learned by trial and error. Future research could be directed toward discovering whether the process of identifying one's best learning style could be somehow streamlined. In the white participants in this study, much of their energy, especially early in college, was devoted to "learning how to learn."

John felt he benefited from the variety available to him at a liberal arts college, which kept him interested and helped him identify the subject areas he was most interested in. Identifying academic interest was a recurring topic among white participants, one they frequently articulated as a key to academic success. He also articulated a point about the rigor of the institution and having access to other people who were "smart." This seems to be an important key to the small college environment, in that it exposes the individual to a small, accessible group of high-performing people.

> I think this being a liberal arts school probably did help a little bit. I think I'd
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> drive myself crazy if I went to a big school and took all finance classes, you
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> know, I mentioned earlier how my major was kind of a grab bag, a lot of different
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> subjects, and I think that variety was good for me. I think I'd get bored with it if I
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> was taking all the same classes over and over again. It's a lot easier to be
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> interested and a lot easier to study something if you're interested. But that being
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> said, I would imagine, you know, at this type of school is that there are other
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> smart people at the school, and so I think being around them helped as well.

John also had an "academic turning point" which seemed to change the course of his undergraduate career. He describes being "exposed" by a professor for putting together what he felt was an especially poor effort on a paper. In John's case, he wrote a paper on

a book he never actually read. Though it does fit the theme of close interaction with professors, it is different because it was a negative interaction.

> It was just assigned reading, and I think we just talked about it in class, and I'm going 'I'm not going to read this book if I don't have to.' If he's just going to assign reading then we're going to talk about it in class, I'll just go to class. Well then either he told us and I didn't pay attention, or he didn't tell us until the very end where we had to write a paper on that book, and that was during pledgeship and I didn't have a whole lot of time anyway, so I didn't have time to read the book and write the paper, and I tried to write that paper without reading the book, and I got an F back. And I think that's the first and only F I have ever gotten in any school at any level. And I remember being just kind of in that "oh shit" moment, and um, I remember how just terrible I felt getting that F back, and I made pretty sure I didn't let that happen again. That… that was pretty big. That certainly left an impression getting an F on that paper.

John articulated a number of key points in his interview that were indicative of the participant pool as a whole. He also spoke at length about the importance of access to professors, small class sizes, and discussion-oriented courses. His interview was quite typical of white participants in this study, though several new themes emerged, such as competition and negative feedback.

Participant #14: Zach

Zach is a white male graduate of Wofford College with a degree in Finance. His undergraduate GPA was 3.62, and he subsequently completed a master's degree from

North Carolina State University. Zach was employed in the accounting field at the time of this study. Zach has two younger sisters, both of whom have attended college. In addition, Zach's parents both completed undergraduate degrees at Wake Forest University. Zach is a native of Charlotte, North Carolina. His family is of moderate to high socioeconomic status. Zach is single and has no children.

Zach's interview focused primarily on several key themes, including hard work, study skills, and time management. These "mechanical" factors were common among white participants in this study. Zach described his hard work as key to his success, but in his case, hard work was something he came to appreciate over time.

> I started to study more than one night hard. I would prepare significantly more because I realized if I actually put in six good hours both nights it was better than putting in like you know ten hours for one day, so that helped.

Zach also benefited from increased responsibility for learning. Homework, in particular, helped him build confidence and strengthened his knowledge base without feeling the need to "cram" for exams.

> One of the things that really helped me was actually being responsible for homework. I think that helped a lot. A lot of professors didn't really… they give it to you, but they would never check up on it, but for me it was good because I had to do it and I think once I did I actually learned that I was learning stuff and I didn't have to study as hard for tests, because I already knew it.

Zach also spoke at length about time management, and associated it closely with his academic success in college. He felt some of his time management skills were a result of a varied schedule in his formative years.

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All the sports I played mean I had to manage time. When I got to college it wasn't that big of a deal. I had to schedule things. I mean, I don't think I ever missed a class. I hated to miss class, and I didn't miss a single day of high school, which I got an award for. I don't tell many people that. In college I tried to schedule everything in the morning so I could get work done and have my nights free. Being in a fraternity there was always something going on that you probably want to be at, but that's another reason why I try to leave my nights open if possible, so it wasn't an excuse. It all comes back to that time management.

Zach's parents were also involved in his education, a factor he associated with his academic success. Almost all of the study participants felt their parents were instrumental to their achievements in the classroom.

My parents are very similar to me in that they work hard for everything they've gotten, so that helped set an example I guess for me. They never pushed me so hard in high school that I felt overwhelmed, but they tried to keep me motivated I guess. I don't think it was one thing, they would just hound me on 'you've got to make good grades' because if you make good grades you go to a good school and get a good degree.

Zach attributed his success primarily to his own hard work, as well as his improved study skills during his time at Wofford. He discussed primarily internal success factors, as well as things that he did personally to improve his ability to perform well. Zach was typical of the white participants in this study in that he felt that as long as he was willing to work hard and make necessary academic adjustments, he would be successful.

Summary

This chapter described the results of this study and provided background on the individual participants. It also established the foundation for more detailed examination of themes across participant groups in Chapter 5. The themes that emerged as common to all participants were: parental involvement, early responsibility and leadership experiences; the "smallness" of the college environment; close interaction with faculty and staff; access to diversity; and, safe risk-taking. Within demographic groups, specific themes also emerged. Among African-American participants, key themes were: religious faith; open-mindedness; early identification of academic talent; and, campus initiatives and open campus groups. Among white participants the key theme of academic adjustment emerged strongly. These themes are analyzed further in Chapter 5, and the implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER V

GROUP FINDINGS

This qualitative research study was designed to give a greater voice to each the fourteen participants in describing their experiences at small, mostly white liberal arts colleges. Each story was unique, but after nearly forty hours of interviews with the participants, a number of clear themes emerged across the group as a whole. In addition, common themes emerged within each demographic group. Some of these findings were unique and unexpected, and have future research and policy implications. This chapter first outlines and discusses the key findings across all participants, and subsequently analyzes unique themes that emerged among the African-American and white participant groups. The implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter 6.

Thematic Analysis

Themes that emerged during data collection were analyzed in the context of Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change. The Key Variables in Pascarella's model are outlined below, and were used as a framework for organizing themes that emerged during the interview process. Accordingly, themes were categorized according to the Core Variable to which they pertained.

Core Variables in Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change

1. Student Background/Pre-College Traits

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2. Structural/Organizational Characteristics

3. Institutional Environments

4. Interactions with Agents of Socialization

5. Quality of Student Effort

Pascarella's model is a "cascading" model whereby Factors 1 and 2 create conditions associated with Factor 3. Subsequently, Factor 4 and 5 are products of the preceding factors. So, a student with excellent pre-college background and experiences (Factor 1) who enters an institution with positive structural/organizational characteristics will find themselves in an ideal institutional environment for generating positive change. This subsequently increases the likelihood of positive interactions with "Agents of Socialization" which further encourages strong student effort. This maximizes the change potential of the student. Negative factors can also inhibit the effects of subsequent variables in Pascarella's model. More positive change factors creates greater capacity for positive change, while more negative change factors inhibit the student's ability to change.

Given the large number of participants in this study, participant responses, when paraphrased in the analysis section below, are labeled as follows:

(P1, AA) where P1 means participant 1, who is an African-American male.

(P2, W) where P2 means participant 2, who is a white male.

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Student Background and Pre-College Characteristics

This category refers to the participant's experiences before college, or traits the student may have developed before attending college. It may refer to family background, socioeconomic status, and significant interactions that occurred in early life. In line with Pascarella's General Model, these characteristics are the most basic building blocks that define a student's capacity for change.

Key Universal Themes

Parental Involvement

All participants in the study cited the involvement of their parents[2] as critical factors in their academic success in college. Parents often went about their roles differently, but in most cases, offered one of four types of academic assistance to their children: motivation, advocacy, enforcement and expectations, or experiences. The commonality in the data was that all participants substantially credited their parent or guardian, in some way, with their success. However, the form of the assistance was quite different between individual participants, and between each demographic group.

Brad (P1, AA) described his mother as instilling in him a sense of confidence, reminding him that he was capable of great things, and that he was a "smart guy." She also enforced strict performance measures, taking Brad to task when his grades did not meet her standards. However, he also described hour as encouraging and uncompromising when it came to ensuring Brad gave his best effort. Sean (P2, AA)

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[2] For purposes of this study, "parents" was defined as any person who played a parental role, such as grandparents, step-parents, or legal guardian.

reported his mother pushed education primarily as a way to improve his life. Will (P3, W) described his parents as setting high expectations for academic performance, as well as more specifically "checking" his homework and responding to questions he had about it. Greg (P4, AA) recounted how his mother made sure he traveled with her whenever possible, which gave him a wide range of social and intellectual experiences that helped him academically. Ivan (P7, W) was entirely home schooled, and accordingly his parents gave him significant personal attention, along with providing him small incentives for achieving his academic goals.

In nearly every case, participants described parental involvement as beginning early in each participant's life, though the interview questions were not chronologically suggestive. This is a strong indication that these participants had active parents, concerned with the education of their child, and that early childhood experiences have a significant and lasting impact on educational performance. The parents of these successful students had a dramatic and positive influence on their children, regardless of their socioeconomic and educational background. This is even more remarkable given the context of the study, which was focused on academic success in college. The interview participants routinely recalled the importance of parental involvement in their education from 15 to 20 years prior to the interview; it is clear that this type of interaction is extraordinarily "sticky" as it left a lasting impression on each interviewee. Participants routinely recounted interactions such as having pizza with their parents after visiting the library; mandatory reading sessions upon coming home from school; and, being reminded of the importance of a college degree with the expectation that they would attain one someday. Perhaps more importantly, parental involvement, as described by the

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participants, cost very little in terms of financial resources. The investment instead came when parents gave time, care, motivation, and high expectations to their children. The parents of these successful students were all invested in their children's education, and that investment provided great returns over time.

Early Responsibility and Leadership Experiences

Nearly every participant in the study also credited early leadership experiences with their academic success later in life. These experiences were quite varied, but usually had the effect of either expanding the student's range of social experiences, or preparing the student for the intellectual and organizational demands of college. It became clear through the course of the interviews that this participant group achieved success because they had become accustomed to handling challenges and responsibility from a young age. In some cases these responsibilities took the form of leisure activities, such as sports or Boy Scouts. In other cases, they were more formalized, such as leadership programs sponsored by high schools and civic groups. In a few cases, these challenges and responsibilities were informal, such as responsibilities within the home.

Several participants discussed the importance of involvement in organized sports in achieving academic success. Zach (P14, W) recounted that the wide range of sports he played during secondary school prepared him to juggle competing scheduling demands in college. John (P13, W) was a volunteer coach for youth athletic teams, which he recalled as a formative leadership experience and a positive influence on his focus on education. Specifically, John's experience with children from different backgrounds made him "glad

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to be where he was" in life, and gave him greater desire to take advantage of his own talents. Bart (P8, AA) was also a youth basketball coach.

Other participants discussed experiences that built their leadership capacity through key responsibilities. Andrew (P9, W) began working on his farm at home as a young boy, which required him to take on significant duties with demanding hours. He felt these built his capacity for leadership, as well as his work ethic, both factors he attributed to academic success at Presbyterian. Both Will (P3, W) and Trent (P6, W) were Eagle Scouts, accomplishments which require organizational ability, steady work over a period of years, and commitment to a singular goal.

Several participants discussed intellectual leadership and travel experiences as building their sense of responsibility and ultimately their academic capacity in college. Wes (P5, AA) attended the South Carolina Governor's School, and was also a participant in an ROTC travel program in high school. Greg (P4, AA) participated in Upward Bound, and traveled extensively with his mother to significant locations such as Chicago and Washington, D.C. as a child. Greg felt these experiences helped set him up to succeed academically in college because he was prepared for "new and different" challenges when they arose. Sean (P2, AA) reported that he participated heavily in numerous clubs and extracurricular activities in high school, which he described as getting him "socially prepared" for college.

Early leadership experiences and responsibilities, as experienced by the study participants, had primary effect of preparing the student for future challenges in college. In some cases, these experiences had the effect of broadening the participant's worldview, or helping identify themselves as "talented." In other cases, it prepared them

to juggle competing responsibilities and better manage time. Other interviewees benefited by learning to persevere toward their goals over an extended timeframe and to work hard to achieve them. However, in all cases, exposure to competing demands and new experiences earlier in life seemed to clearly set the stage for academic success at the college level. Similar to parental involvement, the effects of these experiences seemed to be long-lasting. As a result of leadership experiences and early responsibilities, the participants in this study were prepared to achieve in college, respond to high expectations, and persevere when they encountered difficult times.

Key Themes by Participant Group

African-American Participants

Religious Faith

The most significant theme related to pre-college characteristics and student background among African-American participants was religious faith. Six of seven African-American participants credited their faith as a critical factor in their academic success. Religious themes emerged both in the interview process, and via subsequent examination of resume documents provided by the participants. Faith as an academic success factor was by far the most unexpected finding in the study, and was the factor that resonated most closely with African-American males. By contrast, only one white participant mentioned religion or faith, and in that instance the participant only considered it to be of minor consequence. Conversely, when African-American male participants spoke of faith they did so vigorously and passionately:

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Brad (P1, AA): "Spirituality, my belief in God was tremendous. God was there with me, and helped me have courage."

Brad (P1, AA): "I remember nights where I would come into my dorm room and just sit down on the floor and pray, asking God to get me through it. Without it [prayer and the Bible] I wouldn't have been able to handle it."

Brad also benefited from his religious background because it prepared him well to pursue his major in religion. He described how "growing up in the black church" helped him embrace fundamental questions within his major by providing him with strong "theological underpinnings." Greg (P4, AA) described faith as being the source of his "mental fortitude." He felt that any struggle he encountered in college was part of "God's plan" for his life. This helped him persist through difficult times academically and socially. Wes (P5, AA) credited his "church family" for helping him perform well academically at Furman, primarily because they functioned as a "family away from home." As a musician for the church, Wes connected with the congregation as an off-campus source of social support. In turn, this helped him remain focused and motivated to succeed in his academic work.

Seth (P11, AA) also spoke at length about the importance of faith to his academic success at Wofford:

Faith was important to me. There was a group on campus called Souljahs for Christ, and me being a Christian, it was very nice to find a group who related to me because I know there was another group, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, but I was not used to that crowd. Souljahs was predominately African-American. There were some white people there, but it was more diverse than FCA at that

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time. But it was very instrumental because of, you know, they worshiped in the way I did and I was used to. We had Bible studies. We kind of kept each other encouraged and, like I said, there were African-Americans who were seniors, juniors, had been through everything so…I finally found my niche if you will.

Rob (P12, AA) was also a Wofford student active in many of the same religious organizations as Seth. The critical organizations on campus included both overtly religious groups, such as Souljahs for Christ, as well as groups which were religious in membership and subject matter, such as the Gospel Choir.

The issue of faith was central to most interviews with African-American male participants. This was a theme I certainly did not anticipate, particularly in the context of my interviews and the nature of the research questions. However, it emerged so strongly I believe it to be noteworthy as a policy matter for the colleges which served as sites for this study. Faith seemed to serve a number of key functions that helped these students succeed academically. First, it was a source of social support, which translated to increased motivation and determination. In most of these colleges, religious organizations on campus are disproportionately populated by African-American students. These groups naturally provide a "critical mass" of African-American students. Second, it gave these students confidence and sense of purpose. In many ways the African-American participants in this study viewed their college as a journey, or a "pilgrimage" into unfamiliar territory. Faith and spirituality was important to their accepting the "correctness" of their journey through college, even when difficulties and struggles materialized. Finally, faith-based campus groups formed a point of connection with the college, helping students persist through academic difficulties and encouraging them to

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spend more time on academics. African-American students in this study relied on faith to help them excel, persist, and connect to their institution socially and academically. The implications of this finding are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Open-Mindedness

Another important theme that took shape during participant interviews was the importance of open-mindedness to African-American male academic success at WLC. Most African-American participants in this study described themselves as open-minded, and indicated that this mindset helped them perform well in college. This flexible, "world-facing" mindset seemed to lend itself primarily to social awareness, prudent academic risk-taking, and patience. Open-minded participants let themselves experience a wide range of activities in college, and more importantly, allowed themselves time to adjust to things they did not initially understand or enjoy. These open-minded students "bent" under academic and social pressure but they never broke. They were willing to seek advice, accept criticism, be patient when things were difficult, and accept cultural differences.

> Brad (P1, AA): "I tried to achieve a sense of balance. I played basketball, ultimate Frisbee. I made connections and hung out with different people. Partying was a bit of a conflict for me spiritually, but I did experiment with alcohol a little. I learned to have balance between social and academics, and to make connections."
>
> Sean (P2, AA): "I developed critical consciousness. I asked for help when I needed it."

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Sean's comment about asking for help would also resonate as a frequent expression of this "open-mindedness." Greg (P4, AA) felt this way as well, stating "I needed someone to give me honest feedback, unfiltered. I was always a person who could accept criticism."

Other participants described open-mindedness culturally and socially, such as Wes (P5, AA). Wes recalled his mindset as he began attending Furman:

> I recognized I was not the Furman type, but I was comfortable, and I had no trouble making introductions to people. I went to Furman knowing I was going to be different. I found avenues where I could be comfortable."

He went on to stress the importance of his willingness to seek help anytime he did not understand something, as well as the importance of his global awareness. He felt strongly that the world was much bigger than race, or any social construct. He credited his willingness to embrace differences in others, while retaining his own identity, to his success academically.

Seth (P11, AA) and Rob (P12, AA) both stressed the importance of navigating in both a white world on campus, and an African-American world at home. Both were extremely open-minded and embraced this duality. Seth credited his ability to associate within a white cultural framework, as well as fit in with white friends, as important to his success. Rob was similarly open-minded, as he recounted the importance of understanding different cultures to his work at Wofford, as well as his subsequent work in the medical field.

All of the African-American participants discussed ways in which they were open-minded. Interestingly, only one white participant discussed the idea of being open-

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minded as important or related to his academic success. It is clear that being flexible, free-thinking, and globally-oriented contributes to a student's potential for academic success at a WLC. It seems that open-mindedness was more critical to African-American participants because they were facing incrementally more adaptive challenges than their white counterparts. This is likely because white students have minimal need for open-mindedness at WLC, as they need to make relatively little cultural adjustment. On the other hand, it is likely that African-American students at WLC need to be culturally adept to be successful. These are skills they would necessarily bring as applicants, or desire to develop while in college.

Early Identification of Academic Talent

A significant number of African-American males in this study discussed the importance of being identified as "academically talented" as important to their later academic success. This was particularly true early in their lives, but participants also reported positive experiences during their college careers. Though this theme was present in two white participants, it emerged much more clearly and widely in the African-American demographic group.

Brad (P1, AA) described his experience with a standardized national exam he took in the 4th grade, in which he scored in the top 10% nationwide for all students who took the test. He recounted how this score was a surprise, and how it was a deviation from what was "expected" of children from his low socioeconomic neighborhood. It was at this moment that Brad realized he could excel in an area where most of his peers had not. This accomplishment defined Brad's later course in life, as it pushed academic

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achievement to the forefront of his personal goals. In addition, his teachers took notice, which in his view helped him gain more classroom attention. He also felt that he became "known" as an achiever, which resulted in greater opportunity and higher expectations in subsequent years.

Wes (P5, AA) described the importance of his selection into the South Carolina Governor's school, which he considered particularly significant given he attended a low socioeconomic status, all-African-American high school. His selection came via nomination from the high school faculty and administration. He credited this experience with "making him believe he could go" to Furman and succeed. Similarly, Sean (P2, AA) was selected into the Arkansas Commitment program, a high school program for promising minority students. Sean credited the program with helping him select a liberal arts college, and exposed him to new skills that benefited him later, in his academic pursuits.

Seth (P11, AA) credited his identification as "gifted" in elementary school as a pathway toward inclusion in higher quality academic programs, which coincidentally were typically at "whiter" schools. Seth also considered his announcement as an award winner in his academic major to be of critical importance, as it was of a very public nature. Rob (P12, AA) described himself as being "one of the only" African-American children in his advanced classes growing up. He garnered significant support and talent identification from those who lived in his neighborhood, but he also reported some negativity associated with his high performance. He described this as particularly coming from other African-Americans, who considered him to be "acting too white."

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Identification of talent was important to several African-American participants in this study. The primary effect of this identification process was that it galvanized their own belief that they were academically talented. In addition, having their talent acknowledged publicly or by an authority figure was particularly important. This recognition helped shape their expectations for their academic performance, as well as the expectations that others had of them. Not surprisingly, the participants in this study lived up to and in many cases exceeded these expectations.

Structural/Organizational Characteristics

This category describes academic success factors that are inherent to the organization, such as institutional size and type of institution. These factors are not the result of interactions with individuals or efforts of the student, but rather are factors present in the college environment.

Key Universal Themes

"Smallness:" Community, Accessibility, and Small Class Size

One of the most common interview themes among all participants was the powerful effect the "smallness" of the WLC college community had on their academic success. This was true across both demographic groups, and participants described this impact with great depth and frequency. Notably, participants related experiences well beyond rote descriptions of small class sizes, and also told stories about the impact the entire college community had on their undergraduate experience. The participants characterized the WLC as having a nurturing, supportive, empowering effect on their

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academic experience. It also increased the level of personal accountability each student felt they had for their own academic success.

Brad (P1, AA) felt the approachability of professors and the personal connections they made with him increased his desire to seek help after class and stay engaged in a community of learners. His interactions were just as significant with key staff members, describing how they helped him personally, academically, and even let him borrow money from time to time in order to help him get through college. Sean (P2, AA) characterized Davidson as a "community of friends" where faculty doors were always open, and classes were always small. The effect on his experience was to increase his sense of responsibility to do well academically. With the professors always there "when he wanted them" it encouraged him to put forth his best effort. With so many resources available, it removed many of the barriers to success, and potential excuses for failure. Will (P3,W) recounted that the small environment encouraged greater involvement on campus, both academic and non-academic. Bart (P8, AA) also spoke at length about the importance of the professor knowing the students very well. He characterized its importance in more regulatory terms. While positive performance resulted in kudos and accolades, missed classes and poor performances generated questions, concern, and "supportive scrutiny" from professors. This produced an environment with inherently high academic expectations, and students like Bart rose to meet them. Trent (P6, W) told a similar story. He felt the small, intimate environment fostered personal connection. Ultimately, he described its impact as creating "accountability" because students did not merely answer test questions, they constantly had to "justify" themselves through class discussion. Frequently his viewpoints were challenged by professors and other students.

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The result was greater engagement, rigor, and ultimately, academic performance. Zach (P14, W) echoed this sentiment in slightly different terms. He described how small class sizes helped professors get to know the students more closely inside and outside of class, which made him want to "report back to them with good information." Zach knew they cared, so he did not want to disappoint them. John (P13, W) echoed Zach's view, in addition to describing how small classes often utilized small group work. Despite his strong dislike for small group work, John felt it was ultimately critical to his academic success and development.

"Smallness" was a powerful theme in this study, and emerged frequently and visibly in participant interviews. Small class sizes, personal connections, and a close-knit campus culture contributed to student academic success in several ways. It served to increase the student's sense of accountability, fostered greater academic engagement and cooperation, and increased student motivation. As a whole, the participants in this study felt a sense of belonging: they belonged to the institution, to their professors, and to their fellow students. This simultaneously increased the "stakes" and forced students to engage in learning, while making the process familiar and inviting. Stated differently, the study participants benefited from an encouraging, challenging, and tightly-knit academic community.

Access to Diversity

A number of participants in this study, across both demographic groups, also characterized access to diversity as an important academic success factor in their experiences at WLC. In this analysis, "diversity" emerged in a variety of forms,

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including contact with other students, professors, and staff members with different life experience, ideology, personal background, and socioeconomics. Though each participant experienced diversity differently, the vast majority of alumni interviewed stressed the importance of getting close access to diverse individuals, but in a tightly-knit, "low-risk" environment. Often they characterized their classmates and peers as being diverse, or different from themselves, but still familiar to them because of the intimate nature of their classes and the campus.

In describing the positive impact of diversity on his academic performance, Brad (P1, AA) described how a "dialogue" group at Davidson increased communication between all types of students on campus, including students of different race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Ivan (P7, W) referred to his Furman experience as an "immersion" experience. He recalled that Furman created a kind of intellectual melting pot, contained within a small and accessible sphere. This allowed him to have what he described as great freedom of "movement" between various academic interests. Ivan was deeply involved in a number of activities on campus, from on-campus employment to various social and academic organizations. He stressed the academic value of his Furman experience, which he characterized as an active, on-campus, "24/7" learning experience. Bart (P8, AA) learned to "coexist with people who were different" from himself, which contributed to his intellectual development. He used the analogy "forced but friendly" to describe how the small, intimate environment made it almost impossible to avoid exposure to varying viewpoints. Rob (P12, AA) also benefited from the experience of working with different types of people. He recalled how his Wofford education taught him how to deal with the "real world" which is a world where one has to interact with

people of all races. He felt this type of experience was extremely valuable to his academic success because he learned to work with a wide range of diverse individuals. Even now, as a medical student, Rob described how this enhanced his ability to develop rapport with, and successfully treat, patients who are different than him. Seth (P11, AA) benefited from his experience academically because it helped him become more adept at working within a mostly white environment. Seth was one of several African-American participants who described this as a process of living in two worlds: the casual world at home, where he was African-American, and the formal world of education at Wofford, where he was in a significant minority.

African-American participants overwhelmingly considered the WLC experience to be important because it gave them access to social diversity. However, this diversity was frequently shocking early in the student's academic career. Brad (P1, AA) referred to having "culture shock" in his first year, which he overcame with an intense desire not to fail. He used his spirituality to cope with the change. Wes (P5, AA), Bart (P8, AA), Seth (P11, AA), and Rob (P12, AA) also described culture shock upon beginning their academic careers at WLC. However, despite this potentially negative experience, all of these participants considered this cross-cultural immersion to be important academically. Brad, Rob, Greg, and Seth spoke in detail about the importance of learning to live in two worlds: the African-American community and the WLC environment they had chosen to enter. Typically this involved wearing different clothing, speaking differently, and in general behaving differently, depending on the environment. When in the WLC environment, several African-American participants attempted to "assimilate" frequently by dressing to match the cultural expectations and speaking more formally. These

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participants considered the ability to navigate and succeed in a competitive, mostly white environment to be an important skill. Rob (P12, AA) described his take on the WLC:

I visited the school and fell in love. I loved the small classes, I loved that everyone knew each other, I liked the fact that it was so organized, that every office was in sync with each other. They were just a phone call away or a walk away. Now I remember someone asking me why I didn't apply to an HBCU. I have nothing against HBCU's, I think those are wonderful institutions, however, I feel like they don't represent the real world. I'm sorry as an African-American there are rare occasions where your job is only going to be African-Americans. You're going to have to work with people who are not only white, but people who are of other races, people who have accents that are hard to understand. It's not a real representation of the world… For me it was getting a sense of the opposite spectrum.

As a result, these African-American participants enrolled in WLC and worked hard to make sure they succeeded. In addition, three African-American male participants chose the WLC because they believed it would limit the non-academic social distractions they might encounter at a larger institution or a historically-black college.

White participants who described having benefited from diversity at WLC described the phenomenon in ways distinct from African-American participants. The three white participants who discussed diversity the most benefited primarily from access to a diverse pool of students and faculty with unique academic perspectives and patterns of thought. Trent (P6, W), Ivan (P7, W), and John (P13, W) and all discussed how being in an environment where they had ready access to individuals who were "academically"

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different contributed to their academic success. This theme was consistent enough to be identifiable, and suggests that at least some white students benefit from diversity at WLC in the intellectual sense: that it is possible to see problems in new ways, or to consider issues from other perspectives. In comparing responses from African-American participants, it seems clear that African-American males sought the WLC as access to an academic "crossover" experience which had future functional value to them. They felt the need to gain academic and social experience in a different sphere, similar to the manner in which a study abroad student might consider the value of studying in another country. Alternatively, white males did not seek an academic and social "immersion" experience in the way African-American males did, but rather experienced the WLC as a place to encounter and consider other modes of thinking. Clearly the white participants in this study were well-situated within the cultural majority at the WLC, likely reducing their perception of the academic experience as cross-culture. Nonetheless, they reported enjoying and benefiting academically from the broad range of academic conversations on the WLC campus.

Institutional Environment

The institutional environment is the third factor in Pascarella's General Model, and is defined as a product of the first two factors. Stated differently, the institutional environment where student change occurs is shaped by the student's pre-college experience, as well as inherent structural traits of the organization. Taken together, they create an environment that influences the rate and manner of student change. In this study, one significant factor emerged through the research process that seemed to be

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universal among participants: they experienced the small WLC as a "safe" place to take academic and social risks.

Key Universal Themes

The Liberal Arts College: A "Safe" Place to Take Risks

The vast majority of participants in this study experienced the small liberal arts college as a "safe" place to have new academic and social experiences, both of which participants credited as keys to their academic success. Though African-American and white males described these experiences in different terms, both participant groups took advantage of the small, intimate environment to experiment in academic and social areas they otherwise may not have. The WLC provided a safe environment primarily by providing a sense intimacy and familiarity across all campus programs. Nearly every interviewee was pleased with this aspect of their experience, and felt it was critical to their strong academic performance. At the same time, the WLC provided a safe place to take risks. Notably, it was the risks that often spurred personal and intellectual growth in the participant.

Brad (P1, AA) described the importance of having to "reach out" socially and academically to a diverse group of people while at Davidson. Brad stated that at times he had to "be courageous, especially when situations arose that forced me to interact. I sometimes put myself in uncomfortable situations, where I had to find common ground." He found this experience valuable enough to believe others should embrace it as well, suggesting that other students like him should also force themselves "out of their comfort zone." He suggested "If we aren't out of our comfort zones, we don't learn anything.

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People act different, look different, and it's all about being involved." Trent (P6, W) echoed this sentiment. He described feeling as though Furman was "family," all while being stretched socially and academically at the same time:

> It's a family that you get very much involved with. I think there is a big support network that sort of makes you feel comfortable while you're a student there, that there are going to be people that you can talk to that can mentor you and point you in the right direction, and then Furman did an incredible job of encouraging you to stretch beyond the classroom. We all had our hands in multiple pots, and I think having that push and expectation to do stuff beyond the classroom helped me become who I am and equipped me with the skills I use today.

Ivan (P7, W) and Bart (P8, AA) also described how the WLC forced them out of their comfort zone. Ivan recounted how the WLC engaged him across many different disciplines and gave him substantial "mobility" to try different activities on campus. Trent (P6, W) described a similar experience, as he felt "stretched" to try new activities. For Bart, his interaction with the majority white student body at Furman was a significant learning experience; similarly, Seth (P11, AA) also benefited from cross-cultural contact on campus, including getting to know the college's president well. Though each demographic group described different experiences, as discussed later in this chapter, both groups were academically and socially challenged by their institution's environment.

It is clear that many of the participants in this study took advantage of opportunities to grow academically and socially while in college. Most notably, it was the intimate nature of the WLC that seems to spur these individuals to take these kinds of

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risks. Accordingly, nearly every participant described a high level of satisfaction with their college experience. This satisfaction was typically closely associated with being recognized as an individual student, feeling as though they were part of a college "family", or "not being just a number" like they might at larger institutions. The key effect that emerged in the stories of the study participants was that the environment of the WLC is familiar enough to allow students to take some risks comfortably, but supportive enough to help them also manage these risks successfully.

Key Themes by Participant Group

African-American Participants

Campus Initiatives and Open (Non-Greek) Organizations

Nearly all African-Americans who participated in this study placed significant emphasis on the role of open campus organizations and initiatives on their academic success. These organizations played important academic and social roles in participants' college experiences primarily by improving their academic motivation and forging a deeper connection to the institution. In stark contrast, only one white participant discussed campus organizations that were not Greek in nature. African-American students cited campus organizations, particularly transition programs, as major factors in their academic success. As with the issue of faith, the impact campus organizations had on the academic success of study participants was complicated, and varied by individual. However, a common thread linked all African-American participants: campus organizations and initiatives mattered to them, and they attributed their academic success to these programs nearly as much as they did their faith.

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Brad (P1, AA) described the Davidson STRIDE program as a positive experience which made a significant difference in his academic performance. STRIDE stands for "Students Together Reaching Individual Development and Education Program." As with most participants, the first year of college was the most critical to their academic survival, and was often a time of great distress. Brad said:

> The STRIDE program really helped me adjust to Davidson. We came a week or two early to campus and got acquainted. What it really did was follow minorities during their academic career, and paired them with an older [upper classmen] student. This program made me feel like the college really cared about minority students.

Sean (P2, AA) also discussed the importance of the STRIDE program in bolstering his academic performance. He cited the program's academic rigor, as well as the underlying support system it created as being keys to his success.

Greg (P4, AA) related his experience at Furman and how difficult it was, particularly early in his career. He credited the Office of Minority Affairs ("OMA") as playing a critical role in encouraging him to remain at Furman rather than transfer to another institution. For Greg, the OMA offered a "home" on campus where he could get both academic and social support:

> I had a 3.5 something after my first year. So they know I can come to school and be successful. After my second year some of these other factors you know, I'm at a school and its 90 percent white and it's different. I did consider transferring…so I'm sittin' there going into my third year and I'm like man, I know this experience is good, but I'm getting ready to graduate and I'm gonna

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have this debt on my hands. I don't know if I still wanna be here. I'm an

African-American male who doesn't play football. So that, you know, I thought

about it and took it to [staff member at the OMA], I took it to my advisor. I don't

even think I took it to my parents.

Greg indicated that the staff member who was so helpful to him at Furman was also

African-American, and had encouraged him to remain at Furman due to the value of the

degree in the community.

Seth (P11, AA) cited Souljahs for Christ, the Wofford Transitions Program, and

the Association for Multicultural Students ("AMS") as key factors in his academic

success. Rob (P12, AA) was also an active participant and president of the Association

of Multicultural Students and participant in the Wofford Gospel Choir. For Seth, he

discussed at length having some "trouble" when he first enrolled at Wofford. He

clarified this as a time of stress and discomfort at his new environment, which was

culturally different than what he was used to.

Of course when I got into my sophomore year I was in AMS and Transitions, and

you know trying to help the other black students acclimate I became acclimated. I

remember [when I started] I didn't know anyone so I didn't go talk to the African-

American students, I didn't go talk to the white students. I just sat by myself you

know praying that someone would come up to me because you know I didn't

want to be embarrassed.

Seth referred to campus groups as major factors in his performing well academically, as

well as staying at Wofford and completing his degree. He said these groups helped him

"flourish socially and academically" and he would not have graduated without them. It is

also noteworthy that many campus organizations that appeal to African-American students, such as Wofford's Souljahs for Christ and the Gospel Choir, are also faith-based. In this study, faith and campus organizations were areas where African-American students coalesced.

It is noteworthy that all African-American participants and the single white participant who discussed the importance of campus initiatives considered themselves to be of low to moderate socioeconomic status. The remaining white participants considered themselves to be of high or moderately high economic status. This seems to reinforce the value of open, college-sponsored programs dedicated to connecting academically and socially with students of lower economic status.

Interaction with Agents of Socialization

In Pascarella's General Causal Model, the final two factors are Interaction with Agents of Socialization and Quality of Student Effort. Essentially the student who is best suited for the Institutional Environment will subsequently benefit from the most interaction with agents of socialization, as well as put forth the best efforts at succeeding or effecting personal change. Interaction with Agents of Socialization could include interaction with faculty, staff, or fellow students in the institution who help bring about change in the student. In subsequent paragraphs, the study refers to faculty, staff, and students who positively influence student academic success collectively as "agents." It is important to note that at smaller institutions, with more supportive institutional environments, the capacity of agents of socialization to impact change is increased.

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<center>**Key Universal Themes**</center>

Close, Personal Interactions with Faculty, Staff, and Students

By far the most dominant theme in this study, shared by every participant interviewed, was that participants felt their academic success was influenced positively by close and personal interaction with both students and employees of the institution. In some cases, this positive effect was a result of in-class contact with professors, while in other cases it was a result of casual, personal interaction unrelated to academics. These types of contact were classified into two groups: academic and non-academic. It is notable that interviewees described both types of interactions as being factors in their own academic success, though each influenced student success in different ways. It also became clear that though some of these interactions could have occurred at larger institutions, the depth and frequency with which they were discussed in the interview process made it clear that they are normal, even expected at the small, private institutions examined in this study.

Academic contact was reported most typically as in-class interaction, or as an out-of-class interaction that was academic in nature. While the most commonly reported type of contact was between student and professor, it also involved other agents as well. Numerous examples of this type of interaction emerged in the interviews:

Brad (P1, AA): "My professor in my ancient Greek class left no room for failure. When I approached him after class, he told me, you just gotta do it." (Referring to Brad's frustration at several difficult topics and seeking academic help after class)

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Brad (P1, AA): "The professors were always encouraging and that made me want to study more. I am still friends with [a particular professor.] He used to help me one-on-one with financial decisions, like a father would.

Sean (P2, AA): "I had a community of friends that encouraged and reinforced my commitment to studying."

Sean (P2, AA): "I stayed in my professors' offices. I did multiple drafts every chance I got, and got involved in a cycle of editing where I had people look at my drafts. My girlfriend especially read my drafts. I looked up to her. She was a phenomenal writer and gave me honest feedback. I had engaged friends."

Will: (P3, W): "The math teachers, as I was saying, were very good about working with us and they had their office doors open unless they had a class. Their office doors were open 8 to 5 every Monday through Friday and unless they had class they were in there. You could bother them anytime."

Trent (P6, W): "I house sat for professors, I babysat for professors, professors had us over to their houses for dinner during class and I think having that connection to those people that were teaching you and that was huge for me. I wasn't sitting there in a lecture room."

Trent (P6, W): "Three professors always stick out as having an impact on me. Those are the ones that were professionals in their own right and were intelligent to the point that they, they were almost cocky and weren't afraid to show it, but were also some of the most relatable professors that I had. The faculty take you on in many ways, not just as a student, but as their children for that time period. I

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still talk to several of my professors to this day both personally and professionally about life, what they're doing, what I'm doing, and just stay in touch."

Ivan (P7, W): "I had a freshman advisor that helped me choose classes. He used to laugh about some of my choices, but he gave me freedom in making the choice."

Ivan (P7, W): "I had a circle of friends, a peer group with which I could discuss issues."

Bart (P8, AA): "My chemistry professor still keeps in contact. He was the first person who came out and told me I could be very successful."

Andrew (P9, W): "There's more discussion in PC's environment between professor and student, not that they get off topic, but…I think the environment lends itself to discussion greatly."

Dan (P10, W): "For me it [the most critical academic success factor] was being able to know the professors."

Dan (P10, W): "I just think maybe it made learning feel like more important to an extent because it wasn't… they weren't just showing up and reciting something. I guess maybe it seemed more like they were trying to help you learn because they understood who you were rather than just, you know, show up blindly collecting pay checks."

Rob (P12, AA): "I remember by the end of that semester with her [female professor] I was in her office a lot. I was talking over papers with talking about how I could fix this, what can be done better. It helped because you began to understand more of what you're doing wrong and how to correct those situations.

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I mean when you are talking about your grades or you're talking about a paper or something you will develop a personal relationship with that professor. I remember having simple conversations with Dr. [same professor] that would last 20 or 30 minutes about what I wanted to do in the future, what classes I took, why did I take it. We began to talk about how it related to life."

Zach: (P14, W): "I like the personal relationships you have with your professors. They care about you and they want to know what you are up to, what's going on, what you're about. They remember you, that kind of stuff."

Non-academic contact was usually more indirect and most often occurred away from the classroom. Often it resulted in a perceived increase in student empowerment, motivation, or willingness to work hard.

Brad (P1, AA): "I even linked up with the director of the [non-academic group on campus]. He provided me with recognition and social support.

Brad (P1, AA): "The college [non-academic position] and I talked all the time. He is still encouraging me to [enter his field of interest.] I also became close to the assistant [non-academic position.] He helped me personally, and we still talk."

Sean (P2, AA): "Davidson creates an environment for minority success."

Will (P3, W): "I had friends who were equally interested in doing well in school, 'cause it's kind of the guilt by association thing. If they're studying, they're not going out doing something crazy every night. It will keep you in studying and that sort of thing. You kind of hold each other accountable for everything you do.

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Greg (P4, AA): "If I ever had a problem I'd go to Ms. [non-academic staff member.] I could always go to her and she would always be willing to help me. My advisor Dr. [faculty member] I could always go to him you know. You have to use your resources, and those two people, I talked to them about what I felt and they would help me. Again, I had a 3.5 something after my first year."

Trent (P6, W): "One of my biggest mentors at school was [female, non-academic employee.] She was for all intents and purposes my grandmother for four years while I was at school. So it stretched far beyond just faculty interactions, to the staff as well. I mean even as a sophomore, working as an unpaid RA and working with the janitorial staff who took care of you and helped you out, I think that dynamic on campus was huge."

Andrew (P9, W): "Just being able to discuss things with the professor, and it may even lend itself to where you're talking to the professor and you're discussing things that don't have anything to do with the business class, real life perspective you know and so forth like that. They promoted discussion and I'll tell you just the environment, having, knowing your classmates and professors knowing you was very important."

Seth (P11, AA): "Small classes make it very easy to befriend, to a large extent, my professors. I still talk to [names three professors.] Dr. [male professor, not in Seth's major] he just Facebooked me yesterday about my birthday. I just saw Dr. [male professor, not in major] he teaches chemistry. I have their personal phone number. I got special attention and not just because of me being special, but you

know the thing is, I made an effort to get to know my professors beyond the classroom."

Zach (P14, W): "My freshman year I took one of Dr. [male professor] classes and we ended up playing each other in basketball intramurals. And so ever since that first game when we played and seeing him in class every day or every other day, he would always ask me how my shot was, how things were going, how our team was doing. He would invite me to come play on Fridays. Just stuff like that, you know just asking about things outside the classroom."

As suggested in the introduction, close interaction with agents of socialization, including faculty, staff, and fellow students, was the most pervasive theme in the study. Every participant agreed that such interaction was a critical factor in their academic success, though the form of interaction differed slightly between participants and demographic groups. The primary effect of this close interaction was to increase the level of engagement between the student and the institution. Participants studied more when they were engaged, they sought help with greater frequency, and they received more direct assistance in their academic endeavors. In addition, high levels of engagement with agents of socialization who knew the student well resulted in an increased level of vigilance on the part of the student. Students felt the faculty or staff member cared for them, were paying attention to them, and in some cases were "watching" over them to make sure they performed to their potential. The relationship became more collegial, even parental in nature, which encouraged the participants in this study to perform their best.

Quality of Student Effort

Quality of Student Effort is the final factor in Pascarella's General Model, and represents the cumulative effect of each of the preceding four factors. Student effort includes the actions, attitudes, and approach the student takes in engaging in change. In this study, the most common theme associated with this factor, across all interviewees, was the need to put forth effort to achieve academic success. However, the mechanisms by which participants recalled achieving this change were different.

Key Universal Themes

Hard Work

Nearly every interviewee credited their success in college, to some degree, to their own hard work and diligence. Commonly this theme appeared as an expression of significant study time, seeking alternative methods of learning, peer learning, or trying to understand the "rules of the game." A number of examples have been selected that illustrate common interview responses:

Brad (P1, AA): "I sought out help opportunities, such as the writing center, and TA sessions in the classics."

Sean (P2, AA): "I was not afraid to ask for help, and I loved constructive criticism. I studied my butt off. I don't even know what else you would do in college besides work."

Sean (P2, AA): "My advice to others like me is to take your first year seriously. Don't use it as a reason to screw up. You don't have time. Things are not as easy as you think. If you profess that you want help, go get it. It's there."

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Will (P3, W): "I was proud of my GPA and I was very proud of the work I did there and the relationships I made. The harder you study and the more time you put into the better it will feel when you get that good grade at the end, and that was just always something that was intriguing to me. I remember I would hate life for a couple of days, but when you're done with the exam, it was such a release."

Greg (P4, AA): "Well, I was academically successful in college mainly because I did my work! Before any first test I just engulfed every bit of information that some professor would give me until I can delineate or determine what they're asking of me for a test or project. After the first one I pretty much know what they're expecting and how I need to study or plan for that class. Until then, I'm just all in on every bit of material."

Wes (P5, AA): "I pushed myself. I did not go to college to be social or party. I did not go to escape or "break loose." I was there to study, learn, and find a career. I worked to prevent myself from slipping. I made myself dedicate time to study. My advice to someone like me would be to study. It's not a time to party, you have to put in time. If you don't understand, say something and seek help."

Andrew (P9, W): "Me and my brother were actually fourth generation dairy farmers. As you may or may not know, dairy farm cows have to be milked twice a day, 365 days a year. There are no holidays and they especially like to get out of their fences in the middle of the night, on Christmas Eve, or every other holiday there is. Being a fourth generation farmer I was kind of ingrained in

that—to work hard for what you get and where you are in life and that translates to rewards down the line."

Andrew (P9, W): "I know my first semester, I don't know why it was this, but I had class from 8 to 1 on Friday my first semester. So I had four tough classes on a Friday, and it was kind of like, wow you got to bear down or you're not going to make it through this. So my grades were pretty good then even after going through that hellacious schedule on Friday, but somehow I got through it. I just, you know, it's probably what my mom said, you've been doing this your whole life so you can handle it."

Andrew (P9, W): "PC would make you earn it the right way, and I believe that's one of the more important things that they do. You had to plan it out and do it the right way and spend the appropriate time on it or you wouldn't get the grade that you wanted, you wouldn't be satisfied. The assignments were challenging."

Dan (P10, W): "I think the biggest thing is just putting the effort in. This is advice I have given: Just try. So many students don't bother putting any effort in. It's not rocket science, and even if it was rocket science if they would just put the effort in and prepare ahead of time, you know spend 30 minutes here and there reviewing stuff they'd make A's."

Rob (P12, AA): "I guess just growing up with my family and especially my mother she had this thing where she would not stop at all until it got done…. then I realized I picked up her trait too. So going into a subject whatever it is, going in to it fully engaged and putting all the energy into it, reading books, flash cards, writing notes, that's draining."

Zach (P14, W): "My study habits…I never really studied in high school, and that probably hurt me a lot, but when I got to college my parents were footing the bill and I actually felt like I need to try I guess so I actually put in time and realized that it was working."

No interviewee in the pool described themselves as putting forth anything less than strong effort to achieve great academic results. While some interviewees admitted they were talented, in most cases they characterized themselves as willing to do whatever it took to succeed. However, there were some specific differences in the way this theme emerged in the African-American male and white male participant groups.

The most significant difference in data collected was the consistency and intensity of "hard work" as a theme among white participants. While the theme was also present among African-American male participants, it was less pronounced. African-American students seemed to work as hard, but did not report doing so in such a purely "academic" fashion as did white participants. Rather, they often focused their efforts first on connecting socially to friends, mentors, and the institution.

White students did not typically require similar levels of social adjustment, and instead focused more closely on "mechanics" of their academic efforts. While this makes sense given that white students, in general, probably require less social adjustment at WLC, it suggests a powerful link between social satisfaction and academic achievement. Despite the fact that the site selections for this study were small, liberal arts colleges with strong teaching focuses, academic performance at WLC seemed to be closely associated with non-academic factors. Accordingly, when seeking improvement in academic outcomes, it seems that the conversation about academics should include better

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understanding of the ways students connect socially at an institution. This is particularly true with respect to minority students. This idea is discussed further in Chapter 6, along with some suggestions for improving minority student experiences.

Key Themes by Participant Group

White Participants and African-American Participants

Academic Adjustments

The majority of white students in this study discussed the importance of making academic adjustments in achieving academic success at WLC. "Academic adjustments" as defined in this study were instances where students changed their behaviors to respond to both positive and negative experiences associated with academic work. These adjustments were frequently important turning points or milestones in the students' academic careers. Some examples of common academic adjustments were improving time management, altering specific study methods or locations, and changing study patterns to avoid distractions. Only one white student did not mention academic adjustments. In contrast, only one African-American student spoke about academic adjustments at length. While both participant groups were extremely successful academically, it became apparent through the interview process that white students felt mechanical adjustments in their approach helped them to succeed, while African-American students felt that spiritual and social factors were more important. Further, African-American students did not mention academic adjustments outside of the context of the theme of "hard work."

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Several examples of white participants' responses illustrate the mechanical, often very specific, adjustments they made to their study techniques and approach to learning:

Will (P3, W) "Where I studied was always a big thing for me. I guess me finding, or the fact that everywhere was open to study was very helpful. I think I found that I liked being in a place where I could kind of distract myself and possibly every once in a while see a friend and you could go chat about something and get your mind off the work, but not that it's too social to go back to your table and start studying again. So that's why I really enjoyed studying at our campus union, 'cause you could study upstairs and then if you needed a mental break you could walk downstairs and you knew you'd see somebody you know and could just chat for a while."

Will (P3, W): "I got to where I had a very regimented study pattern, where I would take notes in class, then I would go through all my notes and write a summary, and this was all hand because when I would type stuff on the computer it wouldn't register as well as if I actually handwrote an overview of my notes. Before the tests, since we had so many problem sets, I would just go through every single problem set, go through my overview. I learned this more by trial and error. I had success with it throughout so I was like, "oh, this is working pretty well so let's keep up with this."

John (P13, W): "I learned my own study habits, learned where I wrote and studied better…and how I learned best. I figured out I didn't learn well in groups, because study groups always ended up being more social events. Working in my room didn't work, I learned to avoid that too. I also learned to manage my time

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better, to make priorities, and academics started winning over social. I knew there was fun to be had, so I had to manage my time better."

Zach (P14, W): "I never studied in my dorm room, even in graduate school I didn't. I just liked having everything here and nothing else in the way. I used to love that office that's on the other side of this hall right here. It used to be a study room and I would go there all the time, but I really liked classrooms to study in because nobody was there and that, having the ability to walk into a classroom and just plop down for a couple of hours was nice. The library was good, so that's where I would go if I couldn't get a classroom."

Zach (P14, W): "Time management was another. Putting in enough hours. Another thing is I would not study after 1:00 AM. I always would cut it off and that was because I was miserable. I would get up around 5 or 6 and keep studying, but just knowing that I got some sleep, took a break, those kind of things. Work for a couple of hours and then go for a walk or go get something to drink or something, so I'm just not staring at something for so long. In college that was big for me."

It is also clear that most of these academic adjustments were introspective, rather than imposed by an external authority. These alumni were responding to the intellectual demands of academic work, but were doing so via personal reflection and experimentation. In no case did a participant suggest that a formalized program or procedure helped them make these academic adjustments. They did so by responding to their classroom and social environment in their own way.

These comments were typical of responses from most white students in this study. The specificity of the comments is noteworthy, and clearly demonstrates sharp focus on the particulars of study methods. These students were spending a significant amount of effort trying to determine what worked for them, and making conscious efforts to change things that did not work.

Summary

This qualitative research study was designed to give a greater voice to each the fourteen participants in describing their academic experiences at small, mostly white liberal arts colleges. The research questions were designed to capture memory-elicited data surrounding academic success in the context of the WLC. Each study participant was a high-achieving, "successful" student, and each of the colleges involved as a site was a private college, expensive relative to other colleges, and selective in admissions.

This chapter focused on analysis of the data collected in the study. The data was analyzed for recurring and critical themes and categorized into two major groups: Key Universal Themes and Key Themes by Participant Group. Key Universal Themes focused on themes that were pervasive across both participant groups, and represented themes that were frequently shared by almost every participant. Key Universal Themes were not only present in most interviews; they usually emerged strongly, with participants providing rich detail and in-depth explanations. Alternatively, Key Themes by Participant Group focused on those themes which closely aligned with either African-American or white participants. In this category, themes were frequently associated with just one demographic group. In some cases, members of the other demographic group

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discussed the theme, but it was significantly less frequent or was recalled in much weaker terms. Critical themes were organized by element in Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change (Pascarella, 1985). A visual summary of these findings, as well as a discussion of their implications, is provided in Chapter 6.

<center>**CHAPTER VI**</center>

<center>**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**</center>

Unexpected Findings

This study produced several findings that were not anticipated. In other cases, anticipated findings did not emerge in the data as expected. Unexpected findings are highlighted first, along with discussion of possible explanations. Expected findings that did not emerge are discussed later in this section.

Religious Faith and African-American Males

Religious faith was the most unexpected academic success factor to African-American participants in this study. It dominated all but one interview, and was the primary success factor that emerged uniquely in this participant group. African-American participants reported relying on their faith and faith-based groups on campus as sources of motivation, inspiration, and occasionally, validation that their work in college was the correct life path for them. Conversely, it was mentioned in only one interview with white participants, and then only sparingly. It is clear that despite the proliferation of African-American religious organizations on the campuses of the WLC in this study, these organizations require much greater attention and understanding from campus administrators and faculty.

Participants generally spoke about faith in personal, "experiential" terms, frequently highlighting their participation in faith-based campus initiatives and groups. Faith was often a bridge between the "home community" and the "college community"

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for these students. It was also a critical coping mechanism during difficult times, such as the freshman year. By relying on faith, African-American students in this study were able to reduce or deflect some of the pressure they experienced on campus. Some spoke of adversity at the WLC in terms of being "God's plan," which helped them take a longer-term view of their campus experience, and enabled them to see difficulty as something that needed to be endured for greater long-term good.

Religious faith helped these students stay focused on their studies, persist to graduation, and see the experience at the WLC as spiritually meaningful. In addition, absent a critical mass of minority students on the WLC campus, campus faith-based organizations were a gathering point, and possibly the most important gathering point, for African-American students. Nearly all African-American participants in this study spoke about the importance of faith in their interviews, and demonstrated significant participation in faith-based activities on their resumes and personal histories. In one interview, the participant voiced his displeasure with the WLC "consolidating" African-American student affairs under a single multicultural affairs program. He felt this was a disservice to the African-American community, which had traditionally had its own standalone organization. When this occurred, he remarked that African-American students coalesced instead around the college gospel choir, which was comprised of nearly all African-American students.

The power and pervasive nature of the "faith" theme in this study among African-American students was quite surprising. A key takeaway from this study was that greater conversation and increased awareness of how important spirituality is to African-American students is needed at WLC institutions. Faculty, staff, and administrators at

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these institutions need to better understand that faith is more than a characteristic of the applicant pool. Rather, it is a means by which these students made meaning of their lives, and persisted to academic success. This study suggests that religious faith and campus support was perhaps more important to African-American students than traditional interventions, such as teaching methods, coursework, and study skills.

Campus leaders, particularly in the South where the African-American church is historically a strong influence, need to pay close attention to the important role faith-based organizations and personal faith play in the lives of African-American students. Increasing awareness on campus of the spiritual needs of students, as well as boosting funding and publicity for faith-based campus organizations could improve the minority student experience. Further, stronger ties to the African-American church could improve the colleges' ability to attract and retain strong African-American students. Most of the faith-based campus organizations discussed with participants in this study received minimal, if any, funding. Incrementally, the marginal cost to the WLC in this study to bolster the presence and impact of faith-based organizations is minimal. College administrators should first seek a conversation with African-American student organizations on campus in order to appropriately target faith-based organizations and funding, keeping in line with campus policies related to funding equity for campus groups. It may also be useful to focus informal campus gatherings among students, faculty, and staff on topics that raise awareness of these issues. By investing relatively small amounts of resources, WLC institutions could see significant improvements in African-American academic success.

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As introduced earlier, African-American male participants described struggling most to overcome social discomfort, rather than academic discomfort, and relied primarily on religious faith as a way to manage these feelings of discontent. It is important to point out that even though student discomfort was not reported to be directly academic in nature, it had clear academic effects. As a result, overcoming social discomfort helped the study participants succeed academically.

White Males and Mechanical Academic Adjustments

White males in this study reported that the most important factor in their academic success was academic adjustment made while on campus. Academic adjustments, as defined in this study, were typically associated with specific, mechanical behaviors that were not social in nature, and in most cases were confined to the individual. This factor emerged uniquely among white participants, and did not appear in any significant way in interviews with African-American males. Perhaps most surprising is that these adjustments were most typically described as independent, self-guided, "trial-and-error" experiences in which the student learned informally to adjust their tactics and behaviors to the academic environment. These experiences were not the result of formal efforts, programs, or policies on the campus other than the fact that students were striving to meet institutional and classroom academic standards. This seems particularly important during a time when the benefits of independent learning, such as self-paced courses and open online courses, are being hotly debated. There have also been recent public discussions about reducing the costs of college by reducing the time it takes students to complete degree programs to as little as three years. This particular finding suggests that at least some students, in this case white students at WLC,

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benefit from time and freedom in order to explore their strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles upon arrival in college.

White students in this study uniquely described their academic success in terms of their own ability to "figure out" how to study and prepare in the way one might follow a cooking recipe, or instructions for assembly of a household item. Usually this manifested in dispassionate terms such as: when to study or not study; where to study; whether to study alone or in groups; and, specifically how to go about the process of studying. Frequently white participants went into great detail about how they learned to study, discussing methods such as taking graphic or non-graphic notes, studying where they could view or not view others, or recopying notes when they came home after class. Only one African-American participant was specific about a study method, but it was not a dominant theme in his interview.

This finding suggests that academically-successful white students at WLC have likely satisfied many of their non-academic needs already, and focus more clearly on the remaining issues that affect their performance, such as mechanical adjustments to study methods. This does not imply that African-American students are not making similar academic adjustments. Rather, it suggests that when considering important factors in their academic success, other issues are more important to the African-American demographic group, as will be discussed later.

White students at WLC experience less social anxiety, and have therefore progressed along their "continuum of needs" to more specific tactical challenges, such as study methods. This study clearly reflects that these participants were the beneficiaries of "white privilege," a concept discussed in more detail later in this chapter. As a result of

white privilege, these students experienced little anxiety and were able to focus more pointedly on their own academic behaviors. The college's role seems to be to set high academic standards and provide a small, inviting learning environment. It seems less clear that the college can directly influence study behaviors. Campus programming should consider that diverse students may require different modes of assistance in order to achieve the same goal of academic success. Particularly, African-American students may benefit more from non-mechanical interventions, as discussed in the next section. As a result, when implementing programs on campus, student affairs professionals should consider the possibility that specific campus interventions may benefit demographic groups in very different ways. For example, in attempting to improve academic performance in a hypothetical freshman class at a WLC, it may seem like a good idea to offer across-the-board transitions seminars in study skills and learning styles. However, this study suggests that such an approach might only benefit white students if it were experimental or exploratory in nature, and may not benefit African-American students in a material way at all. It is noteworthy that no students in this study reported making an academic adjustment as a result of a tactical suggestion provided by the institution. Rather, this is something students reported learning on their own.

Any conclusion as to how institutions could respond to this "academic adjustment" process is complicated by several unknowns, including the manner in which students are educated in secondary schools, the type of academic demands made of students in college, and methods of evaluation, such as standardized tests. A more important question for future research could involve examining precisely why students need to make such adjustments, as well as better understanding whether this "trial-and-

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error" process can be streamlined by programmatic interventions. In this study, no campus programs or interventions played any significant role in the way students "learned to learn." Rather, they molded their own learning styles to fit the academic demands that were made of them.

Though some African-American participants discussed academics and study, they did not do so with the depth, consistency, and specificity of white participants. The participants' stories clearly demonstrated that while white students benefited from many of the same factors that African-American students did, they uniquely benefited from making strategic and tactical changes to their study methods. As discussed subsequently, the role of faith and academic adjustment ultimately shaped the overall approach African-American and white students took to their college academic experiences.

"Instrumentalists and Explorers"

Another surprising finding in this study was that African-American male students in this study took an "instrumentalist" approach to their undergraduate education, as opposed to white students, who took an "explorer" approach. These were terms coined in the 2011 Carnegie Report about liberal arts education and its relationship with the business disciplines (Colby, Ehrlich, and Sullivan, 2011).

The Carnegie study examined ten institutions that had integrated business programs successfully with traditional liberal arts curriculums. The study examined the specific practices used to accomplish this goal, but did not examine race or ethnicity in any way. However, the study revealed that many business students can be described as "instrumentalists" in that they focus on concrete, tangible milestones in their academic programs. For example, an instrumentalist would focus on specific academic metrics,

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such as minimum program GPA; specific course requirements; and, test scores required for entry into desired programs. They measured the success of outcomes by "checking off" accomplishments in a linear fashion. These students presented a challenge to liberal arts colleges because they may have avoided taking academic risks and expanding their educational breadth when there were no clear milestones or hurdles to clear and complete.

Other students can be described as "explorers." They are experimenters, willing to travel a non-linear path in their pursuit of learning, viewing education as a customized, qualitative experience. They sometimes make their way through academic programs in a meandering fashion, measuring their success by the quality of their experiences rather than by their ability to "check boxes" in an academic program of study. They typically viewed their education, and academic success, as a chance to obtain a well-rounded experience.

The significance of these terms to this study is that African-American participants frequently described their academic experiences in "instrumentalist" terms, both in the way they defined academic success and in the way they pursued it. Several illustrations of this instrumentalist view are reproduced below:

Wes (P5, AA): "I always had in the forefront of my mind that I was in college to study, to learn, and to work on whatever career I would choose."

Wes (P5, AA): "One thing would be the fact that I never took an English class at Furman. I'm going to tell you one thing. I'm a game player. I like to play the game. I play the game and I like to win the game. I took English before I got to Furman, and when I got to Furman people who didn't hadn't been so fortunate.

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They had to take English 11, and they were getting killed, I mean murdered, making C's, F's, D's. They struggled."

Brad (P1, AA): "I'm a numbers guy. (Academic success) means a GPA you know. You can't say you're academically successful if your GPA doesn't reflect that…so for me that's what it means- having a pretty decent GPA."

Greg (P4, AA): "I was only motivated to go to school to go to school and get a quality education so that I would be able to have a sustainable career, something that I truly enjoy doing."

Sean (P2, AA): "Graduating. Keeping a decent GPA, especially the 3.0 I needed to keep my scholarship. Not Phi Beta Kappa- I don't care. I only got that because I had the GPA."

Rob (P12, AA): "Success is not just grades you make but also the institutions you attend. I am currently at (high profile medical school) which I consider an honor, and it has great credentials. That's how I determine my success."

Rob (P12, AA): "In this current world especially in the past, you know if you were equally qualified as an African-American male to someone else of another race, sometimes we as human beings take other factors such as race, gender, other things into account when you're considering them for any application or job or whatever, so I've always focused on meeting and surpassing the level. That way, racial factors, gender factors won't be such a huge issue. You're well qualified."

Rob (P12, AA):"At Wofford everything was seamless and everyone was on the same page, from financial aid to the Dean's office. You could focus on what you were there for…doing well and getting an education."

Though many students describe success in terms of grades, with African-American participants in this study, objective, "instrumental" measures such as obtaining a desired career, getting good grades, and navigating the academic system were the primary focus. Almost no participants described success in terms of their ability to explore the offerings of the institution. These students were here to complete their academic work efficiently and effectively. They measured themselves against tangible, concrete goals such as solid employment; institutional reputation; high grades; and, efficient use of student aid by maintaining academic scholarships.

White students, on the other hand, frequently took an "explorer" approach to their education, defining their academic experience in terms of experimentation, broad learning, and finding personal fulfillment.

Will (P3, W): "Finding something that I was very interested in was a success. Especially when you're in the liberal arts, you're kind of inundated with every different path you can take out there. I must have done something right if what I am doing now is something I am very interested in."

Will (P3, W): "(not) feeling like you're there just to do well on a test (defined success.) You're there to help further the subject, researching the subject, that sort of thing."

Trent (P6, W): "I think my sign of success was when I could walk out (of college) and say I know what I believe and then also why I believe that, and I can carry on an academic conversation."

Trent (P6, W): "I think people need to find something they are passionate about and follow it. I know too many people who have come into school, parents

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pushed them to something like pre-med. Then they do poorly and one day they pretty much have to tell their parents no. They end up in art or doing well in something else and I think finding out your innate interests, talents is one of the biggest keys to success."

John (P13, W): "I don't measure success in GPA terms. It is kind of a sliding scale of GPA and social life. You need to make friends and do well. You learn to create contacts, have a social life, talk to people. You've got to be able to apply those grades. I would hire someone personable before someone with perfect grades any day."

Zach (P14, W): "I don't see getting a 4.0 as academically successful. I'd say somewhere above 3.3 with several activities is much better than coming in with a 4.0 and that's all you did…being well-balanced, because I really feel like that, somebody like that is more prepared. I mean the smartest person isn't always the best person for what they're doing if that makes sense. Experience is huge and it took me awhile to realize that, but I'm glad I did."

There are several possibilities that could help explain these differences between African-American and white participant groups. African-American students in this study sought out the experience of the WLC similar to the way a professional teacher might seek a particular teaching credential.   They perceived the WLC as a "small, white, private college" rather than simply "college." While they anticipated the experience would be potentially difficult from a social perspective, they valued the education they expected to receive, and more importantly, the environment in which they received that education. Achieving a degree at a WLC had special significance to most African-American

participants in this study: it proved they had been successful in a challenging social and academic setting. Since many African-American participants in this study felt social discomfort, they naturally measured success using highly tangible, objective measures that were easy to define and understand: good grades, highly-reputable institutions, and solid career potential. These students were saying, hypothetically: "Things are tough here, but I know that as long as I can get good grades, get a good job, and graduate from this reputable institution, I will have done what I set out to do." While they frequently defined their academic success and struggles in social terms, they sought academic success as instrumentalists.

Alternatively, white students experienced limited social discomfort at the WLC and did not attend the WLC in order to obtain a different social experience than that to which they were accustomed. They simply perceived the WLC as a "good college" rather than a small, mostly white, private college. Accordingly, they approached success in college holistically, seeking broad learning and a wide range of experiences. They expected to succeed, and had little anxiety that they would not. Given these circumstances, the white participants in this study did not feel the need to focus on specific, tangible measures of academic success. Their approach was relaxed, and they reported that in order to succeed, they needed only to make certain key academic adjustments. The graph below demonstrates this effect on both white and African-American participants. It is apparent that African-American students anticipated difficulty at the WLC, and used specific measures of educational success to mitigate the possibility that they would not succeed.
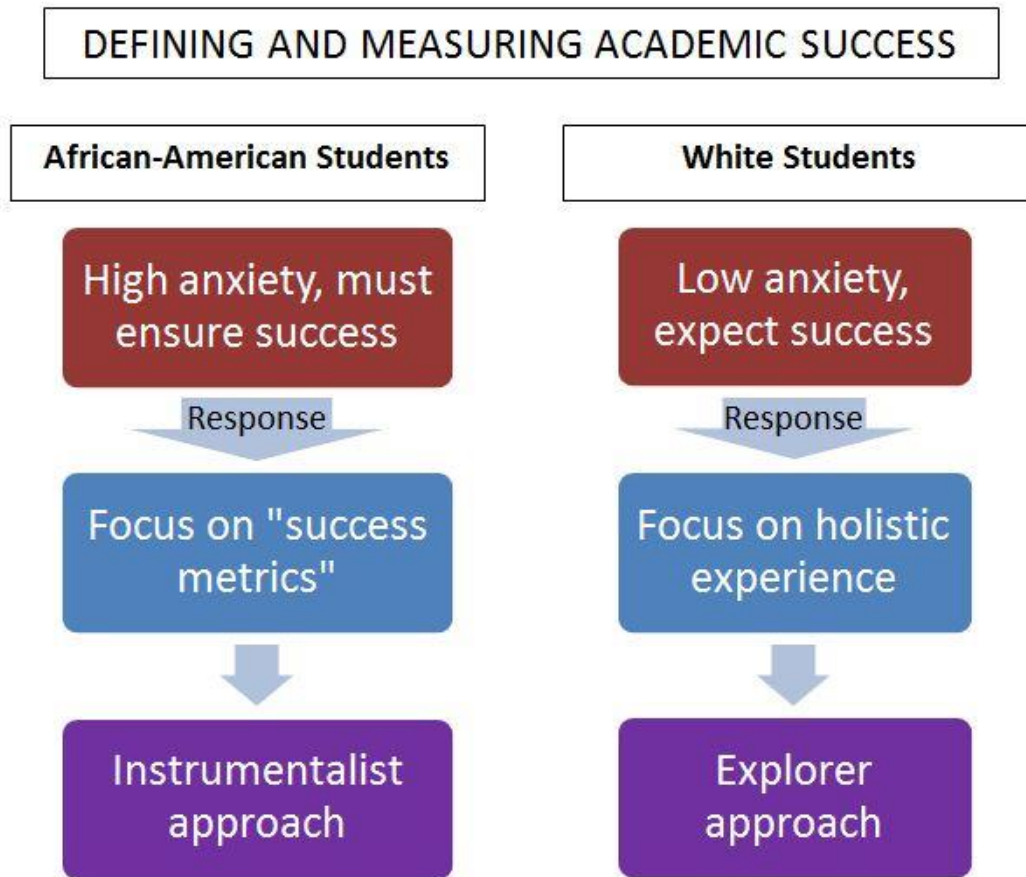
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Figure 5.1: Instrumentalists and Explorers

Though African-American students credit a number of qualitative factors with their academic success, they measured success in this study by focusing on concrete "success metrics."

These findings suggest that the white students in this study felt very little anxiety about their college experience, and in order to succeed, merely needed to make minor adjustments to their academic approach in order to perform well. It is apparent that these students were at a significant advantage over their African-American male counterparts. While African-American students at WLC had to clear several hurdles in their search for

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success, including cultural obstacles, the white students in this study had little in their way. They benefited from a critical mass of other white students who shared many characteristics with them, likely to include race, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms. This concept has been recognized in the literature as "white privilege" (Carnevale and Strohl, 2013). White privilege is the idea that white students, as the overwhelming majority on campus, benefit from many hidden factors that simplify their academic lives. On the other hand, African-American students, as the minority, experience many non-academic forms of duress that could hamper their academic success. This is true even absent overt racism, and despite numerous formal programs on campus to benefit minority groups.

White students experienced the WLC environment as the majority race, and accordingly success came easier to them. That had few social adjustments to make. The adjustments they did make were academic in nature and usually small, mechanical, and even trivial in nature. In this study, white students merely had to "tweak" their experiences on campus, while African-American students had to make significant efforts to perform well. This likely drove both their descriptions of faith as a way to make meaning of the experience, as well as their focus on tangible measures of academic success. It is apparent that the mechanical adjustments described by white participants in this study represent their descriptions of how white privilege benefited their experience at WLC institutions. In addition, the white students in this study were disproportionally of higher socioeconomic status than the African-American students in this study. It is likely they benefited from varying forms of "social capital" that are commonly associated with both economic and social privilege.

Effectively, these factors created two distinct environments. At the sites in this study, African-American students encountered substantial social obstacles. In some cases these students also entered college with low socioeconomic status and limited social capital from which to draw. The result was a high level of anxiety, to which the students responded with an instrumentalist approach in order to, in their perception, "ensure" their success in college. White students, on the other hand, entered college with higher economic status, and in most cases, more social capital. This frequently took the form of having parents who worked in important positions; brothers and sisters who attended the same college; or, access to economic resources, such as the ability to take on an unpaid internship that could lead to key future employment. The result was an environment in which they expected success. As a result, they were free to experience college with less anxiety. They responded accordingly, taking an "explorer" approach to their experience. The white students in this study were able to experience college in a way that was much more relaxed. They focused on the only things that gave them difficulty: their academic courses and how best to succeed in them.

Social Discomfort

Another surprising theme that emerged across all participants in this study was the role of student "discomfort" in the student experience. Participants reported discomfort in their college experience in two primary forms: academic and social. Academic discomfort was described extensively by all participants in this study. This took various forms, including having conflicts or difficulty with particular instructors, struggling with a challenging academic program, or having trouble balancing competing time demands. Only when academic problems intersected with other issues, such as availability of

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student loans or risk of loss of scholarships, did academic struggles become critical in the view of the participants. Stated differently, academic discomfort, as described by participants in this study, did not result in dramatic negative effects on the students.

Social discomfort, however, was frequently toxic to students in ways that academic discomfort was not. Though academics were cited as challenging to all study participants, in no case did a participant characterize academic difficulty or academic problems in a way that could be construed as "toxic" or damaging to their college experience. Rather, they were usually characterized as a brief struggle, and were usually overcome with academic experimentation and mechanical adjustments.

On the other hand, almost all African-American participants reported social discomfort in various forms, and in ways that were clearly toxic. An excellent example of this was Brad's recollection of praying on his dormitory room floor. Based on the data collected in these interviews, these types of significant responses and coping mechanisms are typical responses to significant social discomfort. It is notable that nearly all social discomfort identified in this study was associated with African-American students, primarily due to the nature of this study. Accordingly, when African-American males described their experiences in academic success in this study, they often did so in social terms. However, it is likely that all students feel the effects of social discomfort in ways that are more personally painful than academic discomfort.

In this study, no white participants reported social discomfort in any significant or tangible way, primarily as a result of the benefits associated with "white privilege," as discussed earlier. It is also important to note that the majority of African-American participants in this study actively sought the WLC experience. Though some participants

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were introduced to the idea of attending a WLC by an authority figure, frequently a guidance counselor, all of them reported perceiving the WLC experience as a personal challenge and one that they willingly took on. Some reported this in terms of learning a "necessary skill" while others reported it in terms of pursuing a top educational institution. However, despite anticipating these challenges, social difficulties emerged in this study as particularly toxic to African-American students, while academic difficulties were of secondary importance.

Sources of College Advice

Another unanticipated finding in this study was the manner in which these highly-qualified students were encouraged to, and ultimately chose to attend college. Of the fourteen participants, two reported to be of very low socioeconomic status. One was African-American and one was white. Each of these students relied extensively on the services of guidance counselors at the secondary school level in identifying and considering more highly selective colleges as part of their search. The counselors were instrumental in helping these students identify potential colleges, as well as significant scholarships to help make it possible that they could attend these schools at low or no cost. The approach of the two students of low socioeconomic status was colored by feelings of risk and reward. The participants of reportedly low socioeconomic status were stepping into uncertain territory, and relied heavily on professional counselors to encourage them to try those schools. Some specific quotes are provided below to illustrate this point.

Brad (P1, AA): "There was one person who actually helped me look at colleges. My guidance counselor actually helped me apply to 11 colleges and I got

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accepted to 9 out of the 11 and waiting list on the other 2, so I've always had a sense of support coming from you know, from all kinds of directions. She was going for scholarship bucks, looking for a full ride somewhere and you know she had apparently helped a few people get into Davidson before. It was the first school I applied to."

Ivan (P7, W): "I (was) socieconomically pretty poor. My dad netted maybe $20,000 per year…I think our school's guidance, we did have a school guidance counselor, so I think one of the moms was hired to be the computer teacher and was actually hired to be the (counselor) and she would turn my attention to certain things. This is like, you know, a good family friend, like one of my mom's best friends right, so she said you should go and talk to (counselor's name) and see if she can do anything for you. Of course she knew mostly the ones connected with colleges, right, so PC Fellows, Newberry Fellows…so if a scholarship said anything about financial need I would apply for it immediately. I always thought well even in my small town the two people higher in my class and some people at public school would get the academic one, but on the grounds of financial need I could probably win some of these, and I did."

On the other hand, the other participants in this study reported to be of moderate or high socioeconomic status. Frequently, they received information from parents or relatives who had attended their college of choice, or it was generally understood that they would attend a particular college as their friends and family had done. Several participants were third-generation students at their alma mater, with parents and grandparents attending the same school. Their approach to the college selection process

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was casual and low-risk. They knew what to expect and exactly what to expect at their college of choice. Some of the comments these students made regarding how they learned about college are presented below.

Will (P3, W): "I have an older brother that went to Davidson as well and my dad went there. I always felt like I was good friends with my brother's friends just because we hung out all the time, so there is definitely a lot of me trying to follow in his footsteps and he was a math major at Davidson at the time, then he went into law."

Trent (P6, W): "I knew I wanted to go into the business world and growing up in Raleigh, UNC is right next door and has the best business schools in the country and I told my dad that and he pretty much said over my dead body. He's an NC State guy so we started looking around, and Furman was really the place that felt like home, and I ended up applying there."

John (P13, W): "My core family all went to college and did well for themselves. My dad and grandfather went to Wofford and so did my uncle."

Zach (P14, W): "My mom and dad both went to Wake Forest. They were both accounting majors, umm, pretty sad, I'm third generation, but at Wake Forest grades are very difficult to come by. Also, probably realizing a lot of my friends were getting in to better schools than I was which I'm not saying I would trade my degree from Wofford for anything else. But you know, when you're in high school and everybody is applying to schools and say where are you applying and where'd you get in and all that kind of stuff."

The students of higher socioeconomic status had a ready supply of personal information to rely on in making college choices, and in most cases they had an expectation of where they wanted to attend college based on this information. Their list of possible college choices included selective and highly selective colleges attended by parents, brothers and sisters, and even peers in high school. This was a stark contrast to students of low socioeconomic status who relied on formal mechanisms at the high school level, such as guidance counselors, to direct them toward applying to WLC.

The stories recounted by participants in this study were a stark reminder of how powerful an advantage high socioeconomic status is when considering college choice. The participants of moderate-to-high socioeconomic status were simply choosing a known quantity when selecting WLC. They were certain of the educational outcome, and no doubt, upon arrival on campus, were not surprised at what they found.

These themes have significant implications for how students of low socioeconomic status students gain knowledge of and access to highly-selective institutions, as well as how colleges should approach high school counselors in identifying stellar students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is clear that cultural obstacles and financial obstacles could prevent highly qualified, low socioeconomic status minority students from attending WLC. Strong financial aid packages that address both need and merit are one factor that is critical to relieving the anxiety of students of low socioeconomic status. In addition, a more purposeful focus on quality counseling at the secondary school level could further reduce the level of anxiety experienced by students with economic challenges.

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Expected Findings That Did Not Emerge

Several factors expected to emerge as academic success factors in this inquiry did not: teaching methods and the influence of Greek-letter fraternities. This was surprising, given that the site selections used for this research were four teaching-oriented institutions with high participation in Greek-letter fraternities. Accordingly, it was reasonable to expect that alumni would discuss these factors as part of their academic success. However, participants only mentioned them in passing: only three participants mentioned fraternities, two white and one African-American, and only one white participant mentioned teaching methods. In no case did participants discuss either at length, or in a manner that suggested they were important factors.

Teaching Methods

First, participants rarely discussed teaching methods as being important to their academic success. As a whole, the participant group spoke little about good teaching practices, specific instructional methods, quality of faculty, or even educational technology. Despite the research focus specifically on factors the participants associated with academic success, participants instead focused on factors associated with social adjustment, personal effort, and non-academic interaction with staff and faculty. This suggests that highly successful students at selective institutions may rely more closely on social interaction than good teaching practices or specific teaching methods to succeed academically. Rather, at WLC, it seems that motivating and connecting with students is more important to their academic success. Students in this study spoke very little about specific methods of teaching. Accordingly, it may be that absent extremes in teaching

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quality, such as very poor or truly excellent teaching, students focus more keenly on whether they are receiving an authentic and personal educational experience.

Greek Life

Second, Greek-letter fraternities had minimal impact on student academic success in this study. The majority of participants in this study participated in some form of Greek experience, including white and African-American students. However, no participant credited Greek life as an important aspect of their academic success. Several participants mentioned fraternities as helping them "hang around the right group of friends" but only considered the fraternity as one of a number of considerations in their success. This is in line with a number of quantitative research findings, including studies conducted by Pascarella (2009) which determined that Greek organizations had mixed, if weakly negative, correlation with a number of academic performance variables. In contrast, many fraternities cite leadership as a reason to participate in Greek life. However, aside from positive benefits that may accrue as a result of a supportive peer groups, participants in this study did not identify a clear association between Greek life and academic success.

Key Findings

The diagram below depicts the major findings as they fit into the conceptual framework of the study.   Factors that are attributable to all study participants are shown at the top of the diagram. Findings specific to each participant pool are shown at the bottom of the diagram, and are highlighted in blue and green boxes.
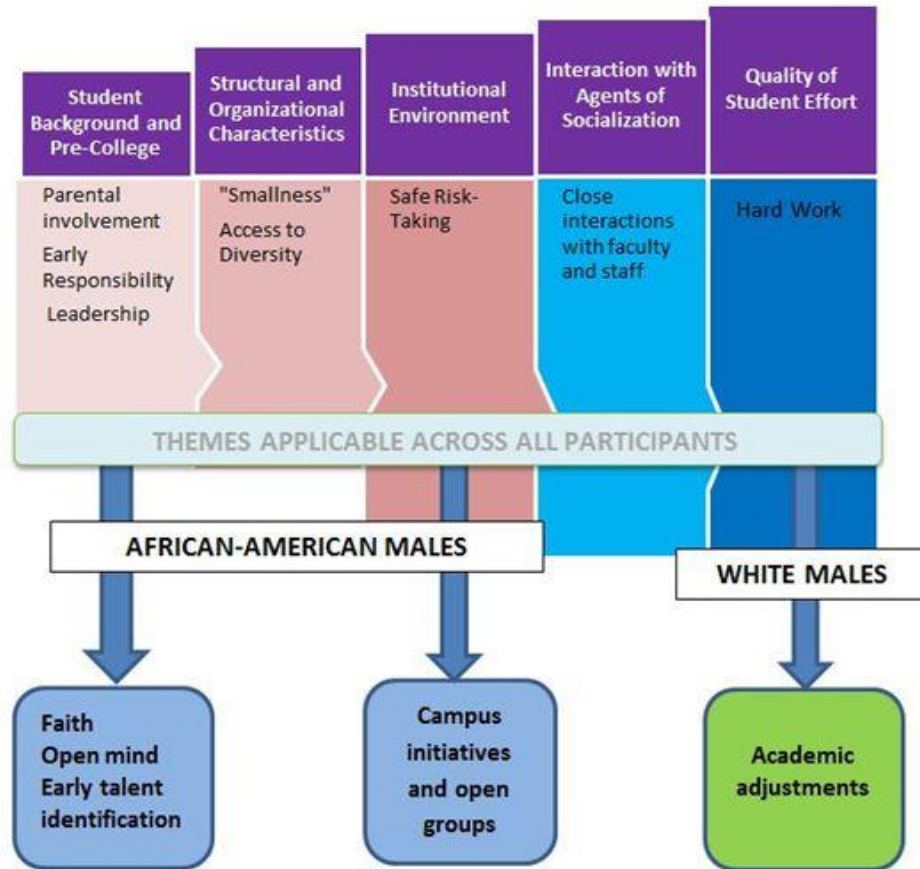
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Figure 5.2: Key Findings

As discussed in Chapter 5 and as revisited in Figure 5.2, interview data revealed numerous findings applicable to almost all participants in the study. For characteristics associated with pre-college experiences and student background, parental involvement, early responsibility, and leadership opportunities had strong effects on the participants in this study, even though participant interviews often occurred many years after the reported experiences. Participants recalled clearly the effects of parental involvement in their education, including direct assistance with studies, encouragement, emotional

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support, and strong behavior modeling. Despite some differences between individual participants, in general, the type of support provided by parents could be categorized in these three areas without respect to race.

Structural and organizational characteristics included the "smallness" of the college environment and access to diversity while at the institution. These characteristics were closely associated with the structure of the small WLC, irrespective of more specific interventions such as teaching methods. When taken together, these two factors influenced the participants in this study by creating an institutional environment where it was safe to take academic and social risks. Most participants in this study benefited in some way from the wide variety of people and perspectives they encountered during their time at the WLC.

Participants also reported that close interactions with faculty and staff, defined in Pascarella's General Model as interactions with "Agents of Socialization", were important to their academic success. Often these interactions helped students by motivating them to work hard and perform well, providing high standards, or creating a tone of accountability. Finally, students were the catalyst for Pascarella's final factor, Quality of Student Effort. Almost all of these highly successful students reported working hard to succeed in college.

Unique themes emerged along demographic lines as well. African-American students in this study described experiences involving religious faith, open-mindedness, and early identification of talent as being most important to their high level of performance in college. White students attributed much of their success, in addition to factors common to all participants, to academic adjustments they made while in college.

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Stated differently, African-American students made substantial social adjustments that helped them succeed academically, while white students focused primarily on making "mechanical" adjustments to their approach to study. A closer examination of these findings reveals a number of possible implications for students, colleges, and instructors alike.

<center>**Implications**</center>

This study, being qualitative in nature, sought to better understand the perceptions, experiences, and thought processes of highly successful African-American male students at small, white liberal arts colleges. The primary advantages of qualitative research are its depth, richness of detail, and context. Though the results of qualitative research are likely not generalizable to all institutions, some or all of the results may be transferable to similar institutions under similar conditions (Patton, 2002). Primarily, this research was concerned with African-American students, but it was anticipated that themes would be revealed that applied to white students specifically, as well as academically successful students in general. The themes that emerged in the participant data were derived from approximately forty hours of participant interviews, as well as documents provided by participants. These have been organized into two major sections for ease of analysis: factors that could be influenced by the institution ("Institutional Factors"), and themes that the institution likely cannot influence ("Non-Institutional Factors"). Any factor which could be influenced by the institution was categorized as an "Institutional Factor." For example, religious faith was a dominant theme among African-American males in this study. While the institution may not necessarily directly influence a student's faith, the institution has the ability to respond and address student

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faith through campus programming, awareness, or other developmental opportunities. As a result, religious faith was categorized as an "Institutional Factor." Alternatively, parental involvement is almost entirely out of the purview of the institution, and is a factor over which particular institutions have little influence. Accordingly, it was classified as a "Non-Institutional Factor."

Figure 5.3 below highlights how all themes identified were classified for purposes of analysis and interpretation in this chapter:
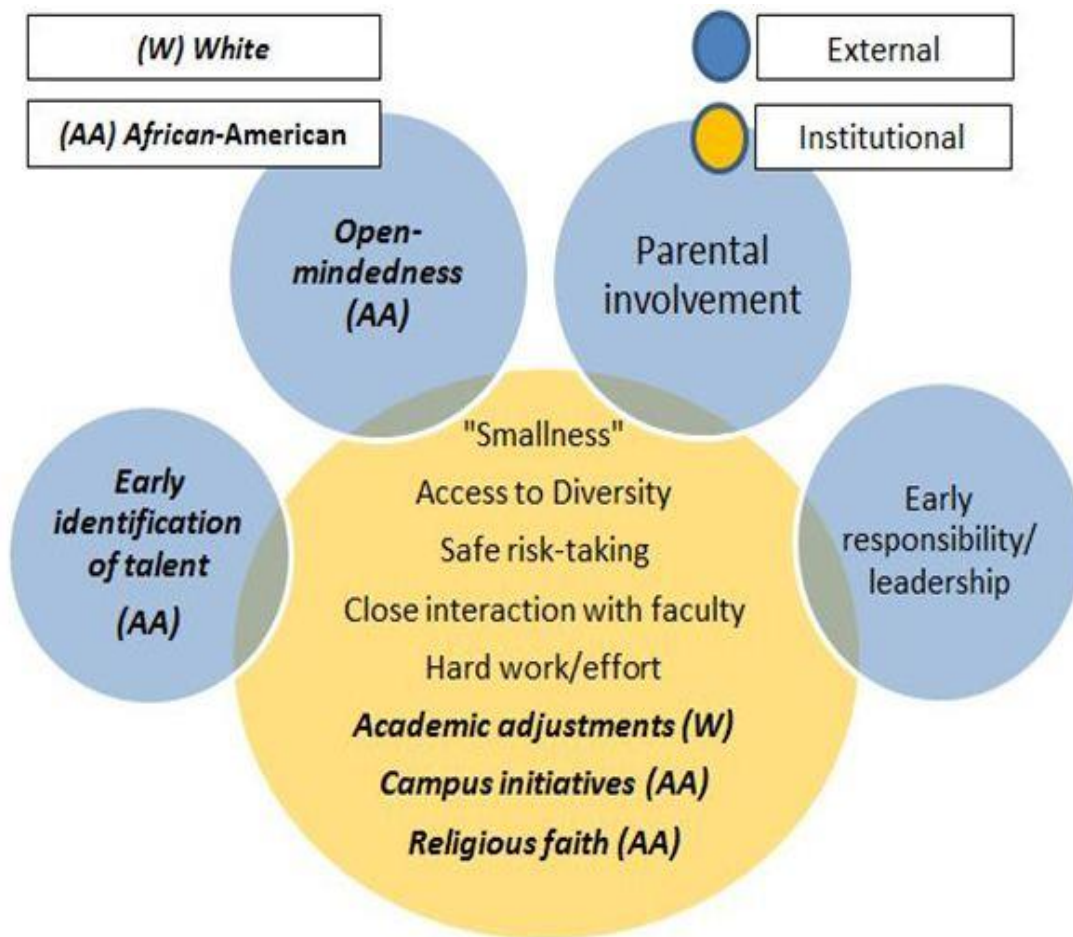

Figure 5.3: Organization of Key Themes

Non-Institutional Factors

A number of the academic success factors identified in this study appear to be outside the influence of the institution. These were typically personal in nature, shaped significantly by forces outside the college, or were impractical for the college to influence. In most cases these factors developed over long periods of time and through deep personal relationships and important life experiences. Given that most institutions only have academic contact with a typical student for four to six years, there is a relatively small window of time during which the institution can influence or re-route the student's academic path.

Parental Involvement and Early Responsibilities/Leadership

Parental involvement, early responsibilities, and leadership experiences were cited frequently in this study. Though the institutions can do little to influence these factors, they played a critical role in the academic development of the participants. It is also likely that these factors are highly interrelated. Parents who participate deeply in the education of their children are also likely to position their children to take advantage of leadership opportunities. Further, these parents may be more likely to assign and enforce particular responsibilities than parents who are not active in the educational lives of their children. Stated differently, parents who feel empowered to encourage their children may also be inclined to understand and value the importance of personal responsibility. This study suggests that if we define academic "richness" as having active, academically aware parents, the rich certainly get richer between early childhood and college. The parents of the participants in this study expected their children to attend college, perform well academically, and participate actively in a wide range of curricular and non-

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curricular activities. They valued education as a pathway to personal enrichment and future economic success, and these expectations "stuck." Most remarkable was the clarity and richness of detail participants provided about early childhood educational experiences involving their parents, despite the fact that these experiences occurred many years prior.

Of particular importance, however, is the finding that the parents in this study did not necessarily require educational expertise to be a strong influence on the educational future of their children. Parents from all walks of life wielded great influence on the participants using a variety of methods. Some set high standards, and encouraged specific educational activities and outcomes. Others championed high performance as a way to a brighter future, providing more emotional support than "technical" support. This study suggests that the method or manner of parental involvement was less important than the level of involvement. As long as parents successfully communicated the importance of doing well academically, their children benefited immensely and permanently.

In addition, most African-American participants in this study were either from single-parent households, or households that involved non-traditional family members in guardianship roles. In nearly every African-American participant, their mother was an important role model, particularly in the absence of the father or stepfather. When African-American males reported strong, positive educational experiences, these experiences were frequently associated with advice or encouragement that came from their mother. Alternatively, all of the white participants in this study reported having both parents present throughout their developmental years. Though this changed the

educational experiences of each individual, participants from single parent and non-traditional households still reaped immense benefits from active, encouraging parents.

Early Identification of Talent

This factor was closely associated with the African-American males in this study. The participants reported the importance of having their academic abilities identified and validated by an authority figure. This occurred most frequently through standardized testing, such as a gifted and talented program in elementary school, or later in their academic experiences by way of a caring teacher. This theme emerged primarily as a factor of psychological importance to African-American males: when an authority figure or a formal program identified them as high-performers, it frequently provided both motivation and validation. This seemed to be of particular importance to the participants in this study who came from underprivileged backgrounds. Being told they were talented paved the way for them to believe in their own abilities and pursue excellence in the academic realm. From a more practical perspective, identification was also important because it ensured they were "plugged into" additional educational and leadership opportunities. In the words of John (P13, W): "I seemed to get lucky and get good teachers, and stayed with good teachers. If you got off that track, I didn't see many people who were able to get back on it." John described the "tracking" phenomenon well, from the perspective of a student who was tracked into positive programs and experiences. This study suggests that early talent identification important is because it starts a kind of educational snowball, a cumulative effect of positive thinking and educational experiences that continue throughout the student's career. Without these

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early identification events, many of the African-American students in this study may have achieved less academically.

Open-Mindedness

The African-American participants in this study described themselves as being open-minded intellectually and socially. Open-mindedness manifested itself as willingness to accept new experiences, social challenges, and academically difficult situations in college. This played a critical role in academic success, primarily because it made these interviewees resilient. Several participants described having an open mind as helping through difficult, demoralizing situations, particularly early in their academic career. This predisposition to be accepting of differences also helped the participants in this study fit into the demographic environment of the WLC. Several interviewees expressed their belief that obtaining the WLC experience in particular was important to their future success. They wanted to participate in an educational environment they believed was more racially and culturally representative of the "real world." Naturally, they were open-minded enough to take on the experience, with the understanding that it could be difficult socially.

It is important to note that African-American students who chose to attend a WLC "self-selected" into an environment with limited critical mass of minority students. Since this study focused on non-athletes, it is even less likely that these students were sought out by the institution, or encouraged to attend, for non-academic reasons. For example, this is in contrast to the experience of an African-American scholarship athlete who might have been recruited into a WLC to play a particular sport, despite the fact that the student may desire to attend college a more demographically "comfortable" institution.

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As a result, it is possible that African-American students who choose to attend a WLC are open-minded in general, and the academic success in this pool of participants is merely correlated with this predisposition, not caused by it.

Institutional Factors and Reponses

A significant number of factors cited by the participants in this study could be influenced positively by the institution. Most of these factors applied to this participant pool as a whole, but several group differences emerged as well. The remainder of this chapter analyzes these factors and subsequently offers policy suggestions, as well as potential topics for future research.

Non-Academic and Academic Contact

One important finding that emerged in this study was that non-academic contact with faculty, staff, and peers was perceived as more important to academic success than formal pedagogical interactions. Examples of formal academic activities include completing class assignments, group projects, academic testing, and formal reading and writing assignments. This finding was universal across all participants. While not unexpected, it was a pervasive theme in this study, and supports earlier literature available on the topic. Participants in this study spoke little about specific methods of teaching, academic qualifications, or classroom assignments. This is not to suggest that teaching techniques are not important. Rather, it suggests that participants in this study disproportionally perceived these "interested" interactions to be more critical to their success than formal academic activities. Participants in this study did not seem to feel strongly about the type of academic work completed, or the methods used by instructors

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in the classroom, and did not cite these types of activities as a key factor in their academic success.

There are a number of possibilities as to why teaching practices and classroom activities failed to emerge as significant theme. First, it is possible that beyond minimal qualifications, students in this study did not differentiate between, for example, a masters-level instructor and a doctoral-level instructor, as long as they had strong personal interactions with that individual. Accordingly, faculty members and staff should consider the importance of personalizing the educational process by getting to know students outside of class. Participants in this study, even years after finishing college, still attributed these personal interactions with staff and faculty to their academic success.

Though non-academic activities are not directly related to academic achievement, the participants in this study described them as having important motivational and operational effects on their academic success. As discussed later in this chapter, personal interaction seems to increase student perceptions of educational accountability in two ways. The first can be characterized as "I know Professor X so well, I am willing to work harder to please him or her." The second is, "Class sizes are so small, I know I must interact with others, so I have to be prepared every day." While it may be administratively expensive to maintain small class sizes, it may not be expensive to encourage instructors to make a point of getting to know their students as well as possible. In academic circles, much of the conversation is dominated by methods of assessment, analysis of pedagogical techniques, and availability of educational resources. This study suggests that many colleges may be overlooking a much simpler form of student engagement in the form of personal contact and mentorship with students

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away from formal classroom activities. This is a key advantage of the small liberal arts college, and one that is increasingly at risk as financial pressures encourage institutions to pursue greater economies of scale.

Second, it is possible that students perceive the academic environment in the classroom as something beyond their locus of control, and therefore have little reason to cite it as a reason they achieved personal academic success. Students may believe they cannot influence what goes on in formal coursework, but do believe they can influence things that occur outside of it. For example, students might purposefully seek greater interaction with their professors, such as seeking meetings with the professor during office hours. When the student subsequently succeeds academically, they may attribute that success to the high degree of personal interaction, when in reality it may have been close engagement with the academic material that made the difference. On the other hand, teaching methods may receive less consideration by the student, and therefore its role in subsequent success is not cited as frequently as a factor in academic success. It is plausible that students could attribute success to their own efforts, while alternatively attributing failure to others, particularly their instructors.

Smallness

"Smallness" emerged as one of the most pervasive themes in this study. The stories of the participants were rich with details about how the small liberal arts college provided a close-knit, supportive environment for academic success. Access to diversity and safe risk-taking were closely related to the theme of smallness, together forging an institutional environment conducive to academic success.

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This study revealed that class sizes, familiarity with faculty and staff, and the close interconnectedness of the campus as whole had a tremendous positive effect on the student academic experience. These effects were both motivational and pedagogical. Students felt the warmth of the small environment; it encouraged them to persist, give their best effort, and seek to connect to new people and experiences. They felt like part of a family, even when they were experiencing personal or academic difficulties. The most noteworthy effect, however, was that the small, interconnected environment made students more willing to connect in ways that stretched them academically and socially. When faced with challenges, the participants reached out and took risks; at larger institutions, diffusion of responsibility may have made withdrawal the easier alternative. Instead, behaviors the participants may have perceived as a prohibitive in a larger institutional context became somehow manageable at the WLC. They met new people, and were forced to interact in ways they may not have expected. At all times participants described feeling like "an individual", not a "number." Stated differently, the familiarity of the WLC made students feel responsible for their success. Conversely, the students perceived the institution accepted deep responsibility for them as well. This translated to responsible risk-taking, diverse experiences, and well-rounded educational interactions for the participants in this study.

The idea of "smallness" was so important to participants in this study that it clearly has critical implications for the WLC. While it is generally accepted that small class sizes and personal interactions are positive factors in educational development at the college level, this study demonstrated that these effects deserve more attention from policymakers and researchers. Unfortunately, over the past several years, higher

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education institutions have faced significant financial pressures due to a variety of factors, particularly reductions in funding from states and changes in Federal funding mechanisms. One of the ways small colleges have responded to financial challenges, particularly those most driven by tuition, is by expanding enrollment. Enrollment expansion clearly creates an economy of scale that allows the institution to survive lean times and expand programs over the longer term. However, this study suggests that expansion could compromise student academic success, social interaction, and persistence by mitigating the hallmark effect of the small institution.

This is not necessarily a criticism of enrollment expansion as a technique for financial optimization or in some cases an institutional survival technique. Rather, it is a caution, and a reminder that small institutions may significantly compromise student performance when they expand without considering the non-financial fallout. Based on the results of this study, college leaders should enter into enrollment expansion with eyes wide open to the possibility that the student experience will be compromised. Further, in the era of "MOOCs[3]" and numerous public discussions about the expansion of the classroom, small college leaders should be prepared to counter with a narrative of their own: the power of "small." Institutional leaders should be prepared to support and defend the importance of small enrollments and intimate interaction. The tide of the public narrative has put pressure on small institutions to justify their costs, but has done little to examine the benefits that go along with these costs. It is the responsibility of small college and higher education sector leaders to elevate this debate to a discussion about costs and benefits, rather than simply an idealistic argument about total costs.

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[3] Massively Open Online Courses

Institutions should also redouble their efforts to fully endow their institutions. Davidson College, a site used in this study, has recently made efforts to fully replace loan-based aid with grants and college funding. Accordingly, fundraising efforts at small colleges should continue to focus on stabilizing direct educational funding for promising students. This would reduce the pressure to bolster the college's finances by way of expanding enrollment. The findings of this study suggest that one of the primary forces that foster student academic success is the small, intimate nature of the institution itself. This comes at a high cost, but produces high academic benefits, as the stories of these participants reveal. With respect to academic impact, "smaller" is really larger, and college leaders need to do a better job of telling this story to stakeholders. This study revealed that "smallness" is more than just a luxury for high-priced WLC; smallness has important academic implications.

Access to Diversity

Many participants in this study benefited from the small college's offering them access to diversity. This was true despite the fact that many WLC, by definition, are not particularly diverse when compared with typical regional and flagship institutions. However, this study demonstrated that students seek different forms of diversity within the same institution. African-American students sought the WLC for its academic diversity and access to mainstream culture that represented the "real" world, even though it was a majority-white institution. Beyond institutional size and "smallness" it is also important that small colleges offer a wide range of academic and social programs, faculty and staff, and diverse student populations. Many small WLC have difficulty attracting diverse students, and unfortunately, in some cases, financial pressures could encourage

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institutions to seek local, full-paying students rather than diverse populations across larger geography. Accordingly, this study strongly demonstrates the need for WLC to pay attention to diversity in all its forms. Institutional leaders should continue to pursue different forms of diversity, including: faculty with different backgrounds and experiences; students from different geographical locations; access to travel programs that are not cost-prohibitive; racial and cultural diversity; diversity with respect to sexual orientation; and, socioeconomic diversity. Diversity is not just a political buzzword or a marketing tool; in the eyes of these participants, having access to it was an important element in their academic success.

Safe Risk-Taking

A by-product of "smallness" and access to diversity, the WLC is unique in that it seems to encourage academic and social risks among all of its students. Most of the participants in this study valued "smallness" and diversity, with the result being that they felt comfortable enough to try new activities, meet new people, and have different academic conversations. Though no participant specifically mentioned "risk-taking" behaviors in their interview, it was something almost all participants were doing and describing indirectly. Most importantly, they were doing so because diversity was both available to them and comfortable enough to be accommodating. While social diversity seemed more important to African-American participants, a number of whom appreciated the ability to "immerse" in a different type of environment, academic and intellectual diversity seemed more important to white participants. In both situations, the participants in this study were positioned to take a risk. WLC leaders, including faculty and staff, should continue to position students to take academic risks by fostering a small, inclusive

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environment where many diverse programs, both academic and social, are available. As suggested earlier, this approach is resource-intensive. In a time where cost per credit hour is an increasingly popular measure of organizational efficiency, it may seem counter-intuitive to provide potentially duplicative programming at numerous small colleges, such as study abroad programs, diversity groups, and campus organizations. However, this study suggests this is precisely the recipe for academic success. By decreasing the effective size of the campus, making it "small," and increasing the available number of academic and social ingredients, WLC seem to create an intense marketplace for the student. As a metaphor, the effect of the small college on the student seems to be that of a traveler experiencing a foreign location for the first time. In a large, bustling environment, it might be tempting for a traveler to retreat to the confines of the familiar: a hotel room, or a few like-minded friends. However, in a smaller locale, where the local culture is more accessible, or perhaps unavoidable, an outsider is forced to partake, and as a result, learns to succeed. Though the experience may either be desirable, undesirable, or different than expected, those who immerse in a culture that is readily available or inviting to them will learn and develop, as these participants did at WLC. This diversity of experience is the key to the academic benefits the WLC provides to the successful student, and campus leaders should make efforts to continue to prioritize it in all of its forms.

Interested Interaction with Faculty and Staff

"Interested" relationships with faculty were of critical importance academically to every participant in this study. Based on the stories told by the participants, key interactions with faculty and staff helped them appreciate new perspectives, learn,

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motivate themselves, and keep themselves on task during difficult times. In at least one case, a staff member helped prevent an African-American make participant from transferring away from the institution. In analyzing qualitative data, it is important also to note not just what is stated to be important by the participants, but what is not stated. Specific pedagogical techniques, class types, and specific assignments came up as a relatively minor theme, primarily in white participants, and a nearly invisible issue in African-American participants. By and large the participants found it to be much more useful to have personal interaction with their professors and staff with whom they came into contact. This is not to say that teaching is not important; rather, this study suggests that personal contact outside of class is uniquely important at small institutions.

Interested contact with professors influenced the work habits, career paths, and choice of academic major and learning behaviors of nearly every alumnus in this study. The primary conclusion drawn is that the closeness of contact with professors and staff creates engagement and a feeling that the institution cares about the student. In turn, this increases the student's desire to succeed, willingness to pursue alternative viewpoints, and an appreciation for learning. When compared with personal interactions, teaching methods seem to be of secondary importance. This is particularly noteworthy, as many institutions invest significant resources in bolstering the teaching capacity of an institution; however, in my experience as an instructor there are far fewer conversations about the monumental importance of personal connection. These participants credited their success heavily to strong personal interactions. Yet, at many campuses, personal interaction is not taken into account in the "student success" equation, at least not formally. In some cases close interaction is even looked upon with mild disdain as

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"fraternization" with students. However, this study suggests that institutions would benefit by openly discussing the importance of personal interaction with students, not just for their satisfaction as consumers or customers, but with their success in purely academic endeavors.

Hard Work and Student Effort

Nearly every student in this study attributed their academic success to personal effort to one degree or another. Only one participant attributed this heavily to pre-college factors, such as family values and early work ethic. Most other participants learned to work hard through a variety of life experiences, including juggling numerous tasks, being given responsibilities throughout their childhood and adolescence, and perhaps most importantly, by strong institutional contacts and influences on the college campus. Stated differently, the participants in this study worked hard because they had always been given high expectations to perform well academically, encouraged to handle complex tasks, and been inspired or encouraged to succeed by mentors. This study demonstrated that the college faculty or staff member needs to more fully embrace their role as more than simply a distributor of academic knowledge. Academically successful students benefit from true mentorship on campus, including ready access to role models who shape their career aspirations, teach them professional behaviors, and pique their curiosity in an academic field. The academically successful students interviewed needed to be inspired as much as they needed to be "taught."

It is also noteworthy that many of the students in this study were internally motivated. African-American participants actively sought out their educational experience at WLC. They were motivated internally to take on a significant challenge,

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and excel academically. They chose to attend WLC, in many cases, despite anticipating social and academic difficulties. This is an important factor in assessing which students will succeed academically at institutions where social and academic barriers are significant. As discussed earlier, though African-American students benefited uniquely from encouragement given to them by authority figures along the way, they responded with internal motivation of their own.

White students in this study were also internally motivated and willing to work hard. Though the keys to their success were different than African-American students, all were willing to put in the necessary time and effort required to succeed at challenging academic institutions. This emphasizes the importance of understanding how hard work and "effort" can take on different forms. It also highlights one area in which Pascarella's conceptual framework could be adjusted to reflect different kinds of student effort. In this study, African-American and white students worked hard to achieve success, though the volume and type of work required were very different.

Though the institution cannot change work ethic developed in early childhood, it can mold students by inspiring their best work. This seems to happen more frequently when professors and staff members show that they are also individuals, in addition to academic experts. Personal interaction seems to break down the barriers to learning and interaction, or perhaps make students realize that they too can succeed, and that before their professor earned a PhD, he or she also experienced failures, successes, and difficult times. College leaders should consider communicating to faculty and staff the importance of this role in the student's individual academic success. All too often the tone of faculty and staff conversations, particularly in forums with colleagues, takes a

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tone of academic one-upmanship and minimizes the importance of approachability. Rather, by improving rapport with students, students may be willing to work hard to achieve greater academic gains. This study demonstrates that inspired students who feel valued are willing to work hard, and they later associate their effort with their academic success.

Campus Initiatives and African-American Students

A vast majority of African-American participants in this study reported that they succeeded academically with the help of campus interventions and open-access clubs sponsored by the WLC. The specific benefits of these initiatives and groups varied, but in most cases were not specifically academic. These campus groups included diversity discussion groups, religious organizations, minority student organizations, and campus "transitions" groups for minority underclassmen. Though some of these organizations offered academic interventions such as study aids and group study, most were social in nature, or had a specific mission, such as performance of religious music. The primary benefit these organizations and initiatives provided to the participants in this study was a sense of belonging, social cohesion, and a "home" away from home. They offered safe places to be with like-minded individuals, and a source of support, motivation, and accountability.

It is important to note that no white students in this study discussed similar transition programs or specific campus groups in a material way. One white participant equated his academic success with access to a wide variety of campus-sponsored activities, such as campus employment. However, open campus programs were far more important to African-American participants. Only one African-American participant mentioned the

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benefit of a "closed" social fraternity, and the fraternity he mentioned was African-American oriented. Traditional Greek-letter fraternities were mentioned by two white participants, but were not of significance.

It seems that campus leaders who are concerned with the success of African-American students should consider investing more deeply into organized campus programs that respond to their needs more directly. Specifically, funding of transitions programs that help African-American freshmen acclimate to the first year would be beneficial. Even more helpful would be funding of a physical space dedicated to students of color. One institution in this study provides a campus building dedicated to minority student affairs. While open to the entire campus, its mission is to provide a place for minority students to congregate, socialize, and study. Each student surveyed from this institution reported how important this space was to them. However, regardless of resource availability, campus interventions mattered to the African-American students in this study because it demonstrated care, commitment, and concern for the minority student. This translated to greater student engagement, and in the experience of the interviewees, greater academic success.

Ideas for Future Research

This dissertation identified numerous academic success factors that African-American male students, as well as white students, associated with their achievement at WLC. However, throughout this inquiry, new questions arose that are worthy of future consideration. This study demonstrated that many policies or actions accrue to the

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benefit of all students; yet, specific demographic groups may uniquely benefit from different types of experiences in ways that are poorly understood or unforeseen.

Some specific ideas for future research are highlighted below:

- The theme of religious faith was strong in this study among African-American participants. However, it is unclear whether this finding would hold true in a different geographical context.

- Future research on different minority student groups, particularly those that are becoming a greater influence on the college campus, such as Hispanic and Latino students, would be useful in determining whether these students also identify strongly with faith as a success factor.

- Additional qualitative research on African-American students at larger institutions, such as regional public universities and state flagship institutions would be helpful. Much of the body of research that has been conducted is quantitative in nature. How are African-American students succeeding at larger institutions, and are they relying on different success factors than African-American students at WLC? Are they finding "smallness" and connecting to campus organizations in ways that they are not at WLC?

- From a quantitative perspective, it would be useful to explore whether faith is more pervasive in first-generation students and students of low socioeconomic status as a whole. How do these students succeed? Does faith play a larger role in their success than expected?

- This study was primarily concerned with students who were already academically successful. They were the "best of the best." Accordingly, it remains unclear whether students who graduated with poor grades, or who showed great academic gains against great odds would report similar success factors. This is of particular interest during a time when greater numbers of students are enrolling in open institutions. It would be useful to better understand why marginal students feel they succeed, since most students are not "high achievers" like the participants in this study.

- It would be beneficial to explore, from a qualitative perspective, the experiences of white students at small, historically-black colleges. This could help shed more light on the phenomenon of "critical mass" and whether it impacts functioning minority groups, regardless of their race, in similar ways.

- This study did not address women. Further research into how women perceive success, and whether their experiences mirror those of male students, would benefit the higher education community. Qualitative studies of minority women would be particularly beneficial as these would describe best the differences in thought processes between African-American male and female students.

- Significantly more research related to group dynamics, institutional size, and student learning would be helpful to institutions which are expanding enrollments or considering alternative teaching models. The climate in

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higher education, as of this writing, has become toxic to the idea of
expensive, labor-intensive education that most small colleges provide.
Both quantitative and qualitative studies would be beneficial in
investigating the drivers of learning and motivation between small and
large institutions. Ultimately, this could help clarify the issue of
institutional effectiveness in motivating and influencing students. Such
research could be particularly useful to higher education leaders at small
colleges, given the results of this study support the power of small
institutions to influence students.

- Surprisingly few participants discussed teaching methods in particular.
  This could be the result of teaching methods being mostly homogenous
  within a particular type of institution. However, with so much time and
  effort focused on teaching methods, both in colleges and secondary
  schools, it begs the question as to whether teaching methods are as
  important as perceived. This study seems to indicate that institutional
  size is much more important to the success of the high-achieving student.
  Perhaps marginal students would benefit more from good teaching
  methods than highly-successful students. Or, perhaps teaching methods
  are in fact of secondary importance to close contact with staff and
  faculty. This would be an important revelation and a strong piece of
  evidence in support of the small college mission.

- Further research on the specific effects of "liberal arts" study and
  traditional courses of study would benefit liberal arts colleges and their

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stakeholders. A qualitative study as to the academic experience of students who attend small, liberal arts colleges and small, career-oriented colleges would help reveal any important differences in student experiences. How important is the liberal arts, when compared with the importance of the "smallness" of the institution itself?

Conclusion

This dissertation identified numerous academic success factors that African-American male students, as well as white students, identified as important to their success at small, mostly white liberal arts colleges. I embarked on this research from the perspective of a teacher, perhaps expecting to find numerous revelations about "magical" teaching methods that made concepts leap directly into students' minds. However, what I discovered was that students described their academic success in unique ways, and from their own perspectives and experiences.

The findings of this study confirmed the validity and wide applicability of Pascarella's General Model for Assessing Change (Pascarella, 1985). Pascarella suggested that student change is a product of a cascading set of factors: Pre-College/Student Background; Structural and Organizational Characteristics; Institutional Environment; Contact with Agents of Socialization; and, Quality of Student Effort. Each succeeding factor is a product of the previous factors, such that Quality of Student Effort is built heavily upon the preceding four factors. As a result, students who experience ideal conditions have the most capacity for positive change. African-American participants in this study experienced change, or academic success, in very different ways

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than white students, primarily because they progressed through Pascarella's model differently.

It seems clear that most of the African-American participants in this study spoke about their academic success in terms of relationships, social interaction, mentorship, and motivation. Their college experience was just that: an experience, a quest, and in some cases a spiritual journey. This seems to be a result of their experiencing the Institutional Environment as more challenging than the white participants in this study, primarily due to cultural differences. They spent more time concerned with social adjustment than did their white counterparts. Accordingly, when they explained their academic success, it was in terms of their ability to break social barriers and persist through their academic program. As a result, their interactions with Agents of Socialization and subsequent Quality of Student Effort, specifically types of effort, were significantly different than white students.

Alternatively, white students spoke about their academic success in terms of an "academic experiment." They experienced the Institutional Environment as one where they were similar to most other students. As a result, they described their academic success in terms of the difficulties they experienced, which were typically mechanical and in most cases purely academic. For the white participants in this study, demographics and social interaction were of little concern. Academic adjustments materialized as a unique theme, likely because the Institutional Environment was significantly less daunting than most African-American participants. This is not to suggest that either white or African-American students had more or less difficult college

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experiences. Rather, they encountered different types of difficulties, and in recalling their experiences from memory, spoke about the ones they found most challenging.

Another important conclusion drawn from this study, as well as earlier research, is the importance of personal contact in the learning process. Many teachers and academics consider themselves as "sources of knowledge" rather than sources of inspiration, or ordinary people in the lives of their students. This study stressed the importance of college teachers and staff members "opening up" to their students and getting to know them outside of the classroom. This type of interaction creates a bond with students, and a pathway to learning, that is impossible to simulate or replicate. In some students, this was a source of motivation, and seeing their instructor as a "regular" person made success seem more attainable. In other cases, it made students feel more accountable. In all cases, students benefited extensively from this type of contact. Mentorship is at the root of what helped all of these participants succeed academically, and accordingly institutions should seek to expect it, foster it, and reward it.   In the end, the participants in this study made it clear that they value the personal commitment and character of their teachers as much, if not more, than their technical expertise.

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Appendix A: Invitation Letter

12/18/2012
Dear Participant,

My name is Ryan Johnson and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Higher Education Administration, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying academic success in African-American male college graduates. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me for a series of two, one-hour interviews about your experiences in college.

In particular, you will be asked questions about your academic experiences and academic success. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about one hour. The interview will be audiotaped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed.

The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, we hope that others in the community/society in general will benefit with an increased understanding of minority student success.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (864) 381.1337 if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. I will call you within the next week to see whether you are willing to participate.

With kind regards,

Ryan Johnson
935 Nantahala Drive   Chesnee, SC 29323
864.381.1337   Johnsonra1@wofford.edu

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Appendix B: Interview Questions

- In what ways were you academically successful in college? (R1)

- Why do you feel you were successful academically in college? (R1, R2)

- Did your pre-college background affect your success in college? In what ways? (R1, F1)

- What occurrences or factors in your life before college were of importance to your academic success? (R3, F1)

- Did the type of college you attended affect your success? How? (R1, R2, F2, F3)

- What occurrences or factors associated with your choice of college were of importance to your academic success? (R3, F2, F3)

- During your time in school, what did the college do to help you be successful in college? (R1, R2, F3, F4)

- What events or experiences that occurred while you were in college affected your academic life the most? (R1,R3, F2,F3,F4)

- What have you personally done to be successful in college? (R1, F5)

- As an African-American male, what does academic success mean to you?(R2, R3)

- As an African-American male, what advice would you give other African-American college students to ensure their academic success in college? (R2, R3, F5)

- Who or what else has helped you succeed? (R1, F4, F5)

    o Have faculty or staff affected you?

    o What types of classes affected you?

    o What types of personal habits affected you?

    o What types of assignments affected you?

- What other factors that we haven't discussed enabled you to be a successful student or experience academic success? (R3)

- Some studies argue that race matters- and that it impacts one's ability to succeed. Do you agree? Why or why not? (R2, R3)

Document Analysis

- What experiences or events on your resume contributed to your academic success? Tell me about those experiences. Why did they contribute to your academic success? (R1, R2)

- Are there any other experiences that do not appear on your resume that contributed to your success? (R1, R2)

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Appendix C: Codes Identified

1G	FIRST GENERATION	MTR	CAMPUS MENTOR, NON FACULTY
2G	SECOND GENERATION OR LATER	N	NEIGHBORHOOD OR HOME CONNECTION
1P	ONE PARENT	NEG	OVERCAME NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES
2P	TWO PARENTS	PA	PERSONAL APPROACH TO GOALS/ED
AA	ACADEMIC ADAPTATIONS	PAC	PEER PACING/RIGHT GROUP
ADP	ADAPTING	PER	PERSONAL CONTACT
ANC	ANCHORED ASSIGNMENTS	PIE	PARENT INVOLVED IN EDUCATION
ATH	ATHLETICS, NOT COMPETITIVE	POT	REALIZE POTENTIAL
AWA	PUBLIC PRAISE/NOTICES	PRA	PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE IN TEACHERS
AWA	AWARENESS OF MINORITY STATUS	PRF	PROFESSOR/INSTRUCTOR INTERACTIONS
BAL	RELAX, BALANCE IN LIFE, "CHILL"	PRG	CAMPUS SUPPORT PROGRAMS
BC	BANNER CARRYING	PTC	PARENT TEACHER CONNECTION
COM	COMPETITIVENESS	PUB	PUBLIC FIGURE, MOTIVATION
CON	CONSISTENCY, PROFESSIONAL, SHOWING UP	PUN	PUNISHED FOR INTELLIGENCE
CRIT	CRIT/CREATIVE LEARNING	REL	RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY
CS	OVERCAME CULTURE SHOCK	RES	EARLY RESPONSIBILITY, EXPERIENCE
DIF	RIGOR, DIFFICULTY OF HS, PREPARATION	RES	RESULTS FOCUS- WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO
DIV	DIVERSE EXPERIENCE	RESWK	RESPONSIBLE FOR OWN WORK, HW
EDP	EARLY DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMS	RMAJ	RACE IS A MAJOR FACTOR
EEC	EARLY EXPOSURE TO COLLEGE	RMIN	RACE IS A MINOR FACTOR
EID	TALENT IDENTIFIED EARLY	RNON	RACE IS NOT A FACTOR
ENJ	FOCUS ON ENJOYMENT AND SUCCESS	SC	SOME COLLEGE
ENV	ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT, ADJUSTMENT	SCH	CLASS SCHEDULING
EXP	PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS	SIM	SEAMLESS EXPERIENCE
FAM	FAMILY ADVICE	SIZ	SMALL CLASS SIZES
FAM	SIGNIFICANT FAMILY EVENT	SOC	SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR ACADEMICS
FIN	FINANCES OR FINANCIAL AID	SOL	SOLITARY, FEW
FRA	FRATERNITY	SPO	SPOUSE/OTHER
FTG	FATIGUE	TM	TIME MGMT
FUN	FINDING SOMETHING OF INTEREST TO STUDY	TRA	TRAVEL, FOREIGN STUDY
GRD	RESULTS AFTER GRADUATION DEFINE SUCCESS	TRP	TRANSITION PROGRAMS, SUMMER, ETC
HLP	SOUGHT HELP	TRS	TRANSLATION, CROSS-CULTURE
HOL	HANDS ON LEARNING/PROBLEM BASED LEARNING	TWO	TWO WORLDS/BLACK-WHITE
HON	ADVANCED CLASSES IN HS	USE	USED TO IT (BEING ONLY AA)
HS	HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER OR EXPERIENCE	Y	YOUNGEST OR YOUNG IN FAMILY
IND	INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING/ATTENTION	WRD	WELL ROUNDED
INT	INTERNSHIP/FIELD EXPERIENCE	DLR	DIVERSITY OF ACADEMIC LEARNING
JUG	JUGGLING, SCHEDULING ACTIVITIES	DSC	DISCUSSION CLASSES
LUC	UNEXPECTED SUCCESS OR DEVELOPMENT	SPZ	SURPRISE HELPING EVENTS
MED	MEDICAL ISSUE		